

Focus on the Situation of Children's Rights
in the Democratic Republic of the Congo





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THE SITUATION OF CHILDREN'S RIGHTS IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO



Introduction

Over the past few years, the Democratic Republic of the Congo has experienced progress in the promotion and protection of human rights. This change of paradigm coincides with the promulgation of the new Constitution of 18 February 2006. In this Constitution, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, for the first time, provided a definition of the child in Article 41, paragraph 1, which states the following: “**A minor child is any person, without distinction of sex, who has not yet reached the age of 18 years.**” We also acknowledge institutional progress through the creation and strengthening of public structures responsible for the promotion and protection of human rights, such as the Ministry of Human Rights and the National Council for the Child (CNEN), which are major assets that have contributed. In addition, there is a legal framework for the protection of children’s rights, notably the promulgation of Law 09/001 of 10 January 2009, which brings together in a single text all legal provisions concerning the child and adapts them to international standards.

On the other hand, serious situations persist in the DRC due to the proliferation of the phenomenon of street children, children who accompany adults to solicit help.

Some large families struggle to take care of their children, as the number of children per family varies between 4 and 8 children.

This work is designed within a purely internal framework for a peace education campaign. It first sets out the context and the challenges of our Democratic Republic of the Congo with regard to the situation of human rights for children (girls and boys); it then presents a general overview of the situation of children facing the resurgence of armed conflict in the DRC; the realities for children in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: continuous violence, a state of perpetual distress, a glimmer of hope; the obligations of the DRC towards children; structural programmes in perspective: Reception, Support, Rehabilitation and Reintegration; the expected solutions in the DRC in terms of Prevention, Verification, Demobilization and Assistance.

A series of recommendations will be formulated before providing a synthesis of this small advocacy work for human rights for children in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Context

Previous investigations indicate that at the origin of the serious violations of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in the DRC is extreme financial insecurity which, as the Committee on the Rights of the Child has underlined, prevents children from fully enjoying their rights and further aggravates the condition of vulnerability of certain groups of children, notably street children." (cf. concluding observations in CRC/C/COD/CO/2 of 10 February 2009, paragraph 7).

Which children are we talking about?

Categories of children in street situations:

1. Firstly, these are children who are sent by their parents to work in the street in order to obtain a source of income. They are called "ration children" due to the fact that they spend their day begging in the street. In the evening, they bring their takings home, where they find a form of family unit.
2. Secondly, those who live permanently in the street, without any family support.

Although they are all exposed to dangers, in the most vulnerable conditions are those who sleep in the street and make the street their home. They survive through small jobs, hiding in old buildings, and many use drugs. Despite the efforts made by the Government, there is a constant increase in the number of children who have broken family ties.



They live in the street and are exposed to abuse, including sexual abuse, economic exploitation, as well as violence among themselves and by police forces.

Concerns

These children do not have access to health care, education and rehabilitation services, as well as being subjected to violence committed by law enforcement forces. The working and employment conditions for children are poor and often highly dangerous. They work approximately 12 hours a day, barefoot, and without any protective equipment. They are exposed to uraniferous materials and dust inhalation, as well as the risks of tunnel collapses and falling into deep shafts. Young girls living on the streets survive through odd jobs, begging, and scavenging for food waste. When frightened by the dangers of the street, they seek protection from adults and other street children. However, they are often attacked and abused. The perpetrators are frequently other street children, but also include police forces or neighborhood guards. These girls are often forced to grant sexual favors in exchange for food or a place to sleep. For other young girls, prostitution is often the only means of survival. While still very young (14 or 15 years old), they begin engaging in sex work. They work at night in bars and nightclubs, but more commonly on the streets and sidewalks. If they work alone, they are more vulnerable to theft and gang rape. For this reason, they always seek to join a group of girls to engage in prostitution together.



Current Context

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Rwanda officially signed the Washington Accords for peace and prosperity on June 27, 2025. Although this agreement—reaffirmed in December 2025—aims to stabilize the eastern part of the country, the situation for children remains extremely concerning on the ground. Key points regarding the situation of children despite these diplomatic advances include:

- **Persistence of Severe Violence:** In 2025, the number of grave violations against children (murder, mutilation, abduction) tripled in certain areas of eastern DRC compared to previous periods.
- **Recruitment by Armed Groups:** In early 2025 alone, more than 400 children were recruited by armed actors, some being abducted directly from schools or the street.
- **Massive Humanitarian Crisis:** Approximately 9.1 million children in the DRC require emergency humanitarian assistance in 2025. More than half of the 7.7 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) are children.
- **Threats to Education:** Hundreds of schools have been closed or occupied by armed groups, depriving over 500,000 children of schooling during the 2024–2025 period.
- **Official Commitments:** Under the accords, the parties committed to facilitating the safe and voluntary return of

displaced persons, including the many children living in camps.

