



Convention on the Rights of the Child

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Summary record of the 2707th meeting

Held at the Palais Wilson, Geneva, on Friday, 12 May 2023, at 10 a.m.

Chair: Ms. Skelton

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The meeting was called to order at 10.05 a.m.

Consideration of reports of States parties *(continued)*

Combined fifth and sixth periodic reports of Sao Tome and Principe (continued)
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1. *At the invitation of the Chair, the delegation of Sao Tome and Principe joined the meeting.*
2. **The Chair**, welcoming the delegation of Sao Tome and Principe to the meeting, said that additional members of the delegation would be participating via video link.
3. **Ms. Delgado** (Sao Tome and Principe), replying to questions raised by Committee members at the 2706th meeting, said that the country's two main islands each had a central hospital as well as smaller district hospitals and community health centres. Health professionals from the central hospitals provided services at the district hospitals when needed, and medical specialists from outside the country also provided support on an occasional basis.
4. Vaccination coverage in the country stood at 99 per cent, with similar levels in urban and rural areas. Neonatal mortality did not show significant gender differences, with rates of 10 deaths per 1,000 and 8 deaths per 1,000 for boys and girls, respectively. The rates for infants under the age of 1 year stood at 19 per 1,000 and 4 per 1,000 for boys and girls, respectively, but those numbers did not give particular cause for concern because, overall, the neonatal, under-5 and maternal mortality rates in the country as a whole were not high. Increases in mortality rates since the beginning of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic had been due to complications related to COVID-19 itself, not to any negligence on the part of hospitals, low vaccination uptake or a shortage of medical staff.
5. Various HIV/AIDS testing options were available. Tests could be performed on hospitalized patients, on pregnant women during prenatal consultations and at family planning clinics. Periodic health fairs also provided testing for HIV/AIDS as well as screening for diabetes, malnutrition and other conditions. The prevalence of HIV/AIDS in young people was not considered a threat to the general health of the population: the numbers stood at 0.7 per cent among 15- to 19-year-olds and 0.9 per cent among 20- to 24-year-olds, in comparison with 1.5 per cent among the general population. However, surveys had revealed the concerning finding that 32 per cent of young people lacked awareness of HIV/AIDS, with many more being poorly informed about the disease.
6. The Government was very concerned that initiatives to curb the numbers of teenage pregnancies had not achieved success, with numbers rising in both rural and urban areas, especially on the more isolated island of Principe. A programme had been set up to enable teenagers to continue to attend school both during pregnancy and after giving birth. At the same time, so that the programme did not send the message that early pregnancy did not have serious consequences, initiatives were being undertaken to encourage parents to discuss issues relating to sex more openly with their children. The Government was also developing a strategy aimed at reducing the current reluctance of teenage girls to visit family planning clinics.
7. The full impact of the baby-friendly hospital initiative on breastfeeding rates could not yet be assessed because not all relevant professionals and stakeholders had received training on the baby-friendly hospital approach. The main factor driving the fall in breastfeeding rates was the fact that mothers often needed to return to work for financial reasons before their babies were six months old, especially since most women worked in the informal economy and therefore did not enjoy two months' paid maternity leave. Meanwhile, the persistence of certain myths relating to breast milk led to the use of formula milk and the early introduction of solid foods, which also hindered efforts to improve breastfeeding rates.
8. Cases of underweight and malnourished children had been identified in more vulnerable groups such as fishing communities, whose diets were often unbalanced owing to a lack of staple carbohydrates and the fact that fishing catches needed to be sold for income. The situation was being monitored and some improvement was starting to be seen. At the

same time, obesity was becoming more prevalent, giving rise to higher rates of hypertension and diabetes.

9. The Government was aiming to develop a strategy for solid waste management, and also for recycling. External financial support would be needed for that purpose, however. Open-air defecation had been largely eliminated in the country. Studies had shown the ground was not well suited to the construction of latrines, so the Government was now researching the possibility of building toilet facilities with septic tanks, from which waste could be recycled.

10. **A representative of Sao Tome and Principe** said that the Government recognized the importance, in the interest of children's rights, of ratifying the Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and the Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness, and was analysing the situation. The mechanisms needed to implement those Conventions would first need to be put in place, however. For example, there was currently no means of tracking children who had been adopted and then taken out of the country. Although the country had not ratified the Convention on Protection of Children and Cooperation in respect of Intercountry Adoption, children born outside the country to citizens of Sao Tome and Principe were not denied their right to nationality. Their parents could apply for recognition of their children's nationality at consulates or, where consular services were not available, by contacting national authorities directly.

