



Ahmed Bialily/Save the Children

**Adolescent Wellbeing  
Framework for Action:  
A critical opportunity  
to fulfil human rights  
and drive change**

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Save the Children



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# Executive summary

Today, around 1 billion adolescents live in developing countries and 145 million live in extremely poor households. Save the Children is committed to ensuring that every one of these children is supported and empowered to achieve their full potential and to fulfil their human rights, including their rights to survival, protection, development and participation.

Adolescence is one of the most critical stages of childhood, involving rapid physical, cognitive, emotional and social development.

It provides a window of opportunity to build on investments in two other key stages of childhood – the first 1,000 days and early childhood – to achieve a ‘triple dividend’ of positive change: improving adolescents’ wellbeing now, improving their future life chances, and improving outcomes for the next generation of children. However, despite their unbounded potential, adolescents also face increased risks of gender-based discrimination, violence, mental illness and exploitation.

Throughout this framework for action, there are examples of excellent work being carried out by Save the Children and other organisations with and for adolescents, which demonstrate the importance and impact of programming and advocacy focused on adolescents. These examples have been compiled in the accompanying **Catalogue of Key Resources** available [HERE](#). 



Joseph Raouf/Save the Children

**“All of us have the power to make change and we can help one another.”**

Bianca, 16 years old

## An urgent call to action

Notwithstanding our extensive experience and global expertise in programming and advocacy with and for adolescents, **an increased focus on adolescent wellbeing is vital** if we want to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and our 2030 breakthroughs, and support every adolescent child to survive, thrive and help to drive change.

This Adolescent Wellbeing Framework for Action sets out why we must increase our focus on adolescents, and how Save the Children can best support adolescents to fulfil their rights and maximise their wellbeing, which both fits with the human rights obligation at the heart of our mandate and also responds to a global call to action led by the United Nations.<sup>1</sup>

In turn, we call on Save the Children staff around the world to use this framework to ensure that programming and advocacy for adolescents is driven by five core principles: i) based on **human rights fulfilment**; ii) informed by **adolescent participation**; iii) **tailored** to meet adolescents’ unique needs; iv) designed to **tackle gender inequalities** and **improve social justice**; and v) focused on **supporting adolescents to catalyse positive change** at all levels.

## Driving change with and for adolescents

Guided by these principles, we will strengthen our support for adolescents. We will **amplify, respond to and advocate for and with adolescent voices**; we will **drive innovation and develop pioneering programming** with and for adolescents; we will **achieve results at scale** by prioritising those with the greatest needs and expanding our evidence base; and we will **build partnerships** that champion adolescents.

Adolescents are at a critical and vulnerable crossroads between childhood and adulthood. As we seek to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and build back better, we must ensure that their human rights are respected, protected, and fulfilled. Adolescents can be powerful advocates on the issues that matter most to them, and with the right support, they can be powerful catalysts for the change that we all want to see.



# Why focus on adolescents

## A critical window of opportunity

Adolescence is a critical stage of childhood, when many changes and transitions occur. It provides a second window of opportunity, following early childhood, to accelerate progress against poverty, inequality, discrimination and gender-based violence. It also provides a unique opportunity to have a positive impact on the trajectories of children's lives, by empowering them to fulfil their rights and future potential.

When considered through a life cycle lens, **adolescence is a unique and important life stage** characterised by intense physiological, cognitive, emotional and social development.<sup>2,3</sup> Neuroscientific evidence indicates that there is rapid neurological development during adolescence, second only to the first 1,000 days of life. There are also significant and rapid physiological changes during this period, and billions of neural networks that affect emotional skills and physical and mental abilities are reorganised.<sup>4</sup>

A growing body of scientific knowledge has improved our understanding of how experience and environment combine with genetics to shape the adolescent brain.<sup>5</sup> This underscores the unique capacity of adolescents for learning and indicates that **programmes and policies aimed at adolescents have a unique opportunity to impact the trajectory of children's lives.**<sup>6</sup>

Positive experiences during adolescence can help create new neural pathways, build new brain architecture, help adolescents to recover from adverse childhood experiences and heal from trauma, and enable them to develop into mature, successful adults.<sup>7</sup> Adolescent-centred programming can result in a **'triple dividend' of positive change for adolescents, "now, in their future adult life, and for the next generation of children"**.<sup>8</sup>

Further, adolescence is a **critical juncture to break stereotypical gender patterns and patterns of exclusion**, and to ensure that children's human rights are respected, protected, and advanced. For many, as they approach or enter early adulthood, adolescence is an age when gender norms further manifest themselves and when additional barriers to social inclusion and human rights fulfilment appear. This can be exacerbated when an adolescent has **multiple vulnerabilities that intersect or are compounded**, for example adolescents of colour, those who belong to the LGBTQI+ community, and those who have an impairment or disability.

However, adolescence is also a time where **children's unbounded potential and leadership** – both to assert their individual agency and to raise their voice for collective change – can be unleashed.

### Box 1: Who are adolescents?

Adolescents are defined by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as individuals aged **10–19 years old**.<sup>9</sup>

As cognitive, physical and emotional development varies greatly within this age bracket, it is important to differentiate between **very young adolescents** (10–14 years old) and **older adolescents** (15–19 years old).<sup>10,11</sup> Age disaggregation is key for planning purposes since adolescents' needs are not necessarily the same as those within the broader category of 'youth', even though there are significant overlaps.

Save the Children balances the statistical definition of adolescents with the reality that **adolescence is a stage of social development between childhood and adulthood that cannot be exactly limited by an age range**, given that the physical, psychological and cultural expressions of a specific age may differ quite substantially across contexts. As the WHO has noted, "age is often more useful for assessing and comparing biological changes (e.g. puberty), rather than the social transitions, which vary more with the socio-cultural environment."<sup>12</sup>

It is **important to consider the age, life and development stage of adolescents**. Examples of life stage considerations include adolescent parenting, child marriage, or taking on a breadwinner or caretaking role while others of the same age are still in school. Developmental considerations include disabilities that delay or impact cognitive, emotional and/or physical development.



Mohammed Awadh/Save the Children

### Box 2: Rights of adolescents

**Adolescents aged 10–18 years old are children by international law.** Their rights are enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which defines a child as "every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier."<sup>13</sup>

Under the UNCRC, their rights include, "recognition and respect for the dignity and agency of adolescents; their empowerment, citizenship and active participation in their own lives; the promotion of optimum health, wellbeing and development; and a commitment to the promotion, protection and fulfilment of their human rights, without discrimination."<sup>14</sup>



Tommy Trenchard/Save the Children

### Vulnerability at the crossroads

**Adolescents are at the crossroads between childhood and adulthood. Although this provides an opportunity to influence their life trajectory, it is also a time characterised by increased vulnerability. Physical growth, cognitive development, the onset of puberty, and sexual maturity can come with restrictions, social norms and risks, as well as gender-based discrimination and bias that limit personal rights and freedoms of adolescents.**

This is particularly true for those **most impacted by inequality and discrimination**, such as adolescents living with disabilities, those that identify as LGBTQI+, ethnic minorities, migrants and displaced adolescents, and those facing extreme poverty. Such **vulnerabilities are often gendered** as different societal norms and expectations on girls and boys in this age group intersect with other factors, such as family roles and responsibilities.

