

V WORLD CONGRESS ON JUSTICE WITH CHILDREN

DECLARATION ON ADVANCING CHILD-CENTERED JUSTICE

Madrid, Spain

4 June 2025



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The 2025 World Congress on Justice With Children (hereinafter, the 2025 World Congress);

Having convened in Madrid, Spain, online, and at national level in various locations around the world through simultaneous satellite events, from 2–4 June 2025, with over 7,000 participants from 160 countries, including government officials, members of the judiciary, experts of law enforcement, representatives of United Nations (hereinafter, UN) agencies and programmes, other international and regional organisations, child rights expert bodies, civil society, non-governmental organisations, and organisations of professionals working with or for children and young people (hereinafter, participants), with the theme of 'Advancing Child-Centred Justice: Preventing and Responding to Violence Affecting Children in Child Justice Systems';

Having been organised by the Global Initiative on Justice With Children (a consortium of Terre des hommes, Penal Reform International, the International Association of Youth and Family Judges and Magistrates, and the Global Campus of Human Rights) and its multiple partners; hosted by the Ministry of Youth and Childhood of the Kingdom of Spain; with inputs from the Committee of Honour, the Scientific Committee, the Technical Support Committee, the Child and Youth Advisory Committee and with pro bono support from Baker McKenzie; under the auspices of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, the European Parliament and the patronage of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation;

Recalling the commitments laid out in the *Global Declaration on Justice With Children* (Mexico, November 2021) (hereinafter, the 2021 Declaration), *Paris Declaration* (France, May 2018), *Geneva Declaration* (Switzerland, January 2015), and *Lima Declaration* (Peru, November 2009) of the four previous World Congresses that focused on topics encompassing access to justice for all children: towards non-discriminatory and inclusive child justice systems, strengthening of child justice systems, disengagement from violent extremism, and restorative child justice;

Recognising, in particular, the leadership of children and youth gathered by the Child and Youth Advisory Group of the 2021 World Congress on Justice With Children, as highlighted in the *2021 Declaration*, and the contributions of children and young people in previous Congresses;

Reaffirming the concrete commitment to promote, protect, fulfil, respect, and guarantee children's human rights contained in the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (hereinafter, the UNCRC) and other relevant international child rights standards;

Noting the UN Economic and Social Council's *resolution 1997/30 of 21 July 1997 on the administration of [child] justice* (hereinafter, the ECOSOC resolution 1997/30), which recognises 'the need further to strengthen international cooperation and technical assistance in the field of [child] justice'; 'calls upon Member States to contribute financial and other resources to project activities designed to assist in the use of the Guidelines for Action [on Children in the Criminal Justice System]'; and establishes the Interagency Panel on Juvenile Justice;

Supporting the development and implementation of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's proposed *General Comment No. 27 on Children's Right to Access to Justice and to an Effective Remedy* as a significant opportunity to influence policy and practice to effectively ensure fair, appropriate, and child-centred justice;

Promoting the UN Secretary-General's *New Vision for the Rule of Law*, the *UN Global Study on Children Deprived of Liberty*, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime and the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children's joint *Strategy to End Violence Against Children 2023-2030*;

Promoting United Nations Children's Fund's *Reimagine Justice for Children* and its vision to protect children from detention and strengthen children's access to justice; and the *Disability Inclusive Child Protection Competency Framework for Strengthening the Social Service Workforce* to prevent and protect children with disabilities from all forms of violence and abuse;

Promoting the Roadmap for Action on Justice for Children Deprived of Liberty (2025–2030) as a coordinated, strategic framework to accelerate progress towards ending the deprivation of liberty of children, and to promote rights-based, non-custodial, and child-sensitive justice systems in line with international child rights standards and the recommendations of the *UN Global Study on Children Deprived of Liberty (2019)*;

Promoting the *Political Declaration on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women*, adopted during the sixty-ninth session of the Commission on the Status of Women, to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls; to accelerate gender equality efforts globally; and to respect the rights, equality, and empowerment of women and girls;

Supporting and upholding the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's *General Comment No. 24 on Children's Rights in the Child Justice System*, which states: 'Children with developmental delays or neurodevelopmental disorders or disabilities ... should not be in the child justice system at all, even if they have reached the minimum age of criminal responsibility. If not automatically excluded, such children should be individually assessed.';

Noting regional guidelines such as the *Council of Europe Child-friendly Justice Guidelines (2010)*, the *OECD Child-Friendly Justice Framework* and the *European Parliament resolution of 13 December 2023 on the situation of children deprived of liberty in the world (2022/2197(INI))*;

Recognising the importance of investing in children as a prerequisite for the world's achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, thereby ensuring justice for all, and particularly acknowledging the UN Sustainable Development Goal (hereinafter, SDG) 16.2: *End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children*, and SDG 16.3: *Promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all*; and

Acknowledging the key priorities of the Global Initiative on Justice With Children: Ending child detention; ensuring justice in times of crisis; reinforcing procedural safeguards for children in contact with the law; emphasising safe and ethical digital justice; understanding neuroscientific approaches in child justice systems; and promoting community empowerment;

Notes the following conceptual framework of child-centred justice as the basis for the worldwide promotion, further development, and implementation of child-centred justice.

