Every day millions of boys and girls around the world experience fear and violence – physical, emotional or sexual. This need not happen. Violence in childhood is preventable – through concerted and collective action that addresses the root causes of violence and lays firm foundations for both sustainable development and more peaceful societies. Acts of violence are a violation of child rights. They breed fear and disrupt the formation of capabilities. This denies children the opportunity to enjoy childhood and realize their full potential.

Development is not a matter of producing more goods and services (or economic growth), but of enhancing human capabilities and expanding the freedoms that people enjoy. These would include, for instance, the capability to lead a long and healthy life, the capability to be well-nourished, the capability to enjoy bodily integrity (and not be abused), the capability to use the senses, to imagine, think, and reason, and to engage in various forms of social interaction. For children, this would additionally translate into the opportunity to play, to laugh, to enjoy recreational activities, and to enjoy childhood.

The human development framework

The human development approach provides an overarching ethical framework within which to focus on what children are capable of doing or becoming in the real world. Both the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopt a “human development” approach – paying attention to what children are capable of doing or becoming, and helping them realize their full potential.

Childhood violence disrupts the formation of these capabilities. Violence breeds fear, and robs them of the joys of childhood. Freedom from fear is as fundamental to life as freedom from want and freedom from hunger, and is essential for harnessing human potential. Fear lies at the root of a child’s distorted and aggressive behaviour. It is reasonable to assume that children naturally play and express themselves imaginatively in play.

This, however, is not the case when children live in fear – experiencing violence in their everyday life. Acts of violence against both women and children are unjustified. In one case, it is the blatant abuse of power (often with impunity) by a partner over powerless women, and in the other, it is a similar abuse of power over helpless children.

Some social policies are justified because investments yield benefits to children. Such a ‘human capital’ perspective concentrates on the instrumental importance of the child – and highlights how investments in health and education, for example, can contribute to enhancing productivity and augmenting production. Benefits of investing in children today are measured in terms of returns to the economy and society tomorrow.

The ‘human development’ perspective, on the other hand, focuses on the ability of children to ‘lead lives they have reason to value and to enhance the substantive choices they have.’ From such a perspective, therefore, all acts of violence are a violation of child rights. It follows then that there can be no threshold below which violence is acceptable. It does not matter whether the act of violence is harmful or not, whether it is deliberately committed or condoned, if it is provoked or unprovoked, if it is a legal violation or not, and whether the perpetrators believe they are acting in the interests of the child. Regardless of whether an act of violence has an adverse effect on the child or not, it can never be justified because it breeds fear and violates the dignity of the child.
Income and childhood violence

The human development approach calls for societies to focus, not on enhancing incomes, but expanding the real freedoms that children enjoy. This is because income expansion or economic growth may not necessarily imply lower levels of childhood violence. Countries with higher incomes do not necessarily have lower levels of violence. Azerbaijan, for example, has a per capita income 18 times higher than that of Niger but its homicide rate is roughly the same. Kenya’s per capita income is similar to that of Tajikistan but the extent of bullying in Kenya is eight times higher. Clearly, violence against children is influenced by many aspects of human development. The human development framework acknowledges that deprivations, inequality, injustice and insecurity may not be the direct causes, but they are breeding grounds of violence in childhood across different settings. Similarly, the new global Violence in Childhood (VIC) Index introduced in the Report reveals that violence in childhood occurs in every country, rich and poor alike. Moreover, countries with similar levels of per capita national income can have very different VIC indices, and others with similar indices can have very different levels of per capita income.

The weak association between a country’s income level and childhood violence is revealed in (FIGURE 1), which shows the distribution of countries according to their ranking on the VIC Index and their GNI per capita. The curves reveal two stylized facts. First, that disparity among countries is much greater in income than in childhood violence. Second, there is no predictable association between a country’s level of per capita income and the level of violence in childhood. Two countries at the same level of income can report very different VIC indices and vice versa.

FIGURE 1: Disparity between countries is much greater in income than in the VIC Index.

Childhood violence is a universal concern of all societies. This analysis has two important implications for policy makers. First, that violence can be prevented even at low levels of income, so low-income countries need not wait to become rich before eliminating violence in childhood. Second, high-income countries cannot afford to become complacent: violence against women and children can persist in spite of greater prosperity, improved standards of living and better living conditions.

Agency of the child

There is a special problem in the case of children when it comes to exercising rights and making choices. Children do not (and cannot), frequently enough, take their own decisions. There is however nothing unusual about such a situation when the actual exercise of one’s freedom depends upon others. For example, even an adult’s freedom not to get exposed to swine flu will depend significantly on actions taken by the State, most notably epidemiological and public health interventions.

The human development approach underscores the significance of recognizing the agency of the
child. While adults should ensure children’s safety, there are many situations in which adults are either absent or unable to fulfil that role. Children themselves must therefore be at the heart of prevention efforts – able to use their evolving capacities to think for themselves and act in their own interests.

Children can, and often do, pursue many aspects of these rights themselves. Indeed, they often have a strong sense of fairness and justice. Interactions with older children reveal a more nuanced picture. Children are not always passive victims. While some might seek help, others may be left with no option but to run away or use violence to defend themselves.

Very young children, however, may simply not have the ability to express themselves and, to that extent, may be helpless. Even older children in many societies may not be allowed to express themselves without fear and because of stigma, or may not be taken seriously when they do. It is therefore incumbent on state and society to create safe spaces and appropriate conditions for children to report incidents of violence without fear of repercussion.

**Role of the State**

The human development approach highlights the responsibility of the State for ending violence. Violence is not a private matter that should be left to families to resolve, but a matter of human rights that states have a duty to uphold. State intervention is also important because many acts of violence generate negative externalities for society as a whole.

Another reason for state intervention stems from the responsibility of the State to guarantee constitutional commitments, including the need to preserve and protect the dignity of women and children. Laws banning corporal punishment or domestic violence need to be enacted and enforced because acts of violence can irreversibly impair capabilities in the long term.

It is also important for the State not to view violence in isolated terms, but to adopt a comprehensive approach to ending all forms of violence. This is because while treating symptoms (such as individual aggression) or enacting laws may be necessary, they cannot by themselves bring about an end to violence. Structural factors underlying violence such as inequality, patriarchy, discrimination and poverty need to be addressed as well, which the State alone is equipped to do at scale.

**Inter-connectedness**

Violence cannot be ended by focusing on specific acts of violence that occur in different settings. Exposure to violence within the family and in the community manifests itself as peer violence in schools. Bullying in schools cannot be stopped by concentrating only on school-based programs. It is equally important to simultaneously address violence in families and the community.

Different forms of violence are inter-connected. Ending violence implies reducing the prevalence rates of all forms of violence in different settings to zero. An implication is that while acts of violence will vary in their severity, this does not justify a hierarchical sequence of response. This is because there are large overlaps between the different forms of violence. Any attempt to prevent different forms of violence against children (such as child sexual abuse or bullying in schools) ends up merely
Every day millions of boys and girls around the world experience fear and violence – physical, emotional or sexual. This need not happen. Violence in childhood is preventable – through concerted and collective action that addresses the root causes of violence and lays firm foundations for both sustainable development and more peaceful societies.

To fulfill the commitments to ending all forms of violence that are enshrined in both the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda, states and societies must analyze the causes of childhood violence, and invest in preventing violence against women and children.