As discriminatory gender norms are internalised and reinforced by girls, boys and their families, **girls are often disproportionately marginalised and vulnerable**. For instance, out-of-school rates are far higher among adolescent girls of upper secondary school age than among younger cohorts, affecting their chances for life-long learning and social-emotional development. Although the world is moving towards gender parity in out-of-school rates, inequalities persist at regional and country level.<sup>15</sup>

Adolescent girls with disabilities encounter multiple intersecting disadvantages, reinforced by discriminatory gender norms and practices that become entrenched during adolescence.<sup>16</sup> They also face attitudinal, environmental, structural, institutional and communicational barriers, among others.

Adolescent girls are more vulnerable to different forms of malnutrition including undernutrition (wasting, stunting and being underweight), micronutrient deficiency (especially iron, iodine and vitamin A deficiencies) and obesity.<sup>17</sup>

In all regions except South Asia and East Asia, adolescent girls are more likely to be overweight or obese than underweight,<sup>18</sup> which affects their own health and wellbeing and that of the next generation.

Pregnant adolescents and adolescent mothers are particularly vulnerable as they tend to have less access to information and relevant services. An estimated 21 million girls aged 15 to 19 years old – and another 2 million girls under the age of 15 – become pregnant each year, predominantly in low- and middle-income countries.<sup>19</sup> When an adolescent girl becomes pregnant before she is physically or emotionally ready, her own growth and development is jeopardised, as well as that of her future child. Her nutritional needs are greater than for an adult pregnant woman<sup>20</sup> and competition for nutrients between the young mother and the foetus can lead to a reduction in linear growth for the mother, and foetal growth restriction for the infant.

### Box 3: Adolescents with disabilities: when challenges intersect

Adolescents with disabilities in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) face multiple and interlinked challenges in realising their full capabilities in areas including education and learning; health, sexual and reproductive health and nutrition; mental health and psychosocial wellbeing; bodily integrity and freedom from violence; voice and agency; and economic empowerment.

The Overseas Development Institute (ODI) report *'Adolescents with disabilities: enhancing resilience and delivering inclusive development'*<sup>21</sup> recommends eight areas for action:



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- 1 Support adolescent capabilities and transitions through an integrated package of disability-tailored support while ensuring inclusion with their peers.
- 2 Conduct disability analysis to gain further understanding on the needs of adolescents with disabilities.
- 3 Work on ensuring that delivered services are accessible and inclusive for adolescents with disabilities.
- 4 Address intersecting disadvantages, to leave no adolescent behind.
- 5 Engage and support caregivers of adolescents with disabilities.
- 6 Create self-help groups among adolescents with and without disabilities to reinforce peer-to-peer support.
- 7 Tackle data and evidence gaps to improve evidence informed policy development and programming based on age-, gender- and impairment-disaggregated data and using the [Washington Group Questions](#)
- 8 Improve governance and accountability among policymakers and donors, including ensuring a multi-sectoral response and coordination among government agencies and cross-referrals to complementary services.



Harrison Thame/Save the Children

**Adolescents often face significant human rights violations.** They are typically exposed to **higher levels of violence**, which can take place in the home, at school, in their community, at work, or online.<sup>22</sup> Poverty, conflict and living in fragile contexts can exacerbate this risk of violence, which may also take on new forms in adolescence. Adolescent girls in urban and rural areas often experience a significant increase in sexual harassment on the streets and on public transport, while travelling to and from school or work. Meanwhile, the risk of violence is increased for adolescent boys who may be exposed to gang violence, recruitment by armed forces or groups, or sexual exploitation.

Other risks such as child marriage<sup>23</sup> and adolescent pregnancy can lead to poor health outcomes.<sup>24</sup> **Half of all cases of mental illness are estimated to begin by 14 years old**, although they are often undetected and untreated, and suicide is the third leading cause of death in 15 to 19-year-olds globally.<sup>25</sup>

Adolescents require services that are respectful and responsive to their needs and rights and take into account that adolescents are a diverse group. That is often not the case and frequently, **adolescents fall between the cracks of initiatives designed for younger children or for young adults** (for example, gender-based violence services designed for adult women, or social protection systems designed for adults).

While adolescents go through a period of intense mental, emotional and bodily change, they face barriers such as a lack of knowledge about the changes that affect them and the services that are available to them; financial or physical barriers to accessing services; restrictive laws; restrictions on movement; stigma and fear of being seen seeking services; and judgmental attitudes of service providers as well as family, peers and community members. **All these factors may restrict the ability of adolescents to seek life-saving services and information.** Adolescents' self-confidence and self-esteem could also be affected by social and gender norms and a lack of awareness about their needs and rights.

**Adolescents are one of the most affected and yet also one of the most neglected groups in humanitarian crises.** Even when programmes are designed with and for adolescents, they are not always integrated with other programmes and support. Many adolescents miss out on existing programmes because they are forced to stay indoors for their safety, or forced to work to provide income for their family. Where internally displaced person (IDP) or refugee camps have restrictions on working, adolescents may be forced to stay outside the camp apart from their family to maintain access to any potential income. They have few opportunities to learn skills or trades that could enhance their livelihood prospects. As a result, many adolescents endure economic and sexual exploitation to meet their (and their families') survival needs or are forced to migrate unsafely in search of safety and economic opportunities.

Adolescents with disabilities are even more at risk when the support systems around them disappear. When institutions are weakened in conflict, they are more directly exposed to financial hardship, are at risk of violence and exploitation (including sexual exploitation) and engagement with armed groups. **Conflict and crises often mean that adolescents lose their support structure while being forced to take on greater responsibilities.** Boys and girls may be married off too young or they may resort to harmful coping strategies, risky and unsafe sexual practices, drug and alcohol misuse, violent behaviour or self-harm as a means of escape.

However, **adolescents can be powerful agents of change** when it comes to peacebuilding, changing societal norms and **championing the need for action on global issues such as climate change.** When adolescents' rights are respected, protected and fulfilled, rather than restricted or rolled back, it can lead to positive impacts for them, their families, their communities and for wider society.

## An imperative for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

**Today, there are 1.2 billion adolescents worldwide and this number is expected to rise over the coming decades. Nearly nine out of ten adolescents live in developing countries and 145 million live in extremely poor households.**<sup>26,27</sup>

A focus on improving the wellbeing of adolescents is critical if we are to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). There is a consensus that **age, as well as gender, disaggregation of data is necessary** to make sure that adolescents are made visible and effectively supported in our common goal to meet the SDG targets.<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, **adolescent and youth leaders have driven global movements in areas critical to the achievement of the SDGs** – most notably climate change, the right to education, freedom from violence, health and mental health – illustrating their ability to drive positive change on our most pressing global issues. In addition, **adolescents who have taken action and spoken out on issues of national and local concern have proven to be effective advocates and human rights defenders on a range of issues**, including adapting and responding to the COVID-19 crisis.