The Congolese government has also made "child-sensitive budgeting" a priority for 2025. The Ministry of Gender, Family, and Children, the Ministry of Social Affairs, Humanitarian Action, and Solidarity, and the Ministry of National Education and New Citizenship are collaborating to fulfill the government's official commitments toward child-rights-sensitive budgeting.

In summary, while the Washington Accords open a diplomatic path, organizations such as UNICEF and Save the Children emphasize that the daily reality for children in conflict zones remains marked by critical insecurity.

The persistence of conflicts and political unrest exacerbates the situation of financial insecurity:

A long succession of conflicts, instability, and political unrest has led the Democratic Republic of the Congo to a humanitarian crisis that is both severe and persistent, compounded by massive population displacement. The DRC is one of the five poorest countries in the world according to the World Bank, which estimates that in 2021 nearly 64% of the population, or 60 million people, were living on less than 2.15 dollars per day, according to World Bank data. This means that the DRC had a significant proportion of the population living in extreme economic insecurity, in stark contrast to the country's vast natural wealth.

In other words:

- **Context:** The DRC is one of the richest countries in natural resources, yet a large part of its population faces severe economic insecurity.
- **Data:** In 2021, 64% of Congolese people (around 60 million) were living on less than USD 2.15 per day, the extreme economic insecurity threshold set by the World Bank.
- **Impact:** Nearly one in six people living in extreme economic insecurity in sub-Saharan Africa was living in the DRC during that period.

Following the above synthesis, in 2025 the situation of economic insecurity in the DRC remains critical according to the World Bank, with estimates indicating that more than **85% of the population lives in extreme economic insecurity** (less than USD 3 per day), despite positive economic growth (over 5.6%). World Bank reports emphasize that this economic insecurity persists due to political instability, conflicts, and weak economic diversification, and call for reforms to improve governance, infrastructure (electricity, roads), and access to basic services.

In other words: Key Figures and Findings (2025)

- **Extreme economic insecurity:** Approximately 85.3% of Congolese people were living on less than USD 3 per day, according to analyses based on World Bank data in October 2025.
- **Economic Growth:** Estimated at over 5.6% in 2025, exceeding the sub-Saharan African average.

- **Persistence of economic insecurity:** Despite growth, the majority of the population remains with limited economic resource, as income per capita does not improve sufficiently.

Factors of economic hardship (according to the World Bank and other sources)

- **Instability and conflicts:** Decades of conflict and political instability.
- **Governance:** Poor management and corruption.
- **Limited access to services:** Education, health, drinking water, electricity.
- **Economic dependence:** Low diversification.

World Bank Recommendations (voiced by Albert Zeufack in 2025)

- *Reduce the costs of the business environment.
- *Improve basic infrastructure (roads, electricity, digital infrastructure).
- *Strengthen governance and the rule of law.
- *Promote employment and SMEs.

*It is in this context that many children, whose needs are often ignored and whose rights are frequently violated, distance themselves from their families and increasingly frequent the streets. Some then develop survival mechanisms, including theft and violence, to assert themselves in a dangerous environment. When they are arrested, these minors in conflict with the law are placed in detention in prisons, places that do not help them prepare for reintegration. Upon release, it is common for them to fall back into precariousness and reoffend. This is indeed the situation of children's rights in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

SITUATION OF CHILDREN'S RIGHTS (girls and boys) IN THE DRC

Children faced with the resurgence of armed conflict in the RDC

For more than thirty years, the conflict in the DRC has cost the lives of more than six million people. Among the long list of persons affected are the children of the DRC. Since 2024, as the conflict has continued to intensify sharply, it is necessary to highlight the impact of these conflicts on children's rights, as well as the violations and structural dysfunctions faced by children in this hostile environment, and to emphasize the role of peacebuilding and long-term humanitarian assistance.

Chronology of the conflicts in the DRC

In the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide, more than one million Hutus crossed the border between Rwanda and the Congo (then Zaire) to settle in camps in North Kivu. These camps housed civilians, but also perpetrators of the genocide, who contributed to the creation of the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR).

In 1996, deadly massacres took place there, marking the beginning of the Congolese rebellion supported by Kigali, which brought Laurent-Désiré Kabila to power in May 1997. Between 1998 and 2002, the country, which became the Democratic Republic of the Congo ("DRC") in 1997, experienced a regional war involving up to seven countries (Journal 20 Minutes, 2008).

The two main Congolese rebel movements were the Movement for the Liberation of the Congo (MLC), supported by Uganda, and the Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD), backed by Rwanda, which, following a territorial reconfiguration, administered the North Kivu area, coveted for its mineral and land resources. At the head of the DRC since 2001, Joseph Kabila called for an Inclusive National Dialogue that led to the Global and Inclusive Agreement of Sun City to restore peace in the country in 2006. This also led, in January 2007, to the resumption of control over the mineral-rich territories that had previously been contested.

