Children and Armed Conflict at a Critical Juncture: Turning Commitments into Action

Geneva Policy Workshop on Children and Armed Conflict

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Defence for Children International
Défense des Enfants International
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The worldwide movement for children's rights

WATCH LIST on Children and Armed Conflict

Permanent Representation of Belgium to the United Nations in Geneva

Permanent Mission of Norway
Geneva

United Nations
Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict

30 Years

OPENING

The opening remarks highlighted the serious and wide-ranging impact of armed conflict on children. Children experience family separation, deprivation of education and dangerous journeys, including journeys by sea. The discussion also raised concerns about emerging technologies, including technologies and AI supported weapons for mass destruction, and the potential consequences of children's participation in these developments, including when they become adults.

The importance of translating existing standards and commitments into concrete protection measures on the ground was emphasised. Millions of children continue to live in the aftermath of armed conflict, and participants stressed that these realities must not become the new normal.

The discussion highlighted the need for greater accountability and more effective use of existing mechanisms, while asking what needs to be done differently and what can be learnt from both successes and failures. Human Rights Council resolution 61/21 (2026) was noted as an important contribution to raising awareness of children and armed conflict, with a particular need to focus on implementation.

Prevention was identified as a key priority. Education was highlighted as a form of protection, providing safety, stability, social connection and psychological support. Concerns were also raised regarding emerging weapons and the impact of explosive weapons on children, including through the destruction of schools, homes and water resources.

Participants stressed that children cannot be treated as adults in armed conflict. Civil society plays an important role in documenting violations, bringing forward evidence and helping to translate human rights standards into reality. Children should also be heard, as their perspectives can contribute to designing better solutions.

The discussion concluded that the violations experienced by children are the result of choices and can therefore be prevented. While achievements have been made, greater accountability and consideration of what can be done differently are needed.

Key recommendations

1. Prioritise prevention
2. Strengthen accountability
3. Focus on implementation of existing standards and commitments
4. Address emerging risks, including digital recruitment
5. Put children at the centre, including in conflict resolution and peacebuilding processes

SESSION 1: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR ADVANCING THE CAAC AGENDA IN LIGHT OF THE 30TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE MANDATE AND HRC RESOLUTION 61/21

The first session reflected on progress made under the Children and Armed Conflict agenda while highlighting the unprecedented levels of violations against children. The urbanisation of conflict, new technologies, deliberate attacks against children and the exploitation of children for combat were identified as significant challenges. The humanitarian system is also being affected by a funding crisis, leaving children without the support they need.

The discussion emphasised the need to break down silos. Resolution 61/21 recognises this need, and the Secretary-General's guidance note on child rights mainstreaming was highlighted. Children and armed conflict concerns a wide range of sectors, including business, development and politics, as well as issues such as family reunification, mental health, education and AI weapons. Children need to be part of decisions affecting them.

Participants highlighted the importance of connecting NGOs, political actors and children, as well as different sectors more broadly. Existing opportunities, including meetings and conferences, should be used to promote the CAAC agenda, while UNCRC General Comments could also provide opportunities to integrate relevant issues. Action plans should be understandable to children.

The discussion also highlighted the importance of domestic accountability. Cooperation, coalition-building and coordination between sectors were identified as necessary, alongside clear timelines. A greater role for the General Assembly in adopting legal accountability was also suggested.

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At the same time, participants noted that the CAAC agenda can produce tangible results. Existing structures and tools have contributed to concrete outcomes, including the release of children. However, a lack of resources and political will remains a major obstacle. The Security Council Working Group on CAAC had not been able to meet during the year.

The inconsistent actions of Member States were raised as a concern, with different dynamics affecting States' willingness to speak out in different situations. Participants stressed that States have the primary responsibility to protect children and that commitments made in Geneva cannot remain in Geneva.

The discussion on education highlighted that teachers and children are being targeted, while the protection of education is a legal requirement. Attacks against schools continue to increase, with deliberate attacks and targeting becoming more common. Participants raised concerns about an expansive notion of permissibility by States, where narrow exceptions can become loopholes for what may legally be targeted. The lack of respect for international humanitarian law was identified as the biggest challenge.

Participants also noted that there are now more rules and commitments, and called for parties to armed conflict to ensure compliance with international humanitarian law, including by updating manuals and incorporating guidelines into domestic frameworks. Measures should also be adopted during peacetime to prevent armed conflict, education should continue, and perpetrators should be held accountable.