11. The country did not suffer from alarming levels of international trafficking in children. However, abuses did exist domestically insofar as some parents sent their children to live with another family member or with friends who could supposedly offer a better life, often in the capital. The Government was focused on implementing preventive legislation and fostering international cooperation, in particular with the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) and African Police Cooperation Organization (AFRIPOL), to better monitor situation.

12. The country had no specific method for collecting data on children in a street situation; the Government was aware of the need to address that deficiency. A partial picture was provided by various sources, such as health centres and social services. It had been found, however, that many children who might appear to be street children were in fact children who had left the family home to escape the rules of family life.

13. The phenomenon of *catorzinhas/papoite*, in which older men formed relationships with younger girls, was regarded in the eyes of the law as sexual exploitation of minors and was therefore a crime under the Criminal Code. Engaging in sexual acts with an adolescent was also a criminal offence. Legal assistance and psychological counselling were provided to victims of such acts, and judicial officials were trained to deal with cases relating to the issue. The judicial system also worked with international partners to effectively combat the sexual exploitation of minors.

14. **A representative of Sao Tome and Principe** said that the sale of alcoholic beverages was prohibited in the vicinity of schools and that, by law, persons under 18 years of age were not allowed to consume alcohol or to enter establishments that sold alcoholic beverages. Businesses that sold alcohol were required to display notices indicating the rules restricting its sale. Television and radio campaigns had been conducted to raise awareness of the consequences of alcohol consumption, and activities involving various stakeholders, including the Institute of Drugs and Drug Addiction and civil society organizations, had helped to further publicize the issue. The cultivation, sale and consumption of cannabis was prohibited by law. The Government had enlisted the support of experienced partners to help it draw up a policy on the use of the plant for medicinal purposes.

15. Regarding the impact of open-air waste disposal on children's health, rotten foodstuffs were currently taken by the competent authorities to a rubbish dump to be destroyed under the supervision of municipal officials, public health officials and police officers, who prevented members of the public, including children, from gaining access to the site. Hospital waste was destroyed at night, also under police supervision.

16. The Parental Education Programme, launched in 2016, with the collaboration of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), was aimed at promoting positive parenting and

supporting at-risk families. Conferences and seminars had been organized to reach the target groups, and the media, including community television and radio and social media outlets, had helped raise awareness further. Brochures, booklets and posters had also been produced for that purpose. Meanwhile, peer exchange groups and meetings with parents and legal guardians provided forums to discuss positive parenting. Psychosocial and emotional support was available to help children and families deal with challenging situations.

17. Government policy on support for children with disabilities was drawn up with the participation of the children concerned and their families and reflected a commitment to ensuring inclusivity and protection. Although some shortfalls remained, children with disabilities had the right to health care and social protection on an equal footing with other children, and their families enjoyed access to the Vulnerable Families Programme and received financial support to help their children live at home. The Government was working to ensure that children with disabilities had equal access to inclusive, high-quality education and teaching materials. The Government had also been collaborating with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international partners to provide rehabilitation and support services, including occupational therapy, physiotherapy and counselling services for children with disabilities.

18. Discrepancies between school enrolment and completion rates persisted, especially among girls and children from vulnerable families. Fewer girls completed school than boys, partly as a result of teenage pregnancies. Children living in poverty, those in rural areas and those whose parents had a low level of education were also more likely to drop out before completing their education. The Government had run awareness-raising campaigns aimed at the affected groups and briefed teachers in an effort to address the issue.

19. The Government was promoting the inclusion of leisure and recreational activities in the school curriculum and was working to raise awareness of the importance of play in children's development. It had been investing in safe public spaces for children's leisure activities, building playgrounds, community centres and leisure facilities in urban and rural areas.

20. **A representative of Sao Tome and Principe** said that the Parental Education Programme provided financial support to vulnerable families and defined areas of intervention and targets to be achieved with regard to parenting responsibilities, intergenerational dialogue, positive discipline, the right to play, nutrition, safety, child protection and other matters. An interim assessment of the results of the Programme had shown some positive signs of progress, including an increase in birth registrations, greater demonstration of affection to children and increased access to health care services. The awareness-raising efforts carried out under the Programme had reached more than 80 per cent of families, and the percentage of families in which all school-age children were enrolled in education was up, compared with the baseline figure, by 3.4 per cent in the districts of Cauê and Lembá, which had previously had the lowest attendance rates in the country.

