

# The Vancouver Principles - A Moral Grammar for Empowered Witness

In June 2014, General (retired) Romeo Dallaire opened a speech on the subject of child soldiers to the Royal Canadian Chaplain Service with these words: “Religion is insufficient to attenuate the evil.” This paper responds to General Dallaire’s statement by examining how *The Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers* (hereafter *The Vancouver Principles*) meet the need for new language to address the encounter with children on operations. It argues that a particular set of agreed upon terms to support soldiers throughout the deployment cycle is needed, not only for ending the recruitment and use of children and youth as participants in war, but also to provide the basis for a moral grammar to help peacekeepers and other actors in theatres of operations remain empowered and healthy on mission and afterwards.

As a military chaplain, I listened to the stories of serving members and veterans including accounts of their experiences in conflicts and operations around the world. General Dallaire’s statement indicated to me the inadequacy of the language of religion and ethics for addressing the evil he and so many others experienced on peacekeeping missions in the 1990s, and Rwanda in particular. His reference to religion highlights the ways in which language, including religious, moral and legal terminology for evil and suffering, failed veterans of operations over the last century. This was especially the case for operations conducted under the auspices of United Nations Peacekeeping where child soldiers were active.

The phrase “child soldier” is a challenging one because it joins two words that do not belong together, yet it is a necessary one for speaking about the phenomenon of children and youth who occupy one of the most morally fraught roles in conflict and for developing remedies to it. It is a fact that children participate in armed conflict as combatants as well as in support roles, and that professional armed forces have to deal with them. A grammar for the encounter with all minors on operations is necessary because moral standards for soldiers and other security sector actors are the same as for the rest of us, even when the context is physically, psychologically and morally perilous. As Shannon French observes, “There is only one moral sphere, and [our] actions in war and peace are judged against the same set of values and principles.”<sup>2</sup> Soldiers and other legal security sector actors know that many of the things they are tasked to do or witness are incompatible with civilian standards.<sup>3</sup> The “one moral sphere” referred to by French affirms that there is no alteration of normative moral standards for armed forces.

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1 Romeo Dallaire, Presentation to the Royal Canadian Chaplain Service, Exercise CALLED TO SERVE (Cornwall, ON: June 3, 2014).

2 Shannon E. French. “Warrior Transitions: From Combat to Social Contract.” Joint Services Conference on The Professional Ethics (JSCOPE), 2005. <http://isme.tamu.edu/JSCOPE05/French05.html>.

3 French. 2005.

Peacekeeping operations take place in a context that is both linguistic (orders and agreements promulgated to establish, guide, and sustain the peacekeeping mission) and kinetic (the potential for violence). Standards for behaviour in professional armed forces are shaped within the operational framework of unlimited liability, that is, the accepted risk to life and limb while following lawful orders<sup>4</sup>. Unlimited liability in turn is linked to a reciprocal obligation on institutional leadership known as the fiduciary responsibility, which is defined as the avoidance of unnecessary harm to subordinates by ensuring they are trained and equipped to do their duty. This responsibility includes the right supports and services to serve them when they are injured in the course of that duty.<sup>5</sup> This includes those operations where children are present and may be integrated into the forces of parties to the conflict.

Jonathan Shay sums up the rationale for a moral grammar by describing armed forces as “a social construction defined by shared expectations and values,” embodied in such things as regulations, orders, structure, discipline, and traditions.<sup>6</sup> A moral grammar emerging from the dynamic of unlimited liability and fiduciary responsibility needs to be capable of two things: acknowledging the intersection of moral and military values and regulations, and empowering the witness - the story telling - of those who are injured on operations while following orders. Stories arising from trauma not only help shape an understanding of what happened to cause the injury, they aid in mourning loss by naming transgression and critiquing those actions by which troops were physically, psychologically or morally injured. They can also direct attention to those situations where standard operating procedures (SOPs) need to change, including the encounter with children.

