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General Assembly

Background Guide Update

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I. Advancing Responsible State Behavior in Cyberspace in the Context of International Security

Recent Developments

The General Assembly (GA) resolution 74/28 on Advancing Responsible State behavior in Cyberspace in the context of International Security, is the most recent resolution adopted by the GA concerning Developments in the field of information and telecommunications.¹ The resolution calls upon Member States to be guided in their use of information and communications technologies.² Member States are encouraged to support the implementation of cooperative measures, as identified in the reports of the Group of Governmental Experts by addressing the threats emerging in this field and ensure an open, interoperable, reliable and secure information and communications technology environment consistent with the need to preserve the free flow of information.³ Furthermore, taking into account the assessments and recommendations contained in the reports of the Group of Governmental Experts, the Secretary General should continue to be informed about their views and assessments on efforts undertaken at the national level to strengthen information security and international cooperation in this field.⁴

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) held its second ever Arria-formula meeting in May 2020 to discuss cyber stability, conflict prevention, and capacity building.⁵ It was highlighted that in an era of global dependence on information and communication technologies (ICTs), many governments have been less anticipating the digital dimension of the current pandemic and are therefore unprepared to respond to the growing variety of malicious operations and activities, ranging from the spread of disinformation to cybercrime and direct attacks on medical facilities.⁶ The Council will therefore hold an

¹ UN GA, *Developments in the field of information and telecommunications in the context of international security (A/RES/74/28)*, 2019.

² UN GA, *Developments in the field of information and telecommunications in the context of international security (A/RES/74/28)*, 2019.

³ UN GA, *Developments in the field of information and telecommunications in the context of international security (A/RES/74/28)*, 2019.

⁴ UN GA, *Developments in the field of information and telecommunications in the context of international security (A/RES/74/28)*, 2019.

⁵ UN SC, *Arria-formula meeting, cyber stability, conflict prevention, and capacity building*, 2020.

⁶ UN SC, *Arria-formula meeting, cyber stability, conflict prevention, and capacity building*, 2020.

Arria formula meeting on cybersecurity, featuring the Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs, focused on maintenance of international security amid cyberthreats.⁷ It will aim to raise awareness about cyber challenges, with discussions focused on national, regional and global policy mechanisms to advance responsible state behavior.⁸

In June 2020, the Secretary General published the report "Roadmap for Digital Cooperation".⁹ The report highlights how the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the collective vulnerability to disruption and abuse.¹⁰ The technological challenge posed by COVID-19 to generate accurate data and information related to the disease were fundamental for an effective response.¹¹ But social media have been misused by some to spread dangerous misinformation and fuel discrimination, xenophobia and racism.¹² The Secretary General also noted that global data breaches have cost countries and businesses trillions of dollars, while malware attacks have caused billions of dollars in permanent damage to computer systems necessary for vital economic and societal functions.¹³ In addition, healthcare facilities were the target of severe cyberattacks during the COVID-19 crisis, with the International Criminal Police Organisation reporting an increase in global ransomware attacks.¹⁴ The report recognizes that an effective digital cooperation is instrumental in achieving the ambitious goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.¹⁵ The High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation was convened to strengthen cooperation in the digital space among governments, the private sector, civil society, international organizations and other relevant stakeholders.¹⁶ As noted, it is vital to engage with the private sector, the technical community and civil society from the beginning if realistic and effective decisions and policies are to be made.¹⁷

The UN General Assembly (GA) requested by adopting resolution 74/116 on Safety and Security of humanitarian personnel and protection of United Nations personnel, the Secretary-General to submit to the Assembly a comprehensive and updated report on the safety and security of humanitarian personnel and protection of United Nations personnel and on the implementation of the resolution.¹⁸ In his Report (A/75/246) on safety and security of humanitarian personnel and protection of United Nations personnel the Secretary-General analyses global security and security incidents involving United Nations and humanitarian personnel in 2019 and the first half of 2020.¹⁹ The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing global challenges, further exposing the underlying causes of insecurity, social and economic

⁷ UN SC, *Arria-formula meeting, cyber stability, conflict prevention, and capacity building*, 2020.

⁸ UN SC, *Arria-formula meeting, cyber stability, conflict prevention, and capacity building*, 2020.

⁹ UN Report of the Secretary General, *Roadmap for Digital Cooperation*. 2020.

¹⁰ UN Report of the Secretary General, *Roadmap for Digital Cooperation*. 2020.

¹¹ UN Report of the Secretary General, *Roadmap for Digital Cooperation*. 2020.

¹² UN Report of the Secretary General, *Roadmap for Digital Cooperation*. 2020.

