



United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF)

Topic B: Strategies to protect children recruited by armed forces or armed groups

Introduction

All throughout the world, thousands of kids are enlisted and employed in belligerent conflicts. These boys and girls are frequently referred to as "child soldiers," but that word does not adequately describe the numerous forms of exploitation and abuse they experience. Children are recruited by combatants to fulfill a variety of roles, including scouts, cooks, porters, guards, couriers, and more. In this context, many infants, particularly girls, also experience gender-based violence.¹

There are several reasons why kids join the military or other organizations. Some are victimized by armed individuals who kidnap, threaten, coerce, or manipulate them. Others are pushed by poverty to work to support their family. Yet others band together in order to survive or to defend their communities. Regardless of their role, the recruitment and use of children by armed forces constitutes a serious breach of both international humanitarian law and children's rights.²

More than 93,000 youngsters were confirmed to have been recruited and utilized by parties to a dispute between 2005 and 2020, although it is suspected that the actual number of incidents is far higher.³ Conflicting parties also deprive children of food and wholesome living conditions, or subject them to drug misuse, which has serious negative effects on their physical and mental health. The bonds that children have with their families and communities are also severely harmed by these events.

According to UNICEF, globally, 426 million children (nearly 1 in 5) live in conflict zones that are becoming more intense and taking heavier toll on civilians, disproportionately affecting children. An estimated 35 million (42%) of the 82.4 million forcibly displaced people as of mid-2021 were children below 18 years of age, many unaccompanied or separated from their families.⁴

Additionally, in 2021, 235 million people needed humanitarian aid and protection due to the catastrophic worldwide crisis brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic; this number

¹ UNICEF. *Children recruited by armed forces or armed groups*. <https://www.unicef.org/protection/children-recruited-by-armed-forces>

² UNICEF. *Children recruited by armed forces or armed groups*. <https://www.unicef.org/protection/children-recruited-by-armed-forces>

³ UNICEF. *Children recruited by armed forces or armed groups*. <https://www.unicef.org/protection/children-recruited-by-armed-forces>

⁴ United Nations Children's Fund. *Protecting child rights in a time of crises UNICEF Annual Report 2021*. UNICEF, New York, May 2022. <https://www.unicef.org/media/121251/file/UNICEF%20Annual%20Report%202021.pdf>





was expected to increase to 274 million in 2022.⁵ In addition to an increase in disease outbreaks, climate change and natural catastrophes have increased the frequency of extreme weather conditions and exacerbated already-existing vulnerabilities, particularly in violently conflicted nations.

Therefore, each year, UNICEF tries to help thousands of children leave armed forces and transition back into society by providing them with a safe place to live upon discharge as well as community-based services for case management, family tracing, reunion, psychosocial support education, catch-up classes, and employment opportunities. The fund also offers victims of gender-based violence special support.

Concepts and definitions

- **Children recruited and used by armed forces or armed groups:** often referred to as “child soldiers”, are girls or boys under the age of 18, who are or have been part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to combatants, cooks, porters, messengers, spies, or for sexual purposes or forced marriage.⁶
- **Armed forces:** combined military, naval, and air forces of any nation.
- **Abduction:** act of removing someone through coercion or dishonesty. Sometimes children are kidnapped to be killed or wounded, to suffer sexual assault, or to be enlisted in the military or other armed organizations.
- **Non-state armed groups:** groups that have the potential to employ arms in the use of force to achieve political, ideological, or economic objectives. They are not part of the formal military structures of States, State-alliances, or intergovernmental organizations; and are not under the control of the State(s) in which they operate.⁷
- **Civil war:** armed conflict that occurs within the same country, involving opposing groups of citizens.
- **Reintegration:** reintroduction back into society of children who were formerly associated with armed forces or armed groups in a peaceful and sustainable way.

⁵ UNICEF. *Global Annual Results Report 2021: Humanitarian action*. <https://www.unicef.org/reports/global-annual-results-2021-humanitarian-action#:~:text=A%20record%20number%20of%20people,of%20needs%20for%20humanitarian%20assistance>.

⁶ *The Paris Principles Principles and Guidelines On Children Associated With Armed Forces Or Armed Groups*. United Nations. Paris, 2007. <https://www.unicef.org/mali/media/1561/file/ParisPrinciples.pdf>

⁷ G. McHugh, M. Bessler, *Humanitarian negotiations with armed groups: A manual for practitioners*, United Nations: New York, 2006, p. 87. <https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/HumanitarianNegotiationswArmedGroupsManual.pdf>





- **Exploitation:** the action or fact of treating someone unfairly or taking advantage of them in order to benefit from their work. Such is the case of sexual exploitation, forced services or labor, inducement to carry out criminal activities, slavery, servitude or sale of organs.
- **Forced recruitment:** compulsory or forced conscription or enlistment of children into any kind of armed force or armed group.