Joseph Wiinikka-Lydon argues that moral injuries arising from military service are not only personal, they are also political, due to the inherently political context of their causes and to the institutional power of armed forces to compel particular behaviour and actions.<sup>7</sup> The problem with psychological and moral injuries is that they are not often immediately apparent and when they are recognized or when symptoms appear, it may be difficult initially to attribute to any single event or power dynamic, especially if the veteran is unable to talk about what happened. The challenge for wounded military members is that they often must tell their story several times in order to access appropriate healthcare or support services. Because moral injury contains an inherent critique of what “failed,” including institutional systems and structures, telling that story can become an experience of not being believed, an ordeal

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4 *The Canadian Armed Forces Ethos - Trusted to Serve*. [www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/canadian-armed-forces-ethos-trusted-to-serve.html](http://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/canadian-armed-forces-ethos-trusted-to-serve.html). 34.

5 *Ethos - Trusted to Serve*, 34.

6 Jonathan Shay. *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Scribner, 1994), 5, 6.

7 Joseph Wiinikka-Lydon. “Moral Injury as Inherent Political Critique: The Prophetic Possibilities of a New Term,” *Political Theology* 18:3 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.1080/1462317X.2015.1104205> .

made more onerous when trauma disrupts language and the sequencing of events. Naming personal or institutional failures on mission or the weakness of organisational structures can deepen the risk for those who speak up by bringing the individual close to the perceived line of insubordination, with little to offset their exercise in courage for reporting betrayal and failure.

The fact is soldiers and peacekeepers are mortally dependent on their chains of command.<sup>8</sup> This dependence includes the need for the right tools for the mission: contextually relevant Rules of Engagement (ROE), realistic threat assessments, and mission-specific training. Each of these resources plays a critical role in keeping troops informed, aware, and empowered on missions where the primary focus is not the use of force but non-lethal intervention, reporting, and witness. Kaethe Weingarten illustrates the importance of a moral grammar in her description of the four possible positions for witnessing violence by means of the dynamics of awareness and empowerment: Position 1, aware and empowered; Position 2, unaware but empowered; Position 3, unaware and unempowered, and Position 4, aware but unempowered.<sup>9</sup>

A peacekeeper deployed on a United Nations peacekeeping mission expects to be effective and competent: empowered by training, experience, rank or position, and equipped with formal Rules of Engagement, they reasonably anticipate occupying position 1, *aware and empowered* to perform their tasks as an effective and competent agent. Good leadership and appropriate support before, during and after each action are vital if they are to avoid Position 2, *empowered but unaware*, which can lead to malpractice; Position 3, *unaware and unempowered*, which may lead to abandoning one's tasks; and Position 4, *aware and unempowered*, the position most likely to result in post-traumatic stress.<sup>10</sup> Any child in an area of operations, however, can impact the ability of the peacekeeper to maintain position 1, even if they are not associated with any of the parties to the conflict.

In Rwanda, the use of child soldiers was even more injurious for UN troops, placing them in what could be called Position 5: *aware and disempowered*. Child soldiers do not exist in a vacuum. They are enmeshed in a context intended to disempower security actors and to amplify the self-doubt and shame that result from believing there is no other recourse than to back down in the face of an armed child or youth. It is this dynamic that *The Vancouver Principles* seeks to disrupt and to remedy, by ensuring peacekeepers are able to remain aware and empowered while on mission and afterwards and that youth are indiscriminantly subject to harm.

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8 Shay, *op.cit.*, 11f.

9 Kaethe Weingarten, *Common Shock: Witnessing Violence Every Day* (New York: New American Library, 2003), 95.

10 Weingarten, *op.cit.*; and Deborah van DeusenHunsinger, *Bearing the Unbearable: Trauma, Gospel, and Pastoral Care* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing company, 2015), 26-29.