¹³ UN Report of the Secretary General, *Roadmap for Digital Cooperation*. 2020.

¹⁴ UN WHO, *WHO reports fivefold increase in cyber attacks, urges vigilance*, 2020.

¹⁵ UN Report of the Secretary General, *Roadmap for Digital Cooperation*. 2020.

¹⁶ UN Report of the Secretary General, *Roadmap for Digital Cooperation*. 2020.

¹⁷ UN Report of the Secretary General, *Roadmap for Digital Cooperation*. 2020.

¹⁸ UN GA, *Strengthening of the coordination of humanitarian and disaster relief assistance of the United Nations, including special economic assistance: strengthening of the coordination of emergency humanitarian assistance of the United Nations (A/RES/74/116)*, 2020.

¹⁹ UN Report of the Secretary General, *Safety and security of humanitarian personnel and protection of United Nations personnel*. 2020.

inequality with overtones of racial tension and nationalism.²⁰ The rapid spread and emulation of slogans and disinformation with destabilizing effects was another emerging trend.²¹ Disinformation campaigns, largely channeled through social media, were focused on false information to discredit health advice.²²

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II. Empowering Conflict-Affected Children and Youth

Recent Developments

Currently, it is estimated that more than 30 million children are affected by conflict since the number of violent conflicts all over the world is the highest it has been in the last 30 years.²³

Without doubt, children and youth are one of the most affected groups by the COVID-19 crisis.²⁴ COVID-19 and conflict present a “deadly combination”: The spread of the virus has massively aggravated poverty and inequality in countries affected by conflicts, as the already overwhelmed health and social systems are further strained by the pandemic.²⁵

International observers are particularly worried about following aspects in the context of children and armed conflict during a global pandemic: Needless to say, the public health situation is highly critical in

²⁰ UN Report of the Secretary General, *Safety and security of humanitarian personnel and protection of United Nations personnel*. 2020.

²¹ UN Report of the Secretary General, *Safety and security of humanitarian personnel and protection of United Nations personnel*. 2020.

²² UN Report of the Secretary General, *Safety and security of humanitarian personnel and protection of United Nations personnel*. 2020.

²³ UNICEF, *Children under Attack*.

²⁴ UNICEF, *Children under Attack*.

²⁵ UNICEF, *COVID-19 and conflict: A deadly combination*.

conflict affected countries.²⁶ According to Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, a global network of nongovernmental organizations, only half of the hospitals are fully functional and two-thirds without access to healthcare.²⁷ Due to the deterioration of the living conditions, the United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF) is worried about food-security.²⁸ According to UNICEF, already 10.4 million children are currently suffering from malnutrition.²⁹ In conflict-affected societies education presents one of the most valuable tools to empower children, as sustainable peace and prosperity goes hand in hand with education.³⁰ All over the world, children are restrained from getting access to education due to the COVID-19 pandemic.³¹ However, one should not forget that many children do not even have access to education in the first place.³² Last year, around 500 attacks on schools in countries hit by conflict were observed.³³ The various lockdown situations also complicate getting access to conflict zones, which is critical for monitoring the situation and sending humanitarian aid.³⁴

Apart from the exacerbation due to the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change constitutes a further threat that worsens the situation of children in conflict regions.³⁵ Further challenges that might be overshadowed by the direct implications resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic are child recruitment and sexual abuse.³⁶ Those issues have constituted particularly challenging threats to children in armed conflict the recent years.³⁷

In recent years, the responsible UN bodies remained active on the ceased matter.³⁸ On 9 June 2020, the Secretary General released its annual *Report on Children and Armed Conflict (A/74/845–S/2020/525)*.³⁹ He stresses the progress in monitoring the situation of children in armed conflict and the development of concrete action plans it enabled.⁴⁰ However, grave violations still exist and he expressed his special concern about children in detention.⁴¹ The most recent *Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict (A/75/203)* was published in July.⁴² The document particularly focuses on the impact of COVID-19 and the connected denial of humanitarian access as well as the attacks on schools and hospitals and issues such as sexual violence.⁴³

In April 2019, the Special Representative launched the new media and advocacy campaign “Act to Protect Children Affected by Armed Conflict” which builds up on the previous campaign “Children, Not Soldiers”.⁴⁴ The new campaign aims to raise awareness for all six grave violations, thereby highlighting the linkages between violations and the need to address them holistically.⁴⁵

²⁶ UNICEF, *COVID-19 and conflict: A deadly combination*.

²⁷ Watchlist, *Children and Armed conflict: Factsheet*, 2020.

²⁸ Watchlist, *Children and Armed conflict: Factsheet*, 2020.

²⁹ UNICEF, *COVID-19 and conflict: A deadly combination*.

