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ABOUT THE COVER ART

'A Path Treacherously Carved'

Within this piece, I wanted to confront the conflict between childhood optimism confronted by the depravity of war-torn conditions. The child within the frame looks onto the horizon with a hope for education and longing for the innocence of childhood while bearing arms – weary of the dangers that may lie ahead. The image of the loaded AK-47 lodged against the school books within the child's bag amplifies the absurdity of the competing priorities that a child must contend with in places where war runs rampant. In line with this preposterous predicament, I have titled the piece 'A Path Treacherously Carved' to assert that this fate is externally assigned. In doing so, I hope to remind all powers that be of their responsibility to these innocent children and provoke them towards honest and urgent actions to remedy this crisis.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Shawn Mwenje is a visual artist based in Nairobi, Kenya. A lot of his art features contemporary takes on the black African experience while integrating wider themes captured emphatically through portraiture. Although he shares an affinity for oil painting, he still aims to thoroughly embrace experimentation in both subject matter and medium. Shawn creates a lot of art behind the name, Chezachora (CZ), a blend of two Swahili words meaning play and draw respectively – this embodies the energy behind his work as he embraces the spirit of free, playful and spontaneous creation.

Along with being an artist, Shawn is currently enrolled at the University of Cambridge, studying Architecture, and striving to convey the same African authenticity and consciousness through design within the built environment.

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*Photo caption: The launch of the Vancouver Principles at the UN Peacekeeping Defence Ministerial in Vancouver, Canada on 15 November 2017.
Photo: The Dallaire Institute for Children, Peace and Security.*

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THE PORTER



CHILD SOLDIER ROLES

PREVENTING THE USE OF CHILDREN AS WEAPONS OF WAR

CHILD SOLDIERS INITIATIVE

www.childsoldiers.org

Photo: Josh Boyter

ABOUT THE DALLAIRE INSTITUTE

The Dallaire Institute for Children, Peace, and Security was founded by General Roméo Dallaire in 2007, and Dalhousie University, located in Halifax, Nova Scotia, has provided a home to the Institute since 2010. General Dallaire first experienced the issue of child soldiers as the Force Commander of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda during the 1994 genocide. During this time, General Dallaire realized that he and his troops were ill-prepared to face children recruited and used as soldiers. Drawing on this experience, the Dallaire Institute was created with the unique premise that preventing violence against children requires a dual lens that is focused on prioritizing the protection of children, as well as understanding the significant operational impacts upon security sector actors.

Through academic and practitioner training, interdisciplinary and applied research, and community engagement, the Dallaire Institute advances innovative strategies for preventing the recruitment and use of children in armed conflicts and violence. Uniquely, the Dallaire Institute works directly with the security sector to implement this prevention strategy. The Dallaire Institute has fifteen years of experience working directly with security actors, including the military, police, intelligence, and corrections, to strengthen operational, strategic, and tactical capacities to prevent the recruitment and use of children in armed conflicts and violence.

The Dallaire Institute advances understanding about the fragile contexts that threaten children, increase their vulnerability to extreme violence and insecurity, and diminish their agency to positively impact change. These challenges perpetuate cycles of inequality and violence that continue over generations. Through this work we hope to build a more holistic, prevention-oriented approach to the issue of child soldiers that complements current efforts while providing innovative solutions with the ultimate vision of building a world where children are at the heart of peace and security.



*Lt. Gen. Roméo Dallaire, Rwanda, 1994.
Used under permission from the National Speakers Bureau.*

ABOUT ALLONS-Y: JOURNAL OF CHILDREN, PEACE AND SECURITY

In January 1994, General Dallaire, then the Force Commander of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR), sent a fax to UN headquarters in New York warning of the impending genocide. He signed the fax with the line “peux ce que veux. Allons-y” – “Where there’s a will, there’s a way. Let’s go.” At the time, there was not a will among the international community, with lethal results for nearly a million Rwandans.

Since then, General Dallaire has worked tirelessly to ensure that there is both a will and a way to prevent mass atrocities in the future. However, action must be informed by understanding for it to be effective, and this has led to General Dallaire’s focus on preventing the recruitment and use of children in armed violence. The creation and adoption of the Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers in 2017, is helping to focus and drive action by the international community to prevent the recruitment and use of children in armed violence through ensuring that security sector actors are trained and prepared to prevent recruitment. Doing so requires learning from experiences and sharing knowledge on all aspects of training, education, research, and prevention in this area.

Published since 2016, the Dallaire Institute journal Allons-y now focuses on supporting the implementation of the Vancouver Principles. Since volume 4 (2020), the journal focuses on commentaries, peer-reviewed research and policy articles which focus on all aspects of the implementation of the Vancouver Principles. The articles provide guidance, policy recommendations, and new knowledge to support the international community’s work to end the recruitment and use of children in armed violence.

LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

By Dustin Johnson and Catherine Baillie Abidi, PhD

This sixth volume of *Allons-y: Journal of Children Peace and Security* focuses on the implementation of the Vancouver Principles in light of the successes, lessons learned, and challenges of the past twenty-five years of the Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC) Agenda. The volume began its journey in 2021, which represented a number of important milestones for children, peace and security: the 25th anniversary of the establishment of the CAAC Agenda with General Assembly Resolution 51/77 (1996), the 20th anniversary of Security Council Resolution 1379 (2001) which first mandated that the Secretary-General publish a list of parties to conflict who recruited and used child soldiers, and 2021 was the International Year for the Elimination of Child Labour.

As multiple of the authors in this volume note, there have been great advancements in the recognition of the specific harms children face during armed conflict and in the international system to prevent and redress them over the past 25 years. These include the adoption of a specific treaty on children's involvement in armed conflict, the establishment of the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism for grave violations of children's right, and the inclusion of child protection mandates in UN peacekeeping operations. States, the UN, and civil society now have multiple tools to aid in better protecting children, and particularly, in preventing their recruitment and use as soldiers, such as the Vancouver Principles, Safe Schools Declaration, and Paris Principles. This time has also witnessed expanded research into children's experiences during armed conflict and how to better protect them, from a range of disciplines from history to social work to international relations.

At the same time, the past twenty-five years have seen the emergence or return of conflict dynamics which further expose children to violence and make their protection even more difficult. The Russian invasion of Ukraine is the latest example of the disregard for children during war, while existing conflicts in Yemen, South Sudan, Mozambique, and elsewhere

continue to involve children as both perpetrators and victims of violence. These include the challenges in effective multilateral responses by the UN due to great power politics and challenges to the international system, the intractability of longstanding civil conflicts that affect hundreds of millions of children, and changes in armed conflict such as the scope of violence by organized crime, the splintering of armed groups and use of terrorist tactics, and new developments in cyber warfare and autonomous weapons. Support for basic human rights and the resources required to address children's needs, are sorely lacking and not rising to meet the challenges of the current world. We hope these reflections on the roles of youth, the UN, civil society, and committed governments in advancing the CAAC agenda into the next quarter century can help foster new thinking, strategies, and relationships to raise children's place in the peace and security agenda and further the cause of peace globally.

FOREWORD

Together and Forward: Delivering the United Nations Children and Armed Conflict Mandate

By Virginia Gamba, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict

Twenty-five years ago, in December 1996, the United Nations General Assembly took the extraordinary decision to create a mandate to protect children from the ravages of war and adopted Resolution 51/77.¹

The inception of the mandate of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC) was an unprecedented action which brought hope for millions of children living in conflict situations. It further prepared the ground for decades of commitments and actions during which Member States, the United Nations and civil society organizations have strengthened the protection of children affected by war.

The mandate has evolved over the years – and is still evolving – allowing my Office to better address the needs and rights of children in armed conflict. An important milestone was reached when, in 1999, the United Nations Security Council adopted its first resolution on children in armed conflict² acknowledging its impact on peace and security. The Council has also identified and condemned six grave violations affecting children in times of conflict: the recruitment or use of children as soldiers; the killing and maiming of children; rape and other forms of sexual violence against children; the abduction of children; attacks against schools or hospitals; and the denial of humanitarian access for children.

Through my office, the United Nations monitors these violations, identifies perpetrators, and engages with parties to conflict to develop action plans and other forms of commitment aimed at ending and preventing such crimes.

1 United Nations General Assembly (1997). Resolution 51/77 (A/RES /51/77). <https://undocs.org/A/RES/51/77>

2 United Nations Security Council (1999). Resolution 1261 (1999) (S/RES/1261). <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/1261>

The CAAC mandate is one of concrete and practical engagement between the United Nations and listed parties. While too many violations against children are verified every year, even more children are able to avoid such tragic fate, thanks to our common work to protect them.

Twenty-five years of actions and commitments has resulted in tangible progress for conflict-affected children: over 170,000 children have been released from armed groups and armed forces following United Nations' advocacy. Thirteen (13) resolutions and multiple Presidential Statements on children and armed conflict have been adopted by the United Nations Security Council. Hundreds of commitments have been undertaken by parties to conflict to end and prevent grave violations against children, including 37 Action Plans, of which 20 are currently under implementation. Furthermore, the international community has supported the mandate through a series of initiatives that act as powerful preventive tools: the Paris Principles, the Safe Schools Declaration and the Vancouver Principles, among them.

In January 2022, as we commemorated the 25th anniversary of the Children and Armed Conflict mandate, my Office launched the Study on its evolution throughout the period 1996-2021.³ By looking at all the important achievements made, and by identifying the challenges that impacted the implementation of the mandate, the study provides an in-depth view of 25 years' work for conflict-affected children. The study further presents opportunities to improve the protection of children in the short and long term; for the mandate anniversary is beyond all an opportunity to look forward and imagine strategic actions to inspire the future we want for the mandate.

So, what do we want for the mandate in the years to come? Allow me to share a few ideas which emerged from the consultative process undertaken for the development of the study.

The Children and Armed Conflict mandate has always had **partnerships** as its foundation and our joint advocacy and outreach can be strengthened through enhancing such strong alliances. A **bolstered collaboration amongst all partners**, including Member States, Regional and sub-regional Organizations, civil society organizations, academia, Groups of Friends on children and armed conflict, as well as media, can further amplify our advocacy efforts in the years to come.

Reinforcing the focus on **prevention** should also be a priority as mandated by the last two Security Council CAAC resolutions (in 2018 and 2021). The proactive engagement with parties to conflict working with the Country Taskforces on Monitoring and Reporting (CTFMRs) and other early warning systems in situations not on the children and armed conflict agenda, can

3 Office of the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict (2022). Study on the evolution of the Children and Armed Conflict mandate 1996-2021. New York: United Nations. <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Study-on-the-evolution-of-the-Children-and-Armed-Conflict-mandate-1996-2021.pdf>

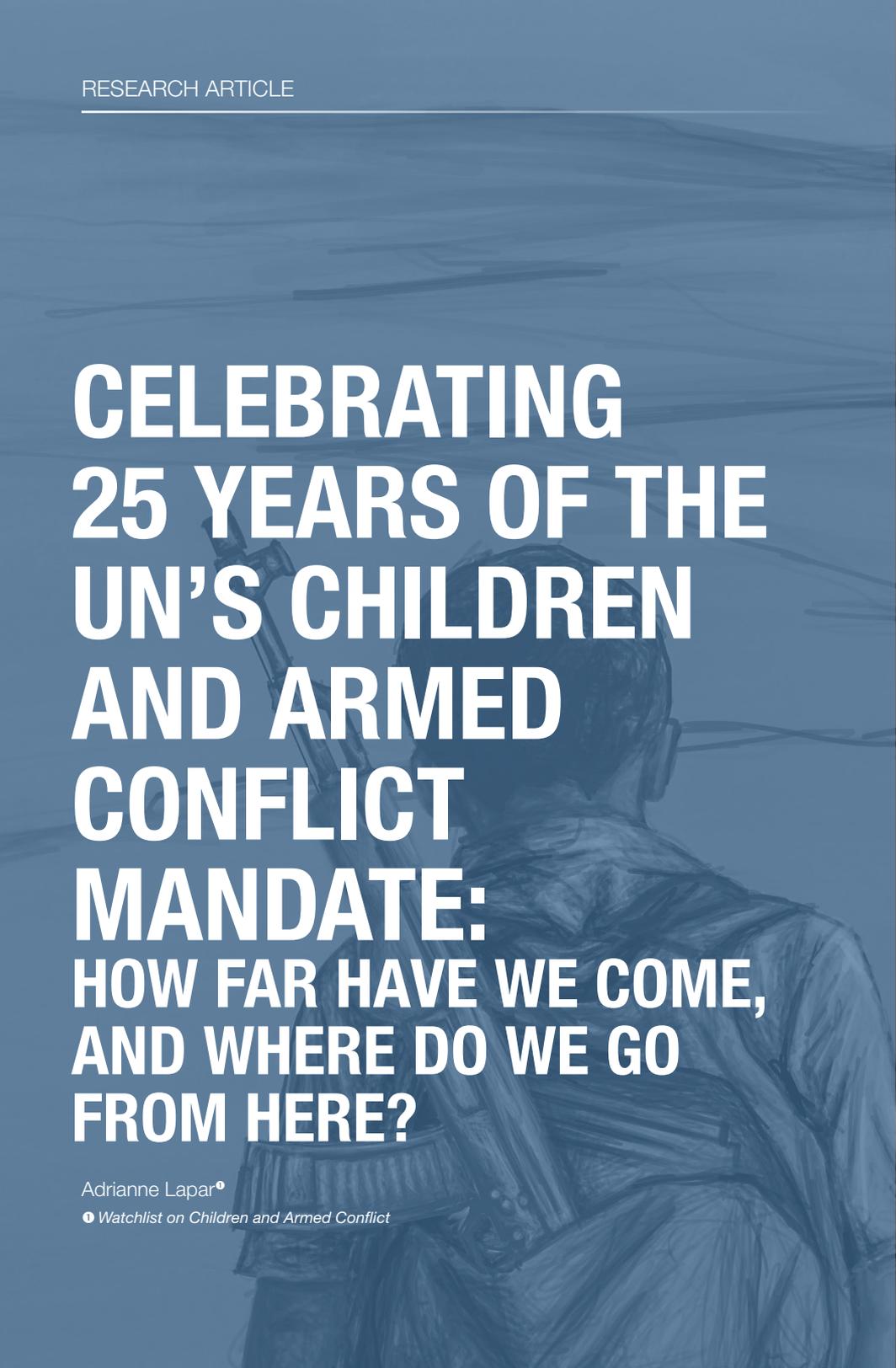
be decisive in **preventing grave violations against children** from occurring in the first place. In that sense, making sure that emerging crises are added quickly as situations of concern could allow the CAAC mandate to play an early warning role.

Lastly, not only maintaining but also **reinforcing child protection capacity** in United Nations missions and country teams is of utmost importance. Our work is only possible because of the fully dedicated child protection staff on the ground. The COVID-19 pandemic has also shown that strengthening child protection capacity should also include **taking advantage of digital technology**. Such tools could help us improve data analysis, as well as reintegration initiatives and the inclusion of child protection elements in peace processes and mediation efforts.

These are only some of the recommendations that we might want to consider as we envisage the next 25 years to better protect children affected by conflict. And many questions remain for which I hope we can work together and explore possible answers. *How can we build better coalitions of child protection champions? How can the CAAC mandate influence cultural and social perceptions to change behavior for the protection of children? How can we ensure that the mandate and its tools remain relevant and up to date in the evolving dynamics of armed conflict? How can we ensure that communities are more resilient in the face of grave violations?*

The Dallaire Institute has been an important partner to the CAAC office in the past and I hope that it can continue to shed light on these important questions.

It is our responsibility as a global community to propose innovative solutions to improve the protection and wellbeing of conflict-affected children in the years to come to end grave violations once and for all. Let us do this together.



CELEBRATING 25 YEARS OF THE UN'S CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT MANDATE: HOW FAR HAVE WE COME, AND WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Adrienne Lapar^o

● *Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict*

INTRODUCTION

Twenty-five years ago, the international community issued an urgent call to protect children affected by armed conflict. Horrified by the findings of Graça Machel's historic study on the impacts of war on children, the United Nations General Assembly established the Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC) mandate in December 1996.¹

Since then, the CAAC agenda has expanded and become one of the most significant, dynamic, and broadly supported multilateral initiatives within the UN system. It provides international policymakers a unique set of tools for promoting the protection of children in war and addressing grave violations of their rights. Even in today's increasingly polarized world, policymakers can rally around the notion that no child should suffer the horrors of war.

Despite progress, children continue to face the devastating impacts of armed conflict. In 2020, the UN documented nearly 24,000 grave violations against children.² More children are living in conflict zones than at any time in the previous two decades.³ At the same time, the rapid expansion of the global counterterrorism agenda threatens to unravel established laws and norms for protecting children's rights. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated children's vulnerability to rights violations and other forms of exploitation and abuse.

This commentary reflects on the progress made over the past 25 years, remaining gaps and challenges, and emerging concerns for children in war. It also provides recommendations for the years ahead.

