United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) Background Guide

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Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) Background Guide

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The Economic and Social ECOSOC (ECOSOC) is one of the six principal organs of the United Nations, established in 1945 to guide international action on economic, social, and related issues.[1] Given its expansive scope, the ECOSOC's objectives are continuously evolving to respond to developments in the economic and social spheres, though its commitment to international coordination on these issues remains unchanged. Today, ECOSOC's primary focus is to advance the global agenda on sustainable development and the integration of its three interdependent pillars: economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection.[2] Recognizing sustainable development as an urgent priority, the ECOSOC functions as a unifying platform for multilateral dialogue and policy coordination to encourage global actors to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda.[3] By fostering an outlet for inclusive discussion and intergovernmental collaboration, ECOSOC hopes to shape how the international community defines, negotiates, and implements sustainable development across diverse contexts.

ECOSOC's broad jurisdiction includes a mandate over economic, environmental, and social development, which spans from technological innovation to global inequality. It operates through a vast network of subsidiary bodies, including functional commissions on science, technology, and sustainable development, regional commissions like the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), and expert bodies that confront emerging global challenges.[4] This structure enables ECOSOC to help translate global commitments into national and regional action by encouraging Member States to share best practices, monitor progress, and align policies across different regions.

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[1] United Nations Economic and Social ECOSOC, *Welcome to the United Nations Economic and Social ECOSOC*, https://ecosoc.un.org/en.

[2] United Nations Economic and Social ECOSOC, *Promoting Sustainable Development*, https://ecosoc.un.org/en/what-we-do/promoting-sustainable-development.

[3] United Nations Economic and Social ECOSOC, *ECOSOC Coordination Segment*, https://ecosoc.un.org/en/what-we-do/ecosoc-coordination-segment#system.

[4] United Nations Economic and Social ECOSOC, *ECOSOC Subsidiary Bodies*, https://ecosoc.un.org/en/about-us/ecosoc-subsidiary-bodies.

With its expansive mandate and convening authority, ECOSOC is uniquely positioned to shape the trajectory of technological and urban expansion in ways that uphold human rights, safeguard environmental integrity, and reinforce global equity.

I. Implementation of the Smart Cities Programme

Statement of the Issue:

In response to escalating urban challenges, including environmental degradation, overpopulation, urban blight, food shortages, and social inequality, the "Smart City" has emerged as a solution to improve quality of life for its inhabitants.[5] Capitalizing on the rapid expansion of digital technology, smart cities seek to improve social integration, public safety, and environmental sustainability. The implementation of Artificial Intelligence (AI), the Internet of Things (IoT), and digital surveillance systems has the potential to revolutionize urban life, but at what cost? Such invasive technologies carry significant risks to privacy, transparency, environmental sustainability, and socio-economic equality, raising international concerns over the governance and ethical implications of smart city initiatives.[6]

UN bodies such as UNECE, UNCRD, and UN-Habitat have developed people-centered frameworks to promote ethical, inclusive, and sustainable smart city models, which emphasize participatory governance, accessible technology, and the protection of human rights. However, these efforts remain fragmented and lack the institutional coordination needed to create enforceable global standards. ECOSOC has yet to consolidate these approaches or formally integrate smart cities into its own agenda, despite the issue's growing relevance to the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As a result, many questions regarding international norms on urban data governance, regulatory accountability, and digital infrastructure access, especially in low-to-middle income countries, remain unanswered.[7]

The issue of smart city implementation reflects broader tensions between innovation and civil liberties, private investment and public accountability, and short-term efficiency and long-

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[5] Justin Hyatt, *Training Materials for Implementing Smart Cities in Asia and the Pacific for Inclusive, Resilient, and Sustainable Societies* (Nagoya, Japan: United Nations Centre for Regional Development, 2022), https://uncrd.un.org/sites/uncrd.un.org/files/smart-city-training-material_1_smart-cities.pdf.

[6] Marta Ziosi et al., "Smart Cities: Reviewing the Debate About Their Ethical Implications," *AI & Society*, September 30, 2022, https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9524726/.

[7] Madelyn Rose Sanfilippo and Brett Frischmann, "Slow-Governance in Smart Cities: An Empirical Study of Smart Intersection Implementation in Four US College Towns," *Internet Policy Review* 12, no. 1 (2023), https://doi.org/10.14763/2023.1.1703.

term sustainability. As digital technologies continue to advance, the ECOSOC must assess how to support Member States in closing regulatory gaps, aligning smart city initiatives with the SDGs, and ensuring that future cities integrate technology in a rights-based, inclusive, and environmentally resilient manner.