For instance, youth-led organisations created virtual learning and experience-sharing platforms, to help other adolescents maintain a safe learning environment, stay active and maintain their mental health and wellbeing during the pandemic. Others conducted COVID-19 prevention awareness programmes for vocational schools or engaged with other young entrepreneurs to respond with innovative solutions, such as producing personal protective equipment (PPE).<sup>29</sup>

These are examples of **turning a ‘youth bulge’** (where adolescents and young adults constitute a large share of the population) **into a ‘demographic dividend’**.<sup>30</sup> More adolescents, including those who are typically underrepresented in public discourse, possess the potential to become ‘change agents’ with support.

Save the Children **works with and for adolescents who are the drivers and owners of solutions** to specific problems related to the SDGs, to support and empower them with the knowledge, skills, and technical support they need to be agents of the change they want to see.



Pim Ras/Save the Children

# A global call to action

Save the Children welcomes the increased global focus on adolescents as a distinct cohort of children with unique needs and supports the United Nations-led global call to action on adolescent wellbeing, which seeks to mobilise the international community to ensure that adolescents can fulfil their human rights.

Working with several youth networks, adolescent-serving organisations and global coalitions, the United Nations H6+ Technical Working Group on Adolescent Health and Wellbeing has developed a definition of adolescent wellbeing and a framework that outlines the five interrelated areas that underpin adolescent wellbeing.

Adolescent wellbeing is defined as when, **“adolescents have the support, confidence, and resources to thrive in contexts of secure and healthy relationships, realising their full potential and rights.”**

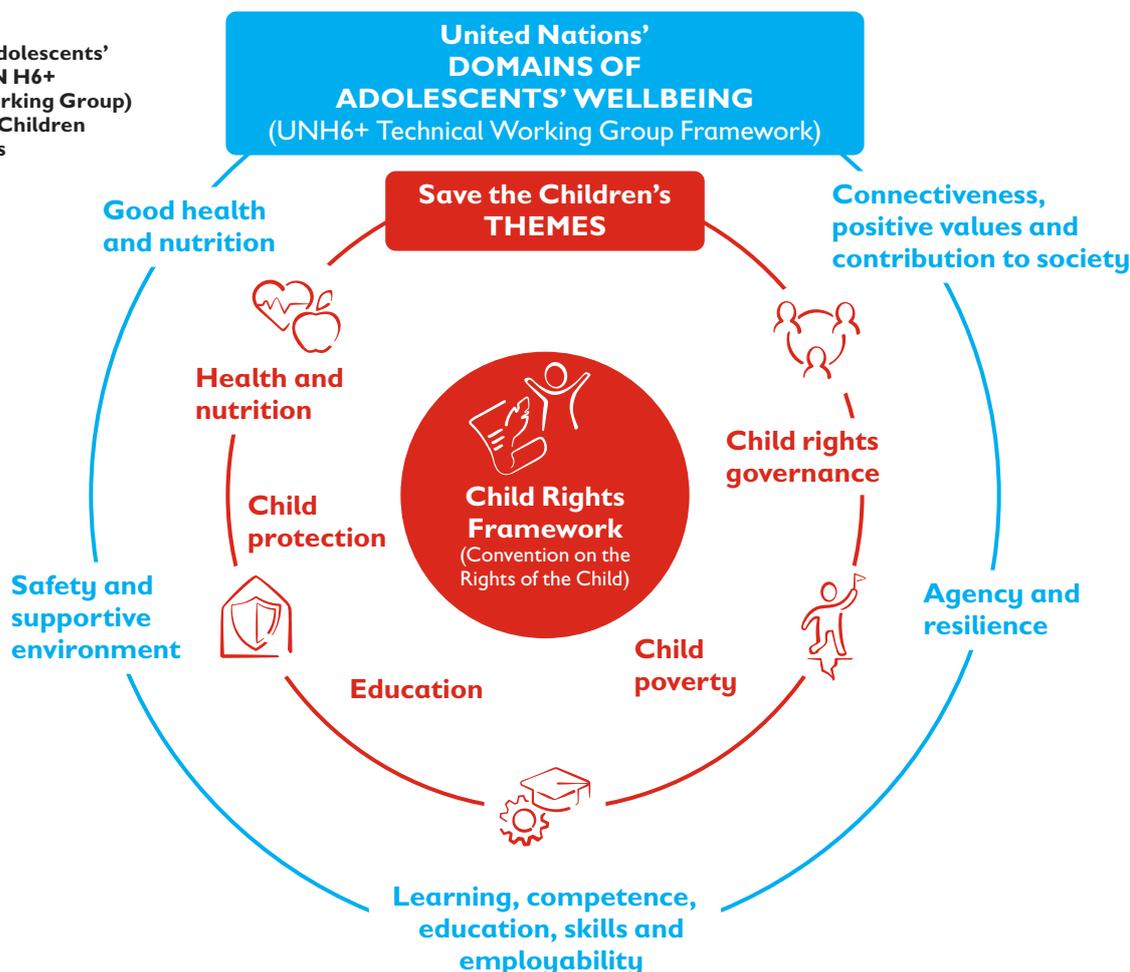
The five interrelated domains that underpin adolescent wellbeing in the UN’s framework are:

- 1 Good health and optimum nutrition
- 2 Connectedness, positive values and contribution to society
- 3 Safety and a supportive environment
- 4 Learning, competence, education, skills and employability
- 5 Agency and resilience<sup>31</sup>

Aligned with the child rights framework in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and largely aligned with Save the Children’s core themes (see Figure 1), these five domains support both subjective and objective wellbeing – where ‘subjective wellbeing’ refers to personal experiences and self-fulfilment,<sup>32</sup> and ‘objective wellbeing’ relates to the material resources and social attributes in a person’s environment.

**Save the Children supports global efforts to increase the focus on human rights fulfilment of adolescents and ensure a multi-dimensional response.** This Adolescent Wellbeing Framework for Action sets out how Save the Children can best support adolescents to fulfil their rights and maximise their wellbeing, in line with the global call to action.

**Figure 1**  
Domains of adolescents’ wellbeing (UN H6+ Technical Working Group) and Save the Children global themes



# Save the Children's commitment to adolescents

**Addressing adolescent wellbeing with and for those who are most at risk, is a human rights obligation that lies at the heart of Save the Children's mandate. This Adolescent Wellbeing Framework for Action aims to address the developmental, contextual and systemic factors that enable or prevent adolescents from advancing and fulfilling their rights, with a particular focus on the most marginalised adolescents.**

Save the Children has extensive global expertise and experience working with and for adolescents across different thematic areas, cross-cutting areas and settings, in our policy, advocacy and programming work. A selection of best practices, experiences and lessons learned can be found in the accompanying **Catalogue of Key Resources**. Links are provided throughout the framework.