However, fighting resumed between the CNDP and the Congolese army until the Goma Conference and the ceasefire agreement signed in January 2008. Despite these agreements, which have been regularly violated since then, a long period of instability and violence took hold, until the signing of a new peace agreement in Goma in 2009 (Journal 20 Minutes, 2008). Nevertheless, Rwanda's non-participation in the peace process had the effect of reinforcing antagonisms between the military groups involved in the Kivus.

In this context, the armed group Movement of March 23, “M23,” was formed in 2012 and subsequently took up arms against the armed forces of the DRC (Slate, 2024). Since June 2024, the M23 has taken control of a central city in the conflict opposing it to government forces in eastern DRC, continuing the perpetual clashes that afflict the country (Le Monde, 2024).

The reality for children in the DRC

Since the beginning of hostilities, the situation in the DRC has continued to deteriorate, and the impact of these armed conflicts on children is severe and ongoing. In 2022, 3,400 cases of grave violations committed against children in the DRC were recorded, including 1,600 children recruited by armed groups, 700 killed in the conflict, and at least 290 cases of sexual violence. Moreover, since the beginning of 2023, more than one million people have been newly displaced in the DRC, bringing the total number of displaced persons to more than 6.1 million (BBC News Afrique, 2023).

In 2024, a proportion of 36% of killings and mutilations of children, 25% of acts of sexual violence perpetrated against children, 18% of cases of recruitment/use of children in combat, and 19% of child abductions were reported. The majority of these grave violations (87%) were recorded in combat zones. In addition, acts of sexual violence against women and children remained numerous in 2023 and increased further in 2024.

In May, 150 cases of gender-based violence were recorded, including 114 rapes (ONU Info, 2024).

This resurgence of violence in eastern DRC, which has led to the displacement of at least 400,000 people in North Kivu since the beginning of 2024 alone, threatens children with increased violence unless their protection is strengthened (UNICEF, 2024). Over time, the level of violence has continued to rise, with an increase of nearly 5% in violations and abuses occurring since April 2024 alone. This increase could be attributed to the continuation of clashes between the M23, as well as other armed groups, and the Armed Forces of the DRC (FARDC) in the southeastern part of Masisi and the northern part of Rutshuru (ONU Info, 2024).

The obligations of the DRC towards children

Since the 1990s, the DRC has strengthened its legal framework for the protection of children's rights through the adoption and ratification of international and regional protection instruments, notably the Convention on the Rights of the Child (“CRC”) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (Ponabana DRC, 2024). In order to implement the commitments undertaken upon ratification of the CRC, the DRC has reformed several legal instruments at the national level, including the Labour Code, the Military Justice Code, and the Family Code (UNICEF, 2019).

Indeed, through continuous efforts, the DRC has enshrined the **best interests and well-being of children at the heart of its Constitution**, which defines a child as “any person, without distinction of sex, who has not yet reached the age of 18 years” (Constitution of the DRC, 2011). Furthermore, the DRC has strengthened the body of specific legal texts defending children’s rights, notably by promulgating the Child Protection Law in 2009, criminalizing sexual violence in Law No. 06/019 amending and supplementing the decree establishing the Code of Criminal Procedure of 2006, and revising the Family Code in 2016 (Ponabana DRC, 2024). However, these legislative efforts are not sufficient, given the scale of the impact of armed conflicts on children’s rights.

Structural challenges in perspective

Given the repercussions of the violence suffered by children in the DRC, briefly outlined above, it is particularly important to examine the obstacles that hinder children’s realization of their rights. One of the challenges remains the fact that the DRC’s Human Capital Index stands at 0.37, which is below the sub-Saharan African average of 0.40.

This means that “a Congolese child born today can expect to realize only 37% of his or her potential, compared to what would have been possible with complete and quality schooling and optimal health conditions” (World Bank, 2024). This result largely reflects “the low survival rate of children under five,

the high rate of stunting among children, and the poor quality of education” (World Bank, 2024). Secondly, the implementation of an environment conducive to children’s rights in the DRC requires an increase in budget allocations and public spending in favor of social sectors that address children’s deficiencies, as they are considered in the most vulnerable conditions. This can only be achieved through “effective tax revenue collection, a responsible fiscal policy, a strong fight against corruption at all levels, and budget allocations in favor of social sectors, particularly health and education,” whose growth must be at least equal to that of the economic sector (UNICEF, 2017).

In light of the above, priority must be given to structural changes, taking into account the long-term consequences of armed conflicts on children’s well-being, in order to offer them the best possible environment to grow fully and realize their aspirations.

Expected solutions in the DRC

In response to the consequences of armed conflicts in the DRC and their successive escalations, on 6 August 2024, the Security Council adopted a resolution “authorizing the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) to support the Mission of the Southern African Development Community in this country (SAMIRDC),” active in the DRC since 2023 (UN Press, 2024).