History:

In 2010, the concept of "smart cities" gained momentum as a model for integrating digital technologies into urban planning.[8] In response, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), in partnership with the Organization for International Economic Relations (OiER), launched the United Smart Cities (USC) initiative.[9] The program evaluated urban sustainability across five key sectors – mobility, information and communication technology (ICT), energy, housing, and governance – and translated development indicators into comprehensive Smart City PROFILES.[10]

The PROFILE approach had significant strategic value: it was adaptable, replicable, and evidence-based. It could be customized for cities of various sizes, stages of development, and resource capacity, indicators and packages were standardized to allow other cities to replicate or compare progress, and the use of pilot cities and real-time monitoring directly refined practices and scaled potential solutions.[11] However, the initiative lacked enforcement mechanisms to ensure cities followed through on its recommendations. As a result, many struggled to implement proposed reforms, either due to resource constraints, institutional limitations, or a lack of political will.[12]

Over time, the United Smart Cities (USC) initiative became integrated into the broader United for Smart Sustainable Cities (U4SSC) program, launched in 2016.[13] Coordinated by UNECE, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), and other UN agencies, U4SSC

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[8] Jose Montes, *A Historical View of Smart Cities: Definitions, Features and Tipping Points* (June 1, 2020), SSRN, https://ssrn.com/abstract=3637617.

[9] United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, *Smart Sustainable Cities*, https://unece.org/housing/smart-sustainable-cities.

[10] United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *United Smart Cities (USC)*, https://sdgs.un.org/partnerships/united-smart-cities-usc.

[11] United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *United Smart Cities (USC).*

[12] UN-Habitat, *World Smart Cities Outlook 2024*, 2024, https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2024/12/un_smart_city_outlook.pdf.

[13] United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, *Collection Methodology for Key Performance Indicators for Smart Sustainable Cities*, 2017, https://unece.org/DAM/hlm/documents/Publications/U4SSC-CollectionMethodologyforKPIfoSSC-2017.pdf.

serves as a global platform to help cities worldwide advance the Sustainable Development Goals – particularly SDG 11, which calls for inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable urban development.[14]

In 2021, the United Nations Centre for Regional Development (UNCRD) launched its Smart Cities Project to offer technical assistance and provide training materials for urban policymakers seeking to build safer, more resilient, and inclusive environments.[15] The initiative was introduced in response to the dual crises of COVID-19 and climate change, emphasizing digital transformation as a key strategy for post-crisis recovery and sustainable development.[16] While the project recognized smart cities as a promising framework to address systemic urban challenges, its implementation revealed a critical gap: many developing countries lacked the financial infrastructure, technical expertise, and institutional capacity to support large-scale smart city investments. Without sufficient funding for innovation and governance reforms, the initiative struggled to gain traction, highlighting the broader challenge of digital inequality in smart city development.[17]

2023 marked a shift in policy. The UN-Habitat Assembly adopted Resolution 2/1, which mandated the creation of international guidelines on "People-Centered Smart Cities."[18] These guidelines introduced a non-binding framework to help national and local governments craft smart city regulations grounded in digital inclusion, data protection, and participatory governance. While earlier models prioritized technological advancement, this new framework stressed the importance of inclusive, sustainable, and rights-based approaches to urban innovation, realigning global smart city priorities.[19]

In March 2024, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) released a toolkit aimed at ensuring that emerging technologies, including facial recognition, are used in ways that uphold individuals' fundamental rights to peaceful assembly and freedom of

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[14] United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *Goal 11: Make Cities and Human Settlements Inclusive, Safe, Resilient and Sustainable*, https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal11.

[15] United Nations Centre for Regional Development, *Smart Cities Programme*, https://uncrd.un.org/content/sc.

[16] United Nations Centre for Regional Development, *Smart City Training Material*.

[17] Marta Ziosi et al., "Smart Cities: Reviewing the Debate About Their Ethical Implications."

[18] United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), *Resolution Adopted by the United Nations Habitat Assembly*, September 2023, https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2023/09/english_9.pdf.

[19] United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), *Annual Report 2023: Local Action in a Time of Crises*, 2024, https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2024/05/annual_report_2023.pdf.

expression.[20] The report reaffirmed the urgent necessity for states to refrain from using facial recognition to identify participants in public demonstrations, and to avoid recording protest activity unless there is clear evidence of criminal behavior.[21] It also emphasizes the responsibility of private companies to conduct human rights due diligence, particularly by integrating data protection and non-discrimination requirements into the design and implementation of new technologies. A clear trend has emerged: as surveillance capabilities expand, so does the urgency to protect digital rights.