For examples of Save the Children's **Common Approaches that relate to adolescents** click [HERE](#)



For examples of programmes, approaches and tools **with and for adolescents** click [HERE](#)

## Enabling Save the Children's 2030 breakthroughs

**Save the Children wants to achieve three overarching global breakthroughs for children by 2030: to ensure that all children survive, learn and are protected.** Although focused primarily on younger children, Save the Children's 2030 Ambition **Closing the Gap** highlights **adolescents as one of the groups of children who face the worst outcomes in terms of rights fulfilment and require special attention.**

In addition, evidence shows that breakthroughs in early childhood – such as reduced mortality of children under five from preventable diseases, and the attainment of basic literacy skills in primary school – risk being undermined, stalled, or rolled back during adolescence.<sup>36</sup> This increases the risk of perpetuating the intergenerational cycle of inequality and exclusion to future generations.

To enable the 2030 breakthroughs, this Adolescent Wellbeing Framework for Action commits to the following:



**Survive:** Unlike the continued reduction in mortality seen in younger children, the reduction in adolescent mortality has stalled in recent years.<sup>37</sup> Save the Children will seek to reduce adolescent mortality and the increased risk for infant mortality among children with adolescent mothers, **by seeking systemic shifts in responding to adolescents' physical and mental health and wellbeing.**

For example, by **addressing adolescent malnutrition** (high rates of anemia, under- and overnutrition), **adolescent mental health issues, and adolescent sexual and reproductive health and rights.**

Save the Children's adolescent sexual and reproductive health and rights (ASRHR) programming and **My Sexual Health and Rights common approach** includes access to knowledge and services to reduce early pregnancy, unsafe abortions and neonatal and maternal mortality (particularly high among young mothers in poverty). Additionally, we will **advocate for health, protection, education and social protection systems to be more responsive to adolescent needs, and work to shift entrenched community norms and stigma** that prevent adolescents from seeking the services they have a right to receive. As we seek to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, it is key to focus not only on saving lives but also saving future life trajectories, which may otherwise be constricted beyond recognition or repair.



## LEARN

**Learn:** Contrary to previous belief, early childhood is not the only period of significant brain development; so is adolescence. Yet, during the adolescent years, school drop-out rates increase in many countries and contexts, worsened by gender norms and marginalisation, undermining learning outcomes in the early childhood years. Poor health and nutrition, including hunger, malaria and anemia also prevent girls and boys from attending and fully participating in school. Pursuing meaningful learning throughout the adolescent years is not only a right of every child but can be a critical enabler for adolescents' future life trajectories and those of their children.

Wellbeing is a key outcome of Save the Children's **Quality Learning Framework**, along with literacy and numeracy outcomes. Save the Children commits to **build on investments in early learning and support efforts to ensure learning opportunities are tailored to adolescents' unique needs and circumstances**, so they can develop their full potential.

Through our focus on **social emotional learning (SEL) across the life cycle**, including the **Life Skills for Success common approach**, we support adolescents to develop **foundational skills, competencies, behaviours, attitudes and personal qualities that complement formal training or learning** and are transferrable.

Our **School Health and Nutrition** programmes, based on the internationally recognised **FRESH Framework**, ensure that **school age children have access to health and nutrition services and education**, and that **schools have policies and WASH facilities that help keep children in school and promote learning and wellbeing**, including support for girls to attend and participate in school during menstruation. Additional efforts to keep adolescents engaged in education include mental health and psychosocial support integrated with education, child-sensitive social protection (for example, school bursaries), and preventing unwanted pregnancies that may lead to school dropout.

Harrison Thane/Save the Children



Joseph Raouf/Save the Children



Mohamed Najel/Save the Children




## BE PROTECTED

**Be protected:** Violence against adolescents is a major barrier to the fulfilment of their human rights and is worsened by poverty, during conflict, and in times of crisis.

Many girls and young women are affected by a '**shadow pandemic**' of gender-based violence, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, according to global estimates, school closures widen learning inequalities and disproportionately hurt vulnerable adolescents. Typically, adolescent girls are assigned an increased share of domestic responsibilities while schools are closed. This heightens the risk that they will not return to education once schools reopen, which reduces their future earning potential and increases their risk of child, early or forced marriage, and teen pregnancies.<sup>39</sup> Rates of violent adolescent deaths are increasing: homicide accounts for two-thirds of violent adolescent deaths globally, with particularly high prevalence seen in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Save the Children is committed to **strengthening child protection, gender-based violence (GBV) and mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) response services** to ensure that adolescents can find the support they need to recover from violence. Our common approaches support adolescents, families, schools and communities to identify and shift harmful social norms that support harmful practices.

There is also work underway in Save the Children to **prevent and respond to self-harm and suicide among children, adolescents and caregivers**, through the recently developed Suicide Intervention Protocols. A key aspect of Save the Children's work also includes supporting a **transition from harmful to decent work** and the realisation of adolescents' rights as economic actors.



# Guiding principles for working with and for adolescents

While the type and focus of programmes, policy and advocacy work will differ across contexts, **these five core principles will guide all Save the Children’s work with and for adolescents:**

1



**Human rights** fulfilment is at the core of all adolescent-focused support

2



The right of **adolescent participation** is incorporated in all of Save the Children’s work and we must utilise it to inform effective programming and policy

3



Programming and policy are tailored to the **unique needs of adolescents** according to gender, ages, abilities/ disabilities, development and life stages

4



Adolescence is a window to transform **gender inequalities** and improve **social justice**

5



Change with and for adolescents is catalysed at all levels of the **socio-ecological model** – including adolescents, families, peers, communities, services, systems, laws and policies



## 1 Human rights fulfilment is at the core of all adolescent-focused support

- **Human rights fulfilment for adolescents** requires a specific focus on age, development, life experiences and life stage dimensions of protecting and advancing human rights.
- **A systemic human rights-based approach** means we must seek to change and/or to strengthen support systems for adolescents at multiple levels, within the social systems in their immediate surroundings (their peers, family, community, schools, local services) and societal systems (laws, norms, gender patterns and their manifestations, e.g. work on better engagement with men and boys to become allies for gender equality).
- **Child rights programming<sup>33</sup> as the foundation** seeks to overturn human rights violations while also strengthening the capacity of relevant duty-bearers to meet their obligations.
- **Strengthened capabilities of adolescents, their caregivers and peers to claim their rights** and hold others to account for improved human rights outcomes – particularly for adolescents most at risk – is at the centre of all programming and policy work.