³⁰ UNICEF, *COVID-19 and conflict: A deadly combination*.

³¹ UNICEF, *COVID-19 and conflict: A deadly combination*.

³² UNICEF Executive Director Fore, *Remarks at the UN Security Council Open Debate on Children and Armed Conflict: Attacks against schools as a grave violation of children rights*, 2020.

³³ UNICEF Executive Director Fore, *Remarks at the UN Security Council Open Debate on Children and Armed Conflict: Attacks against schools as a grave violation of children rights*, 2020.

³⁴ UNICEF, *UNICEF Humanitarian Action for Children 2021*, 2020, p. 3.

³⁵ UNICEF, *UNICEF Humanitarian Action for Children 2021*, 2020, p. 3.

³⁶ UNICEF, *UNICEF Humanitarian Action for Children 2021*, 2020, p. 3.

³⁷ UNICEF, *UNICEF Humanitarian Action for Children 2021*, 2020, p. 3.

³⁸ United Nations Secretary General, *Report on Children and Armed Conflict to the General Assembly*, 2020.

³⁹ United Nations Secretary General, *Report on Children and Armed Conflict to the General Assembly*, 2020.

⁴⁰ United Nations Secretary General, *Report on Children and Armed Conflict to the General Assembly*, 2020.

⁴¹ United Nations Secretary General on Children and Armed Conflict to the General Assembly, *Report to the General Assembly*, 2020.

⁴² United Nations Secretary General on Children and Armed Conflict to the General Assembly, *Report to the General Assembly*, 2020.

⁴³ United Nations Secretary General on Children and Armed Conflict to the General Assembly, *Report to the General Assembly*, 2020.

⁴⁴ Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, *ACT to protect children affected by conflict*.

⁴⁵ Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, *ACT to protect children affected by conflict*.

Additionally, in cooperation with UNICEF, the Special Representative launched a series of regional workshops that brought together members of different UN country task forces on monitoring and reporting.⁴⁶ Those consultations, the first of their kind, aimed at fostering exchanges and generating lessons learned on the monitoring and reporting mechanism on grave violations and on United Nations engagement with listed parties.⁴⁷

In the last year, the Working Group of the Security Council on Children and Armed Conflict paid special attention to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the situation of children in armed conflict.⁴⁸ At the center of its discussions were also regions where children and youth are particularly at risk of conflict and attacks with a special focus on Yemen, the Central African Republic, Afghanistan, Iraq, Colombia, Somalia, Sudan, Nigeria, the Philippines and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.⁴⁹ In addition, the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict presented the new *Practical Guidance for Mediators to Protect Children in Situations of Armed Conflict* at the 90th meeting of the Working Group on January 27, 2020.⁵⁰

Besides, UNICEF - the main UN body for protecting children who is celebrating its 75th birthday this year - has been actively engaged in improving the situation for conflict-affected children. Among other actions, it has revised its *Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action in 2020* and published the report "*Humanitarian Action for Children 2021*" which points out the need for further funding in order to effectively tackle the problems that young people face in crises.⁵¹

To sum up, the pandemic has deteriorated the already worrisome situation of young people affected by conflict.⁵² Many challenges remain in conflict locations such as the protection of schools and the safeguarding of food security, whereby the access to health care has been particularly threatened in the last year.⁵³ The financing of respective programs also remains an issue. Consequently, many areas within the topic of conflict-affected children and youth need action to be taken by the General Assembly.⁵⁴

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⁴⁶ Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, *ACT to protect children affected by conflict*.

⁴⁷ Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, *Practical guidance for mediators to protect children in situations of armed conflict*, 2020.

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⁵⁰ Chair of the Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict, *Letter dated 18 December 2020 addressed to the President of the Security Council*, 2020.

⁵¹ UNICEF, *Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action*, 2020.

⁵² UNICEF, *Humanitarian Action for Children 2021 Overview*, 2020.

⁵³ UNICEF, *Humanitarian Action for Children 2021 Overview*, 2020.

⁵⁴ UNICEF, *Humanitarian Action for Children 2021 Overview*, 2020.

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III. Information and Communication Technologies for Sustainable Development

Recent Developments

With the outbreak of COVID-19 in December 2019, the world has changed rapidly.⁵⁵ Large parts every-day life were moved to the virtual world, leading to global internet usage growing by almost 70 percent only within the first six months of the pandemic.⁵⁶ The crisis thereby illustrated the importance of digital infrastructure to businesses and societies and identified digitization as a key factor for sustainable economic and financial development.⁵⁷ However, by leaving more than 154 million children in Latin America and many more in other parts of the world unable to transfer to e-learning due to a lack of internet access, it also accentuated the digital divide.⁵⁸

But even before the ongoing crisis the Member States of the United Nations (UN) have concerned themselves with the topic of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), the contribution they can make towards a more sustainable future and the negative side effects that come with the modernization of our world.⁵⁹ Over the past years, the UN General Assembly repeatedly recognized the potential that ICTs offer towards sustained, inclusive and equitable growth and sustainable

⁵⁵ World Economic Forum, *COVID-19 could widen the digital gap. Here's what's needed now*, 2020.