Wiinikka-Lydon's proposal for a definition of moral injury includes recognizing that its causes extending beyond the rules of engagement to the institutional uses of power.<sup>11</sup> When moral behaviour is understood primarily as obedience to a scaffold of rules or to a higher authority, it not only loses its relationship to character and consequences,<sup>12</sup> it creates an organizational culture unable to recognize a soldier's need to forgive themselves and others for having followed legal orders. Susan Brison makes a supporting observation that this is because the starting point for military ethics tends to be external questions of strategy and justice without reference to the experience of soldiers.<sup>13</sup>

Wiinikka-Lydon and Brison's arguments in support of soldiers' experience as an additional starting point for military ethics highlights the core tenet of *The Vancouver Principles*: the moral and political necessity of protecting children in theatres of conflict by empowering the peacekeepers. By presuming the vulnerability of youth as well as the common legal and moral responsibility of state security actors towards them, *The Vancouver Principles* resist projections of either innocence or the demonic onto war affected children. Instead, they make room for the complexities and dilemmas that arise from their active presence. By doing so, they also provide the basis for a lexicon and a grammar capable of creating a shared understanding of the risks to children in theatre as well as the risks those children pose to others including peacekeepers.

Language to support and describe these encounters needs to include the knowledge, experience and expectations<sup>14</sup> of peacekeepers. The language of *The Vancouver Principles* is important because the words we choose and the way we use them shapes what we see and how we interpret it.<sup>15</sup> Language as a signalling system influences how we see and understand the world. Grammar simply formalizes the "rules" or the way language combines words into sentences and ideas into principles and guidelines.<sup>16</sup> A grammar itself is not a set of rules but an agreed upon way of speaking about things that help shape one's perceptions of the world.<sup>17</sup> *The Vancouver Principles* provide peacekeepers with a set of statements to guide their encounters with all children, and to help them adapt their skills for conflict into an ethical response to the presence of child soldiers. In this way, they function like a grammar,

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11 Wiinikka-Lydon, 221

12 Wiinikka-Lydon, 221.

13 Susan J. Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002, 26.

14 Trask, 63.

15 R.L. Trask, *Language: The Basics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (London and New York: Routledge) 2004. 63.

16 Trask, 63, 27.

17 Trask, 63.



by providing clear language to support peacekeepers' experience, even though it may include suffering and painful knowledge.

*The Vancouver Principles* may be adapted based on new experiences and understandings gleaned from insights that emerge during peacekeeping operations. It also enables them to address the wider cultural context in which they may be applied, especially among peacekeepers from Western societies where individual experience competes with the use of moral principles to guide decision making.<sup>18</sup> Moral principles emphasise restraint, by taking into consideration the human dignity of all persons in need.<sup>19</sup> As such, they are necessary for supplementing political principles, including Rules of Engagement. The Vancouver Principles provide a range of responses to encounters with youth during operations with the intention to reduce harm to both peacekeepers and those youth. A moral component thus hand in hand with the political and operational elements of the document." For example, Principle 1 (Mandate) encourages the inclusion of appropriate child protection provisions, including the prevention of recruitment and use of child soldiers, in all United Nations peacekeeping mandates, including for regional peacekeeping operations.<sup>20</sup> This statement includes a political and a moral objective, both of which are strengthened by Principle 3 (Early Warning). When the Rules of Engagement include child protection as well as expectations of reporting and addressing the use of child soldiers, the silencing effect of witnessing the abuse of children on operations, including the abuse by other peacekeepers, is neutralized.

Peacekeeping operations place strangers together in an intentional way for clearly defined political purposes with implicit and explicit moral elements embedded in the operations order related to reducing or ending conflict. This same dynamic also puts peacekeepers in situations of considerable ambiguity, where war fighting may have recently stopped or been averted but where tensions have not been eased. As persons tasked to make or enact decisions for the well-being of others, including those most vulnerable to exploitation, peacekeepers are moral actors who are expected to turn their considerable skills for war-fighting to help peace take root in a highly politicized and operationally sensitive context.