## 2 The right of adolescent participation is incorporated in all of Save the Children's work and we must utilise it to inform effective programming and policy

- **Adolescents, as rights-holders, are in charge of their own life trajectories**, as well as the decisions that affect them – from early childhood into adulthood.
- **Each adolescent needs to feel safe, to value themselves** as well as others in their environment, and to **develop a sense of connectedness** that will be beneficial for their own growth and/or contributions to society.
- **Adolescents are supported to lead change** in ways that are appropriate to their own situation and context – whether this is leadership among their peers in their community, or leadership of their own life choices.
- **Adolescents are supported in their access to information**, which needs to be made accessible and inclusive for everyone, that guides them in their choices and helps them build **transferable life skills**.
- **Adolescents play an active role in all decisions that affect their lives.** Adolescent-led and informed advocacy is not only a right defined in the UNCRC (article 12), but it is also critical for systemic shifts to take root and benefit all, including those who are most affected by inequality and discrimination.
- Adolescents play an active role in Save the Children programming and advocacy. To ensure quality, **all participation must be transparent, voluntary, adolescent friendly, supported by trained adults, respectful, inclusive, accountable, safe and relevant** to adolescents.



For examples of programmes and tools for **adolescent participation** click [HERE](#)



### 3 Programming and policy are tailored to the **unique needs of adolescents** according to gender, ages, abilities/disabilities, development and life stages

- **Children’s physical, psychological and social development can vary greatly between the ages of 10 and 19, as can their roles and responsibilities in life.** Many vulnerable adolescents are forced to take on adult roles at an early age, as demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic, when many girls had to take care of siblings/other children, elderly family members and those with disabilities. A tailored, three-pronged approach is needed, to take into account the **specific characteristics** of an adolescent’s **age, development and life stage** as a foundation for their continued life trajectory.
- **Previous human rights gains may be at risk of being rolled back** for some groups of adolescents, while for others, adolescence will be an **opportunity to catch-up and redress earlier life vulnerabilities** through building new skills and agency. Programming and policy should assess how rights fulfilment is affected by both the age and the specific life stage of adolescents.
- **Positive gender norms and support to navigate the transition through puberty**, with access to sexuality education and services to ensure safe and healthy growth and development, is critical. Attention is also needed on **very young adolescents’** sexual and reproductive health and rights, which may otherwise be overlooked, but which may affect later life choices and trajectories.

 For examples of programmes and tools that are **tailored by age and life stage** click [HERE](#)

**“I never understood this discrimination between men and women, boys and girls. Do we want a society where girls have no education and are forced to get married when they are young? Equality should not be an insult. On the contrary, it is a sign that a society is functioning with strong foundations.”**

Raghad, 16 years old



### 4 Adolescence is a window to transform **gender inequalities** and improve **social justice**

- **Systemic gender inequalities become entrenched and embedded during adolescence**, so it is a critical opportunity to address and reverse such inequalities.
- **Gender stereotypes affect negatively all adolescents, regardless of their gender identity. However, girls and adolescents with LGBTQI+ identities often end up disproportionately marginalised due to social norms.** These can result in early and forced marriage; sexual and gender-based violence; lack of access to sexual and reproductive health services (or inaccessible/non-inclusive services) contributing to early childbearing; and harmful cultural practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM). Such **social norms may confine girls’ opportunities**, including their access to education, with gender gaps widening in both school drop-out and completion rates in the late teens. Girls and young women also do a disproportionate amount of unpaid care and domestic work, which curbs their economic potential.
- **Many gender inequalities intersect with other forms of marginalisation and exclusion**, including those relating to living conditions, sexual orientation (LGBTQI+), physical, psychosocial and mental disability, membership of ethnic minority communities, migrant and refugee status, and extreme poverty.
- **Gender transformative programming seeks to change the underlying gender norms that drive inequality** through critical reflection and dialogue, involving the adolescents themselves.
- Save the Children will make sure that **gender and power analysis** specifically looks at gender as a variable affecting adolescent wellbeing, and the underlying patterns of power (which are often gendered in nature) that manifest themselves in adolescence and affect life choices and prospects, with a closer focus on also analysing any disability of adolescents.
- Save the Children will ensure the **consistent application of the Humanitarian Gender and GBV Minimum Actions**, which include Girl Friendly Spaces, in all humanitarian responses.

 For examples of programmes and tools to **transform gender inequalities** click [HERE](#)



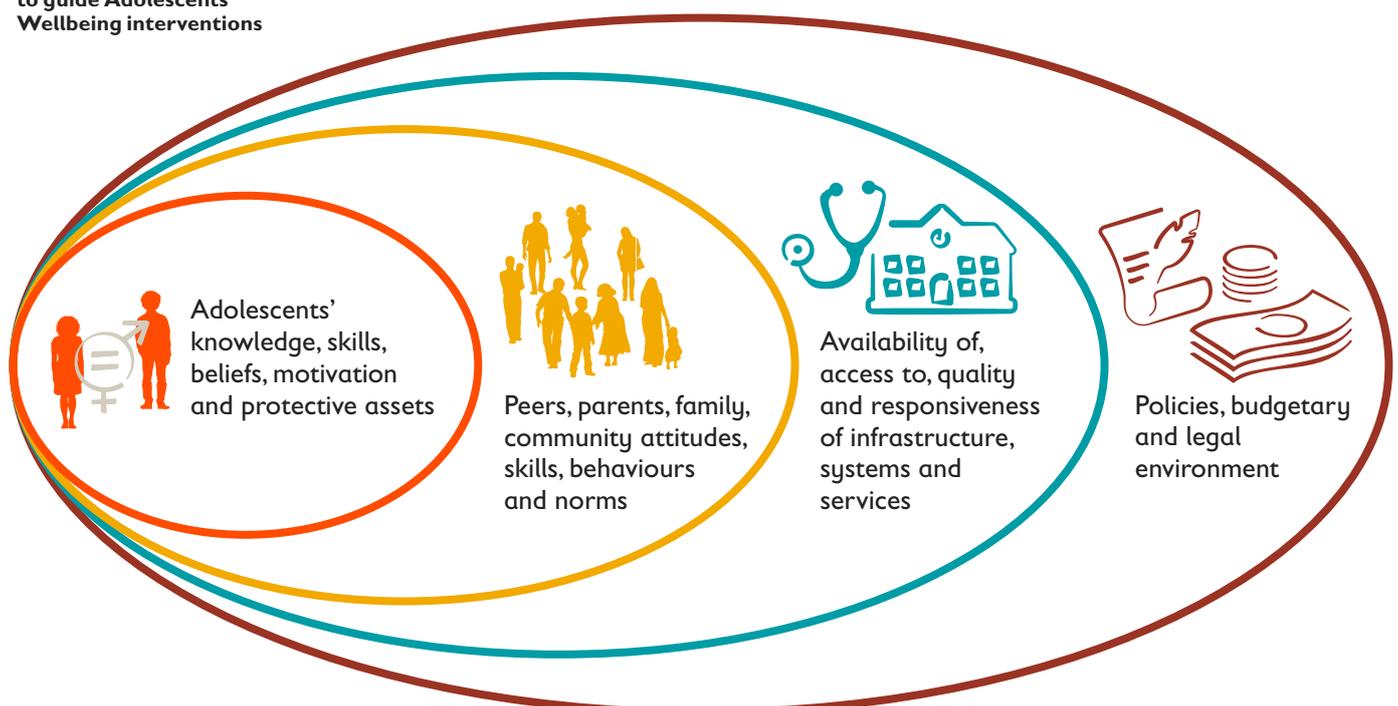
## 5 Change with and for adolescents is catalysed at all levels of the **socio-ecological model** – including adolescents, families, peers, communities, services, systems, laws and policies

