UNICEF Background Guide

AMBMUN'27

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Dear Delegates,

It is with great pleasure that we welcome you all to the 4th edition of AMBMUN, where you will be representing your nations in the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Of all the committees at this conference, this is probably the one where the people being discussed have the least say in the room. Children cannot vote, cannot sit on a Security Council, and usually cannot defend themselves against the adults who exploit them. That is exactly why you are here.

This year's topic is the recruitment and trafficking of children by gangs and organized criminal networks. This is a prominent issue especially in the favelas of Brazil, the suburbs of Sweden, the roads between English market towns and big cities, and online, in group chats that look harmless until they are not. The children involved are often treated as offenders first and victims second, and much of your debate will come down to whether that order should be reversed.

You will be representing a country, so your job is to speak for its policies, its interests and its limits. Keep one question in mind throughout: what actually happens to a twelve-year-old after your clause is passed? Good resolutions can answer that.

This guide is only a starting point. The real work begins with your debates, research, and the solutions you come up with in the committee. Please focus on researching your country's laws, its record, and its relationships with other delegations. We would rather hear one specific, well-sourced argument than five general ones.

We are looking forward to meeting you and seeing what you bring to the committee. Best of luck and we cannot wait to see your skills..

Warm regards,

Anthony Chalhoub & Maya Hasan

Topic: Addressing the Recruitment and Trafficking of Children by Gangs and Organized Criminal Networks

The trafficking of children by gangs and organized criminal networks remains one of the most pressing and complex challenges facing the international community. Criminal groups have always used children, but the scale and the methods have continued to change. Today, children are recruited as lookouts, drug couriers, enforcers, informants, hitmen, and even as fighters in what are effectively private armies. Others are trafficked across borders or within them, then forced into sexual exploitation, domestic servitude, begging, forced labor or illegal work in mines and farms (UNODC).

These two ideas are important to focus on as delegates tend to mix them up. Trafficking, as defined by the 2000 Palermo Protocol, involves moving, harboring, or receiving a person through force, deception or abuse of vulnerability for the purpose of exploitation (OHCHR, 2000). This protocol is way stricter for children than it is for adults. No proof of force or deception is needed, because a child cannot meaningfully consent to being exploited. Recruitment, however, is a broader idea. It includes involving a child into a group's activities, which can happen through threats, payment, promises of protection, or simply lack of any other opportunities.

The numbers are hard to pin down, considering that this is a crime built around secrecy. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime has reported in its "Global Report on Trafficking in Persons" (GLOTIP) that children make up roughly a third of all detected trafficking victims worldwide, and in some regions, primarily parts of sub-Saharan Africa, they are the majority (UNODC). The International Labour Organization and UNICEF estimate that around 160 million children are in child labor, with some experiencing its "worst forms" described in ILO Convention 182, which explicitly includes using children for illicit activities such as drug production and trafficking. Only a small number of cases are actually reported, while many other victims remain unidentified (ILO,2024).

Why do children become involved with gangs or get recruited against their will? Researchers and field workers tend to point to the same cluster of causes with poverty being the most obvious one. Other reasons include weak schooling, family breakdown, displacement, and discrimination. In those places a gang can offer income, status, and a sense of belonging. For a child with few other

options, that is not an irrational choice, and it is worth remembering that when we talk about “voluntary” involvement (OJJDP).

Technology has changed the pattern too. Now recruiters use social media, gaming platforms and messaging apps to find children, build trust and give instructions, sometimes without ever meeting them in real life. For example, in Sweden and the United Kingdom, authorities have described teenagers being hired online for serious violence for small amounts of money. Meanwhile, in conflict zones, armed groups and criminal networks overlap so heavily that it becomes hard to tell where one ends and the other begins (EUROPOL).

For UNICEF, the central difficulty is that the child is both at risk and, in the eyes of the law, often accused. A fourteen-year-old caught carrying drugs may be prosecuted in one country and recognized as a trafficking victim in another. That gap between protection and punishment is one of the main things you delegates will need to address in your committee.

History

Children in gangs are nothing new, however international legislation to protect children within these situations is quite recent. Before 1989, children in exploitative situations were protected under general working conditions and welfare legislation. However, in 1989 the Convention on the Rights of the Child was formed. This means that children should not be exploited economically, involved in drug production and trade and sexually exploited. Additionally, decisions made regarding children must be made with the child's best interests in mind. This is the most highly ratified human rights convention in history.

In the 1990s, civil conflicts in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Uganda, and elsewhere brought the issues of child soldiers to the forefront of global awareness. As a result, in 1999, the ILO formed Convention 182 on Worst Forms of Child Labour. It was agreed that children should no longer be used in illegal activities or conflict, and this must therefore be abolished immediately.

In 2000, significant steps were taken in tackling child exploitation. The UN Convention against Transnational Organised Crime was formed. Within this Convention, the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (Palermo Protocol) was formed, allowing agreement on a global definition for trafficking. Additionally, the Optional Protocols to the CRC were formed; these include sale of children, sexual exploitation of children and exploitation of children in child pornography and the exploitation of children in armed conflict, adding further detail to obligations upon states. In 2005, resolution 1612 was passed by the Security Council to create a monitoring and reporting system for serious violations against children in armed conflict. In 2007 the Paris Principles were developed, providing guidance on the release and reintegration of children in armed groups. One key principle within this is that children in armed groups should be considered primarily as victims.