It is essential that regional actors and the international community intensify their efforts to reach a peaceful political solution to the conflict in order to achieve a sustainable peace agreement for children—who represent more than half of the total population in the DRC—and for their fundamental rights (UNICEF, 2024).

This approach also requires collaboration and the pooling of efforts among the various sectors and their stakeholders to ensure a joint approach and assessment of humanitarian needs and resource mobilization (OCHA, 2024). Despite some progress made over the past ten years, the situation of children and women in the DRC remains precarious. Unfortunately, the specific needs of children and adolescents are rarely considered a priority. Children and adolescents are not only beneficiaries of services provided to address the difficulties they experience. They also assume the role of actors in the process aimed at improving their well-being and are the guarantors of the country's future. By applying this principle, according to the level of maturity of each child, it is possible to promote the right to participation of every child and adolescent, while creating an environment that is conducive to them (UNICEF, 2017).



An empty classroom at the UNICEF-supported Bulengo Primary School in the Bulengo displacement site, near Goma, North Kivu province in Democratic Republic of Congo on Feb. 10, 2025. © UNICEF/UNI734169/Benekire

THE REALITIES FOR CHILDREN IN THE DRC

Continuous violence to affect children in the eastern provinces of the DRC

UNICEF remains deeply concerned about the situation of thousands of children threatened by violence in the province of Ituri, in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Children continue to suffer severely as a result of the violence and chaos triggered by the long-standing conflict in the province. Living conditions for thousands of children in Ituri have deteriorated since the intensification of violence at the beginning of the year. Militia attacks in residential areas have resulted in hundreds of deaths, and children have been mutilated, killed, or recruited by armed groups, according to information received by UNICEF. It is estimated that more than 1.6 million people, the majority of whom are women and children, are displaced in Ituri.

According to UNICEF, 91 children were killed, 27 were mutilated, and 13 were people who have faced sexual violence between January and June 2020. Nearly 18 health facilities were looted or destroyed, while attacks on more than 60 schools left approximately 45,000 children out of classrooms. The province of Ituri currently has 2.4 million people in urgent need of humanitarian assistance. UNICEF and its partners have assisted more than 100,000 people—including 87,000 children—in terms of health care and nutrition, protection, education,

water, and sanitation. Between January and August, UNICEF and its partners:

- Assisted 365 children previously associated with armed forces and groups to reintegrate into the community, reunite with their families, and receive psychosocial support;
- Enabled more than 87,000 children in vulnerable conditions to safely access community spaces for socialization, play, and learning;
- Provided 68 child people who have faced sexual violence with medical, psychosocial, and legal support.

Children in the DRC are in a state of perpetual distress

Across the African continent, conflicts continue to cause devastation today. As in all wars, the populations most affected are women and children. The situation of children in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has been particularly worrying for a very long time. In fact, in 2017, the DRC ranked 176th out of 188 countries on the Human Development Index (HDI). Children are the social group most affected by this generalized underdevelopment in Congo. Indeed, these children are orphans, displaced, or working in mines, among other conditions.

An increasingly serious situation

In the DRC, as of December 2017, there were 4.49 million people displaced due to war, including 2.7 million children. In addition, it was estimated at that time that approximately 13.1 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance, including 7.9 million children.

Moreover, the human rights of Congolese children are more often than not violated, despite existing measures. The Congolese Constitution prohibits forced marriages. The same Constitution guarantees the right to education without discrimination, the right to health, etc. However, although these rights are legally protected, the current situation in the Congo means that they are more often than not violated. The United Nations Security Council recorded at least “11,542 grave violations committed against children by more than 40 parties to the conflict, representing an increase of 60% compared to the previous period (2010–2013).” It should be noted here that the UN security body did not specify the types of violations committed.

This precarious situation has several explanations. According to Global Affairs Canada, the most decisive factor affecting the situation of children in the DRC is the prevailing precariousness in the country. Another determining factor is the generalized state of war. The presence of foreign armed

groups in certain regions of the DRC, such as the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) in North Kivu, partly explains why armed conflicts persist in the DRC and continue to wreak havoc.

War reflects stark inequalities in the DRC

With regard to access to education, the situation is hardly better. In fact, 28.9% of children aged 5 to 17 are not enrolled in school. Among this percentage, 52.7% are girls.

Young girls and women are the most affected by the various wars and inter-ethnic conflicts. According to Amnesty International, the rape of girls aged 12 or under is a common occurrence in the Congo, contributing to the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. According to UNICEF estimates, in 2012 there were approximately 88,000 children living with HIV/AIDS.