- A socio-ecological model shows how **social, economic, and cultural factors interlink at multiple levels to increase risks and/or enable opportunities for adolescents to assert their agency and develop their full potential.** A socio-ecological framing looks at how a person's immediate and most influential micro-system (often their family or for adolescents, frequently their peers) is embedded within, interacts with and is conditioned by other institutionalised systems (such as the neighbourhood, school, workplace, and public service provision).<sup>34</sup>
- As an operational principle, Save the Children's work with and for adolescents will **advocate for systems that are responsive and accountable to adolescents.** This requires a multi-level understanding of how specific groups of adolescents are impacted by the way these societal systems work to either catalyse or impede their positive development. **It is critical to ensure that concrete investments are made and actions are taken to change system dynamics,** in order to catalyse positive change for adolescents.
- **All work must be tailored, inclusive and accessible to adolescents with and without disabilities, and to the contexts and circumstances in which adolescents live.** This includes consideration of how adolescents interact with their peers and their community, and the particular needs of all adolescents during puberty and in other aspects of their physical, psychological and social development.
- **Social protection that is child- and gender-sensitive as well as shock-responsive (including child and maternal grants, healthcare, education fee waivers) must be promoted as a foundation to provide security and resilience against shocks and as a key connector for **integrated approaches** across the life cycle for the poorest and most marginalised groups of adolescents.**<sup>35</sup>



For examples of programmes and tools that incorporate the **socio-ecological context** click [HERE](#)

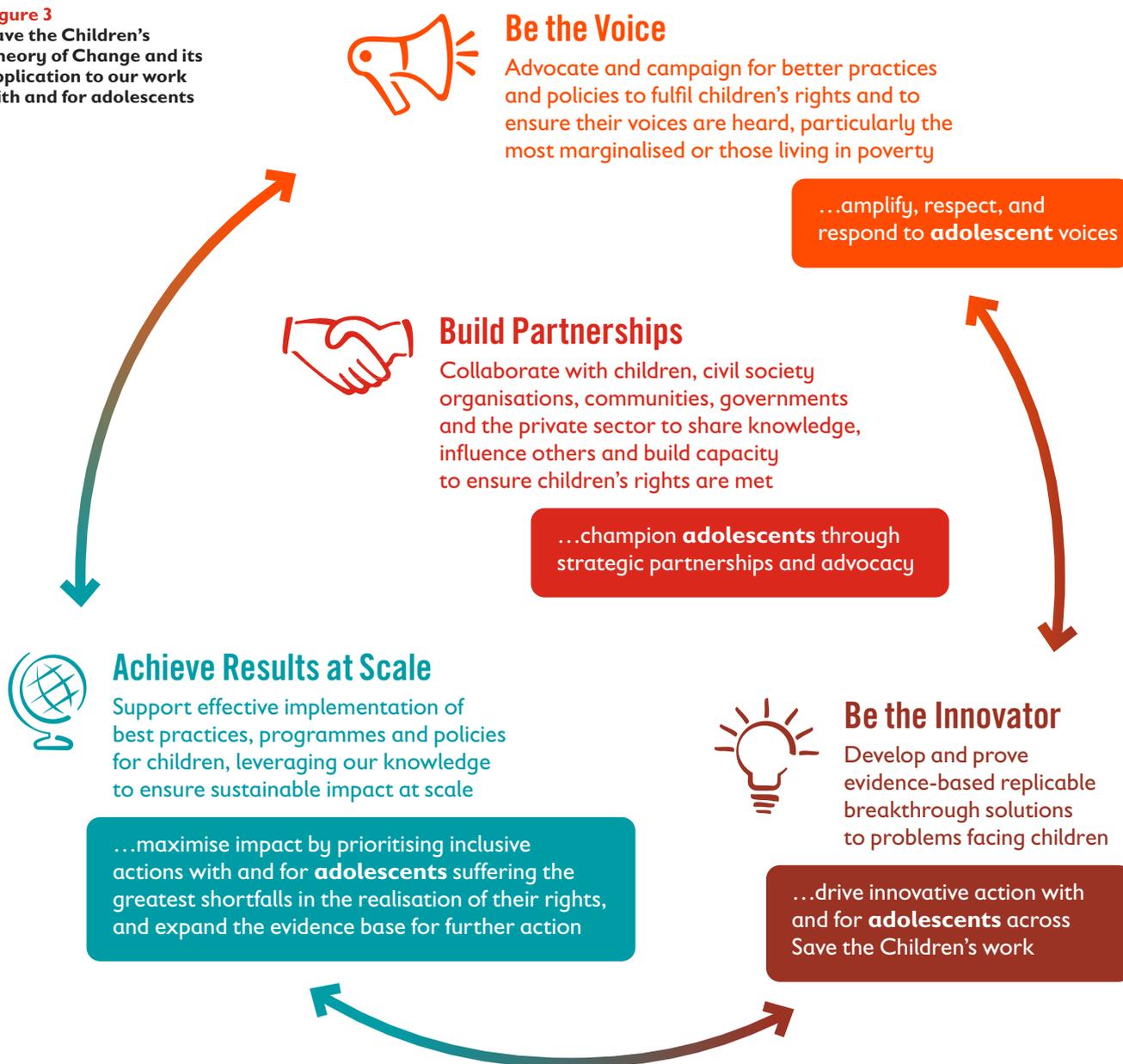
**Figure 2**  
Socio-ecological model  
to guide Adolescents  
Wellbeing interventions



# The change we want to see

In keeping with Save the Children's overarching breakthrough areas and theory of change, and guided by the five core principles set out in this framework for action, Save the Children will strengthen our support for adolescents. We will amplify, respect and respond to adolescent voices; drive innovation and develop pioneering programming with and for adolescents; achieve results at scale by prioritising those with the greatest needs and by expanding our evidence base; and build partnerships that champion adolescents.