A moral approach to peacekeeping is not an idealistic one but a reasonable way of moving beyond an order to considering its impact on those who carry it out and those subject to its effects. As part of the fiduciary responsibility, civilian political leadership and military commanders are required to ensure troops are prepared as fully as possible to meet the contingencies inherent to peacekeeping operations, especially those with serious moral implications. As an expression of that fiduciary responsibility, *The Vancouver Principles* are

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18 Philip S. Keane, *Christian Ethics and Imagination*, (New York: Paulist Press), 1984. 9.

19 Keane, 13.

20 *The Vancouver Principles*. <https://www.vancouverprinciples.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/17-204-Vancouver-Principles-Doc-EN-v3.pdf>

designed to build upon and complement the existing framework on peacekeeping and child protection, including *The Paris Principles* and relevant Security Council resolutions.

*The Vancouver Principles* highlight the explicit moral context of operations, and peacekeepers need to be prepared to activate their moral imaginations. The moral imagination works by restraining reflexive responses to allow consideration of less harmful courses of action. Strengthening peacekeepers' moral imaginations begins before deployment through scenario based training, giving them opportunity to work through their own biases and critical issues concerning war affected children before encountering them. By defining child soldiers to include a range of ancillary roles, the Grave Violations against children provide all parties to the peacekeeping mission with a common language and a shared framework for communicating what peacekeepers may be experiencing or witnessing.

By explicitly stating the differential impact of conflict on girls,<sup>21</sup> the language of *The Vancouver Principles* also prepares peacekeepers and other organizations in theatre to recognize that what may be perceived as a cultural practice or an environmental inevitability could be a grave violation. This in turn strengthens the ability of peacekeepers to consider a wider range of responses in addition to legal ones. They do so by specifying how Member States may train, plan, and describe the conduct of their national forces in peacekeeping by "strongly encouraging" familiarity with measures for child protection and to prevent the recruitment and use of child soldiers. In this way, *The Vancouver Principles* cover potential gaps in national policies and military and police doctrine regarding the presence and the activities of children.

Given the extraordinary risk of moral injury in peacekeeping operations, where non-combatants, including children, are also under threat, *The Vancouver Principles* provide helpful language and images to prepare peacekeepers for what they will experience. By clearly stating what constitutes crimes against children, the Grave Violations enable peacekeepers to name what they are seeing or learning about by using a shared set of terms:

1. killing and maiming of children;
2. recruitment or use of children as soldiers;
3. sexual violence against children;
4. abduction of children;
5. attacks against schools or hospitals;
6. denial of humanitarian access for children.<sup>22</sup>

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21 *The Vancouver Principles*, preamble paragraph 8. [www.vancouverprinciples.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/17-204-Vancouver-Principles-Doc-EN-v3.pdf](http://www.vancouverprinciples.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/17-204-Vancouver-Principles-Doc-EN-v3.pdf)

22 "About the Vancouver Principles On Preventing the Use and Recruitment of Child Soldiers," FN. [www.vancouverprinciples.com/about/](http://www.vancouverprinciples.com/about/)

The Grave Violations acknowledge the unique challenges presented by all children in conflict zones and demonstrate that member states are committed to holding perpetrators to account for the mistreatment of all children. In turn, this helps ensure peacekeepers acknowledge and are able act on the moral obligations of the strong towards the weak, and that their witness will be acted upon, helping to reduce both crimes against children and injuries to their own personnel.

*The Vancouver Principles* are intended to ensure that peacekeepers' witness will be taken seriously. They also acknowledge the potential of war affected children to become responsible citizens in the future. This acceptance of responsibility for future hope identifies the foundation of peacekeeping as moral action. Peacekeepers fill an important role as guardians of future citizens and leaders; they need to be empowered to fulfill their duty to prevent children's potential from being squandered.