21. More than 90 per cent of social protection staff had received training on how to communicate positive parenting messages. Officials at the Ministries of Education, Health and Justice had also received positive parenting training, as had members of the public. There had been a sharp drop in alcohol consumption and the use of corporal punishment by beneficiaries of the training; some 90 per cent of beneficiaries were now aware of all children's rights and 86 per cent had become aware of mechanisms for lodging complaints about violence.

22. With regard to children in a street situation, a survey begun in 2020 had been cut short by the COVID-19 pandemic, but it was known that some children spent the day on the streets because their parents left home early for work, leaving them to their own devices. Other children had been abandoned by their parents but lived with other family members, some of whom were already caring for large numbers of children, and the children suffered neglect as a result. Violence and ill treatment, extreme poverty or an alcoholic parent or legal guardian were further reasons why children ended up on the streets. Without parental supervision, children in a street situation were often looked after by older children in the same situation. They were at risk of sexual abuse, teenage pregnancy, absence from education and child labour.

23. Regarding sustainable development and the impact of business activities on children's rights, the Government was convinced that the private sector could play a positive leadership role and had been working with companies to discuss how the Sustainable Development Goals could be achieved by working collaboratively. Development loans had been made available to that end to small and medium-sized enterprises. The private sector had helped construct schools and day-care centres staffed by trained workers to care for young children while their parents were at work.

24. A recent report compiled with the involvement of UNICEF had indicated that the State budgets for health, social protection and education had displayed a generally upward trend. Nevertheless, the Government recognized that the social protection budget needed to be increased and was seeking to address challenges and discussing options in that regard. Following a workshop and discussions with civil society partners, the Government intended to ensure more effective use of the social protection budget. During the 2023 budget period, it had conducted a national survey with the involvement of all districts and communities to examine the possibility of participatory budgeting.

25. **A representative of Sao Tome and Principe** said that climate change was a relatively recent issue about which little information was available, but the Government had been working on awareness-raising campaigns and data collection in recent years. Conferences had been held in schools and universities to educate the population from a young age about the concept of climate change; the consequences of extreme climate events on the country's communities, economic activities and infrastructure; and strategies to help mitigate the negative effects, such as coastal protection initiatives and risk mapping. Young people were also advised about careful use of water and what action to take in the event of a flood. The Government's determination to reduce greenhouse gas emissions was demonstrated by its goal of producing 50 per cent of the country's energy from renewable sources in coming decades.

26. **A representative of Sao Tome and Principe** said that complaints relating to trafficking in or sexual abuse of children could be reported to the National Police, the Judiciary Police, the Public Prosecution Service or other advisory institutions that worked with children, which worked together in a coordinated manner. Homes and shelters were available for vulnerable children. The social services could contact the police and take a child at risk into care if protection was needed. However, there was no social reintegration service as such for child victims.

27. **A representative of Sao Tome and Principe** said that the Family Code provided that parents could discipline their children "adequately and in moderation". However, there was no legal basis for corporal punishment, which was prohibited by law. Under article 152 of the Criminal Code, any parent, guardian or other person responsible for a child who inflicted physical abuse on the child, failed to provide him or her with health care or otherwise harmed the child was liable to up to 4 years' imprisonment. Corporal punishment in schools was also prohibited by law, and any staff member who practised corporal punishment was punished.

28. **A representative of Sao Tome and Principe** said that the Government was working to ensure that all communities were provided with the necessary school infrastructure. The number of teachers was regrettably low, partly because a high level of training was needed to become a teacher. The Government had conducted awareness-raising campaigns in communities to inform parents that, under the Framework Act on Special Education, all parents were required to send their children to school. The Government's goal was to guarantee inclusive education and ensure that no child was left behind owing to any form of disability.

29. **A representative of Sao Tome and Principe** said that registering the birth of a child with the personal information of the mother and the father was free for the first year following the child's birth. After one year, it cost around 150 dobras for the mother and 300 dobras for the father; those amounts were equivalent to €3 and €6, respectively. A special procedure was in place to register children over the age of 14 years who had still not been registered. New procedures to facilitate the late registration of children living overseas, notably in Angola, Equatorial Guinea and Gabon, were currently under discussion.