A few months later, the 2024 World Smart Cities Outlook was published to assess global trends in urban digitization.[22] The report was developed in direct response to the second session of the 2023 UN-Habitat Assembly, where all 193 Member States requested that UN-Habitat create international guidelines for "people-centered" smart cities.[23] This mandate reflects the urgent need to ensure that urban innovation is grounded in principles of inclusivity, sustainability, and ethical technological use. Drawing on robust data and practical case studies, the report outlines best practices and strategic recommendations for building resilient and equitable urban systems. It stresses the importance of cultivating a collaborative ecosystem to advance both innovation and sustainable urbanization.[24]

Analysis:

The rapid development of smart city technologies has outpaced the international frameworks meant to guide them. Many cities now rely on real-time data platforms to monitor civil operations and manage public services, but few guidelines exist to regulate how that data is collected, stored, or used. As technology continues to evolve, the international community must

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[20] Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *Toolkit for Law Enforcement: Component on Digital Technologies*, March 2024, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/Toolkit-law-enforcement-Component-on-Digital-Technologies.pdf.

[21] Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *New Technologies Must Serve, Not Hinder, Right to Peaceful Protest, Bachelet Tells States*, June 25, 2020, https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2020/06/new-technologies-must-serve-not-hinder-right-peaceful-protest-bachelet-tells.

[22] United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), *World Smart Cities Outlook 2024*, 2024, https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2024/12/un_smart_city_outlook.pdf.

[23] United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), *Report of the Expert Group Meeting on International Guidelines for People-Centred Smart Cities*, January 27, 2025, https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/event-documents/Report_Expert%20Group%20Meeting%20on%20International%20Guidelines%20for%20People-Centered%20Smart%20Cities_0.pdf.

[24] United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), *World Smart Cities Outlook 2024*.

respond with governance systems that are equipped to navigate an increasingly complex and unpredictable digital landscape. While smart technologies are rich in opportunity, they raise urgent questions about data ownership, surveillance, civic participation, and environmental cost.[25] There is currently no unified governance framework to address these intersectional concerns in a comprehensive or enforceable manner.

Initiatives like UNECE's PROFILES, which assesses regional capacity for smart city development, and UN-Habitat's International Guidelines on People-Centered Smart Cities offer useful starting points, but their influence remains limited without universal adoption. The core issue extends beyond a lack of awareness: it reflects an absence of political will, sustainable funding structures, and regulatory alignment across regions. ECOSOC has yet to consolidate these scattered efforts into a coherent global strategy, let alone address the concept of smart cities directly.

In 2025, ECOSOC's Coordination Segment issued an informal note that emphasized ethical AI governance and inter-agency cooperation, which suggests an effort to align digital technologies with the Sustainable Development Goals.[26] However, the segment fails to address the concept of "smart cities" as a standalone issue, an omission that reveals a critical gap in the ECOSOC's current focus.

Financial constraints remain a major obstacle, creating a digital divide across regions. Building secure and inclusive digital infrastructure is expensive, and in the absence of robust public-private partnerships or investment in long-term capacity-building, the burden often falls on already institutionally strained governments.[27] Without clear incentives or pathways for financing, smart city development becomes fragmented and uneven, exacerbating socio-economic inequalities.

On the institutional side, many legal frameworks remain outdated or ill-equipped to address the ethical and technological dimensions of smart urbanization.[28] Even where policies

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[25] Marta Ziosi et al., "Smart Cities: Reviewing the Debate About Their Ethical Implications."

[26] United Nations Economic and Social ECOSOC, *2025 ECOSOC Coordination Segment: Informal Note*, January 2025, https://ecosoc.un.org/sites/default/files/2025-01/2025_ECOSOC_CS_Informal_note.pdf.

[27] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *Shaping Smart Cities of All Sizes: Proceedings of the 4th OECD Roundtable on Smart Cities and Inclusive Growth*, September 17, 2024, https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/about/programmes/cfe/the-oecd-programme-on-smart-cities-and-inclusive-growth/Proceedings-4th-Roundtable-Smart-Cities-Inclusive-Growth.pdf.

[28] World Economic Forum, *Governing Smart Cities: Policy Benchmarks for Ethical and Responsible Smart City Development*, July 2021, https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Governing_Smart_Cities_2021.pdf.

exist, enforcement mechanisms are often weak, and smart city initiatives may be sidelined from national development planning altogether.

These barriers are not abstract: they manifest in concrete ways that directly impact communities. The rise of AI-driven surveillance, for instance, has far outpaced regulatory oversight. In 2023, the New Orleans Police Department (NOPD) collaborated with Project NOLA, a private nonprofit organization, to deploy over 200 facial recognition cameras, which sent automatic alerts with suspect identities directly to officers' phones, bypassing mandated procedures.[29] This initiative operated in direct violation of a 2022 city ordinance that restricted such surveillance to violent crime investigations and required extensive oversight mechanisms.