Child-Centred Justice: A Conceptual Framework

1. **A growing global movement towards people-centred justice is proving to be wide-reaching and socially transformative.** This approach prioritises people and their experiences as the starting point for justice systems, institutions, and reforms. Placing children at the core of this people-centred justice movement and involving them meaningfully in the process is essential to securing the SDG 16+ ambition of equal access to justice for all by 2030. Ensuring justice for children is crucial to achieving justice for all.
2. **Child-centred justice ensures children are empowered and supported in order to prevent the emergence of challenges and to resolve them in an age-appropriate, inclusive, and accessible environment.** Effective practices of judicial and non-judicial avenues can support children in meaningfully participating in justice systems, claiming their rights, making complaints about violations of their rights, and seeking appropriate redress and remedies. While non-judicial avenues may be more accessible to or preferable for children, it is critical that states must be reminded of their fundamental responsibility to respect children's rights and facilitate their access to justice.
3. **Child-centred justice systems are essential to preventing harm and ensuring children's access to justice.** A child-centred justice system recognises children as rights-holders who are entitled to a range of judicial and non-judicial mechanisms. It entails transitioning from justice systems and services that merely involve or accommodate children to those inherently designed with their rights and well-being as a core focus.
4. **A broad interpretation of the meaning of child-centred justice is required to address the wide range of challenges children face and to remove barriers to their accessing justice.** Such challenges may include instances of violence and armed conflict in particular, exclusion, barriers to identity, discrimination, including gender-based discrimination, and deprivation of children's liberty. In light of this, the scope of child-centred justice includes:
 - a. Administrative, civil, criminal, economic, environmental, political, and social justice;
 - b. Judicial and non-judicial mechanisms, including courts and customary, religious, indigenous, community-based, or other justice systems;
 - c. Children as victims/survivors, witnesses, accused of an offence, interested parties, or those requiring intervention for their care, protection, health, or well-being;
 - d. Children initiating justice processes, or having processes initiated on their behalf, to seek remedies for the violation or denial of any of their rights as contained in the UNCRC and other relevant child rights standards;
 - e. Preventive measures delivered by, and complaints filed with, relevant public or other authorities, including those in education, healthcare, child care, child protection, social services, and other key services, as well as providers with responsibilities involving children; and
 - f. Other international or appeal mechanisms in instances where domestic justice systems fail to deliver appropriate processes and remedies. Children should have recourse to review or appeal procedures, including at the regional and/or international level. The *Optional Protocol to the UNCRC on a Communications Procedure* provides a last-resort redress for violations of children's human rights, including those within justice systems. It requires states and other stakeholders to

collaborate to build strong, accessible pathways to justice that begin where children experience injustice.

Further recognising the 2025 World Congress's focus on preventing and responding to violence affecting children in justice systems;

Following more than 120 pledges committing to transformative actions aimed at ending violence against children, which were made at the first Global Ministerial Conference on Ending Violence Against Children in Bogotá, Colombia, held on 7-8 November 2024; and

Amplifying the *Bogotá Call to Action* to promote children's human rights and well-being, ensure their legal protections, invest in evidence-based approaches, address online risks, reinforce collaborations, and implement relevant international instruments;

we, as the organisers, partners, and participants of the 2025 World Congress, adopt child-centred justice as a breakthrough approach to prevent, respond to, and end violence against children, in the manner set out below.

Child-Centred Justice: A Breakthrough Approach to End Violence Against Children

Preventive Interventions

Early intervention, community support, non-custodial measures, and social protection can help children avoid unnecessary contact with justice systems by addressing root causes and unmet needs within their communities. Integrating anti-violence education in schools and community services, along with training professionals in the child justice sector to equip them with the necessary skills for effective interaction with children, creates safer environments and reduces children's exposure to all forms of violence.

Enabling Environment

Children must be provided with accessible information and meaningful opportunities to participate in decisions that impact their lives. Supporting frontline professionals and equipping them with child-centred skills and values ensures respectful and empowering interactions with children that uphold their dignity and rights.