KEY PROGRESS MADE IN PROTECTING THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN IN WAR

Over the past 25 years, the UN's CAAC mandate has made significant strides towards improving the situation of children affected by war and ensuring the protection of their rights. The mandate is spearheaded by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (SRSG-CAAC), who plays a critical role in bringing concerns for children to high-level policymakers and influencing governments and non-state armed groups alike to take concrete actions to end and prevent grave violations. The SRSG-CAAC employs a variety of tools to influence change, including preparing the Secretary-General's annual report and

1 United Nations General Assembly, Resolution 51/77, The rights of the child, A/RES/51/77 (20 February 1997), <https://undocs.org/a/res/51/77>.

2 United Nations Security Council, Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict, A/75/873-S/2021/437 (6 May 2021), <https://undocs.org/s/2021/437>.

3 Kristen Kamoy, Pia Podieh, and Keyan Salarkia, Stop the War on Children: A Crisis of Recruitment (London: Save the Children, November 2021), 3, <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/SWOC-5-5th-pp.pdf>.

other periodic reports on CAAC, supporting the signing and implementation of action plans to end and prevent grave violations, making field visits to advance engagement with warring parties for the protection of children, and issuing public statements on emerging concerns (often in collaboration with other thematic mandates, such as those on Sexual Violence in Conflict and Violence against Children).

UN Member States play a key role in supporting the mandate's implementation. Since 1999, the Security Council has adopted 13 thematic resolutions on CAAC.⁴ The Group of Friends of CAAC—an informal coalition of over 45 Member States, chaired by Canada—further supports the agenda through collective advocacy. Over the years, national and regional Groups of Friends of CAAC have formed to support local efforts to protect children from the scourges of war.

Perhaps the single greatest advancement of the CAAC agenda was the 2005 adoption of Security Council Resolution 1612, establishing the UN's Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM). A unique global mechanism for collecting timely, objective, accurate, and reliable information on grave violations against children in armed conflict,⁵ the MRM feeds data into the Secretary-General's annual CAAC reports and provides the Security Council with an evidence-base for determining actions to address violations. Although the MRM only captures a fraction of all violations committed due to its rigorous verification standard and logistical, access, and resource challenges, it paints a representative picture of the overall situation and plays a vital role in ending grave violations against children.

Resolution 1612 also established the Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict (SCWG-CAAC). A subsidiary body responsible for reviewing country-specific reports on the situation of children and armed conflict, the SCWG-CAAC tracks progress in the development and implementation of action plans and makes recommendations to the Council on possible measures to promote children's protection, including through appropriate mandates for peacekeeping missions and communications to warring parties.⁶

Through a series of resolutions adopted between 2001 and 2015, the Security Council requested the Secretary-General to name parties responsible for committing grave violations against children by listing them in the annexes of the annual CAAC report.⁷ The listing of

4 In 1999, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1261, placing children and armed conflict on its agenda as a matter of international peace and security. United Nations Security Council, Resolution 1261 (1999), S/RES/1261 (30 August 1999), <https://undocs.org/s/res/1261>(1999).

5 United Nations Security Council, Resolution 1612 (2005), S/RES/1612 (26 July 2005), para. 2, <https://undocs.org/S/RES/1612>(2005).

6 *Ibid.*, para. 8.

7 Initially calling for the listing of parties who recruit or use children, the "triggers" for listing parties have since expanded to include other grave violations, namely killing and maiming, rape and other

perpetrators in the annexes of the annual reports provides an important first step toward accountability and serves as the basis for the UN to engage with listed parties to sign and implement action plans to end and prevent grave violations. The annual reports and the listing mechanism have led to the signing of over 30 action plans. Since the mandate's inception, 13 parties have fully complied with their commitments and subsequently been delisted.⁸ In other contexts, the cessation of hostilities and subsequent peace processes have led to an end to violations, including the release of approximately 170,000 children from armed forces and groups over the past two decades.⁹

Over the years, efforts to promote the protection of children in war have been increasingly mainstreamed throughout the Security Council's response to situations of armed conflict and post-conflict reconstruction. This has translated into the inclusion of dedicated child protection mandates for peacekeeping and special political missions, as well as, in limited cases, the employment of sanctions and other targeted measures against individuals or parties responsible for committing grave violations against children.

Beyond the Security Council's legal framework, the CAAC agenda has also contributed to a growing international consensus that children must not be used in hostilities. The majority of UN Member States—172 at this writing—have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child's (CRC) Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict (OPAC). In 2020, the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour, which prohibits the forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict, achieved universal ratification.¹⁰

Member States have made additional, voluntary commitments to promote children's protection in war. Adopted in 2007, the Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with

forms of sexual violence, attacks on schools and hospitals, and abductions.

- 8 These include: the Chadian National Army (ANT); the Forces Armées des Forces Nouvelles (FAFN); the Front de libération du Grand Ouest (FLGO); the Mouvement Ivoirien de Libération de l'Ouest de la Côte d'Ivoire (MILOCI); the Alliance patriotique de l'ethnie Wè (APWé); the Union patriotique de résistance du Grand Ouest (UPRGO); the Congolese Armed Forces (FARDC) for recruitment and use of children; the Unified Communist Party of Nepal Maoist (UCPN-M); the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF); the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF); the Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal (TMVP); Sudan government security forces, including the Sudanese Armed Forces, the Popular Defense Forces, and the Sudan Police Forces; and the Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF). Note: At this writing, the FARDC remains listed for rape and other forms of sexual violence against children.
- 9 Virginia Gamba, "Translating Hope into Action: 25 Years of Protecting Children from the Impact of Conflict" (New York: United Nations, 11 December 2021), <https://www.un.org/en/un-chronicle/translating-hope-action-25-years-protecting-children-impact-conflict>.
- 10 International Labour Organization, "ILO Child Labour Convention achieves universal ratification" (Geneva: International Labour Organization, 4 August 2020), https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_749858/lang--en/index.htm.

Armed Forces and Armed Groups lay out a set of detailed guidelines for preventing the recruitment and use of children and promoting the release and reintegration of those affected.¹¹ International policymakers have also recognized the intrinsic link between children's access to universal, inclusive education and long-term, sustainable peace and development, through the 2015 adoption of the Safe Schools Declaration, a voluntary political commitment to protect students, teachers, and schools from attack. Governments have further sought to bridge the gap between humanitarian efforts and the security sector response through the 2017 adoption of the Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers, which seek to prevent the recruitment and use of children throughout all phases of conflict.¹²

Today, these three sets of voluntary political commitments have become understood as a “package” for the effective protection of children in war. Over 100 governments have endorsed each set of commitments and incorporated corresponding guidelines into their national doctrines and military trainings.

GAPS IN THE RESPONSE AND EMERGING CONCERNS

Despite these advances, children continue to be impacted in conflicts around the world. Gaps in the response, including a lack of sufficient resources to deal with the scale of the problem, and new and emerging concerns for children in war pose significant obstacles to protecting this highly vulnerable population.

Although the UN's collection of data on grave violations has significantly improved over the years, the disaggregation of data by gender, age, and disability remains limited, due to lack of capacity, access constraints, insecurity, and underreporting.¹³ Additionally, there remains a disconnect between the data and efforts to establish effective early warning systems, prevent violations, and deescalate conflict.

Child protection advisors in peacekeeping settings play a critical role in addressing child protection concerns: through monitoring and reporting on violations, negotiating the release

11 United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), The Paris Principles: Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups, February 2007, <https://www.unicef.org/mali/media/1561/file/ParisPrinciples.pdf>.

12 Global Affairs Canada, The Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers (Ottawa: Global Affairs Canada, 15 November 2017), https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/assets/pdfs/issues_development-enjeux_developpement/human_rights-droits_homme/principles-vancouver-principes-english.pdf.

13 Rape and other forms of sexual violence are especially underreported, owing to fear of reprisals, intimidation, stigma, shame, social pressures, a lack of access to response services, and a lack of trust in the justice system

of children from armed forces and groups, and engaging with warring parties to sign and implement action plans. Yet budget cuts and the streamlining of UN mandates have reduced the resources allocated to child protection in peace operations, curtailing the UN's ability to effectively implement the CAAC agenda. The same holds true in contexts of mission drawdown or transition.

Beyond peacekeeping and special political missions, child protection as a humanitarian sector remains chronically underfunded.¹⁴ Child reintegration programming is especially underfunded, with reintegration funding actually decreasing between 2006 and 2016, despite the proliferation of conflicts around the world.¹⁵ Without the necessary reintegration support, affected children face heightened risks of rejection from their communities, stigmatization, re-recruitment by warring parties, and other forms of exploitation and abuse.

In addition to funding and resource gaps, efforts to politicize the CAAC agenda undermine its effective implementation. The listing of perpetrators of grave violations against children in the annexes of the Secretary-General's annual reports serves as an important first step for accountability and incentivizing offending parties to change their behavior. Yet in recent years, there have been persistent disparities between MRM-verified data in the annual report's narrative and those perpetrators listed in its annexes.¹⁶ Moreover, parties have been removed from the annexes¹⁷ without having fully met the existing criteria for delisting.¹⁸ The lack of

14 According to an analysis of 19 humanitarian response plans and refugee response plans in 2020, just 47 percent of child protection needs were funded, compared to 67 percent overall across sectors. See: Margot Thierry, Alvihild Strømme, and Katharine Williamson, *Still Unprotected: Humanitarian Funding for Child Protection* (Geneva: The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action et al., December 2020), https://alliancecpha.org/en/system/tdf/library/attachments/stc_still_unprotected_repport_high.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=40960

15 War Child UK, "Closing the Funding Gap for the Reintegration of Children Associated with Armed Forces and Groups," September 2018, https://www.warchild.org.uk/sites/default/files/link-files/war_child_uk_reintegration_child_soldiers_briefing_paper_web.pdf.

16 For more details, including country-specific examples, see: Eminent Persons Group, *Keeping the Promise: An Independent Review of the UN's Annual List of Perpetrators of Grave Violations against Children, 2010 to 2020* (New York: Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, March 2021), <https://watchlist.org/wp-content/uploads/eminant-persons-group-report-final.pdf>.

17 For example, the Saudi and Emirati-led coalition was removed from the annexes of the Secretary-General's annual CAAC report in 2018 for attacks on schools and hospitals in Yemen, despite the UN verifying the coalition's responsibility for 24 such attacks during the reporting period. In 2020, the coalition was delisted for killing and maiming children, even though it was responsible for at least 222 child casualties in 2019 and 194 in 2020. The Tatmadaw was also delisted in 2020 for recruitment and use, despite having recruited and used at least 205 children during the reporting period; it was re-listed in 2021, after the UN verified 726 cases of recruitment and use in 2020.

18 In his 2010 annual report to the Security Council on children and armed conflict, the Secretary-General defined the criteria for parties to conflict to be delisted from the annexes of his annual reports (see paras. 178-180). As part of the delisting process, a listed party—whether a state actor or a non-state actor—is required to “enter into dialogue with the United Nations to prepare

consistent, transparent application of standards calls into question the impartiality and credibility of the system and incentivizes perpetrators to play politics, rather than undertake good faith efforts to address violations.¹⁹

The ever-growing counterterrorism agenda poses serious challenges to the protection of children in armed conflict, as it all too frequently lacks adequate safeguards for children's rights and undermines existing laws and norms for their protection.²⁰ Governments are increasingly treating children allegedly associated with armed groups, especially those designated as terrorist, as criminals and threats to national security, rather than victims of serious violations of international law entitled to special protections. Additionally, counterterrorism measures, sanctions, and donor conditionality clauses threaten the neutrality of humanitarian actors and children's access to lifesaving assistance.²¹

In at least 20 conflict-affected countries, children have been detained for their alleged association with opposing parties to conflict.²² Often, these children are deprived of liberty in deplorable conditions, where they may be subject to torture and other forms of cruel, degrading, or inhuman treatment.²³ In the case of children of so-called "foreign terrorist fighters," many home countries have refused to repatriate their nationals, including children, on the premise that they harbor extremist ideologies or pose a security threat²⁴; many of these children have spent years languishing in crowded displacement camps and de facto detention facilities, with limited access to basic services. Children in detention are likely to suffer stigmatization, disruptions to their education and social development, and separation from their communities, jeopardizing their reintegration into society.²⁵

and implement a concrete, time-bound action plan to cease and prevent grave violations" for which it is listed. United Nations Security Council, Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict, A/64/742-S/2010/181, 13 April 2010, paras. 178-179, <https://undocs.org/A/64/742>.

- 19 Eminent Persons Group, Keeping the Promise: An Independent Review of the UN's Annual List of Perpetrators of Grave Violations against Children, 2010 to 2020 (New York: Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, March 2021), <https://watchlist.org/wp-content/uploads/eminent-persons-group-report-final.pdf>.
- 20 For more information, see: Mathilde Bienvenu, Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism: The Erosion of Children's Rights in Armed Conflict (New York: Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, January 2020), https://watchlist.org/wp-content/uploads/watchlist-policy-note_jan2020_lr.pdf.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 United Nations Security Council, Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict, A/75/873-S/2021/437 (6 May 2021), <https://undocs.org/s/2021/437>.
- 23 Jo Becker, Extreme Measures: Abuses against Children Detained as National Security Threats (New York: Human Rights Watch, July 2016), https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/crd_detained0716web_1.pdf; Manfred Nowak, *The United Nations Global Study on Children Deprived of Liberty* (New York: United Nations, November 2019), pp. 597, 599-601.
- 24 Mathilde Bienvenu, Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism: The Erosion of Children's Rights in Armed Conflict (New York: Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, January 2020), https://watchlist.org/wp-content/uploads/watchlist-policy-note_jan2020_lr.pdf.
- 25 See: Neuchâtel Memorandum on Good Practices for Juvenile Justice in a Counterterrorism Context

LOOKING AHEAD

The 25th anniversary of the CAAC mandate should be a moment not only to celebrate progress made, but also to reflect on gaps, challenges, and emerging concerns and identify concrete actions to ensure continued progress. In order to more effectively protect children in war, the international community should: 1) uphold core principles for the protection of children in armed conflict; 2) continue to strengthen monitoring, reporting, and response to grave violations; 3) promote accountability for and to children; and 4) ensure a holistic approach to addressing CAAC concerns.

Uphold Core Principles for the Protection of Children in Armed Conflict

Governments, UN actors, civil society, and other stakeholders must defend and uphold existing protection frameworks, including international humanitarian law, human rights law, and juvenile justice standards. To promote global consensus to end the military recruitment and use of children, governments should support the “straight-18” standard—ending the recruitment of children for any military purpose—and encourage those who have not yet signed or ratified the OPAC to do so without delay. Member States who have not yet endorsed the Paris Principles, Vancouver Principles, and/or Safe Schools Declaration should promptly do so and take steps to incorporate the corresponding guidelines into their national military doctrines, trainings, and policies.

Governments must ensure that efforts to counter terrorism and address national security concerns are consistent with their obligations to children. Specifically, domestic laws, policies, and practices should recognize the primary status of affected children—including those allegedly associated with designated terrorist groups—as victims, and national counterterrorism strategies should prioritize the best interests of the child. In line with the Paris Principles, children accused of violent, internationally recognized crimes—beyond mere association—should be treated in accordance with juvenile justice standards. Member States with foreign nationals accused of affiliation with designated terrorist groups should facilitate, without further delay, the return of nationals and children of their nationals and provide the necessary support, in line with international standards and ensuring children’s best interests. Governments of conflict-affected countries should take steps to promote children’s protection and wellbeing, including by signing handover protocols for the swift transfer of children allegedly associated with armed forces and groups in their custody, or whom they have encountered, to child protection actors for support services, including, but not limited to, reintegration.

(New York: Global Counterterrorism Forum, 2015), Good Practice 8, <https://www.thegctf.org/Portals/1/Documents/Framework%20Documents/2016%20and%20before/Neuch%C3%A2tel%20Memorandum%20on%20Juvenile%20Justice%20ENG.pdf?ver=2020-01-13-153528-460>.

Continue to Strengthen Monitoring, Reporting, and Response to Grave Violations

The concerns affecting children in war are complex and multifaceted, and addressing them requires specialized expertise and sensitivity. Better monitoring and reporting on grave violations and related abuses—including disaggregating data by gender, age, and disability—is needed to effectively protect children and address their multiple vulnerabilities. Improved data collection will, in turn, promote a more informed response to violations and associated protection concerns, such as the deprivation of liberty, forced displacement, early/forced marriage, and child labor.