Although there exists a solid legal framework to reduce child exploitation in gangs, difficulties exist in implementation. The scale of gang and criminal group activity has increased greatly in the 1990s and 2000s. With increasing globalization, affordable communication and in many places the drug trade, gang sizes have grown. In Latin America and the Caribbean, groups such as Mexico's cartels, Central American Mara gangs and large prison gangs in Brazil have established strong territory control in schools and homes. In Haiti, armed gangs have gradually begun to take

control of large areas within the capital following political instability caused by the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse in 2021. In parts of Africa and Asia, trafficking routes have increased due to migration and conflict. These routes related to mining, fishing, farming and sex trafficking. In Europe, 'county lines' have increased in the UK. Urban drug gangs are using children to transport drugs to smaller towns. Within Sweden and the Netherlands, young teenagers are being recruited into gangs.

Recently efforts have been made internationally to change attitudes to child exploitation in gangs. It is widely supported by bodies such as the Council of Europe, following the attitude in the Palermo Protocol. The non-punishment principle means that children who have committed crimes as a direct result of exploitation in trafficking should not be punished. This has been implemented in law in many states, however, in others children are still not protected in this way. Some countries do not have this protection at all, or it is applied inconsistently, meaning that children may be detained, rather than looked after. UNICEF, along with partners such as UNODC, ILO, IOM and national child protection agencies have advocated schemes to reintegrate children, provide safe housing, register them at birth and allow them to attend school. However, the amount of funding and political attention given to these schemes differs greatly between countries.

Analysis

Consider that this issue affects different economic regions and nations. Even if a country has high levels of welfare, there may be issues with online recruitment to violent gangs. On the other hand, even within a poor country with effective legislation, the lack of police force, social workers and funding will mean the legislation cannot be effectively implemented. As a result, voting in this committee may be unpredictable. Therefore it might be difficult to form blocs in this committee.

Whether children should be considered victims or offenders is controversial. Child protection experts argue that even if children have committed crimes, they should be considered victims due to manipulation and coercion. However, law enforcement bodies often argue that gangs target children intentionally, as a way to receive reduced sentences. If no consequences are therefore given, children may be even more appealing for recruitment. The most popular opinion seems to be to assess children for exploitation before charges, however this requires trained personnel, which many countries lack.

Some delegations may wish to increase the severity of punishments for adult recruiters, improve intelligence sharing, and have stronger border controls. Other delegations may prioritise preventative strategies such as getting children to stay in education, providing support to families, providing youth schemes and working to create a sense of trust in communities. These ideas are not contradictory to each other, but resources are limited. Consider where you are expecting to get resources for your resolution. Be careful to consider if strategies may be harmful to children. For example, border control policies forcing migrant children to work with smugglers if legal entry becomes impossible.

Rescuing a child from a gang is only part of the solution. If children leave a gang, they may be ostracised by their communities. They may also be threatened by previous gang members and face a lack of education and employment opportunities. Without long term support, children are often re-recruited. However, when education, psychosocial support and safe housing is provided for children, better results are obtained. However, this is costly, time consuming, and often funding is not long term.

Although children are recruited online, online detection methods can also be used. Consider the responsibilities of tech companies, how much data governments can request from companies (without violating children's right to privacy), and how cooperation can occur between countries with varying levels of digital capability. Be aware that very strict monitoring may cause issues around sovereignty and civil rights for some delegations.

In many countries (Sudan, Syria, Libya, Somalia, Iraq, Haiti) criminal groups, armed groups and in some cases state affiliated groups overlap. With broken structures, closed schools and displaced families, trafficking and recruitment is increased. While UNICEF cannot prevent armed conflict, it can consider how to best protect children within these situations. It can consider realistic measures to protect children in situations where the government may be incapable or unwilling to act.

Many cases cross borders. The child may be recruited in one country, move to another, and be exploited in a third. Due to differing definitions, ages of criminal responsibility and evidence laws between countries, it is difficult to investigate effectively across borders. Agreement on sharing information, quickly identifying victims and agreeing on safe ways to return children home, without risking putting children in danger, could make a real difference.

Questions to Be Answered in Your Resolution:

1. How can states make sure that children recruited by gangs are treated as victims first, without removing all accountability for serious harm?

2. What practical steps can improve early identification of children at risk, both offline and online?

3. How should reintegration and rehabilitation programs be funded, and how can they be kept going long enough to stop re-recruitment?

4. What role should technology companies, financial institutions and private businesses play in preventing exploitation?

5. How can international and regional cooperation be strengthened to track trafficking routes and protect children who cross borders?

6. What can UNICEF and its partners do in places where state authority is weak, absent or itself part of the problem?

7. How can countries address the root causes, such as poverty, lack of education and discrimination, rather than only the symptoms?

8. Who should be held accountable for children being exploited in criminal networks, and should responsibility reach beyond gang leaders to officials who take bribes, businesses that profit from child labour and platforms that allow recruitment?

Starter Resources

1) UNODC, Global Report on Trafficking in Persons (most recent edition)
2) UN Secretary-General's annual report on Children and Armed Conflict
3) UNICEF, child protection, including its pages on trafficking, child labour and children in armed groups
4) ILO and UNICEF, Child Labour: Global Estimates 2020
5) The Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups (2007)
6) Full texts: Convention on the Rights of the Child, ILO Convention 182 and the Palermo Protocol
7) Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime and InSight Crime, for regional analysis of criminal networks

Country Matrix

Haiti – Colombia – Ecuador – Mexico – Brazil – Honduras – Guatemala – Sweden – United Kingdom – Russia – France – Ukraine – Netherlands – Nigeria – Sudan – Pakistan – Somalia – South Africa – Syria – Thailand – Lebanon – Iraq – Libya – Kenya – Philippines

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