The most well-known war may be the Congolese civil war, which ended in 2003. Nevertheless, certain regions of the Congo, such as the provinces of North and South Kivu, or currently Uvira, remain at war. Moreover, according to estimates by NGOs, several thousand children are still serving in militias in these two provinces. The situation is hardly better elsewhere in the DRC. In the provinces of Tanganyika and South Kivu, UNICEF estimates that approximately 3,000 children are recruited into militias. However, it is possible to observe a wind of change approaching, as the Security Council has recorded a decrease in the number

of child soldiers. Indeed, “a total of 7,736 children (including 7,125 boys and 611 girls) had been separated from armed forces and groups.” In addition, the number of children recruited by armed groups decreased nationally, from 2,085 children in 2014 to 1,049 in 2017.

Very often, Congolese children are forced to work in mines. In Western countries, mining remains very hard and dangerous work even today. However, in a country like the DRC, this work is even more dangerous. Children work in mines where working conditions are appalling, for long hours. They extract tungsten, tin, and tantalum, all minerals essential for the manufacture of mobile phones. An investigation published by Amnesty International revealed that companies such as Renault, Microsoft, Lenovo, and BMW source cobalt from the DRC, thereby contributing to the perpetuation of these children’s working conditions.

Nevertheless, it is possible to glimpse a certain glimmer of hope on the horizon. In fact, in 2017, the Congolese government adopted an action plan aimed at eradicating child labor by 2025. This was not new, as the Congolese government had already presented a similar action plan in 2011; however, it was never officially adopted.

This situation of child labor exploitation is not an isolated phenomenon in the DRC, but is widespread throughout sub-Saharan Africa. Indeed, worldwide, nearly 158 million children aged 5 to 14 are forced to work against their will.

Among them, nearly 69 million are found in sub-Saharan Africa. The most affected age group is that of 15 to 17 years old, as they carry out the most hazardous work.

A glimmer of hope

In recent years, significant progress has been made. Infant mortality at birth decreased from 184 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1990 to 94 in 2016, representing a reduction of 49%. However, it is important to put this figure into perspective, as the mortality rate of children under five has increased. This rate rose from 280,000 deaths in 1990 to 304,000 deaths in 2016. When a child dies, it occurs in 98% of cases before the age of five.

Several factors explain such a high infant mortality rate, despite the remarkable progress that has been made. Among these factors are infectious diseases, malnutrition, lack of access to clean water, in addition to the many conflicts.

In sum, it is by no means easy to be a child in the DRC. Many children live below the poverty line, are malnourished, and are likely suffering from an infectious disease that could most probably be prevented with a vaccine. Moreover, warlike circumstances force these children to work in mines extracting the minerals necessary for the functioning of our “smartphones,” phones covered with the blood of those who die in these mines.

TWO MAJOR REFORMS: IMPACTS OF FREE PRIMARY EDUCATION AND FREE MATERNITY CARE IN THE DRC

Free primary education in the DRC:

Constitutional Basis: Article 43 of the 2006 Congolese Constitution stipulates that education is a right for all.

Implementation: Introduced progressively, it now applies to public primary education across the country.

Objective: Increase school enrollment, especially for children in vulnerable conditions, by eliminating tuition fees.

Challenges: Overcrowded classrooms, lack of infrastructure, distance to schools, and significant financing needs.

The introduction of free primary education in the DRC has positively and significantly increased access to education, bringing millions of children back to school and alleviating the financial burden on parents. However, it has also created major challenges, including insufficient funding, deteriorating infrastructure, overcrowding in public schools, hidden costs for families, negative impacts on the private sector, teacher salary reductions, strikes, overcrowded classes, declining quality of education, lack of teaching materials, and low teacher motivation.

The implementation of free public primary education has allowed millions of children previously had no access to school

to benefit from increased enrollment, retention, and participation in these schools.

These children have been able to access free education in public primary schools in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Overcrowded classrooms have emerged, new classrooms need to be built, desks need to be manufactured, teaching materials need to be provided, the free-education allowance for primary school teachers needs to be increased, and the quality of teaching and learning remains unsatisfactory. The truth is the following: "The budgetary allocations for education, although slightly increased, are insufficient to cover the cost of a high-performing and quality education system."

Positive impacts:

- **Increase in Enrollment:** Millions of children returned to school, significantly raising the enrollment rate.
- **Reduction in Dropouts:** Eliminating tuition fees facilitated access to education for many children, reducing school abandonment.
- **Financial Relief for Parents:** Families save on school fees, though hidden costs remain.

Challenges and Negative Impacts:

- **Insufficient Funding:** Allocated budgets do not cover needs, causing implementation problems.
- **Quality and Infrastructure:** Public schools are overcrowded, infrastructure is inadequate, and education quality suffers.
- **Impact on the Private Sector:** Closure of private schools, decreased enrollment, and reduced teacher salaries.
- **Hidden Costs:** Families still face other expenses (uniforms, supplies), which remain a barrier.
- **Demotivation and Strikes:** Low salaries in the public sector, despite free education, trigger social unrest.