Data on grave violations, including in countries not on the CAAC agenda, should be used to inform early warning and prevention efforts. Wherever there is credible information that warring parties are committing grave violations against children, the Secretary-General should promptly alert the Security Council by including such “other situations of concern” in the annual CAAC report.²⁶ Initiatives like the Dallaire Institute’s Knowledge for Prevention (K4P) project should be utilized to strengthen the connection between monitoring, reporting, and prevention.²⁷

At the same time, adequate resources are needed to effectively implement the CAAC mandate. Member States should ensure peacekeeping and special political missions, as well as other child protection actors, have the necessary financial and human resources to effectively monitor, report, and respond to grave violations. This includes ensuring robust child protection mandates for peacekeeping and special political missions, requesting the timely deployment of child protection advisers in all relevant missions, and ensuring these posts are appropriately resourced through budgetary decisions of the General Assembly’s Fifth Committee. In any transitions and drawdown strategies, the Security Council should closely consider CAAC concerns and ensure that child protection functions are preserved and adequately funded.

In addition to mandates and resourcing, Member States should call upon governments of conflict-affected countries to facilitate safe, timely, and unhindered access for the UN to carry out critical child protection functions. This includes facilitating access to non-state armed groups for the purpose of humanitarian dialogue leading to the adoption of action plans and providing adequate support for the timely implementation of such plans.

26 For more information, see: Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, “A Credible List”: Recommendations for the Secretary-General’s 2020 Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict (New York: Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, April 2020), p. 3, <https://watchlist.org/wp-content/uploads/watchlist-credible-list-report-2020-final.pdf>.

27 For more information, please see: <https://dallaireinstitute.org/k4p/>.

Promote Accountability For and To Children

Accountability is essential for protecting children in war and ending grave violations of their rights. Holding perpetrators of such violations accountable increases the costs of noncompliance with international law, deters future violations, and thus, better protects children.

Governments should bring all perpetrators of grave violations to justice, including through prompt investigation and prosecution for genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and other egregious crimes perpetrated against children. Furthermore, they should support national and international accountability efforts, and encourage cooperation with international justice mechanisms, including the International Criminal Court (ICC). The Security Council and the SCWG-CAAC should use all available tools to promote accountability; this includes strengthening the use of targeted measures against perpetrators through existing sanctions regimes and exploring options such as asset freezes and travel bans where sanctions regimes do not exist. In each of these cases, the Security Council must carefully safeguard principled humanitarian action.

The listing of perpetrators in the Secretary-General's annual CAAC reports remains one of the most unique and powerful tools for promoting accountability today, and it should not be undermined by political considerations. Member States who support the CAAC agenda should continue to call on the Secretary-General to list all perpetrators that deserve so in the annexes of his annual CAAC report for all relevant violations. Member States should also continue to urge all listed parties to adopt and fully implement action plans to end and prevent grave violations against children, as the path to delisting.

Promoting accountability includes not only bringing perpetrators to justice, but also ensuring that programs and policies are accountable to the very children they are designed to protect. Children's right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them is enshrined in the CRC and further elaborated upon in General Comment 12.²⁸ Children's participation is not only a right, but also helps build their capacity for active citizenship, contributes to breaking cycles of violence, and promotes long-term, sustainable peace.²⁹ Policy and decision makers—including governments, the UN, and civil society—should promote children's participation

28 Convention on the Rights of the Child, New York, 20 November 1989, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>; United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 12 (2009), The right of the child to be heard, 20 July 2009, <https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/AdvanceVersions/CRC-C-GC-12.pdf>.

29 Alessia Chiochetti, Practical Guidance for Mediators to Protect Children in Situations of Armed Conflict (New York: United Nations, February 2020), <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Practical-guidance-for-mediators-to-protect-children-in-situations-of-armed-conflict.pdf>.

in decision-making processes affecting them and provide accountability and response to their inputs, in line with children's best interests. Decision makers should remove barriers to children's participation, such as restrictive laws and practices, to ensure their civic activity.

Ensure a holistic approach to addressing CAAC concerns

Over the next 25 years, the UN, its Member States, civil society, and other stakeholders must work together to promote a more cohesive response to CAAC concerns in order to ensure sustainable, positive results for children.

The Security Council should continue to mainstream CAAC throughout its work, systematically addressing grave violations in all relevant country-specific and thematic issues on its agenda. This includes the authorization and renewal of mission mandates, establishment or modification of sanctions committee mandates, country-specific and thematic resolutions, presidential statements, briefings and consultations, and terms of reference of visiting missions.

Donors should prioritize long-term, sustainable funding for child protection, including reintegration, support services for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, mental health and psychosocial support,³⁰ and comprehensive case management. Response efforts should engage a broad range of stakeholders in multiple sectors and across the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus (HDPN), to promote a holistic, long-term approach to child protection concerns spanning armed conflict and post-conflict reconstruction.

There has been a growing recognition in recent years of the urgent need to address child protection concerns in all phases of conflict.³¹ International decision makers should call for the integration of child protection into peace processes from the outset of any negotiation. Governments, mediators, and other stakeholders should closely consult and draw from the OSRSG-CAAC's Practical Guidance for Mediators to Protect Children in Armed Conflict to address child protection issues in peace and ceasefire agreements.³² Greater efforts should be

30 A 2021 study found that more than half (57 percent) of children living in fragile and conflict-affected countries expressed a need for mental health and psychosocial support as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns. This rose to 70 percent for refugee and displaced children, a threefold increase from pre-COVID estimates. This finding could indicate that 456 million children are currently likely to need mental health and psychosocial support worldwide. See: Nadine Haddad, Eamonn Hanson, and Phiona Naserian Koyiet, *The Silent Pandemic: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Mental Health and Psychosocial Wellbeing of Children in Conflict-Affected Countries* (War Child Holland and World Vision International, April 2021), https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/The%20Silent%20Pandemic_final.pdf.

31 See, for example: UN Security Council, Resolution 2427, S/RES/2427 (9 July 2018), [https://undocs.org/S/RES/2427\(2018\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/2427(2018))

32 Alessia Chiochetti, *Practical Guidance for Mediators to Protect Children in Situations of Armed Conflict* (New York: United Nations, February 2020), <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Practical-guidance-for-mediators-to-protect-children-in-situations-of-armed-conflict.pdf>.

made to facilitate children's participation in peace processes, which contributes to breaking cycles of violence and preventing future violations.

Efforts to protect children in war are needed today, more than ever. Armed conflicts have continued, and warring parties continue to commit grave violations against children, too often with impunity. The reverberating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have further exacerbated children's vulnerabilities to grave violations and other forms of exploitation and abuse. Despite its shortcomings, the CAAC agenda remains one of the most impactful, widely supported thematic agendas. We must do our utmost to make effective use of the tools and mechanisms at our disposal to protect children's rights and secure a peaceful future where they can thrive.

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UNDERSTANDING PERENNIAL RECRUITMENT OF CHILD SOLDIERS IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

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ABSTRACT:

Recruitment of child soldiers in armed conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has become a perennial problem despite efforts by local and international actors to put a stop to it. This paper launches a critical investigation into the underlying causes behind the continued recruitment of children as soldiers. More so, in light of economic challenges in a war-torn country, where there is no school, no recreational facilities and no proper services, this paper seeks to establish how the implementation of the Vancouver Principles can be made a total success in such conditions.

KEYWORDS

Child Soldiers, Armed Conflict, Children, Vancouver Principles

INTRODUCTION

Although the definition of children and therefore of child soldiers varies between countries and cultures, most authors define child soldiers as all people under the age of 18 who are recruited to a country's armed forces or to a non-government entity (NGE), even if the country is in a state of peace.¹ This paper includes in its definition of child soldiers those children who are forcibly recruited, as well as those who join voluntarily; as in both cases children become subject to the horrendous consequences of child soldiering denounced by international law. The definition adopted is in line with how major pieces of international law pronounce the need to protect children from recruitment by armed groups in armed conflict. For instance, the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict suggest special protection of persons under the age of 18 so that they do not take direct part in hostilities.² The Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers, which this paper will refer to in analysing the perpetual recruitment of child soldiers in DRC, advances that protection of children is a critical component in achieving success by United Nations (UN) peacekeeping missions.³ Child soldiers will be discussed in the context of all child participants in armed conflict, regardless of function, for example, cooks, porters, messengers, 'bush wives' or other support roles.

The effects of having children recruited as child soldiers are not doubted and have been widely noted over the years. Child soldiers are often exposed to horrific violence as they are both witnesses to and perpetrators of violence. Child soldiers suffer severe physical, psychological, and emotional injuries. They can be torn from family and friends, barred from educational and other development opportunities, stigmatized or rejected by their community and peers, and denied their fundamental needs and basic human rights.⁴ Also, some of them may grow to become adults with a violent culture deeply rooted in them and if they do not receive counselling and healing, they are likely to institute violence in their adulthood.⁵ This results in

- 1 Volker Druba, "The Problem of Child Soldiers - International Review of Education," SpringerLink (Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1023/A:1020309527289>,
- 2 "Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child," OHCHR (OHCHR, 2000), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/opaccrc.aspx>.
- 3 Global Affairs Canada, "Government of Canada," GAC (Government of Canada, August 1, 2019), https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_development-enjeux_developpement/human_rights-droits_homme/principles-vancouver-principes-pledge-engageons.aspx?lang=eng.
- 4 "Implementation Guidance for the Vancouver Principles - Canada," Government of Canada (Government of Canada, 2019), <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/dnd-mdn/documents/reports/2019/igvp-20190614.pdf>,
- 5 Roos Haer and Tobias Böhmelt, "Child Soldiers as Time Bombs? Adolescents' Participation in Rebel Groups and the Recurrence of Armed Conflict," *European Journal of International Relations* 22, no. 2 (November 2015): pp. 408-436, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066115581910>.

armed conflict as a continuum. As such, several treaties, conventions and guiding principles have been instituted by the international community to fight the problem of child soldiers, not only in DRC, but world over.

Major pieces of international law and policy guide the fight against the recruitment of children, including the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols, the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Paris Principles on Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups. However, of particular interest to this paper are the Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers which are a set of guiding principles and/or political commitments on how UN peacekeeping operations can ensure the protection of children. The principles were launched in 2017 out of concern from the widespread recruitment and use of children in situations of armed conflict by armed forces and armed groups, including as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies, or for sexual purposes, as well as other grave violations against children in armed conflict.⁶ This paper takes interest in the Vancouver Principles to understand how their recent adoption in DRC can yield better results. UN peacekeeping operations in DRC have not managed to put an end to the recruitment of child soldiers. Thus, this paper seeks to make a contribution on how the aforesaid principles can be better implemented in order to bring an end to the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict.

DRC remains one of the leading cases where children are not only recruited by armed groups but are also victims of other grave violations of children's rights such as killing and maiming. In 2020, as the United Nations (UN) Secretary General's report states, the UN verified 26,425 grave violations against children, of which the highest numbers of violations were the recruitment and use of 8,521 children by armed groups, with DRC having the second highest number of these cases.⁷ Despite the fact that the whole country is fragile, Eastern DRC is more vulnerable and armed conflict in recent years has been concentrated in that region. Despite the vast efforts by international and regional actors in stopping the recruitment of child soldiers in DRC, the problem has continued to be existential. Almost all parties to the armed fighting in DRC either recruited, abducted and used child soldiers, often on the front line.⁸ There is no exact figure of how many children are recruited but relying on the UN Mission's estimates,

6 Global Affairs Canada, "Government of Canada," GAC (Government of Canada, August 1, 2019), https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_developpement-enjeux_developpement/human-rights-droits_homme/principles-vancouver-principes-pledge-engageons.aspx?lang=eng.

7 "Children and Armed Conflict. Report of the Secretary-General," United Nations (United Nations, May 6, 2021), https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S%2F2021%2F437&Lang=E&Area=UNDOC.

8 "Child Soldiers Global Report 2004 - Congo, Democratic Republic of the," Refworld, 2004, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/49880668c.html>.

between 3000 and 5000 children become combatants each year.⁹ Between 2014 and 2017, the UN documented and verified 6168 cases of child recruitment in DRC.¹⁰ In some instances and in some parts of the DRC, it is alleged that children as young as six are routinely recruited by militias and taught to kill and there is estimation that 8 to 16 year old children make up 60% of combatants in some parts of the country.¹¹ Although demobilization of child soldiers officially began in 2000, none of the forces involved were genuinely committed to the process when it started and only a small proportion of child soldiers were demobilized.¹² As a result, with the continuing of fighting, the recruitment of children as soldiers has not stopped, such that it qualifies to be named a perennial problem.¹³

The matter which is of central interest, is to examine the underlying factors that have continuously fuelled forced or voluntary recruitment of child soldiers, in the specific context of armed conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The analysis and discussion this paper will present seeks to serve as reference to both academics and practitioners. Understanding the underlying causes of the perpetual recruitment of child soldiers in the DRC can provoke the need for further research or debates in academia which translate to informed references for practitioners and policy makers. The paper acknowledges that different conflicts have different contexts and complexities and findings from one case cannot generally be applied to all other cases, but, the DRC is one of the world's long protracted conflicts from which lessons can be derived from. Also, there is keen interest to discuss how the Vancouver Principles can be best implemented in order to respond effectively to the continued recruitment of child soldiers. This is against the background that the UN mission in DRC, together with efforts from other national, regional and international actors have tried addressing the perennial recruitment of child soldiers but to no avail.

9 France 24, "DR Congo's Former Child Soldiers Face Tough Return to Civilian Life," France 24 (France 24, October 28, 2021), <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20211028-dr-congo-s-for-mer-child-soldiers-face-tough-return-to-civilian-life>.

10 "Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict," United Nations (United Nations, January 2019), https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/190128_monusco_our_strength_is_in_our_youth_child_recruitment_and_use_by_armed_groups_in_the_drc_2014-2017_final_english_0.pdf,

11 Ibid, p. 50.

12 "Child Soldiers Global Report 2004 - Congo, Democratic Republic of the," Refworld, 2004, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/49880668c.html>.

13 Jesutimelehin Akamo, "The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) Conflict Insights," ed. Mesfin Gebremichael and Cynthia Happi, Africa Portal (Institute For Peace And Security Studies, April 2021), <https://media.africaportal.org/documents/DRC-Conflict-Insights-23042021.pdf>.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is a product of secondary research methodology where the researcher was not directly involved in the data gathering process but relied on already existing data in order to come up with conclusions. Secondary research, which is also known as desk research involves synthesizing existing data that can be sourced from the internet, peer-reviewed journals, textbooks, government archives etc. Data analysed in secondary research would have been collected by someone else for another primary purpose. Utilization of this existing data provides a viable option for researchers who may have limited time and resources.¹⁴ Besides, the major advantages associated with secondary research are the cost effectiveness and convenience it provides.¹⁵ In case of this research, journal articles, reports by governments and international organizations as well as policy documents by relevant institutions were consulted. These were considered to be sufficient due to their credibility.

EXPLAINING THE CONTINUED RECRUITMENT OF CHILD SOLDIERS IN DRC

Poverty has been largely cited and is evidently one of the major reasons why children end up recruited as child soldiers. Empirical evidence shows that most child soldiers in the DRC and world over are drawn from poor backgrounds or disintegrated families.¹⁶ A widely noted trend is that armed groups also prefer to target those children from disadvantaged background.¹⁷ Some child soldiers may be said to join armed groups voluntarily, although it is important to note that 'voluntary' participation may be only an illusion in situations where political or economic forces leave children with no other option.¹⁸ In some instances, some children are motivated by the need for food and shelter and end up joining armed groups. For the years DRC has experienced violent conflict, empirical evidence shows that there has been neglect

14 Melissa P Johnston, "Secondary Data Analysis: A Method of Which the Time Has Come," View of secondary data analysis: A method of which the time has come (Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in Libraries (QJML) , 2014), <http://www.qjml-journal.net/index.php/qjml/article/view/169/170>,

15 Alexander K. Smith et al., "Conducting High-Value Secondary Dataset Analysis: An Introductory Guide and Resources," Journal of General Internal Medicine 26, no. 8 (August 2011): pp. 920-929, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11606-010-1621-5>

16 "Child Soldiers: One of the Worst Abuses of Child Labour," Amnesty International (Amnesty International, January 1999), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/ior420011999en.pdf>.

17 "Child Soldiers: One of the Worst Abuses of Child Labour," Amnesty International (Amnesty International, January 1999), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/ior420011999en.pdf>.

