

SPECIAL COMMENT

In over fifty countries around the world, children suffer in the midst of armed conflict and its aftermath. Children's insecurity in times of conflict manifests itself in numerous insidious ways. At present, it is estimated that there are 22 million children who have been displaced by war within and outside their countries. Children are increasingly targeted, abducted and, in many cases, recruited as combatants and trained to operate small arms and light weapons. The impact of war on girls is particularly damaging, as they are sometimes abducted and undergo sexual abuse and enslavement during armed conflict. There is undoubtedly a correlation between the easy availability of small arms and the dramatic rise in the victimization of children. It is estimated that of the 4 million war-related deaths since 1990, 90% were civilians—80% of whom were women and children who fell victim to the 'misuse' of small arms and light weapons.

Over the past decade the United Nations has increasingly focused on the issue of children affected by armed conflict, working to strengthen norms and modify the role of its operational actors. The United Nations Security Council has become actively engaged on this issue, as underscored by adoption of landmark Security Council resolution 1261 and resolutions 1314 and 1379—all of which affirm that the protection of children affected by armed conflict is a peace and security issue. Children's concerns are also being integrated into United Nations peace operations, through mandates, reports, child protection advisers and training.

There is an impressive array of international human rights and humanitarian instruments to protect children from the consequences of war—most notably the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, which provides an important normative framework. International standards have also been strengthened—the recent entry into force of the Convention of the Rights of the Child's Optional Protocol and the classification of war crimes against children in the Rome Statute are particularly significant. Additionally, major United Nations conferences and Special Sessions, such as the Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All its Aspects and the General Assembly Special Session on Children, have served to fortify standards and, in particular, to highlight the interconnection between issues such as small arms, HIV/AIDS and children affected by armed conflict.

We have seen a significant increase in advocacy and awareness, as well as tangible progress in developing and advancing child protection. Children and armed conflict has been placed high on the international political agenda, as well as on the agendas of major regional organizations. The well-being of children in situations of armed conflict is now being included in peace agendas and has become a priority focus in post-conflict peace building. Warring parties have made concrete commitments for the protection of children. And there has been a major growth in NGO advocacy and programme activities.

Yet while we note commendable progress on many fronts, to the children tormented by the effects of armed conflicts, our efforts to bring about an 'era of application' of protective norms and

standards fall short both of their expectations and of universally agreed standards. Children continue to be targeted despite commitments made (and sometimes met) by parties to various conflicts. The United Nations and the international community must persist in their search for more effective ways to monitor and ensure compliance with the international standards that protect children—the plight of these children deserves our special attention and action.

Serious gaps in knowledge can constrain international efforts on behalf of children. I am optimistic that the newly established international research network on children and armed conflict housed at the Social Science Research Council will soon bring international expertise to bear on the assessment of and response to pressing child protection issues.

Ultimately, I believe that our collective ambitions—as governments, United Nations partners and NGOs—for the agenda of children affected by armed conflict should be the following: *one*, to channel our various actions and initiatives into a critical mass of activities whose impact can be truly felt on the ground; *two*, to aim to build a self-sustaining culture of advocacy, of protection and of response for the benefit of children affected by armed conflict; *three*, to embark on an ‘era of application’ on the ground—the application of international and local norms for the protection of children; and, *finally*, our collective efforts should give rise to a major social and political movement for the protection of children affected by armed conflict. The experience of the last few years has demonstrated that these objectives are not utopian, that when we work together we can move mountains, that concrete and targeted actions can yield tangible results in pushing forward this agenda.

I am heartened by UNIDIR’s dedication of this issue of *Disarmament Forum* to children and security. Not only does this underscore the need to take a collective, multi-disciplinary approach to addressing the situation of children in conflict, it will encourage sustained attention to this issue, particularly amongst audiences that do not traditionally focus on child protection.

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