The moral response enabled by *The Vancouver Principles* plays a significant role in naming and supporting, even enforcing, communal response and accountability when it comes to protecting children and youth before, during and after conflict. Child protection focal points (Principle 4) aid and strengthen interoperability on peacekeeping missions by enhancing cooperation between various state actors and nongovernmental organisations in the area. Their existence is not only a potential source of hope and relief for children, but supports the mental and moral well-being of peacekeepers who know there are safe places dedicated to children's well-being. The inclusion of mental health (Principle 13) strengthens all the Principles as moral and communal components of the fiduciary obligation of command leadership. Prioritizing the mental health of peacekeepers in theatre and afterwards, and supporting research on trauma related to the experience of war affected children, acknowledges that their operational experience is important to their chains of command, their governments, and society. This recognition is a significant achievement considering the shame and opprobrium experienced by veterans suffering psychological injuries in the past.

*The Vancouver Principles* also offer encouragement to those on peacekeeping missions who have responsibility for the well-being of others, including commanders, chaplains and mental health specialists. By providing a common language and a defined set of terms, *The Vancouver Principles* help shape political and moral desires and ideas into concrete terms, giving linguistic form to observed reality and providing common ground for identifying the presence and activities of child soldiers and other war affected children. The vulnerability of children and youth encountered on operations imposes responsibilities, not only towards minors, but also towards their families and communities. By focussing on the vulnerability of children rather than debating their innocence, *The Vancouver Principles* provide a useful framework for the encounter with minors on operations by highlighting the role and responsibility of peacekeepers and other security sector actors as professionals trained and equipped for these encounters.



Challenges remain for some security sector actors and veterans. Many of those who needed their parents' permission to join the Canadian Armed Forces because of their age argue that a child soldier is a just another soldier. Others struggle with tremendous guilt for having prioritized self-protection when encountering an armed child. *The Vancouver Principles* do not attempt to weigh the moral innocence of any particular group of children, nor do they waive the right of self-defence for peacekeepers. Instead, their focus on the vulnerability of all minors in regions of conflict is consistent with Just War Theory, which recognizes that child soldiers act under great, even "irresistible" duress.<sup>23</sup> Contemporary Just War Theory also recognizes that the older the child soldier, the greater their presumed capacity for discerning right and wrong, even when it is not an adult capacity.<sup>24</sup>

As principles for peacekeeping operations, and as source of guidance for other operations, *The Vancouver Principles* cover "a critical gap in policies and military and police doctrine."<sup>25</sup> By including ancillary and exploitative roles filled by children, including those for sexual purposes, the Grave Violations recognize that peacekeeping plays an essential role in preventing such abuses. Empowering peacekeepers to intervene effectively where children are being exploited helps reduce the burden of witnessing harm to children and youth is reduced. It is hard enough for soldiers to describe many of the things they witness or participate in; to have structures in place to address the events they report enables peacekeepers to maintain the witness position of Empowered and Aware, the position most conducive to effective performance and to limiting moral injury.

Moral emotions lie at the heart of moral injury. Therapy is necessary to treat the injury, but it alone is not enough. The morally injured also need a community capable of helping them integrate a new understanding of their experience and of the context in which that experience injured them.<sup>26</sup> These are interpersonal, communal, even political tasks that depend on language to be effective. Language is useful for passing on information, for establishing and maintaining relationships with others, and for sharing experiences and emotions.<sup>27</sup> *The Vancouver Principles* not only help peacekeepers prepare for encountering children and youth while on mission, it gives them an internationally recognized language to give them voice for their experience, both good and bad.

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23 Jeff McMahan. *Killing in War*. Oxford; Clarendon Press, 2009. 201.

24 McMahan, 201.

25 <https://www.vancouverprinciples.com/about/>

26 Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. 54.