18 Mia Bloom, "Child Soldiers in Armed Conflict," IISS (International Institute for Strategic Studies, July 2018), <https://www.iiss.org/publications/armed-conflict-survey/2018/armed-conflict-survey-2018/acs2018-03-essay-3>.

to children as social and familial structures were destroyed and the displacement of children from their homes being a norm.¹⁹ More so, in some cases, parents encourage their children to join armed groups and it is estimated that 35% of the children who enlist as soldiers have their parents agreeing to it.²⁰

Among the already noted reasons behind recruitment of children as child soldiers is the need to gain comparative advantage by armed groups and it has become a military strategy by the armed groups to use children in armed conflict as they are easy to exploit and provide cheap labour.²¹ This way, armed groups use less financial resources in attracting human resources at the same time pursuing their objective, thus gaining a comparative advantage from recruiting children. More so, as they are young minds, children are easy to brainwash and can show great loyalty as preferred by the armed groups.²² In some cases, as has been widely captured in the literature on child soldiers in DRC, armed groups may subject children to witness brutality against family members in order to propel them to join armed groups and seek “revenge”.²³ Young girls have fallen victims not only to serve as fighters or offer support roles but have become a favourable vulnerable group which easily can be sexually abused. Armed groups are very much aware that children are unable to make independent decisions, and as such can be easily terrorized into leading any sort of life that is being shown to them, even a very violent one.²⁴

However, it has to be noted that armed conflict, which has become such ‘a way of life’ in the Democratic Republic of Congo is the single most important reason for the perennial recruitment of child soldiers. Its effects create fertile ground for children to be vulnerable to the interests of armed group. In many instances, families are disintegrated as a result of armed conflict and it breaks down the needed social support system children deserve. Armed conflict cripples the economic system thereby furthering poverty and that has been the case in DRC. Institutions become dysfunctional during armed conflict and the education system collapses. Children are left with no social system to safeguard them and in the end; because

19 Jennifer Prashad, “Children of the Democratic Republic of the Congo,” Humanium (Humanium, July 13, 2021), <https://www.humanium.org/en/democratic-republic-congo/>.

20 “Child Soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo,” WITNESS (WITNESS, August 15, 2014), https://www.witness.org/portfolio_page/protecting-child-soldiers-democratic-republic-congo/.

21 “Child Soldiers – and Other Children Associated with Armed Forces and Groups. Policy Brief,” Save the Children’s Resource Centre (Save the Children, 2010), <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/1538.pdf/>.

22 Ibid

23 “Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict,” United Nations (United Nations, January 2019), https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/190128_monusco_our_strength_is_in_our_youth_child_recruitment_and_use_by_armed_groups_in_the_drc_2014-2017_final_english_0.pdf,

24 Pravin H. Parekh, Human Rights Year Book, 2010 (New Delhi: International Institute of Human Rights Society, 2010).

of lack of that aforesaid support, opportunities and future prospects together with the need to voice their opinions, they end up becoming child soldiers. All the commonly cited reasons for the recruitment of child soldiers as discussed above are as a result of armed conflict. This paper makes a strong argument that the prevalence of armed conflict is the primary reason for the perennial problem of child soldiers. Besides creating the social and economic conditions which leave children vulnerable to becoming child soldiers, armed conflict draws the need for fighters even before impacting on the systems of a country.

From 2001, the DRC government and most of the DRC's armed political groups were formally committed to demobilizing child soldiers. Success was limited however, in part because of continuing conflict.²⁵ Besides, the research acknowledges that at one point, there was lack of political will from the country leadership as supported by Amnesty International which purports that demobilization initiatives were mere public relations exercises, undermined by lack of commitment to the process, inaccurate information, poor preparation and coordination, and lack of resources.²⁶ The country leadership later went on to achieve remarkable successes as witnessed by the end of recruitment of children into government forces. Focus is now on independent armed groups which are in continuation with the recruitment of children due to the continued need created by armed conflict. Thus, in as much as lack of political will contributed to the limited success of demobilizing child soldiers, 'continuing conflict' remains the major reason that deters the successful demobilization of child soldiers. This paper stresses a point that there is need to address the root causes of armed conflict which, if they continue unaddressed, the recruitment of child soldiers will be a never-ending problem. Armed conflict creates the needed conditions for the use of children as soldiers and hence efforts to stop the problem of child soldiers without effectively addressing the causes of armed conflict will only be in vain.

To further understand the perpetual recruitment of child soldiers, simply because of the prevalence of armed conflict as this paper strongly argues, it is imperative to look at the causes of armed conflict. The structural drivers of violence in Africa are complex and country specific, although there are a number of common themes that relate to poverty, democratisation, regime type, population age structure, repeat violence, the bad neighbourhood effect and poor governance.²⁷ The haphazard de-colonisation process has been indicted as the chief

25 Rachele Magloire, "RDC: Les Maï Maï Et Ex-Combattants Dans L'attente D'être Démobilisés - Democratic Republic of the Congo," ReliefWeb (MONUC, 2004), <https://reliefweb.int/report-democratic-republic-congo/rdc-les-ma%C3%AF-ma%C3%AF-et-ex-combattants-dans-lattente-d%C3%AAtre-d%C3%A9mobilis%C3%A9s>.

26 "Democratic Republic of Congo: Children at War," Amnesty International (Amnesty International, June 4, 2021), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/AFR62/034/2003/en/>.

27 Jakkie Cilliers, *The Future of Africa Challenges and Opportunities* (Cham Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

reason behind conflict, recurring instability, and bad governance in countries like DRC and Burundi when it was observed that in many countries, the contradictions of the colonial state were passed on to the independent states through a flawed process of de-colonisation.²⁸ The granting of independence to the countries mentioned above has been widely cited as hasty and unprepared hence why the post – colonial state is gripped with instability and fighting.

More so, the post – colonial state inherited the colonial systems which were made of ethnic and regional diversities, and rendered conflictual by gross inequities in power relations, and in the uneven distribution of national wealth and development opportunities.²⁹ This assertion has a major implication for understanding the various conflicts and the attempts to resolve such conflicts on the continent and with it also comes complications. Former colonial masters have been at the forefront in responding to conflict in Africa and most of the continent’s developmental challenges. It may not be possible for them to redress the problems created during colonialism but it remains a wonder if they are sincere in their interventions. If the causes and consequences of the conflicts have their roots in colonialism, the processes of de-colonisation and state formation, and the ensuing crisis of nation-building, then any attempt to resolve the conflicts must also transcend the concepts of ‘new institutions that will increase participation, legitimacy, and redistribution’ and ‘good governance.’³⁰ As such, this also would suggest that the recruitment of child soldiers would continue if the root causes of armed conflict are not addressed. The sincerity of actors involved in addressing these challenges also matters.

The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa is of the opinion that the recurring armed conflict in the DRC is to some extent, a reincarnation of past conflicts, which is an indication that the fundamental causes of the wars have not been adequately addressed.³¹ This also helps in explaining the continual recruitment of children as soldiers, despite the many efforts by various actors to put an end to the problem. This paper argues that effort could be misdirected as actors are dealing with the results and signs rather than the root causes of the main problem. Responding to conditions created by armed conflict and not addressing that which causes armed conflict will result in the perpetual use of children as soldiers. Therefore, emphasis is placed on the need to take a historical perspective in the analysis of the root causes

28 Fonkem I Achankeng, “Conflict and Conflict Resolution in Africa : Engaging the Colonial Factor,” African Journal on Conflict Resolution Vol. 13 , no. No. 2 (January 1, 2013): pp. 11-37, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/284670618_Conflict_and_Conflict_Resolution_in_Africa_Engaging_the_Colonial_factor.

29 “Conflict and Conflict Resolution in Africa,” ACCORD (ACCORD, February 10, 2020), <https://www.accord.org.za/ajcr-issues/conflict-and-conflict-resolution-in-africa/>.

30 “Conflict and Conflict Resolution in Africa,” ACCORD (ACCORD, February 10, 2020), <https://www.accord.org.za/ajcr-issues/conflict-and-conflict-resolution-in-africa/>.

31 “Conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo.,” UNECA (UNECA, September 2015), https://archive.uneca.org/sites/default/files/PublicationFiles/conflicts_in_drc_eng_25sept_rev1.pdf.

of the conflict and in the design of strategies aimed at not only ending the conflicts but also minimizing the risk of reoccurrence of the conflicts in the future.³² This would permanently deal away with the conditions that end up leading to the recruitment of children by armed groups.

Additionally, armed conflict in DRC has multiple causes revolving around four clusters of factors: economic, institutional, regional, and global geopolitical factors. Besides, the causes of the wars also vary with regions within DRC. Economically, the struggle for resources and the ethnic differences in benefitting from the economy contribute to outbreak of armed fighting in the DRC. Regarding institutional factors, the institutions established under the colonial regime and in the post-independence era generated and perpetuated antagonisms around the control of the state and national resources while sowing the seeds for inter-regional and inter-ethnic conflicts.³³ Regional factors date back to the time of a conflict spill-over from the Rwandan genocide when refugees from Rwanda took part in destabilising DRC.³⁴ The country has also become a political playfield where great powers are competing for their interests. The vast mineral resources in DRC have attracted powerful nations which have allegedly sponsored armed groups as they fight to have control over the resources.³⁵ On the other hand, despite making notable strides in responding to armed conflict, African regional efforts in addressing protracted armed conflict cases, like the DRC, continue to be pulled back by lack of institutional capacity not only by the AU but also by regional economic communities; for instance, lack of resources has seen these institutions heavily relying on external funding.³⁶ The above mentioned factors are not to be treated in isolation in understanding the context of the violent conflict in DRC or in the design of intervention strategies as they are interrelated.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE VANCOUVER PRINCIPLES IN DRC

The ever increasing number of armed conflicts around the world has prompted the modern international society to address a new development in the world scenario, where children who are as young as 6 years old are being forced to the frontline of battlefields. There are a number of international conventions and treaties that have been put in place to fight the recruitment of children as soldiers in armed conflict. The first official and legally binding international treaty

32 Ibid

33 Ibid

34 "Conflict and Conflict Resolution in Africa," ACCORD (ACCORD, February 10, 2020), <https://www.accord.org.za/ajcr-issues/conflict-and-conflict-resolution-in-africa/>.

35 Benjamin Mwadi Makengo and Joseph Mimbale, "Why Might DRC Find Itself in a Complex Dilemma with the Conservative-Progressive Competition in the Post-Covid-19 World Politics?," *Academia Letters*, September 2021, <https://doi.org/10.20935/al3508>.

36 "Securing Predictable and Sustainable Financing for Peace in Africa," African Union (African Union, August 2016), <https://au.int/en/documents/1147>.

to provide for the civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights for the children was the Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989 by the United Nations and it remains the most widely adopted child rights treaty. It imposes a duty on States to ensure that persons who have not attained the age of 15 years do not take part in hostilities.³⁷ Other international efforts to stop the recruitment of child soldiers include the Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers (known as the Vancouver Principles) which is a set of political commitments aimed at preventing and addressing the recruitment and use of children by armed forces and armed groups during United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations.

By endorsing the Vancouver Principles, Member States acknowledge the unique and far-reaching challenges posed by child soldiers, and commit to prioritizing the prevention of the recruitment and use of child soldiers in the context of UN peacekeeping operations and to helping ensure that all peacekeepers – military, police, and civilian – are prepared and directed to take appropriate action.³⁸ The implementation of the Vancouver Principles appears to be meant to be within the confines of the UN peacekeeping missions (and also regional peacekeeping missions), which implies that areas outside UN peacekeeping operations are not targeted by the principles. However, the DRC has had several UN missions starting with the United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC) established in 1999 initially to plan for the observation of the ceasefire and disengagement of forces after a ceasefire agreement. In 2010, MONUC was renamed the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) and the new mission was authorized to use all necessary means to carry out its mandate relating, among other things, to the protection of civilians, humanitarian personnel and human rights defenders under imminent threat of physical violence and to support the Government of the DRC in its stabilization and peace consolidation efforts.³⁹ Under its mandate on the protection of civilians, and guided by the Vancouver Principles, MONUSCO has been focusing on the protection of children from use as child soldiers. The mission has made notable strides in engaging armed groups for the release of children recruited as child soldiers and has, though less progressively, been helping the government of DRC to prosecute perpetrators of child soldiering.⁴⁰

37 “Convention on the Rights of the Child,” OHCHR, accessed September 06, 2021, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>.

38 “Implementation Guidance for the Vancouver Principles - Canada,” Government of Canada (Government of Canada, 2019), <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/dnd-mdn/documents/reports/2019/igvp-20190614.pdf>.

39 “Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict,” United Nations (United Nations, January 2019), https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/190128_monusco_our_strength_is_in_our_youth_child_recruitment_and_use_by_armed_groups_in_the_drc_2014-2017_final_english_0.pdf.

40 “Background,” MONUSCO (MONUSCO, February 9, 2021), <https://monusco.unmissions.org/en/background>.

It is imperative to understand UN peacekeeping missions which are responsible to ensure a coordinated response to violations against children affected by armed conflict. Peacekeeping by the UN is meant to help countries torn by conflict to create the conditions for lasting peace. Peacekeepers protect civilians, actively prevent conflict, reduce violence, strengthen security and empower national authorities to assume these responsibilities. In the case of DRC, the UN has failed to completely do away with armed fighting despite investing so many resources in addressing the conflict. More so, despite efforts to curb the use of children by armed groups as mentioned earlier, the UN mission in DRC has not also been successful in bringing a stop to the problem. Regional organisations have also been key players in the conflict in the DRC and their efforts have been compromised by a number of challenges which include lack of institutional capacity. This automatically translates to the failure to stop the recruitment of children as soldiers and in one way or the other; this may also speak to failure on successful implementation of the Vancouver Principles.

Of notable interest to this paper from the set of principles listed in the Vancouver Principles are the principles related to early warning and prevention which, as policy, are meant to guide peacekeepers and national authorities to mitigate the use of children in combat roles. However, these principles, together with peacekeeping missions do not necessarily address the strategic context of a conflict but are only responses to the outbreak of fighting. Peacekeeping seeks also to create conditions necessary for other peace building activities to take place. It can be argued that because peacekeeping and the Vancouver Principles do not seek to address the root causes of conflicts, they are bound not to successfully stop the recruitment of children in armed conflict. This is against the main argument this paper makes, that the prevalence of armed conflict itself is the major reason behind the continuous use of children in armed conflict. Thus, dealing with the results and/or symptoms of conflict and not addressing its causes translate also to failure to effectively deal with the problem of child soldiers. Also, because the Vancouver Principles are implemented within the confines of UN peacekeeping whose weakness has been described above, it can as well be argued that implementation of the principles will result in failure to stop the perennial recruitment of child soldiers.

CONCLUSION

The recruitment of child soldiers in the DRC continues to persist and will continue as the key challenge which has not been addressed over the years, due to the causes of armed conflict. Armed conflicts bring the need for fighters and because of its other devastating effects, children are left vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups and to be used in both combat and no-combat roles. Armed conflict destroys the needed institutions to protect and safeguard children, at the same time affecting the economy of a nation resulting in poverty. The DRC is a good example to showcase the distressing effects of violent conflict. As a result of continued

fighting, poverty has been the main driver for the recruitment of children as child soldiers. While on-going conflicts must be addressed, resources and effort should also be devoted at the same time towards tackling the root causes of conflicts and taking preventive actions. There is need to model the implementation of the Vancouver Principles so that implementation include initiatives outside UN peacekeeping operations. Peacekeeping missions can fail due to other operational challenges and their failure is a huge blow to the implementation of the Vancouver Principles. Besides, the implementation of commitments such as the Vancouver Principles should consider addressing the root causes of conflict rather than focusing on dealing with the results of conflict.

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BELGIUM'S CHAIRMANSHIP OF THE SECURITY COUNCIL WORKING GROUP ON CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT (2019-2020)

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ABSTRACT:

This article looks at the objectives of Belgium's chairmanship of the United Nations' (UN) Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict (SCWG-CAAC) and to what extent they were achieved. It furthermore analyzes the SCWG-CAAC conclusions, their structure, and the traditionally challenging points in the negotiations. Finally, the article concludes by reflecting on gaps and opportunities moving forward.

INTRODUCTION

Children's rights in general and the UN's CAAC Agenda in particular have been a foreign policy priority of the Government of Belgium for decades, both in financial and policy terms. Its Head of State at the time, King Baudouin, addressed the UN General Assembly (UNGA) on the occasion of the entry into force of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990. Thirty years later, King Philippe addressed the UN Security Council (UNSC) during a special session dedicated to CAAC during Belgium's chairmanship of the Security Council in February 2020. As a UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Advocate, H.M. Queen Mathilde, Queen of the Belgians, is a steady champion of the importance of reintegration and mental health support for children affected by armed conflict and has spoken at numerous events at the UN in recent years. Belgium has been and remains an important donor of UNICEF and its CAAC-related work. It also has financed nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) working on CAAC, such as the international network-based organization Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict with a Secretariat in New York, and specific projects related to CAAC, such as MONUSCO's¹ project on accountability for the recruitment of children, and funding for the Junior Professional Officer posts (JPOs) working on CAAC. As a result, awarding Belgium the chairmanship of the SCWG-CAAC was the logical result of this commitment and a unanimous decision by the UNSC members when distributing chairmanships of subsidiary bodies to the incoming non-permanent UNSC members at the end of 2018.