Paris similarly tested AI-led video surveillance to monitor crowd movements and analyze video streams for potential threats in preparation for the 2024 Olympic Games.[30] While the technology was meant to enhance security, it sparked debates over privacy and the potential for misuse. Critics emphasized the need for clear regulations and oversight in deploying such invasive technologies.

But surveillance concerns are only the beginning. In the rush to digitize, environmental costs are frequently overlooked by both policymakers and tech developers. The energy demands of data centers, water usage for server cooling, and growing e-waste all raise serious questions about the long-term sustainability of digital infrastructure, particularly in climate-vulnerable or resource-scarce regions.[31]

In the absence of a binding international framework, states have developed varying models of smart city implementation. These approaches reflect each country’s unique political system, development priorities, and capacity for technological oversight. In Singapore, smart city policy is shaped by a centralized governance model that integrates facial recognition technology and biometric tracking into everyday urban functions, including business transactions, government ID cards, and school-issued exams.[32] This model, while praised for its efficiency and

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[29] Douglas MacMillan and Aaron Schaffer, "Police secretly monitored New Orleans with facial recognition cameras," *The Washington Post*, May 19, 2025, https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2025/05/19/live-facial-recognition-police-new-orleans/.

[30] Giulia Dal Bello, Sivan Hirsch-Hoefler, and Daphna Canetti, "AI video surveillance at the 2024 Paris Olympics," *The Loop (ECPR)*, September 24, 2024, https://theloop.ecpr.eu/ai-video-surveillance-at-the-2024-paris-olympics/.

[31] United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), "AI has an environmental problem. Here's what the world can do about that," August 2024, https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/ai-has-environmental-problem-heres-what-world-can-do-about.

[32] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *Public Provider vs. Big Brother: Shaping the Future of Public Sector Innovation*, November 2020, https://trends.oecd-opsi.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/OECD-Public-Provider-vs-Big-Brother.pdf.

public safety outcomes, raises concerns about individual consent, transparency, and the long-term implications of normalizing high-tech social control.

Canada has taken on a more participatory approach, placing civic engagement and data protection at the center of its development strategy. Canadian smart city initiatives tend to emphasize transparency and public accountability, relying on collaborative policy design, open data standards, and community oversight mechanisms to guide implementation.[33] This model reflects a broader commitment to democratic governance and digital rights, offering a valuable counterpoint to more top-down approaches.

China presents yet another developmental pathway, marked by a highly coordinated, state-driven model that combines smart city infrastructure with national political priorities. China's strategy integrates urban digitization into its broader surveillance architecture, including real-time facial recognition, social credit scoring, and AI-powered predictive policing.[34] These technologies are deployed not only for urban management, but also to consolidate state authority and monitor citizen behavior at scale, demonstrating how smart city frameworks can be leveraged to aid authoritarian governance.

Such diverse approaches point to the urgent need for international dialogue on the ethical, legal, and political dimensions of digital urbanization. The associated issues of privacy, environmental costs, and digital inequity must be addressed to ensure that smart city innovation aligns with broader goals of sustainability and rights protection. The ECOSOC has a responsibility to advocate for inclusive, sustainable, and ethically governed urbanization, beginning with better coordination of global strategies for smart city development. The objective is to begin transitioning global urban development from a progress-centered approach to one rooted in people-centered values and long-term sustainability.

Conclusion:

The development of smart cities is no longer a futuristic concept, but an active global trend with real-time consequences for governance, civil liberties, equity, and environmental

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[33] Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), *Smart Cities and National Security*, February 16, 2022, https://www.canada.ca/en/security-intelligence-service/corporate/publications/smart-cities-national-security/smart-cities-national-security.html.

[34] Katherine Atha et al., *China's Smart Cities Development*, U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, April 2020, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2020-04/China_Smart_Cities_Development.pdf.

sustainability. As urban centers continue to digitize rapidly, the international community faces an urgent imperative to ensure that technology serves the public good, not just private or state interests.

The absence of a unified, binding model for smart city governance has resulted in highly divergent national strategies. This has created a regulatory vacuum in which surveillance, data exploitation, and environmental harm can persist without consequence. The ECOSOC is uniquely positioned to respond to these challenges by leveraging its convening power, interagency networks, and development mandate. Its role is to foster international dialogue, promote ethical standards, and strengthen institutional capacity – particularly in regions with limited digital infrastructure.