Key recommendations

1. Use the structures and tools that already exist
2. Ensure consistency and accountability, including holding perpetrators to the same standards
3. Ensure that political commitment matches existing standards
4. Connect NGOs, political actors, children and different sectors
5. Strengthen cooperation, coalition-building and coordination, with clear timelines
6. Ensure accountability at domestic level
7. Make action plans understandable to children and involve children in decisions
8. Ensure compliance with international humanitarian law, including through updated manuals and domestic frameworks
9. Adopt measures in peacetime to prevent armed conflict
10. Ensure the continuation of education during armed conflict
11. Ensure accountability for perpetrators

SESSION 2: EMERGING PROTECTION PRIORITIES FOR CHILDREN AFFECTED BY ARMED CONFLICT

Accountability and justice

Participants discussed both judicial and non-judicial accountability. Some perpetrators have appeared before criminal courts, while others have been addressed through investigative bodies.

The use of an intersectional lens in investigative mechanisms was highlighted as contributing to stronger legal findings. Universal jurisdiction cases in Germany were cited as an example, including cases concerning persecution on the basis of gender and ethnicity.

At the same time, restrictions on resources are affecting work on children. Children's positions are often among the first to be cut within organisations, while donors are prioritising service provision. Combining portfolios can also result in the loss of specific expertise.

Participants noted that States are now the primary sources of human rights violations during conflict, making it harder to guarantee justice against State actors. Support for the multilateral system is also at risk, while access is being limited. Where actions are not visible, this may indicate that information is being blocked.

The large quantity of material available for investigations also creates ethical dilemmas where children are present in the material. Technology and AI can support investigative mechanisms, but can also be used negatively. Social media can spread disinformation, target children and enable armed groups to groom children.

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Participants called for international investigations and coordinated approaches to justice. Child rights mainstreaming was highlighted as important, including dedicated expertise to ensure that qualitative information is brought forward and that investigations apply a child rights lens.

Legal advocacy and capacity-building were also discussed. Progress was noted in relation to tribunals, records and State action, including in France and Sweden, as well as increased awareness of the impacts of armed conflict on children. Child rights violations are also being addressed in ICJ genocide cases, although imperfectly. Universal jurisdiction and some domestic cases contain prominent child rights aspects, but there remains questions about how much jurisprudence examines children in armed conflict.

Security, protection and consent were identified as barriers to legal action.

Recommendations

1. Pursue international investigations and justice in a coordinated manner
2. Mainstream child rights and maintain dedicated expertise
3. Apply a child rights lens to investigations and accountability
4. File cases in a timely manner and move procedures forward
5. Make use of civil cases where useful
6. Submit information to governments to support requests for sanctions

Health

The discussion on health highlighted that children in armed conflict die from indirect causes, including lack of food, shelter and aid.

Three health priorities were identified:

1. Indirect causes: the collapse of systems continues to cause significant child mortality, beyond deaths directly caused by weapons
2. Healthcare as a target: health care is itself being targeted
3. Access and funding: access to healthcare and funding are collapsing together

The collapse of systems during armed conflict creates an urgent need to restore basic services. Conflict triples child mortality, while malnutrition, infections, neonatal and obstetric complications, interrupted care for chronic diseases and outbreaks among unvaccinated children are among the consequences.

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Participants noted that the workforce deployed is not built for these circumstances. There is also insufficient coordination between the humanitarian and child rights sectors, a lack of data on conflict settings and collapsing budgets.

The need to professionalise humanitarian paediatrics was highlighted. Priorities included scaling up routine immunisation and catch-up campaigns, securing funds, providing non-specialist mental health support and calling on peace actors to act.

A strong emphasis was placed on the need for different actors to work together.

Digital recruitment and use of children

Participants highlighted the growing use of digital means to recruit and use children. Digital platforms, online chats and social media are changing how children can be reached. Physical proximity to a child is no longer required, and children can be indoctrinated without ever meeting a recruiter.

Online recruitment can involve membership of an armed group and the carrying out of tasks. The same legal framework applies to online recruitment as to recruitment in person, although participants raised the need to examine whether laws are being applied effectively and whether they need to be updated.

Children may not fully understand the risks involved.

Recommendations

1. Support children and parents to recognise and resist online recruitment and use
2. Develop school campaigns explaining how recruitment works, with children involved in their design
3. Examine existing laws to assess whether they are being applied and whether updates are needed
4. Put children at the centre of responses to digital recruitment
5. Fund research into digital recruitment and the use of children