**Figure 3**  
Save the Children's Theory of Change and its application to our work with and for adolescents





## Be the Voice ... amplify, respect, and respond to adolescent voices



Yagazie Emezi/Save the Children

- To best support adolescents' agency, development and wellbeing, Save the Children will ensure adolescent leadership through adolescent participation. **Adolescents must play an active role in the identification, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of Save the Children's work.** This includes collecting, analysing and using information gathered to enhance their own capabilities in claiming their rights, which is considered an essential element of psychosocial approaches and wellbeing and one of the core principles in the IASC Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings.<sup>40</sup> Save the Children will support this by using **participatory research and evaluation** methods and **ensuring that adolescents have the tools to effectively participate, and are protected and safe when doing so.** That includes accommodating for the safe participation of all adolescents, including those with disabilities, through the provision of safe spaces including Girl Friendly Spaces.
- **Advocacy by Save the Children must be adolescent led and informed,** and such work conducted on behalf of adolescents must **support adolescents to advocate for themselves and their peers,** including the most marginalised and directly include adolescents at appropriate opportunities.
- Save the Children will **advocate for adolescents as a distinct group** when it comes to age and life stage, with unique requirements to respect, fulfil and protect their human rights (including economic, social and cultural rights as well as civil and political rights). **Adolescent-led social movements will be recognised and supported.**
- Save the Children will **call out when and under what circumstances adolescent rights are being stalled, slowed down, or rolled back.** To do so, Save the Children **child rights situation analysis (CRSA)** will include an adolescence wellbeing lens to provide an accurate contextual assessment.
- Institutionally, Save the Children will seek gender-balanced **adolescent representation in Save the Children International and in our national member organisations,** to engage in all of the organisation's decision-making, for example through adolescent board membership.



For examples of actions and tools to **amplify, respect and respond to adolescent voices** click [HERE](#)



## Be the innovator ...drive innovative action with and for adolescents across Save the Children's work

Harrison Thane / Save the Children



- Save the Children will ensure that the **indivisibility of children's rights is reflected by more integrated programming**. Save the Children will encourage integrated programming for adolescents across thematic areas, **based on a holistic situation analysis and feedback from adolescents themselves**. Intentionally linking the design, implementation and evaluation of initiatives across thematic areas will seek to increase leverage **across thematic sectors** and amplify our impact.<sup>41</sup> Adolescent-specific programming may include either integrated or mainstreamed programming addressing multiple domains of wellbeing, or more targeted programming. A multi-layered approach to mental health and psychosocial support should be applied across all adolescent programming.<sup>42</sup>
- **Applying a life cycle approach**, Save the Children will connect adolescent programming with early childhood programming by deliberately analysing how and under what circumstances age, development and life stages of adolescents as well as abilities/ disabilities and social gender norms affect children's continued rights fulfilment. Such analyses will be based on the five guiding principles set out in this document, to provide consistency across Save the Children's work. **Updated diagnostic tools will pay special attention to gender issues** along with other dimensions of rights fulfilment that become increasingly important, or where risk factors are introduced during adolescence.

- Save the Children will seek to pioneer **adolescent-tailored and -led initiatives**, drawing on extensive experience and good practice in involving adolescents in programming and advocacy in multiple domains of change. In particular, Save the Children will **support adolescents as human rights defenders** and help remove the barriers they may experience when fulfilling their civil and political rights.
- Save the Children will **expand adolescent programming and advocacy in humanitarian and conflict settings** including **migration and displacement**, with consistent application of the **Humanitarian Gender and GBV Minimum Actions**, which can help to stabilise adolescents' lives and strengthen their economic prospects, capabilities and resilience.<sup>43</sup> It is also critical to create programming that **meets adolescent needs in the challenging phase of flux between humanitarian, development and peace contexts**. For example, migrant and displaced adolescents are often forgotten in programming and often end up in urban areas, with many residing in slums. Save the Children will **explore and support adolescent programming in urban contexts, especially in slums and informal settlements as well as in post-conflict recovery contexts**, and will enable tailored activities and approaches for adolescent girls in humanitarian contexts.



For examples of programming, tools and external resources for working with and for *adolescents in humanitarian contexts and crisis* click [HERE](#)

**“If the children aren't active, [being] positive leaders and knowing that they have to demand their rights while they are young, they will not be active and innovators when they become adults.”**

15-year-old girl, Yemen



For examples of integrated programmes and tools demonstrating *innovation and potential* click [HERE](#)



## Achieve results at scale ... maximise impact by prioritising inclusive actions with and for adolescents suffering the greatest shortfalls in the realisation of their rights, and expand the evidence base for further action

- To ensure sustainable impact at scale, Save the Children will **implement evidence-based programming responsive to the specific needs of adolescents in their given context**. Save the Children's Common Approaches provide an evidence-base for good practice and some are particularly relevant to adolescents, including Life Skills for Success, My Sexual Health and Rights, Public Investment in Children, Child Rights Reporting and the forthcoming Community Based Child Protection Systems and Child Centred Social Accountability common approaches (see the Catalogue of Key Resources for the list of Common Approaches that relate to adolescents). Save the Children's cross-sectoral MHPSS Technical Guidance (which will be published during 2021) will be another key resource supporting holistic programming for child, adolescent and caregiver wellbeing.
- Save the Children will **advocate for adolescents' rights to government-led social protection (UNCRC Articles 26 and 27) and draw lessons from implementing the Child Sensitive Social Protection (CSSP) approach that can be applied to adolescent programming**.<sup>44</sup> CSSP is a rights-based approach that includes public policies, programmes and systems that address the specific patterns of children's poverty and vulnerability, and looks across the age, development, abilities/disabilities, and life stage of children. 'Cash plus' interventions, which provide cash transfers in combination with other types of support such as education or health services, can be used as a foundation to scale up approaches that address multiple aspects of adolescent wellbeing. They are proven to be very effective, especially for the poorest households.
- Save the Children will **strengthen evidence and learning around adolescent rights fulfilment**. By applying this framework to both existing and new initiatives, Save the Children will seek to gather and learn from experiences that are specific to adolescents. At the same time, Save the Children will seek to **contribute to a stronger global evidence base that shows how age, development, life stages and abilities/disabilities affect the underlying risk factors that adolescents face**. Learning what factors and triggers affect adolescent rights fulfilment (including dimensions relating to gender and marginalisation faced by individuals with disabilities, minorities, and those who identify as LGBTQI+) can inform adolescent-led advocacy and lead to more efficient programming across the age continuum.
- Save the Children will **create high-level key performance indicators (KPIs)** to monitor and learn how the guiding principles and commitments set out in this framework are put into practice. These will be learning-oriented in nature, complementing Save the Children's overall monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning guidance. They will serve to assess the degree to which Save the Children policy and programmes enable adolescents to claim their rights, and the duty-bearers to respond. Importantly, high-level KPIs will ensure that Save the Children stays focused and can be held accountable for its promises to adolescents, by adolescents themselves.
- **Leading by example, when possible Save the Children will add adolescent-centred performance indicators to our monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (MEAL) practices**, with data collected and analysed by adolescents themselves in collaboration with Save the Children. Data will always be disaggregated by gender, disability, and age or age bracket, with adolescent data tracked as distinct from data for youth, and we will review the data for overlap, similarities and differences when it comes to age, location, life stage, etc.