This reform, initiated by the 2006 Constitution and progressively implemented by the government under President Félix Antoine Tshisekedi Tshilombo, alongside the introduction of free maternity care in several provinces in 2023, aims to improve access to these essential services despite implementation and funding challenges.

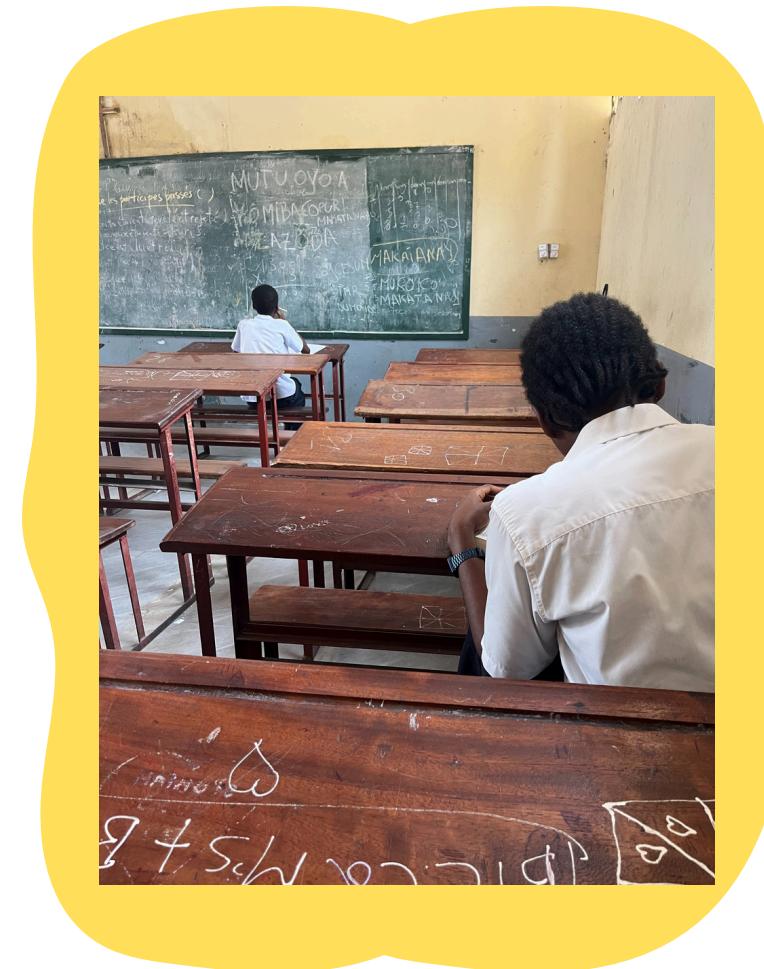
Free Maternity Care in the DRC:

Launch: Began in September 2023, initially in Kinshasa and a few provinces (South Kivu, Kasai-Oriental, Kongo Central).

Objective: A first step toward universal health coverage, reducing the financial burden on pregnant women.

Challenges: Hospitals report delays and partial payments from the state.

In summary, free services in the current Congolese context reflect efforts to make primary education and maternity care accessible to all, even if full implementation faces obstacles.



PROGRAMS IN PROSPECTIVE: RECEPTION, SUPPORT, REHABILITATION AND REINTEGRATION. PREVENTION, MONITORING, DEMOBILIZATION AND ASSISTANCE

Problematic

Extreme economic insecurity is one of the main causes of school dropout among many children. Even if families could forgo the income provided by “working children,” they often lack the resources to cover school costs. Multiple school fees (tuition, report card fees, digitization fees, extra-session fees, ordinary session fees, supplementary fees for teacher needs) are very high, due to the fact that most teachers are poorly paid by the State.

Consequently, the supply of teachers in the labor market is insufficient, as they are attracted to better-paying jobs. To attract teachers, schools try to offer more adequate salaries, asking families to pay higher additional school fees. Children whose families cannot afford these extra costs are denied access to basic education and thus deprived of their right to education.

How can the rehabilitation and reintegration of street children be achieved?

Targeted programs exist that can ensure effective rehabilitation and reintegration of street children. These programs focus on girls aged 3 to 17, from poor families, abused or accused of witchcraft by their parents, as well as refugees, abandoned children, or orphans. Children (in this context, girls) are picked up from the streets, villages, or refugee camps.

Certain missions conduct outreach to locate and support these girls, facilitating their family, social, and professional reintegration.

These programs are structured around four detailed phases: Reception, Support, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration, based on the belief that the family unit should remain the ideal environment for the education and physical, psychological, and moral development of children. Programs are tailored to each girl's personal history, making her a beneficiary of a holistic growth process.

The methodological approach covers nutrition, health, schooling, and vocational training. Promotion of cultural qualifications and practical skills—such as sewing, computer literacy, and commercial and administrative techniques—helps facilitate family and social reintegration.