The objective is to shape how these cities are controlled and governed. This includes identifying key stakeholders, navigating the balance between innovation and accountability, and supporting Member States in building long-term, people-centered models. The ECOSOC should work to ensure that technological progress aligns with the economic, social, and environmental pillars of sustainable development, not just short-term efficiency gains.

Questions to Consider:

1. What role should private companies play in financing and implementing smart city infrastructure, and how can governments ensure public needs are not overshadowed by corporate interests?
2. How can environmental sustainability be better integrated into smart city strategies, and what steps should the UN take to address the environmental impact of AI, data centers, and e-waste?
3. How can the ECOSOC help bridge the digital divide and ensure that smart city innovation reduces, rather than reinforces, existing social and regional disparities?

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Dal Bello, Giulia, Sivan Hirsch-Hoefler, and Daphna Canetti. "AI Video Surveillance at the 2024 Paris Olympics." *The Loop (ECPR)*, September 24, 2024. https://theloop.ecpr.eu/ai-video-surveillance-at-the-2024-paris-olympics/.

MacMillan, Douglas, and Aaron Schaffer. "Police Secretly Monitored New Orleans with Facial Recognition Cameras." *The Washington Post*, May 19, 2025. https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2025/05/19/live-facial-recognition-police-new-orleans/.

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Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). *Shaping Smart Cities of All Sizes: Proceedings of the 4th OECD Roundtable on Smart Cities and Inclusive Growth*. September 17, 2024. https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/about/programmes/cfe/the-oecd-programme-on-smart-cities-and-inclusive-growth/Proceedings-4th-Roundtable-Smart-Cities-Inclusive-Growth.pdf.

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Ziosi, Marta, Matthew James Rattigan, Juan M. Durán, Bernd Carsten Stahl, and Christopher Burr. "Smart Cities: Reviewing the Debate About Their Ethical Implications." *AI & Society*, September 30, 2022.

II. Protection of Child and Youth Migrants and Refugees

ECOSOC's mandate encompasses all economic, social, cultural, and health matters, as well as human rights and fundamental freedoms.[35] Through its expansive network of functional and regional commissions, and its coordinating authority over key UN agencies like UNICEF, UNHCR, and IOM, the ECOSOC promotes integrated strategies for youth empowerment and inclusion.

In 2004, ECOSOC adopted Resolution 2004/27, which established the Guidelines on Justice in Matters involving Child Victims and Witnesses of Crime. These guidelines set comprehensive standards for protection, including the right to dignity, freedom from hardship, access to tailored support services, and meaningful participation in legal proceedings.[36] By codifying these protections, ECOSOC affirmed that justice systems must be both child-sensitive and rights-based. As a critical platform for reform, the ECOSOC works to ensure that protection frameworks are practical, enforceable, and built to last.

Statement of the Issue:

Child and youth migrants under the age of 18 make up roughly half of the world's displaced population, yet protection efforts remain fragmented, inconsistent, and chronically under-resourced.[37] The international community has long endorsed child protection, but implementation continues to fall short. Many governments outwardly affirm the rights of migrant and refugee youth, but fail to translate these commitments into sustainable policy, funding, or enforcement mechanisms.

This disconnect between rhetorical support and meaningful protection raises urgent questions about accountability, burden-sharing, and the operational definition of "protection" itself. While some countries have invested in integration programs and prioritized youth resettlement, others have relied on detention, denied education access, or resisted refugee quotas

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[35] United Nations. *Economic and Social ECOSOC (ECOSOC) Documentation*. https://research.un.org/en/docs/ecosoc.

[36] United Nations Economic and Social ECOSOC. *Resolution 2004/27: Guidelines on Justice for Child Victims and Witnesses of Crime.* July 21, 2004. https://www.un.org/en/ecosoc/docs/2004/resolution%202004-27.pdf.

[37] Ziba Vaghri, Zeinab Tessier, and Celeste Whalen, "Refugee and Asylum-Seeking Children: Interrupted Child Development and Unfulfilled Child Rights," *Children* 6, no. 11 (2019): https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6915556/.

altogether. The result is a fragmented system in which a child's rights and future opportunities are determined more by geography and politics than by global norms.

Recent funding cuts, policy reversals, and inadequate enforcement of legal protections point to a systemic gap in protective frameworks, which directly undermines long-term development goals and leaves displaced children vulnerable to exploitation, instability, and exclusion.[38] The urgency is heightened in low-resource contexts, where support systems are already overstretched and heavily dependent on fluctuating donor contributions.

This issue sits at the intersection of political will, institutional coordination, and economic capacity, and demands more than aspirational language. Member States must consider what it means to protect a child not just from harm, but toward a dignified and stable future. The ECOSOC must assess whether current mechanisms are sufficient enough to ensure accountability. The international community has a responsibility to protect displaced children not as passive recipients of aid, but as recognized and empowered citizens with the power to shape their communities.