Aygun Akad/Save the Children



For examples of programming, tools and actions for and with the **most marginalised adolescents** please click [HERE](#)



For examples of actions, tools and external resources for **evidence-based programming** as well as **MEAL tools** please click [HERE](#)



## Build partnerships – champion adolescents through strategic partnerships and advocacy

- Save the Children commits to further developing partnerships with adolescents, including adolescent groups and adolescent-led organisations to design, inform and implement programming and to advocate for changes in policy and practice. Additionally, Save the Children will continue to support and strengthen the capacity of local implementing organisations, adolescent-led organisations, and grassroots organisations led by and working with adolescents, particularly those adolescents who are most disadvantaged.
- Save the Children will create stronger links between global advocacy for adolescent wellbeing, and adolescent rights-holders, including those at the frontline of implementation. Save the Children will continue to play an active role in international consultation and reporting against the ambitions set out in the Joint UN Global Framework on Adolescent Wellbeing (H6+ Technical Working Group), ensuring that progress is reported and used for learning.

 For examples of partnerships to champion adolescent wellbeing click [HERE](#)



David Atani/Bulgari/Save the Children

**“Children are a key component in the fight against poverty, because while they are vulnerable, they also harbour so much potential. We are proud to partner with Save the Children to do our part in making a better tomorrow.”**

Christophe Babin, CEO Bulgari

## Annex I

### Glossary of terms

Term	Definition
<b>Adolescent</b>	Statistically, adolescents are defined by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as individuals aged 10–19 years old. However, adolescence is also a stage of social development between childhood and adulthood that cannot be exactly limited by an age range. <sup>45</sup>
<b>Adolescent wellbeing</b>	When adolescents have the support, confidence and resources to thrive in contexts of secure and healthy relationships, realising their full potential and rights. This includes positive outcomes in five key areas: i) good health and optimum nutrition, ii) connectedness, positive values, and contribution to society, iii) safety and a supportive environment, iv) learning, competence, education, skills and employability, and v) agency and resilience. <sup>46</sup>
<b>Agency</b>	The ability of individuals to affect change, make autonomous and independent choices and act in self-determining ways.
<b>Child</b>	The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) defines a child as “every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.” <sup>47</sup>
<b>Child Rights Programming</b>	The planning, implementation and monitoring of development and humanitarian programmes that further the realisation of children’s rights laid down in the UNCRC and other human rights instruments; are guided at all stages by the standards and principles in those instruments; contribute to the development of duty-bearers’ capacity to meet their obligations to respect, protect and fulfil children’s rights; and empower and support children to claim their rights.
<b>Child-Sensitive Social Protection (CSSP)</b>	Public policies, programmes and systems that address the specific patterns of children’s poverty and vulnerability, are rights-based in approach, and recognise the long-term developmental benefits of investing in children. <sup>48</sup>
<b>Climate change</b>	A change in global or regional climate patterns, in particular a change apparent from the mid to late 20th century onwards and attributed largely to increased levels of atmospheric carbon dioxide produced by the use of fossil fuels.
<b>Decent Work</b>	The concept of decent work is captured in the four pillars of the International Labour Organization (ILO) Decent Work agenda: full and productive employment, rights at work, social protection and social dialogue. This is interpreted as quality work that is age appropriate, provides a fair remuneration, safe working conditions, awareness and ability to exercise rights in the workplace as well as freedom of association.
<b>Empowerment</b>	Enabling individuals or groups to gain greater control over decisions and actions affecting their life, through expansion of their choices and ability to claim their rights.
<b>Gender</b>	Socially constructed roles, behaviours, expressions and identities of girls, women, boys, men and gender-diverse people. Gender influences how people perceive themselves and each other, how they act and interact, and the distribution of power and resources in society. Gender identity is not binary (girl/woman, boy/man) nor is it static; it exists along a continuum and can change over time. There is considerable diversity in how individuals and groups understand, experience and express gender through the roles they take on, the expectations placed on them, relations with others and the complex ways that gender is institutionalised in society.

Term	Definition
<b>Gender transformative approach</b> <sup>49</sup>	<p>An attempt to promote gender equality by:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 Fostering critical examination of inequalities and gender roles, norms and dynamics.</li> <li>2 Recognising and strengthening positive norms that support equality and an enabling environment.</li> <li>3 Promoting the relative position of women, girls and marginalised groups and transforming the underlying social structures, policies and broadly held social norms that perpetuate and legitimise gender inequalities</li> </ol>
<b>Human rights</b>	<p>The rights inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, gender, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status. Human rights include the right to life and liberty, freedom from slavery and torture, freedom of opinion and expression, the right to work and education, and many more.</p>
<b>Human rights defender</b>	<p>Someone who seeks the promotion, protection and realisation of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights.</p>
<b>Integrated programming</b>	<p>Intentionally linking the design, implementation and evaluation of programmes or projects across thematic sectors to amplify their impact. This is different to holistic programming as it does not necessarily include all thematic sectors, only those that are applicable to a particular context and group as determined by a holistic situation, gender and power analysis.</p>
<b>Life stages</b>	<p>The different phases of life that are common throughout the human race such as infancy, childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, mid-life and old age.</p>
<b>Resilience</b>	<p>The ability to withstand, adapt to, and recover from stress and adversity, and maintain or return to a state of positive mental health and wellbeing, by using effective coping strategies.</p>
<b>Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)</b>	<p>A set of 17 global goals that were developed through global partnership and adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015. They recognise that ending poverty and other deprivations must go hand-in-hand with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality and spur economic growth, while tackling climate change.</p>
<b>Social ecology</b>	<p>The relationship between humans and their environment, including the social and cultural aspects of how individuals interact with each other and with institutions and other actors.</p>
<b>Young people</b>	<p>Statistically, young people are defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as individuals aged 10–24 years old.</p>
<b>Youth</b>	<p>Statistically, youth are defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as individuals aged 15–24 years old.</p>
<b>Wellbeing in mental health and psychosocial work</b> <sup>50</sup>	<p>Wellbeing describes the positive state of being when a person thrives. In mental health and psychosocial work, wellbeing is commonly understood in terms of three domains:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 Personal wellbeing: positive thoughts and emotions such as hopefulness, calm, self-esteem and self-confidence.</li> <li>2 Interpersonal wellbeing: nurturing relationships, a sense of belonging and the ability to be close to others.</li> <li>3 Skills and knowledge: capacity to learn, make positive decisions, respond effectively to life's challenges and express oneself.</li> </ol>

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**“Save the Children is often told that its aims are impossible – that there has always been child suffering and there always will be. We know it’s impossible only if we make it so. It’s impossible only if we refuse to attempt it.”**

Eglantyne Jebb, Save the Children Founder



Fahad Kaizer/Save the Children

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