To promote reintegration, organizations maintain constant contact with children's families and encourage a gradual relationship between them. After achieving this goal, organizations continue to provide material support to the girls, paying school fees and medical costs to economically assist families and prevent the girls from returning to life on the streets.

Families are indirect beneficiaries, receiving activities designed to empower them and prepare them to welcome the children back into the family environment.

Calls for Prevention, Verification, Demobilization, and Assistance

UN human rights experts have called for urgent measures to address serious violations committed against children in the DRC, in the context of escalating hostilities in North Kivu and South Kivu provinces (March 26, 2025 – Peace and Security).

“The recent surge in violence has led to indiscriminate attacks against civilians, massacres, and conflict-related sexual violence, violating international human rights and humanitarian law,” stated the experts in a joint communiqué. Health facility reports indicate an increase in rape cases, with children accounting for 30% of people treated. Humanitarian agencies identified more than 1,100 unaccompanied and separated children in North Kivu and South Kivu, while attacks on hospitals, humanitarian facilities, and civilian infrastructure have worsened the crisis. Schools have also been attacked, occupied by armed groups, or used as shelters for displaced populations.

“As offensives intensify, over 700,000 people, including 41% school-age children, have been displaced, and the number of people affected, including children, is rising at an alarming rate.

Most cases go unreported, likely representing only the tip of the iceberg,” warned the experts.

Prevent, Verify, Demobilize, and Assist

The recruitment and use of children in armed conflict remain an urgent concern and a serious violation of children’s rights in the DRC, intensifying as the conflict escalates and exposing children to devastating conditions, including injuries, abductions, deaths, and sexual violence.

“We are particularly concerned about reports of missing children, abducted or trafficked children, and children recruited for combat by all parties to the conflict,” the experts said. “Child-appropriate measures must be implemented immediately to protect them from these violations.”

According to the experts, these measures include:
Strengthening early warning and child protection risk prevention systems;
Developing rigorous age verification methods to prevent child recruitment;
Allowing access to military sites for child protection agencies to ensure no children are illegally recruited.

They also emphasized the need to demobilize recruited children and provide all necessary support for their physical and psychological recovery, as well as safe reintegration.

“We call on all parties to the conflict, including those directly engaged in hostilities and those in command positions within armed groups, to end these atrocities and respect their legal

obligations to protect civilians, particularly children,” they stated, noting ongoing contact with DRC authorities on these matters.

Experts Involved: Siobhán Mullally, Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children; Mama Fatima Singhateh, Special Rapporteur on the sale, sexual exploitation, and abuse of children; Tomoya Obokata, Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences.



Recommendations

To promote the enjoyment of children's rights in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), we recommend that particular attention be given to the following areas within the framework of the Universal Periodic Review:

To the Government of the Democratic Republic of Congo:

Take all necessary measures to enforce national legislation and international standards against discrimination of all groups in vulnerable conditions, and implement awareness-raising initiatives and professional training on the protection of children separated from their families, particularly street children.

Implement training programs and remedial solutions for law enforcement personnel to prevent further acts of violence and sexual abuse against these children.

Develop all necessary measures, including administrative ones, to enforce legislation protecting children from discrimination, theft, rape, and violence.

Increase budget allocations for children in the Democratic Republic of Congo and ensure their equitable distribution, both in the capital and in peripheral regions.

Strengthen government programs to support and assist the poorest families, prevent family breakdowns, and promote the reintegration of children into their families and local communities.

Regarding the rights of children subjected to economic and sexual exploitation:

1. Develop measures to address the root causes of theft, sexual violence, and sexual exploitation, particularly financial insecurity.
2. Implement appropriate measures to end impunity for perpetrators of sexual offenses against children and ensure that they are prosecuted.
3. Implement necessary measures to eliminate child labor, particularly in its worst forms, including the enforcement of laws regulating child labor and imposing appropriate sanctions on those who violate them.