History:

UN engagement in refugee and child rights began in the aftermath of World War II, when global displacement reached historic levels. The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, along with its 1967 Protocol, defined the term "refugee" and established the principle of non-refoulement, which prohibited the return of individuals to countries where they face serious threats to their life or freedom.[39] The protocol further outlined state obligations to protect the basic rights of refugees, including access to housing, education, and healthcare. Although its focus was not specific to children, the convention laid the foundation for later frameworks focused on the unique vulnerabilities of displaced youth.[40]

A significant turning point came with the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1989, which remains to be the most widely ratified human rights treaty in history. The United States is the only UN Member State that has not ratified the CRC.

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[38] UNHCR, "Funding Cuts Threaten the Health of Nearly 13 Million Displaced People," USA for UNHCR, March 2025, https://www.unrefugees.org/news/unhcr-funding-cuts-threaten-the-health-of-nearly-13-million-displaced-people/.

[39] Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Human Rights and Refugees: Fact Sheet No. 20*, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/refugees.pdf.

[40] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "The 1951 Refugee Convention," UNHCR, https://www.unhcr.org/us/about-unhcr/overview/1951-refugee-convention.

The Convention defines a "child" as a person below the age of 18, and provides a common ethical and legal framework for the realization of children's rights.[41] The CRC also reaffirmed core principles including non-discrimination; the child's best interests as a primary consideration; the inherent right to life, survival, and development; and the right of the child to freely express views in matters affecting them, with those views given due consideration.[42]

The United Nations has recently introduced additional mechanisms to align child and youth protection with broader development goals. The 2015 World Youth Report called for inclusive development models that accounted for the specific challenges facing youth affected by conflict, displacement, and migration.[43] Youth2030, launched in 2018 as the UN system-wide strategy on youth empowerment, similarly emphasized the importance of supporting young migrants across education, employment, and civic engagement.[44] These initiatives formally recognized that young refugees are not simply beneficiaries of aid, but primary actors in rebuilding communities, participating in governance, and shaping the future of their societies.

UNHCR and UNICEF have spearheaded this vision, developing targeted programs in mental health, child protection, and education. These include psychosocial support for children in refugee camps, community-based protection strategies, and efforts to ensure access to learning for displaced youth. Yet despite promising models, implementation remains uneven. UNHCR has reported chronic funding shortfalls that continue to impact essential child protection services.[45]

In many regions, access to essential services is obstructed by political resistance, underfunding, or limited administrative capacity. In 2014, Mexico saw a significant increase in the number of unaccompanied migrant children apprehended near the Northern Triangle. Officials were required to screen unaccompanied children for international protection needs, but

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[41] UNICEF, "Frequently Asked Questions on the Convention on the Rights of the Child," https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention/frequently-asked-questions.

[42] UNICEF, "Frequently Asked Questions on the Convention on the Rights of the Child."

[43] United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *World Youth Report 2015: Youth Civic Engagement* (New York: United Nations, 2016), https://social.desa.un.org/sites/default/files/publications/2023-03/World%20Youth%20Report%202015.pdf.

[44] United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "Youth2030: UN Launches a New Strategy for Young People 'to Lead'," Division for Inclusive Social Development, September 25, 2018, https://social.desa.un.org/sdn/youth2030-un-launches-a-new-strategy-for-young-people-to-lead.

[45] UNHCR, "Funding Cuts Threaten the Health of Nearly 13 Million Displaced People," USA for UNHCR, March 2025, https://www.unrefugees.org/news/unhcr-funding-cuts-threaten-the-health-of-nearly-13-million-displaced-people/.

often failed to meet this responsibility.[46] Detention conditions often discouraged children from pursuing asylum, and authorities routinely failed to inform them of their legal rights, further undermining access to protection. Later that year, a similar pattern was evident in Thailand, where refugee children endured prolonged detention in harsh conditions with little to no access to education or healthcare.[47]

Evidently, legal protections have proven to be vulnerable against political pressure. In response to the Syrian refugee crisis, the European Union implemented a relocation scheme in 2015 to distribute approximately 160,000 asylum seekers, including vulnerable children, more equitably among Member States.[48] This initiative faced significant resistance from certain Member States. Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic notably refused to participate in the relocation efforts, citing concerns over security and national sovereignty.[49] Their non-compliance not only strained relations within the EU but also undermined the collective response to the humanitarian crisis.

This resistance highlights a broader pattern of states political agendas over humanitarian commitments – particularly when it comes to safeguarding displaced children. It is imperative that the ECOSOC take on a more active role in holding Member States accountable for prioritizing child refugee protection.

