

# United Nations University

Contribution to the Preparation of the Mid-Term Report on the

International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence for the

Children of the World

The United Nations University (UNU) organised two major research projects that dealt exclusively with contribution to the international decade for a culture of peace and non-violence for the children of the world. The broad aim of these UNU projects is to advance our knowledge of the differential impact that armed conflict has on children and of the problems and challenges faced in trying to develop policies that would ameliorate this situation. At the heart of the research project is an explicit normative quest to move beyond 'standard setting' and 'norm elaboration' in order to find concrete ways to save children from the scourge of civil wars and internecine violence.

In both these projects, we approached children as actors rather than victims, and, sought to make the issue more relevant to human security analysis rather than only to traditional child rights advocacy by examining the social, economic and political factors and conflict characteristics that lead to child participation.

The two projects included:

Children and War: Impact Conference - Edmonton, Alberta on April 1-3, 2004  
Interact – Children in Armed Conflict, Pretoria, South Africa, June 22, 2004

The research agenda for the project **Children and War: Impact Conference - Edmonton, Alberta on April 1-3, 2004** was focused on:

- 1) identifying critical gaps in knowledge about the scope, nature, and multidimensionality of the impact of armed conflict on children through systematic and careful aggregation and synthesis of available data
- 2) filling gaps in knowledge by drawing upon emerging data and information gathered by international, regional and local agencies working in conflict and post-conflict societies, and
- 3) linking the work of scholars and practitioners who have been concentrating on this issue for some time.

Participants of the conference came to grasp the complexity of the subject and the problems that exist with the current research on the issue of war and children. Discussions throughout highlighted that in terms of defining the 'war-affected child', a number of issues, including gender, need to be taken into account. The war-affected child is not solely a term that can be equated with 'child soldiers'; it also needs to consider as well other aspects such as child labour, abduction, disease, sexual exploitation, rape and psycho-social trauma, for example. The circular challenges of war, disease, poverty, and many other problems, contribute to the complexity of the effect war has on children.

The conference was an overwhelming success with participation from non-governmental organizations, academia, government, youth and the general public (roughly 300 per day). A total of twenty nine individuals made formal presentations at the conference, along with keynote addresses by: the Honourable Lloyd Axworthy; Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict Olara Otunnu; and The Honourable Minister Shirley Gbujama of Sierra Leone.

A youth session was held parallel to the general conference that brought together a variety of former war affected children and Canadian youth to discuss the problem associated with living in theatres of conflict. A project website was created and is continually being updated to reflect developments within the project. In-depth interviews with individual participants were filmed - some of which will be used in a three-part documentary for television. An edited volume of the most relevant presentations made at the conference will be published in 2005.

Assessment of the conference included written and verbal evaluation, meeting of targets and media coverage. The main method of assessment however involved critical or positive feedback by 300 plus participants through submission of evaluation forms to conference planners. Feedback on the conference was overwhelmingly positive. It was strongly agreed (62% strongly agree, 36% agree) that the conference was well organized and 59% of the participants felt inspired to take further action. The event significantly impacted and increased the awareness and motivation for participants in the general conference and the youth session surrounding the issue of war-affected children and more generally, the notion of human security.

#### Event Outputs:

Number of research reports and position papers prepared/presented - *papers presented (29), papers prepared (30)*

Works created from the proceedings of the conference include:

Project website (complete). From December 31, 2003 until August 31, 2004, there have been a total of 6113 visitors to the site.

See <http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/childrenandwar>

Conference Final Report circulated to participants and funders (complete). 500 copies of this report have already been disseminated to NGOs, governments, academia and the general public locally and internationally. The report can be found at: [http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/childrenandwar/papers/Edmonton\\_Children\\_and\\_War\\_conference\\_report.pdf](http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/childrenandwar/papers/Edmonton_Children_and_War_conference_report.pdf)

Edited Volume of selected presentations (in process)

Conference proceedings highlighting the impact of war on children (in process)

28 hour video archive of conference (complete)

DVD "pitch" for Banff Film Festival for 3 x 60 minute TV documentary on Children and War (complete).