BELGIUM'S CHAIRMANSHIP OBJECTIVES

When Belgium took up its chairmanship of the SCWG-CAAC, this subsidiary body of the UNSC as well as the CAAC mandate was well established over time. Twelve UNSC resolutions on CAAC had been adopted at the time, the last one being Resolution 2427 (2018) negotiated and adopted under its predecessor, Sweden.² The year 2020 marked the 15th anniversary of UNSC Resolution 1612 (2005) that established the UN's Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) and the SCWG-CAAC.³ It also marked the 20th anniversary of the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict. Building on the work of its predecessor Sweden, Belgium decided

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- 1 The United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO).
 - 2 Since the end of Belgium's chairmanship, a new UNSC resolution on CAAC was adopted, UNSC Resolution 2601 (2021), on October 29, 2021, co-drafted by Norway and Niger, relating to attacks against schools and educational facilities.
 - 3 This anniversary was marked by a Security Council press statement 14224, adopted at the annual open debate on CAAC of the Security Council, on 23 June 2020, under the French Presidency of the SC: "Press statement on the occasion of the 15th anniversary of the adoption of resolution 1612 (2005) on children and armed conflict", <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14224.doc.htm>.

not to aim for adopting a new UNSC resolution on CAAC, but instead to focus on improved implementation of this strong SC mandate during its term.

Belgium was not against adopting a new resolution per se – it was open to extend the mandate through a new resolution, in case of clear need – but did not want to seek visibility with a new UNSC resolution if there was no value added. In the year before Belgium entered the UNSC, an initiative was taken to look into making the only CAAC violation that is not yet a trigger for listing parties to the annexes of the UN Secretary-General’s (UNSG) annual reports on CAAC for committing grave violations, namely the denial of humanitarian access, a trigger. However, after careful consideration on part of the humanitarian actors who resisted the initiative fearing the impact it would have on the perception of impartiality of their work on the ground, this initiative was abandoned. Nevertheless, during Belgium’s chairmanship of the SCWG-CAAC, the UNSC adopted two Presidential Statements, as well as one press statement, which furthered the CAAC mandate.

Belgium set itself the following objectives as Chair of the SCWG-CAAC: 1) reducing the length of reporting cycles of country-specific reports and as a result adopting country-specific conclusions more frequently and in a timely manner; 2) improving the follow up of the implementation of conclusions; 3) better mainstreaming the CAAC agenda throughout the work of the Security Council; 4) continuing the practice of field visits; and 5) inclusiveness, engagement with and transparency towards the different stakeholders of the CAAC agenda, including civil society. As thematic and geographical priorities, Belgium wanted to focus on the importance of reintegration of children affected by armed conflict, the special needs of girls, mediation, and the Sahel region.

These objectives were inspired by the research done by the NGO network Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict in its publication, “Working Methods 2006-2016: Strengthening the Impact of the Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict”⁴ on the implementation of the SCWG-CAAC toolkit, as elaborated under the French Presidency of the SCWG-CAAC.⁵

4 Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, “Working Methods 2006-2016: Strengthening the Impact of the Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict”, January 2018, <https://watchlist.org/publications/working-methods-2006-2016-strengthening-impact-security-council-working-group-children-armed-conflict/>.

5 See Annex to the letter dated 8 September 2006 from the Permanent Representative of France to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council: “Options for possible actions by the Working Group of the Security Council on Children and Armed Conflict (“toolkit)”, 16 May 2008, S/A.51/2007/2, <https://undocs.org/S/AC.51/2007/2>.

Timely Conclusions

A key tool of the SCWG-CAAC are its country-specific conclusions, containing recommendations based on the findings of the country-specific reports of the UNSG on the situation of children affected by the armed conflict. These reports are drafted when parties to conflict are listed in the annexes of the UNSG's annual reports on CAAC for committing grave violations.⁶

By the time Belgium took up the chairmanship of the SCWG-CAAC, the reporting cycles of the country-specific reports had become increasingly long. The second report of the UNSG on Syria (S/2018/969) covered almost five years (from 16 November 2013 to 30 June 2018), and the second report on Yemen (S/2019/453) covered more than five years (from 1 April 2013 to 31 December 2018). The fourth and fifth reports on Myanmar (S/2017/1099 and S/2018/956) together covered more than five years as well (from 1 February 2013 to 31 August 2018).⁷ As a result, it was deemed that conclusions relating to events which took place more than five years ago were at risk of losing their relevance.

Belgium agreed with the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict (SRSG-CAAC), Ms. Virginia Gamba, to produce country-specific reports more frequently and developed a yearly work plan with her in order to achieve this. Belgium wanted to deal with all the 14 countries on the CAAC agenda with parties listed for grave violations against children during its two-year mandate as Chair of the SCWG-CAAC. This would effectively reduce the reporting cycle of country-specific reports the Office would have to produce to two years. As a result, country-specific conclusions could be adopted by the SCWG-CAAC more frequently, and the recommendations therein would be more timely and more relevant, lending themselves to meaningful UNSC action.

Thanks to the increased output of the Office of the SRSG-CAAC and everyone involved in the MRM, Belgium achieved its objective and adopted 13 conclusions (on Syria, Myanmar, Yemen, Afghanistan, the Central African Republic (CAR), Iraq, Colombia, Somalia, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Mali, Nigeria, and the Philippines) and drafted the conclusions based on the UNSG's third report on the situation of children and armed conflict in South Sudan (S/2020/1205), which was published in December 2020. These have since been adopted under its successor Norway in March 2021.

6 For an overview of all reports and conclusions, see <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/subsidiary/wgcaac/sgreports> or <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/virtual-library/>.

7 The UNSG's fifth report on the situation of children and armed conflict in Myanmar (S/2018/956) (covering the period from 1 July 2017 to 31 August 2018) constituted an update of the fourth report on the situation of children and armed conflict in Myanmar (S/2017/1099) (covering the period from 1 February 2013 to 30 June 2017) following a request by the Swedish Chair of the SCWG-CAAC in order to include the atrocities which took place from August 2017 onwards.

Shorter reporting cycles make it easier for the Country Task Forces on Monitoring and Reporting (CTFMRs) and the Office of the SRSG-CAAC to draft new reports and verify the violations therein. The UNSG's sixth report on the situation of children and armed conflict in Myanmar (S/2020/1243), for example, was published in December 2020, covering a reporting period of less than two years (from 1 September 2018 to 30 June 2020). The UNSG's third report on Syria (S/2021/398), published in April 2021, covered exactly two years (from 1 July 2018 to 30 June 2020).

Belgium only managed to achieve this goal thanks to the commitment of SRSG-CAAC Gamba and her Office in speedy report production, as well as everyone involved in the MRM at the field and headquarters level, including the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the Department of Peace Operations (DPO), noting in particular the CTFMRs on the ground.

Implementation of Conclusions

Another objective of Belgium's chairmanship was to improve the follow up of the implementation of country-specific conclusions. It did so among others by introducing a new practice: regular video-teleconferences with the CTFMRs on the ground. This gave the opportunity to the co-chairs of the CTFMRs (the local UNICEF Representative on the one hand, and the Deputy SRSG of the UN peacekeeping operation (if there was one) or the UN Resident Coordinator on the other hand) and the Child Protection Advisors (CPAs) to present their work and their engagement with the country concerned, allowing them the opportunity to interact directly with the UNSC members in New York. Often these video-teleconferences were timed ahead of the renewal of the mandate of a UN peace operation or special political mission. The video-teleconferences allowed for reviewing the CAAC-related aspects of the mandate, or the need for reinforcing or reducing them. It also allowed for reviewing the CPA capacity of UN peace operations and for identifying the need to reinforce or safeguard this capacity.

Originally, the idea was to organize video-teleconferences on a country-specific situation in the year that no conclusions were adopted about a given country on the CAAC agenda. This would have allowed the SCWG-CAAC to deal with all the 14 country situations with listed parties at least once a year (either through the adoption of conclusions or monitoring the follow up of these). However, this proved to be quite ambitious.

Video-teleconferences were organized with the CTFMRs of Afghanistan, Colombia, the DRC, Iraq, Libya, Nigeria, Philippines, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, and Yemen. No conclusions were adopted on Libya, a situation of concern with no listed parties. However, a video-teleconferences with the CTFMR of Libya allowed the SC members to monitor the situation outside the process of adopting conclusions. Via CAAC workshops organized by its embassies in e.g., Bamako, Bogota and Kinshasa, Belgium also followed up on conclusions locally in the

countries concerned. The fact that Belgium is a member and, in some cases, co-founder of local Groups of Friends on Children and Armed Conflict contributes to its ability to be active on the CAAC agenda worldwide.

Global Horizontal Notes on children and armed conflict, which are quarterly updates of the situation in all the countries of concern and are presented by UNICEF to the SCWG-CAAC, are another way to closely monitor the situation, including on the implementation of conclusions. At the initiative of Sweden, Belgium's predecessor as Chair of the SCWG-CAAC, a new format of the Global Horizontal Note was introduced in 2019, in order to improve the focus on early warning, prevention and the implementation of measures to better protect children. In addition, the objective was to make these Global Horizontal Notes more user-friendly, including the use of visuals such as graphs during the presentations. In 2020, a section on COVID-19 was added. The quarterly discussion of these Global Horizontal Notes in the SCWG-CAAC allowed for reviewing the follow up of conclusions on specific country situations and for discerning indicators of worsening situations in the framework of an early warning and prevention perspective.

Mainstreaming the CAAC Agenda

From its very first resolution on CAAC, the Security Council formally acknowledged that the protection of children affected by armed conflict is a fundamental peace and security concern. As a result, this topic cannot be viewed as a niche subject confined to the SCWG-CAAC or to the annual open debate on CAAC in the UNSC. Rather, the issue requires attention across all the geographical and thematic discussions taking place in the UNSC and all its other subsidiary bodies.

Belgium tried to mainstream the CAAC agenda throughout the work of the UNSC in several ways. Belgium started a new practice of convening monthly meetings to preview the Programme of Work of the UNSC, presented by the incoming president of the respective month. This allowed for identifying CAAC-related opportunities and needs related to the agenda topics of the UNSC, both geographical ones (e.g., mandate renewals of peace operations and sanction regimes) and thematic ones (e.g., the yearly open debate on the Protection of Civilians and the implementation of UNSC Resolution 2286 (2016)). These meetings included technical experts from the Office of the SRSG, UNICEF and DPO, which allowed UNSC members to engage with UN counterparts on a regular basis. The UNSC mandate renewals of UN's peace operations with CAAC-related aspects in their mandates had to be followed up by budget discussions in the UNGA's Fifth Committee, including to ensure the necessary CPA capacity with corresponding budget lines.

Furthermore, Belgium encouraged respective presidents of the UNSC to extend invitations to speakers to address the Security Council in a direct manner, both in open sessions as well

as during closed consultations, on the situation of children affected by armed conflict. For example, in May 2019, UNICEF's Executive Director Henrietta Fore addressed the UNSC on Yemen in an open session of the UNSC and SRSG-CAAC Gamba debriefed the UNSC on her field trip to CAR during closed consultations of the UNSC. Belgium also encouraged the UNSC to include aspects of the CAAC-agenda in the terms of reference for UNSC field visits.

Regarding UNSC's subsidiary bodies, Belgium worked towards setting up joint meetings of the SCWG-CAAC and sanctions committees that included CAAC-related criteria in their mandates. For example, a joint meeting of the SCWG-CAAC and the sanctions committee on CAR, chaired by Côte d'Ivoire at the time, was set up on July 29, 2019.⁸ Belgium also advocated for including CAAC-related criteria in relevant sanctions regimes for designating individuals and entities committing grave violations against children. For example, the Yemen sanctions regime included an explicit reference to the recruitment and use of children when it was renewed in January 2020,⁹ upon advocacy of Belgium among others.¹⁰

Field Visits

Belgium continued the practice of its predecessors of organizing field visits, another tool in the SCWG-CAAC's toolkit. In December 2019, the SCWG-CAAC undertook a field trip to Mali,¹¹ building on experiences of previous visits to South Sudan (2018), Sudan (2017), DRC (2014), Myanmar (2013), Afghanistan (2011) and Nepal (2010). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the field visit planned for 2020 could unfortunately not take place.

As there is no UN budget foreseen for these trips, not even for the Chair of the SCWG-CAAC, as is the case with UN sanctions committees, and costs lie where they fall, this has an impact on full participation by all UNSC members. Therefore, in general, only one field visit per year takes place, and destinations have to be identified in a careful manner, taking into account reporting cycles and adoption of conclusions, field visits by the SRSG-CAAC and the work of the local CTFMRs, in order to reinforce messages and either take advantage of momentum created to further the CAAC-agenda or instigate such momentum.

8 See press release 13937, "Special Representatives Deliver Briefings during Joint Informal Consultations of 2127 Sanctions Committee, Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict", <https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/sc13937.doc.htm>.

9 SC Resolution 2511 (2020), para. 6.

10 An interesting research tool, giving an overview of CAAC-related aspects in SC resolutions and PRSTs, is the CAAC Dashboard created by the Security Council Division of the UN Secretariat. See <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/repertoire/research-tools/children-and-armed-conflict>.

11 See 2019 annual report of the SC WG CAAC, S/2019/981, 20 December 2019, para. 23, <https://undocs.org/S/2019/981>.

Belgium ensured that at least one field visit of the SCWG-CAAC took place, in order to familiarize the SCWG-CAAC members with the situation in Mali, to follow up on the implementation of conclusions and to pass on messages to the different stakeholders in the country.

Inclusiveness, Engagement with and Transparency towards Stakeholders

Belgium wanted to be an inclusive and transparent Chair of the SCWG-CAAC, actively engaging with all key stakeholders. It periodically organized NGO roundtables, gave regular briefings to the Group of Friends on CAAC chaired by the Government of Canada in New York, and was a panelist and active participant in the annual policy workshops on Children and Armed Conflict organized by Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict and the Liechtenstein Institute on Self-Determination at Princeton University. By organizing Arria-formula meetings of the UNSC¹² and other events at the UN (cf. next section), Belgium sought to provide a forum for non-UNSC members to actively engage on the CAAC mandate. It invited civil society briefers to speak at the UNSC, e.g., Jo Becker, then-Chair of the Advisory Board of the NGO network Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, on February 12, 2020,¹³ and in Arria-formula meetings and high-level events at the UN, such as Hichem Khadhraoui, Director of Operations at Geneva Call, and Dragica Mikavica, Senior Advocacy Adviser at Save the Children.¹⁴

In November 2019, Belgium hosted DPO's biennial meeting for CPAs of UN missions worldwide and the launch of the new CPA handbook. It also organized a meeting of the SCWG-CAAC experts with the CPAs in order to exchange experiences and engage directly with the technical experts from the field who could showcase their critical work directly to Member States.¹⁵ In 2019 and 2020, Belgium organized CAAC trainings for incoming UNSC members, with presentations from the Office of the SRSG-CAAC, UNICEF, DPO, and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

Belgium also reached out to the Permanent Representative of each country about which the SCWG-CAAC received a report, in order to explain the whole process from the presentation

12 The Arria-formula meeting is an open format of the UNSC where non-UNSC members can participate.

13 Security Council Briefing: "Children and armed conflict: integrating child protection into peace processes to resolve conflict and sustain peace", 12 February 2020, <https://media.un.org/en/asset/k11/k11i7q08m6>.

14 See "Children and Armed Conflict: Protecting Boys and Girls in Shrinking Humanitarian Space – Security Council Open Arria-formula meeting", 12 February 2019, <https://media.un.org/en/asset/k10/k10n2g95mc> and "Launch of the Practical guidance for mediators to protect children in situations of armed conflict", 12 February 2020, <https://media.un.org/en/asset/k1i/k1irx3k88a>.

15 See 2019 annual report of the SC WG CAAC, S/2019/981, 20 December 2019, para. 22, <https://undocs.org/S/2019/981>.

of the report to the adoption of conclusions and to listen to any of their concerns. Furthermore, Belgium as a Chair made sure that the Permanent Representative of the country concerned was invited to and present at the formal SCWG-CAAC sessions, during which the report was presented and during which the conclusions were formally adopted.

Belgium as Chair of the SCWG-CAAC also placed importance on hearing directly from children affected by armed conflict themselves. During its field trip to Mali, the SCWG-CAAC met the Children's Parliament of Mali. Moreover, Belgium invited child speakers to high-level events it organized at the UN¹⁶ and a former child soldier from the FARC-EP in Colombia to the UNSC session on February 12, 2020,¹⁷ to share their experiences. Furthermore, the Arria-formula meeting which Belgium organized on November 26, 2019, explored how children and youth formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups can be involved in the design and implementation of reintegration programming solutions, and included the testimony of another former child soldier.¹⁸ With these examples, Belgium sought to emphasize the importance of actually engaging children as they are at the heart of all these efforts. Children's right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them is enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and further elaborated upon in General Comment 12 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child.

Thematic and Geographical Priorities

Belgium regularly organizes events related to CAAC¹⁹ and continued this practice as Chair of the SCWG-CAAC. In that way, it continued its role as a guardian of the mandate and also put the spotlight on some of its thematic and geographical priorities. As mentioned, these were the importance of reintegration of children affected by armed conflict and support of their mental health, the special needs of girls, mediation, and the Sahel.