27 Trask, 138

Dorothee Soelle writes about the importance of language for re-establishing communication after difficult or traumatic experience.<sup>28</sup> Bernard Verkamp argues that wounded soldiers need community, not autonomy or privacy.<sup>29</sup> Serene Jones describes the role of such a community is not to explain the suffering of the other but to witness the possibility of reconfiguring it to a better purpose.<sup>30</sup> Each of these perspectives recognizes that it is not enough simply to tell of one's experience; there also needs to be an intentional, committed response to it. For UN peacekeepers in the 1990s, many found they could not prevent atrocity no matter how hard they tried, either to intervene or to argue for more robust Rules of Engagement. Those in Rwanda experienced "failure" because the connection between their intentions and their actions was severed by being forbidden to act by higher political authorities.<sup>31</sup>

Efforts to address the potential psychological and moral effects of operations on peacekeepers recognize that they suffer guilt and shame about many of the things they may have to do while on operations, especially anything they do or fail to do that results in the deaths of children and non-combatants.<sup>32</sup> Guilt and shame are important moral emotions.<sup>33</sup> Verkamp describes the necessity for analysis of one's conduct "with reference to some moral standard beyond one's own subjective feelings," and the importance of giving peacekeepers access to a community of shared experience, where they may learn that the guilt they are being asked to carry is not theirs alone.<sup>34</sup> It is for this reason that *The Vancouver Principles* are a necessary component of peacekeeping operations: they help structure a moral framework for dealing with child soldiers, for the sake of the children, for the peacekeepers, and for the social environment in which they are deployed.

Ultimately, this is a political task. *The Vancouver Principles*, like other important communications, have two sources of meaning, their content and their context.<sup>35</sup> The context for peacekeeping operations is always political. Wiinikka-Lydon's argument for recognizing the potential political critique inherent to moral injury opens up possibilities for ethics and for peacekeeping policy.<sup>36</sup> I would add it also encourages military helping professionals and leaders to be proactive when new operations or deployments are being planned. Moral injury

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28 Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering*, translated by Everett R. Kalin, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press), 1975, 70.

29 Bernard Verkamp, *The Moral Treatment of Returning Warriors in Early Medieval and Modern Times* (Scranton: University of Scranton Press, 2006). 97.

30 Jones, 52, 53.

31 Jones, 111.

32 Mark Baker, *NAM: The Vietnam War in the Words of the Men and Women Who Fought There* (1981), cited in Verkamp 61.

33 Verkamp, 62.

34 Verkamp, 97.

35 Trask, 124.

36 Wiinikka-Lydon, 3.

is not simply a consequence of following or breaking rules, it is an injury to one's world view, to deeply held beliefs about right and wrong, and to one's sense of self as an effective moral agent.

Because peacekeepers serve on operations that have multiple operational and political objectives, their moral injuries have both an institutional component and an individual one. *The Vancouver Principles* can help peacekeepers mitigate some of their moral injury by enabling active witness to wrongdoing and supporting expectations of accountability. By providing a new understanding and new processes for addressing encounters with children on operations, especially child soldiers, *The Vancouver Principles* have the potential to mitigate transgressions of international law and violations to the peacekeeper's moral integrity.

As Wiinikka-Lydon has argued, to recognize the morally damaging conditions of political violence and atrocity is to recognize the limits of the peacekeepers' agency.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, there is a powerful agency in fulfilling one's duty to stand fast and witness as part of peacekeeping operations. Such witness does not accept atrocity or the use of child soldiers, nor is it a passive limitation imposed by ROEs, but is instead an acknowledgement that empowered critical witness, arising from the consequences of imperfect social and foreign policy, can still play a central role in shaping future change. *The Vancouver Principles* serve to aid and strengthen the bonds between peacekeepers and the chain of command, the fiduciary responsibility, and cooperation with other actors in the area of operation. These Principles can also strengthen the covenant between peacekeepers and the civilian community in whose name they serve, and the reciprocal commitment of that same community to help them restore childhood to war affected children.

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37 Wiinikka-Lydon, 13