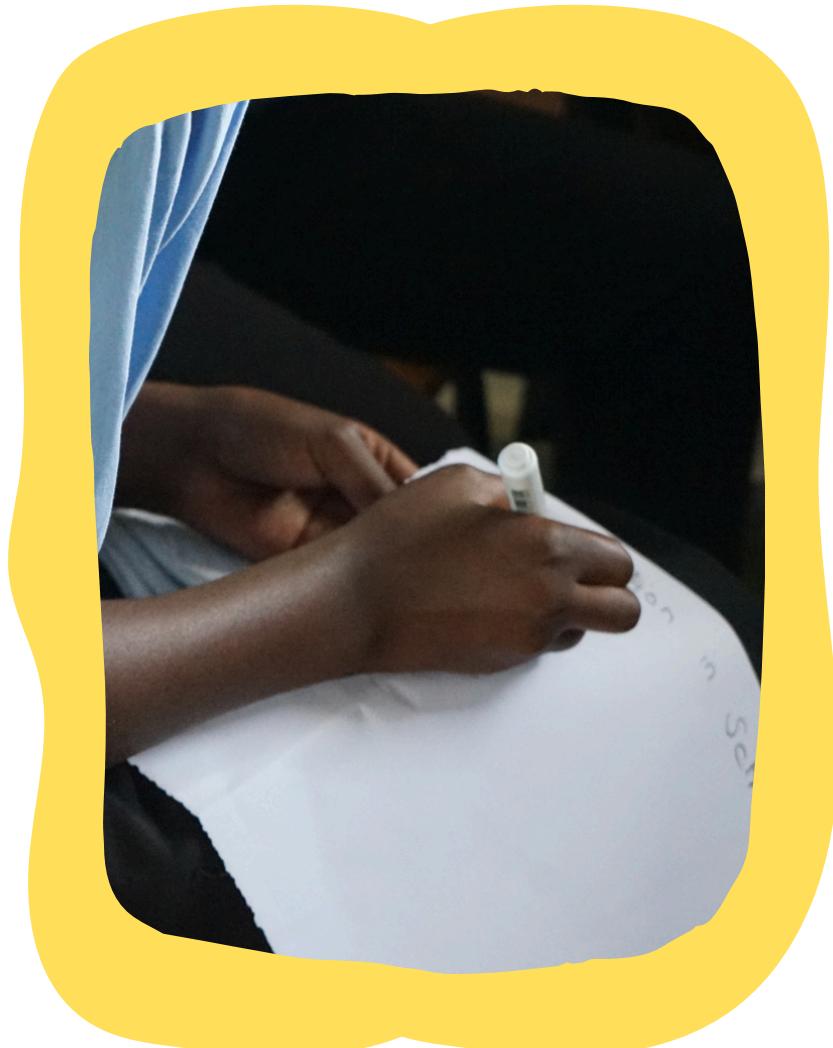
On Reception, Support, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration:

1. Strengthen collaboration with NGOs active on the ground to adopt best practices through the development, planning, and implementation of policies promoting children's rights.
2. Implement preventive measures specifically targeting girls under 10 years old, considering that after this age, the likelihood of successful rehabilitation and reintegration decreases.
3. Ensure state responsibility for the physical, psychological, and moral development of street children and internally displaced children, including the presence of a multidisciplinary team (educators, teachers, doctors, and psychologists) capable of identifying an individualized and comprehensive rehabilitation pathway for each child..

4. Prioritize improving primary school enrollment, access to universal health coverage, and prevention of school dropout to eliminate the worst forms of child labor.
5. Allocate sufficient human and financial resources for the rehabilitation and reintegration of street children and internally displaced children, so they can exercise their rights to education, universal health coverage, and protection.

Further Recommendations:

1. Strengthen and improve the data collection system, as well as the National Statistical Research Center, and use the collected data to assess progress in realizing children's rights and to contribute to policy development for the implementation of the Convention.
2. Develop and implement appropriate policies and programs for prevention, rehabilitation, and social reintegration of child victims, in accordance with the Declaration and Program of Action and the Global Commitment adopted by the World Congress against the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in 1996, 2001, and 2008, as well as the final documents of other international conferences on this issue.



Conclusion

As of January 2026, the situation of children's rights in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) remains one of the most critical in the world, marked by an alarming rise in violence and persistent humanitarian precarity.

Summary of Major Violations (2025–2026):

- **Explosion of sexual violence:** In 2025, approximately 35,000 cases of rape and sexual assault against children were reported. Support for survivors has decreased despite the intensification of conflicts in the East.
- **Recruitment of child soldiers:** The number of children recruited by armed groups (notably M23-AFC) is steadily increasing. At the start of 2025, reports of serious violations against children tripled within just one month.
- **Displacement crisis:** Around Goma, over 700,000 people were displaced, including a majority of children separated from their families, deprived of safe drinking water, and exposed to cholera, measles, and monkeypox outbreaks.
- **Economic exploitation:** Child labor in cobalt mines remains a major challenge, depriving thousands of young people of their right to education.

Progress and Legal Framework:

1. **Legislation:** The Law on Child Protection (Article 13) theoretically guarantees the right to life, education, and protection, placing obligations on parents and the State.

2. **Public Health:** Despite ongoing challenges, under-five mortality has gradually decreased, from 96.5 per 1,000 in 2015 to approximately 79 per 1,000 according to the latest SDG monitoring reports.

3. **Mobilization:** Programs for "inclusive protection" and initiatives such as UNICEF's "Child Reporters" aim to amplify young people's voices in decision-making processes.

The current situation in the DRC is described as the "second most severe crisis on the planet" for children. Despite legislative efforts and international advocacy, chronic insecurity in the East negates many social and health gains. The top priority for 2026 remains the cessation of hostilities and safe humanitarian access to areas controlled by armed groups to prevent statelessness and extreme violence.



Some of the rights under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, as elaborated in this publication, and not upheld in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

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