16 See, for example, at the High Level Event "How are we going to stop the war on children", 23 September 2019, <https://media.un.org/en/asset/k1d/k1dceazhg7>, and at the High Level Event "Launch of the Practical guidance for mediators to protect children in situations of armed conflict", 12 February 2020, <https://media.un.org/en/asset/k1i/k1ix3k88a>.

17 Security Council Briefing: "Children and armed conflict: integrating child protection into peace processes to resolve conflict and sustain peace", 12 February 2020, <https://media.un.org/en/asset/k11/k11i7q08m6>.

18 Arria-formula meeting "Reintegration of Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups (CAAFAGs): Bridging the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) Nexus", with co-sponsors Peru, Poland and the UK.

19 See, for example, the Conference "OPAC turns 18", 21 February 2018, organized together with Child Soldiers International and co-sponsored by UNICEF and the Permanent UN Missions of Canada, Colombia, France and Sierra Leone, <https://media.un.org/en/asset/k1z/k1z77kufw>.

Belgium organized, for example, a dedicated high-level session of the UNSC with its Head of State, King Philippe, hosting, on the topic of mediation and CAAC on February 12, 2020,²⁰ as one of the signature events of its Presidency of the UNSC. The UNSG presented the “Practical Guidance for mediators to protect children in situations of armed conflict”²¹ at the special session, and a Presidential Statement was adopted,²² in which the UNSC “encourages the Secretary-General (...) to broadly disseminate (...) and to promote the use of the practical guidance in UN-supported, -sponsored, and -facilitated peace and mediation processes.” It also encourages “United Nations entities, Member States as well as regional and sub-regional organizations involved in peace and mediation (...) to promote the integration of child protection issues in peace processes”.

Under the Presidency of Niger of the UNSC, on September 10, 2020, a special session of the UNSC was dedicated to attacks on schools, with a focus on the Sahel,²³ at which a Presidential Statement²⁴ was also adopted condemning attacks on schools and calling for special attention to the situation of girls who are disproportionately affected by such attacks.

Belgium furthermore organized several Arria-formula meetings of the UNSC on CAAC. It organized, for example, an Arria-formula meeting²⁵ on February 12, 2019, on the occasion of the International Day against the Use of Child Soldiers, or Red Hand Day, on the protection of children affected by armed conflict in contexts where operating space for humanitarian actors is shrinking, with a specific focus on examples from CAR. A peace agreement with non-state armed groups had been signed a couple of days before, and panelists highlighted how CPAs’ engagement with parties to conflict can be maintained, for example, leading to the signing of action plans or the release of children, despite the sometimes-limited humanitarian space. Belgium organized another Arria-formula meeting on November 26, 2019, with a focus on reintegration and more particularly, on how the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus

20 Security Council Briefing: “Children and armed conflict: integrating child protection into peace processes to resolve conflict and sustain peace”, 12 February 2020, <https://media.un.org/en/asset/k11/k11i7q08m6>.

21 Practical Guidance for mediators to protect children in situations of armed conflict, S/2020/114, <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Practical-guidance-for-mediators-to-protect-children-in-situations-of-armed-conflict.pdf>. This practical guidance was drafted, based on high-level consultation workshops organized in 2018 and 2019, financed by the Governments of Sweden and Belgium, and facilitated by the European Institute of Peace.

22 S/PRST/2020/3, [S/PRST/2020/3 - E - S/PRST/2020/3 -Desktop \(undocs.org\)](https://undocs.org/en/S/PRST/2020/3-E).

23 Security Council meeting “Children and armed conflict: Attacks against schools as a grave violation of children’s rights”, 10 September 2020, <https://media.un.org/en/asset/k1f/k1fakju0sb>.

24 S/PRST/2020/8, <https://undocs.org/en/S/PRST/2020/8>. At the time of writing, work is ongoing to transform this PRST into a resolution, at the initiative of Niger.

25 Arria-formula meeting, “Protecting Conflict Affected Children when Humanitarian Space is Shrinking”, with co-sponsors Central African Republic, Côte d’Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, and France.

can be bridged and a short-term humanitarian approach to reintegration can be linked to longer-term development and peacebuilding approaches.²⁶

Other noteworthy events are the event “Girl in Crisis: Protection of Girls Affected by Armed Conflict in the Lake Chad Basin,” organized with Niger and Plan International on August 1, 2020, the day before the annual open debate on CAAC of the UNSC, as well as the high-level event, “How Are We Going to Stop the War on Children?,” organized with Save the Children on September 23, 2019, during the UNGA high-level week, with the participation of H.M. Queen Mathilde, Queen of the Belgians, and Nobel Prize Winner Nadia Murad, and co-sponsored by Côte d’Ivoire, France, Germany, Indonesia, South Africa and the European Commission.²⁷

Conclusion: Most Active Subsidiary Organ of the UNSC

As a result of these objectives, the SCWG-CAAC was, under Belgian chairmanship, easily the most active subsidiary organ of the UNSC. In 2019, for instance, it met more than 40 times in 13 formal and 28 informal meetings (excluding the so-called “informal informals” such as the monthly meetings to preview the Programme of Work of the UNSC).²⁸ This was more than double the number of meetings of the second most active subsidiary organ of the UNSC, the ISIL (Da’esh) and Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee, which met about 20 times in 2019. Due to challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, including limitations on holding in-person meetings, the SCWG-CAAC was forced to amend its rules and procedures and working methods and agreed to hold virtual meetings in the form of closed video-teleconferences. As a result, in 2020, three formal in-person meetings and 18 virtual meetings were held.²⁹ The negotiations of conclusions were largely replaced by a written procedure, with one or two virtual meetings to settle the most difficult points in the texts.

UNDERSTANDING THE WORKING GROUP’S CONCLUSIONS

Adopting country-specific conclusions remains the core activity of the SCWG-CAAC. The very strength of these conclusions consists of their adoption by consensus. Recommendations contained in such country-specific conclusions are a unanimous message of all 15 members of the UNSC, including of its five permanent members (P5), and are thus a powerful advocacy

26 Arria-formula meeting “Reintegration of Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups (CAAFAGs): Bridging the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) Nexus”, with co-sponsors Peru, Poland and the UK.

27 High Level Event “How are we going to stop the war on children”, 23 September 2019, <https://media.un.org/en/asset/k1d/k1dceazhg7>.

28 See 2019 annual report of the SC WG CAAC, S/2019/981, 20 December 2019, para. 7, <https://undocs.org/S/2019/981>.

29 See 2020 annual report of the SC WG CAAC, S/2020/1260, 31 December 2020, para. 8, <https://www.undocs.org/en/S/2020/1260>.

tool in the hands of the Office of the SRSR-CAAC, the CTFMRs, civil society and other CAAC-related actors and advocates. At the same time, the requirement of consensus is one of the greatest hurdles to overcome for the adoption of the conclusions.

Since the adoption of the first conclusions of the SCWG-CAAC in 2006, the conclusions steadily grew in length from a mere three to four pages in the early years, to on average 10 pages by the time Belgium took over as Chair of the SCWG-CAAC in 2019. Belgium decided to build on the work of its predecessors and continue the same template of conclusions as evolved by the time Belgium took up its chairmanship. This chapter aims at explaining the structure and the different sections of country-specific conclusions, pointing at the traditionally challenging points in the negotiations.

Adoption by Consensus

Finding a balance between the formulation of a text that is agreeable to all UNSC members and, at the same time, contains strong messages without being watered down to the lowest common denominator is one of the greatest challenges for a chair of the SCWG-CAAC. The most difficult and sensitive conclusions to be negotiated are the ones about country situations with state actors listed in the annexes of the UNSG's annual report on CAAC for grave violations against children. These state actors have direct access to the members of the UNSC and can exert greater political pressure than non-state actors can. When UNSC members are themselves involved in a conflict in one of the country situations under scrutiny, especially when they are themselves listed, arguably becoming judge and party at the same time, it can become nearly impossible to find consensus on a text. The most difficult negotiations can take months on end.

However, the very fact that, time and again, consensus has been found on conclusions, even on country situations about which the UNSC is usually divided, illustrates that the UNSC – and more generally the international community as a whole – is united in its commitment to addressing violations against children affected by armed conflict. Belgium thrived on that consensus, and both forged it and diplomatically pushed the normative envelope on sensitive issues to ensure the greatest possible gains for children.

Cycle: From the Presentation of the UNSG Report to the Adoption of Conclusions

The cycle of the adoption of country-specific conclusions starts with the presentation of the UNSG's report on a specific country by the SRSR-CAAC to the SCWG-CAAC in a formal session in the presence of the Permanent Representative of the country in question. After the presentation of the report by the SRSR-CAAC, the Permanent Representative of the country in question takes the floor with a statement, reflecting on the report and the situation in his or her country. This statement will later be annexed to the conclusions when

these are published after adoption. After this statement, the members of the SCWG-CAAC have a question-and-answer session with the Permanent Representative. At some point, the Permanent Representative leaves the room, and the SCWG-CAAC continues its session with the SRSG-CAAC. This session, like all formal and informal sessions of the SCWG-CAAC, takes place behind closed doors, with only the UN and UNSC members present.

On the basis of the UNSG's report, the statement of the Permanent Representative and the discussions of the SCWG-CAAC, draft conclusions are elaborated by the SCWG-CAAC Chair. When drafting the text, the Chair can consult the Office of the SRSG-CAAC, UNICEF, DPO, and ICRC, for instance, to further clarify elements of the report or verify developments on the ground or the accuracy of a formulation in light of International Humanitarian Law. Sometimes input is received from a local Group of Friends on CAAC if there is one established in that country context, with recommendations based on the UNSG's report for consideration of the members of the SCWG-CAAC. For instance, the Group of Friends on CAAC in Somalia based in Nairobi sent recommendations to the members of the SCWG-CAAC for the negotiations on the conclusions on Somalia in 2020. Next, the zero draft of the conclusions is circulated to the members of the SCWG-CAAC by the Chair, upon which the SCWG-CAAC meets in informal sessions to negotiate these conclusions. During Belgium's chairmanship, texts were generally agreed upon in two readings (each consisting of several sessions). Sometimes, however, three or even four readings were needed. Once an agreement is reached with a silence procedure on the text not being broken, these conclusions will be adopted by the SCWG-CAAC in a formal session, in the presence of the SRSG-CAAC, a UNICEF representative and the Permanent Representative of the country in question. The Permanent Representative and the SRSG-CAAC both make a statement and reflect upon the adopted conclusions, followed by an interactive session with the SCWG-CAAC. After the formal SCWG-CAAC session as such, a press release is published, with the public message of the conclusions contained therein. The adopted conclusions themselves are sent to the UN editors for a final check, which sometimes takes several weeks, after which they are published on the website of the UN.³⁰ In implementation of the conclusions, the UN Secretariat prepares and sends several letters to, for instance, the government in question and donors.

When the COVID-19 pandemic reached New York, where the UN headquarters are based, in March 2020 and the city entered lockdown, the working methods of the SCWG-CAAC had to be adapted. Virtual sessions of the SCWG-CAAC only counted as informal sessions; hence these had to be followed up by written procedure in order to formalize them.³¹ The in-person negotiations of the conclusions were replaced by written comments sent by the members of

30 See <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/subsidiary/wgcaac/sgreports>.

31 See Report of the Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict, S/2020/1260, paras. 7-8, <https://www.undocs.org/en/S/2020/1260>.

the SCWG-CAAC, on the basis of which the Chair drafted a new version of the text. An online negotiation had to resolve the most difficult points of contention. Negotiating sensitive texts by written procedure and online meetings is far from ideal. Nevertheless, the SCWG-CAAC managed to agree on several conclusions with these new methods. The fact that Belgium had chaired the SCWG-CAAC for almost 15 months in person created a basis of experience and trust upon which could be built in order to continue the work online.

Structure of the Conclusions

As already mentioned, when Belgium took up the chairmanship of the SCWG-CAAC, it decided to build upon the work of its predecessors regarding the structure of the conclusions. Throughout the years, the conclusions have steadily increased in length, to an average of approximately 10 pages.

Introduction

The first four paragraphs of conclusions constitute an introduction, referring to the session of the SCWG-CAAC at which the UNSG's report on the country was presented and describing in general the discussion that took place. In the first years of the SCWG-CAAC, the conclusions included a paragraph on the statement of the Permanent Representative of the country in question, made at the session during which the report was presented.³² However, as this often involved long discussions, it was decided from the conclusions on Afghanistan adopted in 2016³³ onwards to annex the statement as a whole to the conclusions, once adopted and published. Nevertheless, paragraph 3 of the conclusions, which describes the discussion of the SCWG-CAAC upon the presentation of the UNSG's country-specific report, often remains a contested and hotly debated paragraph. No value judgments can be made in that paragraph, nor recommendations be made, even when those were made in the formal session of the SCWG-CAAC during which the report was presented and discussed. The description is a factual listing of topics discussed. Paragraphs 2 and 4 refer to the relevant UNSC resolutions on CAAC relevant for the CAAC mandate and are usually repeated unaltered in all conclusions.

Public statement by the Chair of the Working Group

The next section of the conclusions contains the "Public statement by the Chair of the Working Group." This section is published as a press release upon formal adoption of the conclusions by the SCWG-CAAC.³⁴ Paragraph 5 of the conclusions is always subject to the longest negotiations. Once agreement on certain elements is reached on this paragraph, it is easier to agree them later on in the text.

32 Until the conclusions on Syria, S/AC.51/2014/4, para. 4, <https://www.undocs.org/S/AC.51/2014/4>.

33 See the conclusions on Afghanistan, S/AC.51/2016/1, <https://www.undocs.org/S/AC.51/2016/1>.

34 See for all press releases: <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/subsidiary/wgcaac/sgreports>.

The public statement usually starts with a chapeau addressing all parties to the armed conflict, in particular the parties listed in the annexes of the Secretary-General's annual reports on CAAC, including state actors when applicable. What follows is an expression of concern regarding the various CAAC violations taking place in the country concerned, with a message to the parties to armed conflict calling them to end these violations and prevent new ones from happening. Addressing the public statement to all parties to the armed conflict, in particular the listed parties,³⁵ in the chapeau, including for violations for which they are not necessarily listed, is a choice for several reasons.

First of all, it is done for practical reasons. The public statement would become unreadable and too long if per listed party different violations for which they are listed are addressed. Secondly, the public statement calls for preventing violations in the future, which is a message applicable to all parties. Thirdly, even though a party is not listed for a certain violation, it does not mean that it has not committed these violations on a lower scale. Sometimes, however, the chapeau is short and reads, for example: "The Working Group agreed to address a message to the following parties through a public statement by its Chair"³⁶. Messages are then split up in common messages "to all parties" or "to all parties to the armed conflict", and specific messages "to the Government" and "to all armed groups".³⁷ Sometimes specific messages are addressed to specific parties, such as "the Coalition to Support Legitimacy in Yemen",³⁸ "the Civilian Joint Task Force",³⁹ or "to the United States of America",⁴⁰ or messages are addressed more widely "to all those concerned".⁴¹

Sometimes, there is a discussion about whether a specific conflict is an "armed conflict" according to International Humanitarian Law. In that case, reference is made to the explanation in the conclusions on Colombia of 2010, "recalling that resolution 1612 (2005) does not seek

35 Sometimes only the listed parties are addressed, see for example the conclusions on Syria, S/AC.51/2019/1, para. 5, <https://www.undocs.org/S/AC.51/2019/1>.

36 See, for example, the conclusions on the Philippines, S/AC.51/2020, para. 5, <https://www.undocs.org/S/AC.51/2020/9>.

37 See, for example, the conclusions on Myanmar, S/AC.51/2019/2, para.5, <https://www.undocs.org/S/AC.51/2019/2> and the conclusions on the Philippines, S/AC.51/2020, para. 5, <https://www.undocs.org/S/AC.51/2020/9>.