Analysis:

Despite decades of international consensus on the rights of child and youth migrants, the implementation of protective measures remains inconsistent. Most Member States publicly affirm the importance of safeguarding refugee youth, but rhetorical support often fails to translate into political action. Structural barriers, ranging from chronic underfunding to weak legal enforcement, continue to obstruct progress. The result is a fragmented global protection system that all too often fails the very populations it claims to serve, leaving displaced youth without the support they are legally entitled to.

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[46] American Immigration ECOSOC, "A Guide to Children Arriving at the Border: Laws, Policies and Responses," June 26, 2015, https://www.americanimmigrationECOSOC.org/research/guide-children-arriving-border-laws-policies-and-responses.
[47] Charlie Campbell, "Thousands of Refugee Children Are Suffering in Thai Detention," *Time*, September 2, 2014, https://time.com/3252129/thailand-migrant-children-detention-human-rights/.
[48] BBC News, "EU to Sue Poland, Hungary and Czechs for Refusing Refugee Quotas," *BBC News*, December 7, 2017, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-42270239.
[49] BBC News, "EU to Sue Poland, Hungary and Czechs."

Political resistance is one of the most persistent obstacles. While most countries have formally committed to protecting refugee children, these obligations are often overshadowed by domestic political interests, which take priority over meaningful implementation.[50] In some cases, states actively resist resettlement or family reunification initiatives out of concern that such measures might be perceived as encouraging irregular migration.[51] Rather than viewing protection as a moral imperative, it is frequently treated as a liability: a political risk to be managed rather than a legal duty to be fulfilled.

This reluctance is compounded by financial constraints. When it comes to budget cuts, services for child and youth migrants are often the first to go, though UNHCR and UNICEF have repeatedly warned that funding gaps directly affect access to food, shelter, education, and mental health care.[52] In 2025, major humanitarian programs in countries like Uganda and Rwanda experienced significant cuts to food, health, and education services for refugee children due to global funding cuts.[53] Such significant aid reduction jeopardizes protection systems that are already stretched thin, especially in frontline host countries.

Institutionally, enforcement mechanisms remain weak or nonexistent. There are no binding international frameworks to legally enforce refugee quotas, and even widely ratified treaties, like the CRC, often lack mechanisms to monitor compliance or impose penalties for subsequent violations.[54] National practices tend to vary, and in some cases, children face prolonged detention, exclusion from education systems, and legal limbo. These inconsistencies reveal the limitations of relying on voluntary compliance in the absence of meaningful oversight.

It is increasingly clear that the definition of "protection" must evolve. Traditional models focus narrowly on safeguarding children from violence, persecution, or trafficking. But emerging frameworks now recognize that protection must also include access to education, stable housing, healthcare, and pathways to long-term human development.[55] For displaced youth, education is more than a legal entitlement: it is a lifeline to stability and future opportunity. Similarly, mental

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[50] Vaghri, Tessier, and Whalen, "Refugee and Asylum-Seeking Children."

[51] Jonathan Blitzer, "Trump Makes America's Refugee Program a Tool of White Racial Grievance," *The New Yorker*, June 9, 2025, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/06/09/trump-makes-americas-refugee-program-a-tool-of-white-racial-grievance.

[52] UNHCR, "Funding Cuts Threaten the Health."

[53] UNHCR Uganda, "Updates about Food Assistance for Refugees – February 2025," March 17, 2025, https://help.unhcr.org/uganda/2025/03/17/updates-about-food-assistance-for-refugees-february-2025/.

[54] UNHCR, "The 1951 Refugee Convention," https://www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/overview/1951-refugee-convention.

[55] UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *A Framework for the Protection of Children*, 2012, https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/legacy-pdf/512e212e6.pdf.

health support, vocational training, and civic engagement must be recognized as essential components of protection, not peripheral services.

Children must be protected not only from harm, but supported in building a brighter future. Empowerment must be central to any reform strategy. Refugee youth are not passive beneficiaries of aid, but active participants in their communities. Programs that promote leadership, civic engagement, and economic independence, like the Global Youth Advisory ECOSOC or local after-school initiatives, demonstrate the potential for displaced youth to shape policy and drive development.[56] Recognizing this potential means shifting international frameworks and national policies from treating the youth as dependents to partnership models that place them at the center of decision-making.[57]

Comparative case models reflect a diverse range of national responses to child refugee protection. Sweden offers one of the clearest examples of a rights-forward approach. The country's global resettlement quota gives priority to children in vulnerable situations, regardless of nationality. This approach reflects a long-standing commitment to humanitarian values and international law, ensuring that displaced youth receive protection based not on political expediency but on need.[58] Sweden also provides access to education, healthcare, and social support from the moment of arrival, enabling children to integrate into society with stability and dignity.