In implementing this project, we learned that the most critical gap in the current research on this issue is to understand the nature of this complexity of defining the 'war-affected child' and the variety of impacts upon them. Stemming from this gap is the problematic and inconsistent nature of data collection and the statistics gleaned on children in war. The project contributed to advancing the research agenda and understanding of the complexity of the impact of armed conflict on children, the follow-up phases of this project aim to assess legal and indigenous protection strategies for children as well as effective rehabilitation strategies that take into account the complexity of impacts and gender

The research agenda of the project and workshop **Interact – Children in Armed Conflict, Pretoria, South Africa, June 22, 2004** included discussions of challenges and achievements, methodology, new discourses on children and youth in armed conflict and the current state of advocacy. The organizations represented in this workshop included:

United Nations University  
Institute of Security Studies, South Africa  
The South African Ministry of Foreign Affairs;  
The Centre for Conflict Resolution (South Africa);  
World Vision (UK);  
Save the Children Sweden;  
The Human Sciences Research Council (South Africa);  
The SADC Youth Movement;  
The Embassy of Germany;  
The United Nations of Youth Organization (UNOY)  
Women in Law and Development in Africa (Ghana)  
African Security Dialogue and Research (Ghana)

The Interact project, which began in 2001, included applied research on security issues, toward addressing the problem of child soldiers in Africa through:

- 1.Undertaking a survey of the problem of child soldiers and child abduction for co-option through a questionnaire filled out by caregivers in Africa;

2. Undertaking a survey of military personnel about their perceptions of child soldiers as opponents or comrades;
3. Undertaking research into the special conditions associated with the plight of girl combatants;
4. Creating a training module for international and regional peacekeeping forces on how to deal with child soldiers and girl combatants in the field in the pursuit of peace-keeping, peace enforcement, demobilization and peace support operations.

The research methodology took into account typologies of conflict, meaning that certain conflicts had particular features that seemed to be worthy of investigating in the context of the child soldier issue. A formal questionnaire was used to interview former soldiers (now adults) in Ethiopia, Uganda and Mozambique.

In implementing this project, one lesson we learned is that the definitions of childhood differ in Africa from elsewhere. By international legal definition, anyone under the age of 18 is a child. Youth are defined as those between the ages of 15 and 25. In Africa however, socio-economic circumstances dictate that children often bear adult responsibilities and youth are unable to attain the economic and social status that accompanies adulthood. The exploitation of children in war has more to do with vulnerability of young people in particular political, economic and social positions than strict chronological age. Conversely, some youth are not able, for economic reasons, to attain adult status, which often requires marriage and the establishment of a household. It is this position that makes a much larger group than just children vulnerable. Adding to this is the fact that the child-adult distinction is blurred in war, as is the military-civilian distinction, making young people more vulnerable than ever.

In order to transcend this problem, and to not restrict the research within artificial, chronological definitions of age, we considered the reality of demographics. With over half of the African population under the age of 18, HIV/AIDS decimating the care-giver age group and severe poverty affecting the whole of the continent, the legal frameworks protecting children are perhaps not being used effectively. Child and youth welfare needs to be approached as a governance issue, i.e., of accountability to a young majority, and thus one of conflict prevention as well. Preventing vulnerability of children to politicization and militarization would be a major contribution to political stability.

In this sense, the research was not strictly rights-based, but will hopefully contribute to new ways of promoting children's rights, in the interest of conflict prevention, for example. It is not that legal frameworks are inadequate – they need to be used as more than safety nets.

The other lesson worthy of mention is that livelihood crises and vulnerability can begin decades before conflict. In a world of liberal economic agendas, conflict has opened new opportunities. We need to ask, for example, why the most profitable commodities circulating in the informal sector in much of West Africa are small arms and light weapons, drugs and mercenaries and why mercenarism has become a viable economic option for many young West Africans and relate this to positioning in the world economy. One scholar observed that the quickest way to gain power and to become a political actor in West Africa is to lead a violent insurgency. This is a crisis of governance and of state capacity that has a direct and

devastating impact on young people, but cannot be solved using the current legal frameworks regulating the use of under-age combatants.

Our research has shown that the co-option or suppression of vocal youth groups and individuals is almost inevitable. This has forced the interests of young people into the more private domain of child welfare, where it is un-threatening, and made them marginal to more 'mainstream' concerns, such as governance and economic policy. This is why there is such an imperative for mainstreaming. We cannot afford to continue marginalizing groups that represent the majority of Africans.