30. **Ms. Aho** (Coordinator, Country Task Force) said that there seemed to be a shortage of trained health care professionals and modern hospital equipment in the State party. She wished to know what progress was being made in remedying that situation. She failed to understand why birth certificates included the name of the mother but not the name of the father. It would be useful to learn what measures were in place to care for women with obstetric fistula. Information on the rates of contraception use would also be welcome. She would like to hear more about what was done to discourage early marriage.

31. She wondered whether the State party made free or affordable menstrual hygiene kits available to girls, and whether separate bathroom facilities were provided for girls and boys in schools. She also wished to know whether any awareness-raising activities had been carried out to ensure that menstruation was not perceived as a problem or a social taboo that could prompt girls to drop out of school. Although the head of delegation had indicated that open-air defecation was not a problem in the State party, the Committee had been informed that the practice remained prevalent. Information on the strategies that were in place to reduce that problem would be welcome. Lastly, she wished to know what the State party was doing to guarantee access to safe drinking water.

32. **Ms. Ayoubi Idrissi** said that she wished to know what percentage of the overall State budget was dedicated to education. Moreover, she would appreciate an update on how the State party was engaging with international partners such as UNICEF, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) to improve children's access to education.

33. **Mr. Pedernera Reyna** (Country Task Force) said that he would like to know what efforts the State party was making to reduce gender disparities that stemmed from a vision, reinforced in schools, of girls as homemakers and performers of domestic tasks. More information on corporal punishment and how it was being addressed holistically would be welcome.

34. **Ms. Otani** (Country Task Force), noting that the delegation had provided answers about the positive impacts of the business sector on children's rights and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, said that she wished to know whether the State party planned to study the negative impact of the business sector on children's rights. As it was still unclear whether the educational centres used to house children who committed crimes were closed institutions, she would welcome clarification in that regard.

35. **Ms. Alassane Moulaye** (Country Task Force), noting that the State party had indicated that it had no mechanism for regulating international adoption, said that she wished to know which bodies had overseen the known cases of intercountry adoption. It would be interesting to hear whether girls who dropped out of school after falling pregnant returned to full-time education after giving birth. She would also welcome more information about what the State party was doing to prevent such pregnancies and to provide health care for the girls concerned.

36. **Mr. Mezmur** said that the percentage of babies exclusively breastfed for the first six months had fluctuated significantly since 2000. It would be useful to learn the reasons for the ups and downs and to hear the delegation's thoughts on what interventions might help to keep the figure high. Household and ambient air pollution reportedly accounted for a significant proportion of mortality in the State party. He wondered what was being done to address that problem. He would like to know what awareness-raising activities were being carried out to combat cultural drivers of alcohol consumption and whether there was a minimum age for alcohol consumption in the home.

37. **Ms. Al Barwani** said that she would like to know whether the deadline for achieving the target dates set under the Education Policy Charter had been moved from 2022 to 2030. She would also like to know what actions were being taken to achieve the targets and whether there had been any review of the progress made thus far. She wished to know what measures the Government was taking to increase the salaries of teachers and enhance respect for the teaching profession.

38. **Ms. Correa** said that it would also be useful to have clarification regarding the competences of the Ministry of Women's Rights specifically in relation to children's rights and information on how that Ministry coordinated its activities with other ministries responsible for the protection of children's rights. She would also appreciate information on the competences of the Commission on the Human and Social Rights of Children. It was unclear whether the observatory for children's rights associated with the Commission was part of the Government or was a non-governmental entity that carried out independent monitoring. She would welcome clarification in that regard. She would be interested in hearing how civil society participated in the development of mechanisms for the protection of children. She wished to know how many children were without parental care and where they were housed. It would be helpful to learn more about which entities ran homes for such children, what resources were available to such facilities and what was being done to deinstitutionalize children who lacked parental care, place them in a family environment and ensure that their rights were upheld. Lastly, she wondered how the State party measured "moderate" punishment in families and schools, and what steps had been taken to inform children of their right not to be subjected to corporal punishment and to help them to distinguish between discipline and ill-treatment.

The meeting was suspended at 11.50 a.m. and resumed at 12.10 p.m.

39. **Ms. Delgado** (Sao Tome and Principe) said that, as a consequence of the financial crisis in her country, many health-care professionals were choosing to leave the country in search of better-paying jobs. Strategies were in place to bring retired health care professionals back to work and to train new professionals. Various methods of family planning were available. Women were generally willing to use contraceptives, but men often discouraged them from doing so, believing that the use of contraceptives made them less inclined to engage in sexual relations or to have children. As a result, women tended to use contraceptives secretly. Some men were willing to use condoms to prevent both pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. More awareness-raising was needed to inform people about the benefits of family planning. Bathrooms for girls, including gender-segregated facilities, were available in schools, and the Government had plans to improve facilities for both boys and girls.