Canada has developed a robust Government-Assisted Refugees (GAR) program in which the federal government assumes responsibility for resettling refugees, including children. The program provides housing, language training, and educational support, and places strong emphasis on child welfare during the integration process.[59] Canada's model stands out for its clear lines of accountability and integration of children's rights into policy design. Yet despite its successes, there are ongoing concerns about uneven outcomes across provinces and the disproportionate challenges faced by unaccompanied minors in accessing services equitably.[60]

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[56] UNHCR, *Global Youth Advisory ECOSOC: Annual Report 2018*, December 2018, https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/legacy-pdf/5c90f4d84.pdf.

[57] UNHCR, Youth Report 2020–2022: *Working with and for Youth in Situations of Forced Displacement*, March 2023, https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/unhcr-youth-report-2020-2022.pdf.

[58] UNHCR, *Priority Global Quota for Resettlement*, August 12, 2019, https://globalcompactrefugees.org/good-practices/priority-global-quota-resettlement.

[59] UNHCR Canada. "Refugee Resettlement to Canada," https://www.unhcr.ca/in-canada/unhcr-role-resettlement/refugee-resettlement-canada.

[60] Canadian ECOSOC for Refugees. "Developing a National Framework for Unaccompanied Minors in Canada." Resolution 2, June 2019. https://ccrweb.ca/en/res/developing-national-framework-unaccompanied-minors-canada.

Uganda is often praised for its open-door policy, having hosted one of the world's largest refugee populations for decades.[61] Refugee children in Uganda are legally permitted to attend public schools and live alongside local communities. However, the country's ability to maintain these commitments is heavily dependent on foreign aid. Recent funding shortfalls have severely undercut essential services, forcing humanitarian agencies to scale back food, healthcare, and education programs.[62] Especially in low-income regions, well-intentioned models are difficult to sustain without consistent international support.

The European Union exemplifies the challenges of collective responsibility. In recent years, Europe has faced a significant migration crisis, driven by conflict, persecution, and poverty across the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. Southern and eastern border states have taken on a disproportionate share of the burden, and while some countries have been willing to welcome refugees, others have been resistant to relocation efforts, sparking political tension across the bloc.[63] The issue of burden-sharing has emerged as one of the EU's most pressing challenges, and despite calls for cooperation among Member States in crisis management, migration policy remains fragmented.

Together, these case models expose a persistent gap between rhetorical support for refugee and migrant children and the realities of national implementation. To bridge this divide, greater international oversight and accountability mechanisms are essential. The ECOSOC must support Member States in developing consistent, enforceable protection models – beginning with a more comprehensive definition of what meaningful protection entails.

Conclusion:

The question is no longer whether states support child protection, but whether they are willing to match that support with meaningful action. True unity in youth protection must be structural, and without adequate funding, accountability, and long-term integration strategies, the lives and futures of displaced children will remain at risk.

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[61] UNHCR. "Uganda's Open-Door Policy for Refugees Strained by Arrivals from Sudan, DRC, and South Sudan." Briefing Notes, May 17, 2024. https://www.unhcr.org/us/news/briefing-notes/ugandas-open-door-policy-refugees-strained-arrivals-sudan-drc-and-south-sudan.

[62] UNHCR, "Uganda's Open-Door Policy for Refugees."

[63] Ngan Ha Tran, "Burden-Sharing and Solidarity: Why the EU Fails to Solve the Migrant Crisis," *Shaping Europe*, May 16, 2023, https://shapingeurope.eu/burden-sharing-and-solidarity/.

The ECOSOC is uniquely positioned to move the international community from sentiment to strategy, but doing so requires a clear standard for protection and the means to enforce it. The challenge is not to reaffirm shared values, but to implement them. Reform is necessary to ensure that child refugees are not only protected from immediate harm, but from long-term exclusion and neglect.

Questions to Consider:

1. Consider how "protection" is defined. How can ECOSOC promote a version of protection that encompasses not only physical safety, but also long-term integration, education, mental health, civic engagement, and economic empowerment?
2. How can ECOSOC promote a more equitable framework for burden-sharing that supports both frontline host countries and donor states, especially those facing domestic political resistance or resource shortages?
3. What steps can be taken to ensure displaced youth are seen not as temporary dependents, but as future citizens, leaders, and agents of change within their communities? How can governments and UN agencies create space for youth leadership and civic engagement?
4. What can be done to protect refugee and migrant children in low-income countries where aid systems are fragile and dependent on inconsistent donor support?

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