38 See the conclusions on Yemen, S/AC.51/2020/1, para. 5 (l), <https://www.undocs.org/S/AC.51/2020/1>.

39 See the conclusions on Nigeria, S/AC.51/2020/8, paras. 5 (aa) – (bb), <https://www.undocs.org/S/AC.51/2020/8>.

40 See the conclusions on Afghanistan, S/AC.51/2020/2, para. 5 (v), <https://www.undocs.org/S/AC.51/2020/2>.

41 See, for example, the conclusions on Yemen, S/AC.51/2020/1, paras. 5 (o) – (q), <https://www.undocs.org/S/AC.51/2020/1>, and the conclusions on Afghanistan, S/AC.51/2020/2, para. 5 (z)-(cc), <https://www.undocs.org/S/AC.51/2020/2>.

to make any legal determination as to whether the situations referred to in the Secretary-General's reports are or are not armed conflicts within the context of the Geneva Conventions and the Additional Protocols thereto, nor does it prejudge the legal status of the non-State parties involved in these situations".⁴²

Paragraph 6 in the conclusions contains a message to community and religious leaders and is repeated usually unaltered in all conclusions, since the conclusions adopted on Nigeria in 2017.⁴³

Recommendations to the Security Council - Letters

Under this heading, the SCWG-CAAC recommends the President of the Security Council to transmit letters to the government of the country under scrutiny, to the UNSG,⁴⁴ to the chair of the sanctions committee (when applicable), and to other relevant actors, such as the President of the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council and the Chairperson of the AU Commission,⁴⁵ the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD),⁴⁶ the Government of the State members of the G5 Sahel,⁴⁷ and the Coalition to Support Legitimacy in Yemen.⁴⁸

In the letter to the government, many messages of the public statement are repeated. Sometimes some messages are more detailed or tailor-made. In the letter to the UNSG, often recommendations are made regarding the peacekeeping operation in the country concerned, including regarding the CPA capacity, the MRM, action plans with listed parties, or peace and mediation processes and the importance of including the protection of children.⁴⁹

42 See the conclusions on Colombia, S/AC.51/2010/3, para. 5, <https://www.undocs.org/S/AC.51/2010/3>.

43 See the conclusions on Nigeria, S/AC.51/2017/5, para. 6, <https://www.undocs.org/S/AC.51/2017/5>. A message to only "community leaders" was already included in para. 5 of the conclusions on the Philippines, S/AC.51/2017/4, para. 5, <https://www.undocs.org/S/AC.51/2017/4>.

44 Letters to the Secretary-General can be consulted online: <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/subsidiary/wgcaac/letters>.

45 See the conclusions on Nigeria, S/AC.51/2020/8, para.9, <https://www.undocs.org/S/AC.51/2020/8>.

46 See the conclusions on South Sudan, S/AC.51/2021/1, para. 9, <https://undocs.org/S/AC.51/2021/1>.

47 See the conclusions on Mali, S/AC.51/2020/11, para. 9, <https://www.undocs.org/S/AC.51/2020/11>.

48 See the conclusions on Yemen, S/AC.51/2020/1, para. 8, <https://www.undocs.org/S/AC.51/2020/1>. It is to be noted that in the case of the Coalition, the letter is transmitted by the Chair of the SC WG CAAC, not by the President of the Security Council. The retainment of this paragraph under this section and not the next one ("Direct Action by the Working Group") is the result of a compromise in the negotiations.

49 See for example the conclusions on Syria, S/AC.51/2019/1, para. 8 (a), <https://www.undocs.org/S/AC.51/2019/1> and the conclusions on the Philippines, S/AC.51/2020/9, para. 8 (d), <https://www.undocs.org/S/AC.51/2020/9>.

No letters are sent to non-State actors which are listed parties to the conflict, as many are also armed groups designated as terrorist by the UN and the UNSC sending letters to designated terrorist groups is not deemed legitimate. Non-state actors are only addressed through the public statement. This, however, often amounts to frustration among listed state actors, as an imbalance is perceived in the amount of criticism they receive as opposed to non-State actors.

Finally, this section can also include direct recommendations to the Security Council,⁵⁰ regarding for example the mandates of UN peacekeeping operations.

Direct Action by the Working Group – Letters

Under the last section of the SCWG-CAAC conclusions, letters are sent to donors, such as the World Bank and the conveners of the Humanitarian Task Force on Syria in Geneva,⁵¹ and relevant governments. Under this section, letters have been sent to other relevant actors, such as to the leadership of the NATO Resolute Support Mission.⁵²

Hard Negotiations

As mentioned, the most difficult and sensitive conclusions to be negotiated are the ones about country situations with state actors listed for grave violations against children. When UNSC members are themselves involved in a conflict in one of the country situations under scrutiny, especially when they are listed themselves, it becomes nearly impossible to find consensus on a text. The challenge is to find consensus on a text without watering down the messages in the text to meaningless recommendations. In order to work towards consensus, Belgium involved and mobilized its whole diplomatic network during its chairmanship of the SCWG-CAAC. The triangle of Belgian embassies in capitals around the world, the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Brussels from desk officer to Human Rights and UN Directors to Political Director to Minister of Foreign Affairs, and the Belgian Mission to the UN in New York was crucial in bringing its chairmanship to a good end.

Some issues were time and again difficult to negotiate. One of them was referring to the Paris Principles and Commitments to end the unlawful recruitment and use of children, the Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and

50 See, for example, the conclusions on Iraq, S/AC.51/2020/4, para. 9, <https://www.undocs.org/S/AC.51/2020/4>, the conclusions on Somalia, S/AC.51/2020/6, para. 11, <https://www.undocs.org/en/S/AC.51/2020/6>, the conclusions on Mali, S/AC.51/2020/11, para. 10, <https://www.undocs.org/S/AC.51/2020/11>, and the conclusions on South Sudan, S/AC.51/2021/1, para. 11, <https://undocs.org/S/AC.51/2021/1>.

51 See the conclusions on Syria, S/AC.51/2019/1, paras. 10-11, <https://www.undocs.org/S/AC.51/2019/1>.

52 See the conclusions on Afghanistan, S/AC.51/2016/1, para. 14, <https://www.undocs.org/S/AC.51/2016/1>.

Use of Child Soldiers, and the Safe Schools Declaration. As these texts are not the result of intergovernmental negotiations, but voluntary commitments of States to go beyond what is legally required, there was no consensus in the SCWG-CAAC to include recommendations in the conclusions to sign up to these texts.⁵³ Once a government had endorsed one of these texts, this was, however, welcomed.⁵⁴ Moreover, once a government had voluntarily signed up to these texts, consensus was found to recommend these governments to implement their commitments,⁵⁵ “guided by” these documents.⁵⁶ Since Presidential Statement/2020/3 was adopted (cf. supra), conclusions of the SCWG-CAAC have also started to make reference to the UN Practical guidance for mediators to protect children in situations of armed conflict, encouraging actors involved in peace and mediation processes to use it.⁵⁷

Like in all other UN fora, references to gender are increasingly hard to maintain in conclusions of the SCWG-CAAC. Belgium as a Chair managed to keep references to, for example, sexual and gender-based violence against children in all conclusions,⁵⁸ to specialized and gender-sensitive services for victims of rape and other forms of sexual violence in armed

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- 53 One notable exception is, for example, the reference to the Safe Schools Declaration in the conclusions on Colombia, even though Colombia has not endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration yet. See the conclusions on Colombia, S/AC.51/2020/5, para. 5 (l), <https://www.undocs.org/S/AC.51/2020/5>. Similarly with the reference to the Paris Principles in the conclusions on South Sudan, even though South Sudan has not endorsed these yet. See the conclusions on South Sudan, S/AC.51/2021/1, para. 5 (d), <https://undocs.org/S/AC.51/2021/1>.
- 54 See, for example, the conclusions on Myanmar, S/AC.51/2019/2, para. 5 (q), <https://www.undocs.org/S/AC.51/2019/2>, and the conclusions on Somalia, S/AC.51/2020/6, para. 7 (p), <https://www.undocs.org/en/S/AC.51/2020/6>. As the Vancouver Principles is still a relatively (?) recent document, the SCWG-CAAC has not had the occasion yet to welcome the endorsement by a country in its conclusions.
- 55 See, for example, the conclusions on the DRC, S/AC.51/2020/10, para. 7 (j), <https://www.undocs.org/S/AC.51/2020/10>: “Recalling the endorsement of the Safe Schools Declaration and the Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict by the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and calling for their swift implementation, (...)”.
- 56 See, for example, the conclusions on Afghanistan, S/AC.51/2020/2, para. 5 (f), <https://www.undocs.org/S/AC.51/2020/2>: “(...) urging that children associated or allegedly associated with parties to conflict must be treated primarily as victims and that detention should be considered only as a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate period of time, in line with international law and guided by the Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups (the Paris Principles), which was endorsed by the Government of Afghanistan”. See also, for example, the conclusions on Colombia, S/AC.51/2020/5, para. 5 (o), <https://www.undocs.org/S/AC.51/2020/5>.
- 57 See, for example, the conclusions on Colombia, S/AC.51/2020/5, para. 5 (c), <https://www.undocs.org/S/AC.51/2020/5> and the conclusions on South Sudan, S/AC.51/2021/1, para. 5 (d), <https://undocs.org/S/AC.51/2021/1>.
- 58 See, for example, the conclusions on Myanmar, S/AC.51/2019/2, paras. 5 (j), 7 (b), and 9 (c), <https://www.undocs.org/S/AC.51/2019/2>, in line with SC Resolution 2427 (2018), OP18 and SC Resolution 1261 (1999), OP10.

conflict,⁵⁹ as well as to reintegration and rehabilitation opportunities for children affected by armed conflict that need to be gender-sensitive.⁶⁰ It also managed to insert a reference to early marriage and forced marriage of girls for the first time in SCWG-CAAC conclusions.⁶¹

Finally, the need for and importance of accountability for grave violations committed against children has been a central element as well in the conclusions negotiated under Belgian chairmanship.⁶² This includes maintaining increasingly contested references to the International Criminal Court, where applicable.⁶³

INSIGHTS ON GAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES MOVING FORWARD

Belgium's chairmanship of the SCWG-CAAC (2019-2020) continued in the footsteps of its predecessor Sweden and focused on the implementation of the CAAC mandate. Moving forward, the following recommendations can be considered by its successors.⁶⁴

First of all, a close working relationship between the Chair of the SCWG-CAAC and the SRS-CAAC, consistent with their respective mandates, should be maintained. The development of a yearly work plan regarding the publication of country-specific reports is a good practice to be continued. Ideally, the SCWG-CAAC should adopt conclusions on all country-specific situations with listed parties during the two-year mandate of a Chair of the SCWG-CAAC (currently 14). For this to occur, country-specific reports should be published in a regular and timely manner.

Furthermore, the focus on the follow-up of the implementation of country-specific conclusions, including through continuing the practice of regular video-teleconferences with the CTFMRs on the ground, should be maintained. Future chairs of the SCWG-CAAC could improve this focus on the follow up of conclusions by engaging and involving the country concerned. Also, the discussions in the SCWG-CAAC on Global Horizontal Notes on children and armed

59 See, for example, conclusions on Iraq, S/AC.51/2020/4, para. 5 (v), <https://www.undocs.org/S/AC.51/2020/4>.

60 See, for example, the conclusions on Myanmar, S/AC.51/2019/2, paras. 5 (t), 7 (i), and 9 (a), <https://www.undocs.org/S/AC.51/2019/2>, in line with SC Resolution 2427 (2018), OP26.

61 See, for example, conclusions on Yemen, S/AC.51/2020/1, para. 5 (f), <https://www.undocs.org/S/AC.51/2020/1>: “early marriage of girls” (as this was the wording used in the second report on Yemen, S/2019/453) and conclusions on Somalia, S/AC.51/2020/6, paras. 5 (g), (i) and 7 (l): “forced marriage”.

62 See, for example, conclusions on the Syrian Arab Republic, A/AC.51/2019/1, paras. 5 (c), (f), (g) and 7 (c), <https://www.undocs.org/S/AC.51/2019/1>.

63 See, for example, the conclusions on the Central African Republic, A/AC.51/2020/3, paras. 5 (j), (o), and 7(c), <https://www.undocs.org/S/AC.51/2020/3>.

64 Belgium included these recommendations in a letter to the Security Council of 24 December 2020, S/2020/1288, <https://undocs.org/S/2020/1288>.

conflict should allow for regular updates for country situations under consideration as well as emerging country situations of concern. More thought should go into how to leverage these Global Horizontal Notes for early warning and improved prevention. Future chairs could also improve how to deal with situations of concern with (so far) no listed parties, such as “Libya”, “Israel and the State of Palestine”, or “Burkina Faso”. The organization of a video-teleconference with the CTFMR of Libya under the Belgian chairmanship was one way of doing so.

Continuing the practice of field visits and of mainstreaming the CAAC agenda throughout the work of the UNSC are critical to maintaining attention and urgency on the issue. Extending invitations to speakers to address the Security Council in a direct manner on the situation of children affected by armed conflict, both in the open sessions as well as during consultations behind closed doors, is one example. Organizing joint meetings of sanctions committees and the SCWG-CAAC, is another. The monthly meetings of the SCWG-CAAC to present and discuss the Programme of Work of the UNSC with the President of the UNSC of the month and representatives of the Office of the SRSG-CAAC, UNICEF and DPO is yet another practice that is recommended.

Engagement with all stakeholders, including the country concerned, civil society, and everyone involved in the MRM will remain essential. Holding regular NGO roundtables, for example, is a practice that is recommended. Furthermore, the organization of Arria-formula meetings of the UNSC, in which non-UNSC and civil society members can take part, is another way of engaging stakeholders.

The Chair of the SCWG-CAAC is one of the guardians of the CAAC mandate. Even though the Chair has no formal role in the drafting process of the UNSG’s annual report on CAAC, messages can be passed on, as Belgium did during its tenure as chair. It underlined the importance of evidence-based listing and delisting of perpetrators in the annexes of the UNSG’s annual reports on CAAC, accurately reflecting the data collected and verified by the MRM, according to the criteria included in the UNSG’s annual CAAC report of 2010.⁶⁵ Maintaining the integrity and impartiality of the listing mechanism is crucial for this precious and powerful tool, as it provides leverage to the UN to work with listed parties to improve the situation of children affected by armed conflict. Such a mechanism must be resourced with robust capacity on the ground to monitor and report further challenged by COVID-19 but deemed more relevant and necessary than ever.⁶⁶

65 See UN Security Council, Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict (A/64/742-S/2010/181), April 13, 2010, <https://undocs.org/A/64/742 paras. 176-180>.

66 See, for example, the interventions of Belgium at the annual open debate on CAAC, on 2 August 2019, https://newyorkun.diplomatie.belgium.be/sites/default/files/content/pdf/caac_eng.pdf, and on 23 June 2020, https://newyorkun.diplomatie.belgium.be/sites/default/files/content/20200623_caac_intervention_final.pdf.

Annelies Verstichel, LL.M. (Columbia Law School), PhD (European University Institute), is a career diplomat and was responsible for Belgium's chairmanship of the SCWG-CAAC during its mandate in the UNSC as a non-permanent member (2019-2020)



REFLECTING ON 25 YEARS OF THE CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT AGENDA

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EDITORS' NOTE:

This commentary is in a somewhat different form from others published in Allons-y and reflects our commitment to methodological pluralism and the importance of experiential knowledge. It takes the form of a transcribed discussion between three members of a youth advisory committee established as part of the Knowledge for Prevention research project on the early warning of the recruitment and use of children in armed violence at the Dallaire Institute, and the Dallaire Institute's research advisor Laura Cleave.

LAURA CLEAVE

Thank you for being here to reflect on the successes and challenges of 25 years of the Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC) agenda. The CAAC agenda was established by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly following the release of Graça Machel's novel report on the impact of armed conflict on children. In this report, now widely considered to be the cornerstone of the CAAC agenda, Graça Machel emphasized the disproportionate effect that conflict and violence have on children.

Today we are very lucky to be joined by our Knowledge for Prevention (K4P) Youth Advisory Committee, whose advocacy and research span from Cameroon to Kenya, Northern Ireland, Somalia, South Sudan, and the United States.

Our Youth Advisory Committee was created to advise on how children and young people can be better engaged as part of peacebuilding and early warning efforts to prevent children's recruitment into armed conflict. Our committee continues to demonstrate the power of young people as changemakers and relationship-builders, both in their respective communities and across the globe.

So, to begin our discussion today, I would ask, how would you describe the context for children and youth in your communities?

ABDIKARIM HASSAN

I think discussions around issues affecting children and youth in my community have increased. Child protection and youth issues are now more consistently being considered in key decision-making processes, from child advocates being represented in government and cores ministries, i.e., the child protection units within the Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Defence.

So, the discussion is well placed, and people are well informed on the issue of children's engagement in conflict. But again, there are still challenges to effect change with respect to the issue of children, specifically the issue of children in armed conflict. This has to do with limited resources, as Somalia is still in a transition period from a decades long conflict. Necessary resources to adjust and effect policies are yet to be fully implemented and many government offices and civil society organizations still rely on donors and the international community to implement daily activities and daily service delivery for children. There are also the challenges related to the prevalence of poverty in the country, which still hinders many youths and children to be fully engaged in positive programmes, such as education and so forth.

And once you know the overall challenge in the community with respect to the prevalence of poverty, we find that children are being misused by recruitment cells into conflicts. We have not yet invested a lot of time and resources in the fostering of knowledge and community engagement. There is a tendency to be reactionary in our approaches, to only help or come to the aid of children after the fact and not before. So, that's why it is important to invest in early warning and community-based programming.

MYRAH OLOO

So, my answer is a little bit more general. If you look at the age structure of Kenya, roughly 40% of the population is below the age of 14. The government does do a lot to help us, for instance through initiatives such as the Youth Enterprise Fund which provides funds for people who have entrepreneurial ideas and who want to start their own companies.

And then there's also the National Youth Service (NYS), which is a program that helps young people get involved in the security field, for instance the military and basic training.

There is also the Ministry of Youth that does focus a lot on programs centred around youth.