Systemic Reforms

Comprehensive legal and policy reforms that recognise the ongoing neurodevelopment and psychosocial development of children—scientific data and evidence show that this development continues well into the second decade of life—are imperative for establishing a child-centred justice system. Such a system should recognise children's evolving capacities and their right to understand what is happening to them and to participate meaningfully in the processes affecting them. Establishing specialised and accessible mechanisms helps deliver justice that truly responds to children's needs and experiences. These mechanisms should be implemented across all contexts involving children within criminal, civil, administrative, religious, and customary justice systems, where legal pluralism allows various legal systems to reinforce one another. Furthermore, they should extend to those initiating justice processes on behalf of children to seek remedies for any violations or denial of their rights.

Digital Justice

Child-centred justice needs to be revisited for the digital age—not only to adopt technology responsibly, but also to confront the harms it enables, from AI-driven exclusion and exploitation to

surveillance—ensuring that children's dignity, rights, and agency are embedded by design at the core of every action.

Marginalisation and Violence

Children in contact with justice systems face a heightened risk of violence, abuse, exploitation, and discrimination, especially during detention, transportation, and testimony. Tackling systemic inequalities and structural barriers is crucial to address the over-representation of marginalised children, including the girl child, families, and communities with unmet justice needs, when interacting with justice systems.

Child Rights Accountability

With an increase in armed conflicts and multi-crisis globally, millions of children are amongst the principal victims of serious violations of human rights and crimes, enduring unimaginable hardships that demand urgent and concerted action. Despite existing international and national frameworks aimed at protecting children, the persistence of grave violations, abuses, and crimes against and affecting children, including recruitment into armed groups, sexual violence, attacks on schools, unlawful detention, torture and ill-treatment, forcible displacement, etc., highlights that critical gaps exist. Accountability for violations, abuses, and crimes against or affecting children contributes to ending impunity, reinforces the rule of law, and maximises the prospects of long-term peace and security. Child-centred documentation and investigations must be prioritised within justice processes.

High-Level Commitment

Sustained high-level political commitment must prioritise prevention, rather than solely focus on resolution. Long-term economic and social preventive investments that are child-focused and gender-specific create the conditions for children, communities, and societies to thrive. Coordinated leadership across governments and society is required to effectively prevent violence against children and protect their rights. This Declaration calls for governments to further strengthen international cooperation and technical assistance in the field of child-centred justice and contribute resources to reactivate a child-centred justice interagency panel following the *ECOSOC resolution 1997/30*.

Accordingly, with this Declaration—in light of the significant challenges and injustices encountered by children worldwide—the 2025 World Congress submits that placing children at the heart of the international child-centred justice agenda is a matter of urgent concern and utmost importance for the realisation of SDG 16 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as well as for the reinforcement of the human rights and freedoms of all children.

Child-centred justice is a prerequisite for sustainable and intergenerationally equitable justice for all. It must be seen as a core obligation for all of humankind, underpinning the rule of law and demonstrating unconditional respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Endorsers



The **Global Initiative on Justice With Children** is a joint programme developed by a consortium of international organisations that organises the World Congresses as a Justice With Children Global Milestone and also engages and mobilises a global community of practitioners through the Justice With Children online platform. It aims to facilitate critical discussions and action-oriented problem-solving among professionals through an online and onsite space for reflection, exchange, and constant learning in the field of child justice.

The **World Congresses on Justice With Children** are designed to address the most current issues related to children in contact and/or conflict with the law, and it provides a dedicated and active space for children and youth, policy makers and justice system stakeholders, academics, civil society and UN representatives, and other experts, and practitioners to: (1) Promote fair and appropriate justice systems for and with children worldwide; (2) Provide space for professionals to exchange best practices, foster scientific cooperation, formulate policy recommendations, and raise awareness of justice for children; and (3) Support the operational implementation of international instruments and standards related to the rights of children and young people in contact with the law.

The **2025 World Congress on Justice With Children** focused on the critical need for justice systems to ensure children are at the centre of the justice systems and responding and preventing the escalating violence and systemic challenges that jeopardize their safety and development worldwide. Participants engaged in international and regional plenary sessions and action-oriented workshops consisting of panel discussions, certified trainings, and policy-oriented working group meetings. Within the overall theme of 'Advancing Child-Centred Justice: Preventing and Responding to Violence Affecting Children in Child Justice Systems', 7 sub-themes were prioritised during the World Congress:

- Child-centred justice policy reform;
- Preventing and responding to violence affecting children in the child justice system;
- Ending child detention;
- Justice in times of crises;
- Digital justice – procedural safeguards in child justice;
- Neuroscience approaches in child justice systems; and
- Community empowerment.

This **Declaration on Advancing Child-Centred Justice** was drafted by the World Congress Consortium, with inputs from the Committee of Honour, the Scientific Committee, the Technical Support Committee, the Child and Youth Advisory Committee, organising partners, and participants of the World Congress and its preparatory meetings.

For more information, visit www.justicewithchildren.org.

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