⁵⁶ World Economic Forum, *COVID-19 could widen the digital gap. Here's what's needed now*, 2020.

⁵⁷ UN DESA, *Recover Better*, 2020.

⁵⁸ World Economic Forum, *COVID-19 could widen the digital gap. Here's what's needed now*, 2020.

⁵⁹ World Economic Forum, *COVID-19 could widen the digital gap. Here's what's needed now*, 2020.

development.⁶⁰ However during its more recent sessions, the UN General Assembly also stressed that there is still uneven growth in access to and the use of ICTs.⁶¹ Illustrating this digital divide in numbers, the *Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Report 2020* showed that by the end of 2019 half of the world's population used the Internet.⁶² However there were immense differences between different regions of the globe, with 87 per cent of Europeans and Northern Americans and only 26 per cent of Sub-Saharan Africans using the Internet.⁶³

Although the figures in the 2020 SDG Report show that global internet usage is rising in all parts of the world, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has posed a new threat to these positive developments and shown that ICTs not only provide chances but also bring various complications.⁶⁴ Though they are often unintended, they are of great seriousness. The UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) is concerned about the exacerbation of inequalities, tax avoidance, health risks, ethical issues, privacy matters and the increasing digital divide and therefore urges governments to focus on context-specific policy measures in order to achieve the SDGs.⁶⁵ The High-Level-Advisory Board on Economic and Social Affairs also noted that the sudden transition from in-person to virtual communication provided many chances but also resulted in debt and bankruptcy for many business worldwide.⁶⁶ The pandemic thereby illustrated the increasing interconnectedness between ICTs and economic and financial development.⁶⁷

But even though there are many issues about the upsurge of ICTs, the international community has also created solutions for scaling down the negative effects of digitalization.⁶⁸ Some of them were exchanged at the eCommerce Week, which is annually hosted by the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) as a leading forum for ministers, government officials, business representatives, civil society and many other stakeholders to exchange experiences on digital transformations.⁶⁹ This year UNCTAD offered a virtual eWeek themed "Creating values in the digital economy" with an explicit focus on the effects of Covid-19 on the digital economy.⁷⁰ Among many participants, the UN Capital Development Fund (UNCDF) used this high-level forum to introduce the Inclusive Digital Economy Scorecard which was launched in 2019 and is currently being piloted in eight countries in four different regions.⁷¹ The UNCDF thereby provides a policy tool that measures the development of an inclusive digital economy and can be used by governments to set the priorities for their country's digital transformation.⁷²

The past years have already shown, that ICTs bring not only immense potential towards the achievement of the SGDs but also many negative effects, including the global digital divide.⁷³ And the worldwide pandemic we are currently facing has only accentuated this ambiguity.⁷⁴ This is why it is of utmost importance for the international community to find the balance between using the full potential of ICTs to make progress towards the fulfillment of the SGDs while also minimalizing, if not even eradicating the negative effects.⁷⁵

⁶⁰ UN General Assembly, *Information and Communication Technologies for Sustainable Development (A/RES/75/202)*, 2020; UN General Assembly, *Information and Communication Technologies for Sustainable Development (A/RES/74/197)*, 2019.

⁶¹ UN General Assembly, *Information and Communication Technologies for Sustainable Development (A/RES/75/202)*, 2020; UN General Assembly, *Information and Communication Technologies for Sustainable Development (A/RES/74/197)*, 2019.

⁶² UN DESA, *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020*, 2020.

⁶³ UN DESA, *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020*, 2020.

⁶⁴ UN DESA, *Recover Better*, 2020.

⁶⁵ UN DESA, *Recover Better*, 2020.

⁶⁶ UN DESA, *Recover Better*, 2020.

⁶⁷ UN DESA, *Recover Better*, 2020.

⁶⁸ UNCTAD, *eWeek 2020 Summary Report*, 2020.

⁶⁹ UNCTAD, *eWeek 2020 Summary Report*, 2020.

⁷⁰ UNCTAD, *eWeek 2020 Summary Report*, 2020.

⁷¹ UNCDF, *UNCDF Introduces the Inclusive Digital Economy Scorecard During UN General Assembly*, 2019.

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