However, as the youth demographic that is part of a large population, we fall victim to many unique problems – whether it's poverty, unemployment, etc. When we look at the age group up to 25, we are looking at about 65% of the population. I believe that the unemployment rate at the national level is about 7%, and for youths specifically (16 to 35) it is about 17%. This represents a large disparity.

So, I'd say the context for youth and young children in my community is that the policies and guidance are there, but like my colleague before me has said it's all about resources. It's all about execution and this I believe is where we fall short. For example, in 2021, we've had a huge downfall in terms of education and young people returning to school. Yes, the policies are there that state that we must go to school, but the execution is where I think the problem rests. So, it is important that we do a little bit more to ensure that what we say is what we do in our community.

Although I feel like youth are generally seen and heard, we need to strive to act and create safer environments for all.

ACHALEKE CHRISTIAN LEKE

For Cameroon, there are different contexts for children depending on where you are in the country, so the situation of children and youth is always evolving. Depending on the area of the country, rises in conflict and limited opportunities affect young people and children differently. Firstly, in terms of education, our country currently runs a free education system where our children and young people – from primary right to higher education – pay a minimum amount for tuition. Yet, there are communities where children have not had access to schooling for over three years. This creates a significant challenge in terms of response.

Another key area which I want to flag is around employability and income generating opportunities. At present in Cameroon, unemployment is very high and opportunities for employability remains low.

In terms of government response, there is the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Civic Education, as well as the Ministry of Social Affairs, which account for youth and children. These ministries have programmes which they have developed around employability and income generation, for instance the special three-year plan for young people where the state provides funding in the form of loans to young people to set up their businesses, follow up and support them. There are also a wide variety of other programmes that are supported by the entrepreneurial spirit of youth themselves.

Displacement of children, and the increasing vulnerability of street children - particularly as in many cases the children themselves have chosen to leave the home due to poor treatment by parents – and refugee and internally displaced children remains of grave concern. These children experience conflict differently and are particularly vulnerable to abuse and atrocities of their rights. The Government has tried to respond to this, but it is a complex issue and bureaucracy often hinders response. Civil society movements are also responding to the increased vulnerability of children (i.e., through livelihood support, educational support, etc.).

The reality is that the implementation of our National Youth Policy rests around 30%. Yet, when it comes to children, there is not presently an institutional policy around children beyond policies around the protection of children and their education around child abuse and exploitation. To a certain degree, government, policymakers, and other development stakeholders have been able to ensure that this is mainstream within all institutions. Even civil society organisations are mandated to develop a child a protection policy.

Speaking from a peace and security lens, I believe that recent UN Security Council Resolutions around peace and security have been able to amplify these processes of not just protecting children or young people, but also engaging them in developing and monitoring initiatives.

LAURA CLEAVE

Reflecting on the past 25 years of the CAAC agenda, and especially the early findings of the Graca Machel report regarding the disproportionate impact of conflict on children, what advances have been made in protecting children from being engaged in violence? And what concerns do you have for effectively implementing a protection agenda?

ACHALEKE CHRISTIAN LEKE

Unfortunately, CAAC-based policies are not effectively being translated into real-time work on the ground in situations of concern. Investment in child protection often misses or overlooks the fact that the reality of children is constantly evolving – particularly given access that children and young people now have to the internet, for good or for bad. Over the past 10 to 15 years, access and exposure to information has shifted, which has affected children's ability to think and react to situations that affect them. This means that programming around children needs to take into consideration the changing natures and realities of childhood today.

Another challenge that we are facing is that programming still considers children from a more beneficiary perspective. I'm aware that we need to continue to strive for greater child protection, but we also must recognize the faculty of children and the creativity and reflection that they bring to the table. Programming must also evolve in terms of how we perceive children and how we meaningfully address their perspectives. Children should be developed in the development of protection-based programming.

From my experience working with children in the field, children have the potential to master and shape peacebuilding tools. If violent extremist groups can teach children to be able to carry guns, peacebuilding agencies can equally teach and work with children on how they can build peace. Imagine a generation where we have children whom at the age of three or four already understand the principles around peaceful mediation and dialogue. That child stands the chance of not falling prey to radicalization and recruitment.

In this context, the conversation of children being the “leaders of tomorrow” is already outdated as well. Today, we are seeing children who are leading on peacebuilding in their communities.

ABDIKARIM HASSAN

Reflecting on the children and armed conflict agenda, to some extent certain mandates have been successfully mainstreamed in many countries. Yet, violations against children continue to be underreported or overlooked, and the consideration that needs to be given towards existing norms within communities has yet to change. Communities are still susceptible to recruitment of children, and the issue of monitoring grave violations against children including recruitment remains challenging in conflict-based contexts. Data on child recruitment remains limited, particularly for non-state actors. Largely it is children who are able to leave armed groups who are counted within recruitment data. But this misses important interventions to prevent such a practice in the first place and to understand the scope of the issue. Investment in funding child protection policies to enhance recruitment prevention efforts must then be prioritized.

MYRAH OLOO

From the past 25 years, I think a success of the CAAC agenda is the awareness that has been raised around children’s vulnerability to conflict and violence. At the country level, knowledge of children’s rights and legal frameworks for child protection have increased.

However, I think 25 years may not be a long enough time to fully appreciate societal change and how it can affect one society. Some countries have been in conflict for over 20 years, and we must consider the children who have grown up in such environments and who are now adults themselves.

Accountability remains a core issue. It is one thing to raise the issue, or even to sign a peace agreement. However, it’s another thing to uphold what is written in the peace agreement. And in this context, peace and ceasefire agreements rarely include provisions related to children and child protection.

Child protection programming and policies continue to look at children as one that needs protection rather than as a group who holds rights. They do not recognize that children have the ability to bring peace to their communities – which can be seen as disempowering and does not give children the space to recognize the power that they have in shaping societal progress and sustainable peace.

As such, we need to see children more involved in peacebuilding. If children and youth already comprise such a vast proportion of the population, we are already leaders. And whether we're leading ourselves, whether we're leading our peers, we are already leaders and we need to be treated like leaders who should be discussed and involved in matters that affect us.

LAURA CLEAVE

A recent report by the Danish Refugee Council discusses the normalisation of violence during childhood years, drawing on case examples of how children internalise violent contexts even within the games that they may play on the playground at school. So, from your perspective, what is needed to break cycles and normalizations of violence from the earliest stages?

ACHALEKE CHRISTIAN LEKE

Normalising violence and crime are becoming very common within schools and other places where children may go. As such, we need to create programming that targets curriculums and reshapes perspectives to normalize peace.

From our side, we have a program called the Spread-Love campaign, where we are working in primary and secondary schools to teach children how to love. Love might seem to be an elusive word, but having such conversations helps children to start looking at things differently.

Thus, the culture of dialogue is critical, and something that is lacking in our context and can be seen as taboo. My organization is working hard on this to start and sustain community dialogues – trying to make the culture of dialogue like a lifestyle. But, even when we look at schools, there is still a culture of punishment that limits opportunities for dialogue and discussion. In such spaces, there is not space for children to talk among themselves. The findings in the Danish Refugee Council report would likely have been the same 10 or 20 years ago as well. Hence, we need to foster cultures where children have the opportunity to grow up differently. What if a child starts learning about peace in a softer way from games or activities when they begin nursery school? This is how you create champions of peace.

Funding for peace also needs to change. From our side, we have been running a program for children for three years, yet funding goes to the biggest organisations in lieu of local civil society organizations. If we continue to overlook local organizations and expertise, reports like the one that was mentioned before will continue to be produced and findings will never change.

The way we fund peacebuilding needs to change. There needs to be a reflection in programming and stakeholders who invest and work in these spaces. I work with these children every day, and I can tell you what the challenges are. We need to be able to look at things differently and ensure that children are taught and brought up in a way that will prevent us from having conflict tomorrow.

ABDIKARIM HASSAN

It's important to note that children always have and continue to face the highest repercussions of armed conflict and cycles of violence. Recognizing that we have rules in society, we need to prioritize implementation and the enforcement of laws, so that we can create a safe environment for children. We must invest in safe environments – such as education and resources – that can challenge cycles of violence and children's engagement in conflict. Rather than waiting for children to grow up, prioritizing life skills and education for peace at an earlier age can augment conflict mediation and prevention.

We must also invest caregiving support – for instance for parents and guardians – so that they are able to sustain environments of peace for children within the household. Oftentimes if children are not receiving love and care at home, then they may be more enticed to leave and find comradery and security elsewhere. Children who have been traumatized at home may be more susceptible and prone to conflict. Yet, from the point of view of the families, they may also be struggling financially and providing for their children, so opportunities for income generation could go a long way to changing household narratives around protection and creating safe spaces for children to live and grow.

MYRAH OLOO

To echo the point above on reprimanding children with corporal punishment, such forms of punishment during children's formative years shape the way they see power. Growing up, the greatest players in a child's life are their parents and their teachers. These are the people who they view as above them, in terms of holding decision-making power. So, when we do introduce violence in this context, it attributes violence and power as one.

Such misuses of power can also be seen at the community level when police act violently – reinforcing the idea of power and violence once again.

So, we need a way of educating these children that there is a different way for

your voice to be heard and a different way for you to be seen. Programs that teach children how to engage and debate peacefully are important. They present children with different tools and resources in their toolkit to convey their feelings.

We must also teach children about decision-making and its various layers – in the room, around the room and outside the room – so that they can recognize themselves and their agency at each stage. And from the point of view of decision-makers, we must convey how space must be created at each stage so that alternative voices can be brought into discussions.

LAURA CLEAVE

You are all such strong advocates and voices for children. Could you reflect on your experience and whether there was a defining moment in your life where you felt empowered as a young person to be part of peacebuilding in your community?

ACHALEKE CHRISTIAN LEKE

For me, I grew up living in violence and seeing it first-hand. I think the defining moment from my experience was when I realized that I had something in me that was unique and that could be of value to others, for example when I discovered my skills in theatre. It was a defining moment when I came to realise that people could find joy in what I was able to offer.

I had another defining moment in my life where someone showed me forgiveness and love in a different way. While I was in boarding school, I learned why teaching people by example can be such a powerful tool. We must strive to recognize the competencies and abilities of children, as that can make a difference for them in the long-term and the way they perceive themselves. Sometimes children go through trauma yet may not recognize that they have been through such an experience. Having someone there to show such a child that they have value and meaning is exceptionally important.

I've worked with former Boko Haram before, as well as with former separatists – from children to young people and adults. We need spaces where people are able to see things differently because they feel that they have something to offer and that they are valued by those around them.

MYRAH OLOO

For me, life has shown me so many different environments and places and has taught me about privilege. I was born in the UK and grew up in Kenya, and I've always thought of myself as a bridge to support others. Growing up in two different countries, it showed me how to relate to people from diverse contexts, and that you can always find commonality with others. Although different areas may have different challenges, every child has value and potential. What I learned was that it is possible to love a country, even when you recognize its problems and faults. And to truly love a place, you cannot sit idle you need to actively work to change the landscape.

The school I attended taught us about charity and giving back. I remember we took a trip to Samburu, which is in the north of Kenya, and I spoke to a girl called Frida. She shared about how in her home area there were cattle raids and during one of those raids they killed a few people in her community. They did this to fund political campaigns. It broke my heart because the government that is set out to protect these children and societies were the ones destroying them.

Despite this, Frida wants to become a lawyer and get involved in the justice system that has done her wrong, so that she can be part of the solution. We have a lot that we can do to support young people like Frida, and that is where I see my role. Youth have such potential and we need to ensure that we can give them the right environment and platform.

ABDIKARIM HASSAN

Somalia disintegrated into conflict when I was very young. My father was a businessman and would travel around many parts of Somalia, until the conflict became widespread. Over 30 years of civil conflict has meant that many of the youth, like myself, have grown up in violence. So, I grew up with this resentment that all hope had been lost for Somalia and for our entire generation of youth in Somalia.

But my hope was restored by the resilience of the youth in Somalia, especially in areas like Mogadishu that had been ravaged by conflict. Despite such fragility, youth have always picked up the pieces and continued to build a better future. When I returned to Somalia from school in 2011, it was inspiring to see youth fighting for their rights to go to school, to carry onto university, to seek greater well-being than what had been provided to them. And I was shocked by the fact that you know these are youth who haven't had any form of government, who haven't had a day's peace of mind from years of shelling and being forced to migrate and adapt.

And from then on, I felt that hope was not lost, and that I should be part of the process to build peace. From there I began to work in a school, another defining moment for me, which led me to Elman Peace where I worked for over six years on child protection and reintegration.

When we look at the breakdown of a country like Somalia that has such a high population of youth, that should give us hope, not worry. Where children and youth can engage more meaningfully, we will see not only a brighter future for themselves, but for also for their country.

The K4P Youth Advisory Committee was formed to bring the perspective of youth to the prevention of the recruitment and use of children as soldiers and to help advance the predictive, early warning work undertaken by the Dallaire Institute. Since its inception, the Committee has provided guidance on the SRSG for Children and Armed Conflict's 25-year review of the CAAC agenda, participated on the Dallaire Institute's Children, Peace and Security podcast, reviewed the Dallaire Institute's youth engagement strategy, and hosted research labs and collaborative dialogues with key partners. The Dallaire Institute would like to thank the Committee for their continued engagement and for their advocacy for the rights of young people across the globe.

K4P Youth Advisory Members:

Laura Cleave – Dallaire Institute for Children, Peace and Security, Canada

Ruth Frimpong – Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre, Ghana

Bazilika Joan Lado – EVE Organization for Women's Development South Sudan

Achaleke Christian Leke – Local Youth Corner Cameroon

Abdikarim Hassan – Legal Consultant, Somalia

Myrah Oloo – Giants of Africa Alumnus, Kenya

Aubrey Marie Seader – Arts and Peacebuilding Researcher, United States

Aisha Zannah – Future Prowess Islamic Foundation, Nigeria

Laura Cleave is a Research and Learning Advisor at the Dallaire Institute for Children, Peace and Security in Kigali, Rwanda. Laura is the lead researcher and coordinator of the Knowledge for Prevention (K4P) project, which focuses on the development of an early warning system for the recruitment and use of children as soldiers. In this capacity, Laura chairs the K4P Community of Practice and the K4P Youth Advisory Committee, contributes to academic and policy articles, and organizes the Dallaire Institute's annual international symposium focused on prioritizing children in early warning systems. With over five years of experience in the humanitarian and not-for-profit fields, as well as in the Canadian public sector, Laura has worked across the globe, including in Ireland, Morocco, Rwanda, South Korea, and Canada's northern territories, and has visited over 50 countries to date. She has a Master's in International Peace Studies from Trinity College Dublin.

Abdikarim Hassan is a consultant working with civil society and government agencies to build an effective enabling environment for children in Somalia. Much of his focus has been working with the Ministry of Justice as a senior legal advisor advising the institutions in the legal harmonization of necessary protection laws. Abdikarim, before his current role, worked with ELMAN Peace Center as the Protection Program Manager in Mogadishu, Somalia. In his role, Abdikarim oversaw the Centre's work with Children Associated with Armed Forces and Groups (CAFAAG) to effectively facilitate demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration (DDR) of Elman Peace's beneficiaries into civilian life. Abdikarim is an LL.M. graduate from Loyola University Chicago School of Law. He is an internationally recognized expert for community-based approaches to reintegration in an armed conflict where no peace agreement has yet been concluded. He has also worked in Lake Chad Basin countries facing similar conflict as Somalia. Abdikarim currently pursues post-graduate research on the legal landscape affecting DDR processes and lectures human rights law at different universities in Somalia.

Myrah Oloo is a youth leader and an alumnus of the Giants of Africa program who strongly believes in supporting and empowering youth across Africa. She has adapted a role to facilitate and act as a voice for the forthcoming generation of changemakers. Myrah is currently studying in the UK, and originally from Kenya. Her dream is to one day be the president of Kenya.

Achaleke Christian Leke is a peacebuilding, violent extremism, and international development expert from Cameroon with 15 years of experience as a practitioner and academic. His passion for peace was inspired by his childhood growing up in Fiango Kumba, which was known for crime and violence. The realities of violence drove him to build violence-free communities with young people at the forefront.

He currently serves as the Executive Director of Local Youth Corner Cameroon; a youth-led peace-building organization based in Cameroon. He was recently appointed by the African Union as African Union Youth Ambassador for Peace for Central Africa Region. Achaleke's experience as a practitioner, researcher and scholar has provided him with the unique opportunity to contribute to local, national and global conversations, initiatives and implemented over 600 projects on youth empowerment, peacebuilding, counter violent extremism, and sustainable development.

He has been named trice in the list of 100 Most Influential Young Africans; named UNESCO RealLife Hero, 2020; decorated as the winner of the Luxembourg Peace Prize in 2018; named Most Influential Young Cameroonian in 2016; named the Commonwealth Young Person of the Year 2016 and received by HRM Queen Elizabeth II.



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