40. **A representative of Sao Tome and Principe** said that much of the water available in rural areas originated from natural springs and was untreated. The Government had mounted a major effort to address the need for treated water in those areas. There were no additional initiatives in place to combat alcohol consumption among young people beyond the campaigns and legislative measures that had already been mentioned, but the Government was aware that further measures were required to tackle the issue.

41. **Ms. Delgado** (Sao Tome and Principe) said that, while in the past it had been considered that the place of women and girls was in the home, boys and girls now enjoyed equal rights with regard to school attendance and the number of girls enrolled at all levels, including higher education, had increased.

42. **A representative of Sao Tome and Principe** said that, since fathers were not always present at the maternity hospitals where births took place, the law allowed mothers to register their children on their own. In those cases, only the mother's name would appear on the birth certificate initially, but fathers were able to take the birth certificate to a civil registry office at a later date to have their names added.

43. **Ms. Delgado** (Sao Tome and Principe) said that menstrual hygiene kits were not free, but a resolution had been adopted to reduce their cost and ensure that they were affordable. Girls who became pregnant were not required to leave school, although in some cases they might decide to stop attending school temporarily and return after giving birth. A support programme was in place to provide psychological and financial assistance during and after pregnancy to help teenage mothers complete their education.

44. **A representative of Sao Tome and Principe** said that, according to data from 2019, 13 per cent of children did not live with their biological parents. There were three privately run temporary children's homes in Sao Tome. They received some funding from the State, but were mainly financed with funds from the Portuguese Institute for Development Assistance, the Catholic Church and individual donors.

45. **A representative of Sao Tome and Principe** said that there were no social reintegration centres specifically for children in conflict with the law. To address issues of alcohol use, campaigns were carried out in schools to raise awareness of laws prohibiting the consumption of alcohol by children. There were also plans to increase taxes on imported alcoholic drinks. A study on the consumption of alcohol and other substances in schools was being carried out in order to assess the extent of the problem.

46. **A representative of Sao Tome and Principe** said that a group had been established to develop strategies and policies to implement the Education Policy Charter. The group met at least twice a year and included partners working in education, NGOs and development partners such as UNICEF. Planned measures to improve the education system included the introduction of inclusive policies, improvements to infrastructure and increased recruitment of teachers.

47. **The Chair** said that she wished to clarify whether children placed in educational centres by courts were unable to leave and, therefore, were deprived of their liberty.

48. **A representative of Sao Tome and Principe** said that a survey conducted among beneficiaries of cash transfers had shown that they considered the amounts provided to be sufficient to cover basic daily needs and to establish microbusinesses. She was not aware of any cases of child deaths caused by pollution in the country.

49. **A representative of Sao Tome and Principe** said that there were no detention centres for children because, by law, children could not be held criminally liable for their actions. The children's homes that had been previously mentioned were for children who had been abandoned, mistreated or neglected by their parents or legal guardians. The children in those facilities were able to attend school and health care facilities and to come and go freely. There were currently no plans to establish a refugee protection system, as the country did not have the capacity to meet the needs of refugees. Its limited resources needed to be spent on meeting the needs of its own people, including its children.

50. **Ms. Aho** said that the dialogue with the State party had been fruitful and the Committee had seen that progress had been made. Nevertheless, challenges remained, particularly with regard to the implementation of certain policies and strategies and to amendments to certain laws, including those pertaining to child marriage. Going forward, the Committee would like to see a greater number of children benefiting from health care and nutrition and improved measures to protect children, particularly girls, from early marriage and early pregnancy and from sexual abuse and violence. Measures to improve education were also needed. The Committee encouraged the State party to implement further projects and programmes to promote the best interests of children.

51. **Ms. Delgado** (Sao Tome and Principe), acknowledging that much remained to be done with regard to education, health, safety, nutrition, sanitation and domestic violence, said that the Committee's questions and remarks would help her Government to fulfil its obligations with regard to children's rights. The Government would give careful consideration to the Committee's recommendations. Nevertheless, change could not happen overnight and progress would be dependent on the Government's ability to mobilize the required financial resources and build the necessary technical capacity.

The meeting rose at 12.45 p.m.