Current situation

According to UNICEF, while living among armed actors, children experience unconscionable forms of violence. They may be required to participate in harrowing training or initiation ceremonies, to undergo hazardous labor or to engage in combat – with great risk of death, chronic injury and disability. They may also witness, suffer, or be forced to take part in torture and killings. Girls, especially, can be subjected to gender-based violence.⁸

Nowadays, armed forces or armed groups recruit vulnerable children that are generally displaced, abandoned, poor or living in conflict zones. They learn to follow orders and are easy to manipulate or reward. Therefore, once they become associated to forced groups or armed groups, children fight on the front lines, cook, clean camps, spy, loot, carry out suicide missions and raid minefields as human detectors. They are forced to plant explosives and learn to use pistols and automatic weapons. In addition to this, many girls serve as sexual slaves to the commanders and suffer all kinds of abuse.

Unfortunately, there are children that never get released, but even those who survive and dissociate from armed forces or armed groups often face difficulties regarding reintegration. Whether or not children are accepted back into society depends on various factors, including their reason for association with armed actors, and the perceptions of their families and communities. Some children who attempt to reintegrate are viewed with suspicion or outright rejected, while others may struggle to fit in. Also, psychological distress can make it difficult for children to process and verbalize their experiences, especially when they fear stigma or how people will react.⁹

International initiatives

The fundamental tenets for defending the rights of all children at all times are laid out in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which specifically forbids the enlistment and involvement

⁸ UNICEF. *Children recruited by armed forces or armed groups*. <https://www.unicef.org/protection/children-recruited-by-armed-forces>

⁹ UNICEF. *Children recruited by armed forces or armed groups*. <https://www.unicef.org/protection/children-recruited-by-armed-forces>





in hostilities of minors under the age of 15.¹⁰ Additionally, it establishes State obligations in a number of areas that have a direct bearing on children who are recruited by or at danger of being recruited by armed forces or armed groups. Amongst these areas, there is the children's right to education; the outlawing of torture and the unlawful or arbitrary deprivation of liberty; the protection of separated and unaccompanied children; the recovery and social reintegration of children that are victims of neglect, exploitation or abuse, torture, ill treatment, or punishment; and the treatment children receive under the juvenile justice system.

Additionally, conscripting or enrolling children under the age of 15 into national armed forces or groups or utilizing minors to actively participate in all forms of hostilities, is considered a war crime, according to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), which was adopted in 1998.¹¹ Persons under the age of 18 are not subject to the jurisdiction of the ICC. The illegal recruitment and use of children has been denounced and requested to stop in numerous UN Security Council Resolutions.¹² Also, minors are defined as those who are less than 18 years old under ILO Convention No. 182, which lists forced and compelled recruitment of children into armed conflict as one of the worst types of child labor.¹³

Actually, in the year 2000, a voluntary protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) was established to address the issue of children taking part in armed conflict.¹⁴ It raises the age requirement for direct engagement in hostilities and coercive recruitment to 18 years old, implores armed groups to refrain from recruiting or using minors, and obligates State-parties to take all practical steps to make such actions illegal. Additionally, it urges States to increase the legal minimum age and enact rigorous regulations for any underage military recruiting.

On the other hand, the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice (The Beijing Rules) from 1985¹⁵, the United Nations Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of their Liberty from 1990¹⁶, and articles 6 and 10 of the International

¹⁰ *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. United Nations, New York, 1989. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>

¹¹ *Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court*. <https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/RS-Eng.pdf>

¹² UN Security Council Res. 1261(1999) 1314(2000) 1379 (2001, 1460 (2003, 1539 (2004) and 1612 (2005).

¹³ *ILO Convention No. 182*.

https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C182

¹⁴ *Voluntary protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child*. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/optional-protocol-convention-rights-child-involvement-children>

¹⁵ *UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice 1985*

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/united-nations-standard-minimum-rules-administration-juvenile>

¹⁶ *UN Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of their Liberty 1990* <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/united-nations-rules-protection-juveniles-deprived-their-liberty#:~:text=Juveniles%20deprived%20of%20their%20liberty%20shall%20not%20for%20any%20reason,with%20the%20deprivation%20of%20liberty.>





Covenant on Civil and Political Rights from 1976¹⁷ provide protection for children in the justice system and also as witnesses, which is relevant regarding former “child soldiers”.

That being said, States are primarily responsible for ensuring the safety and protection of all children under their legal control. States are tasked with facilitating the provision of humanitarian action by unbiased parties when they are unable to directly fulfill all of their humanitarian obligations. From the moment of an emergency, all human rights and humanitarian actors—including those without specialized knowledge in child protection—should take action to avoid and ensure an effective response to the enlistment of children in the armed forces or armed groups.

Guiding questions

- Is your delegation involved in any armed conflict? If so, how does it affect children?
- Do your delegation’s armed forces recruit children? Or is there any armed group present within your delegation’s territory that recruits children?
- Is there any relevant statistic regarding “child soldiers” that involves your delegation?
- If your delegation faces the problem regarding children recruited and used by armed forces or armed groups, which initiatives has it put in place to counter this situation?
- Which measures has your delegation implemented to prevent children’s recruitment? And to help children that have already been recruited exit the armed force or group? And to reintegrate survivors back into society?
- If your delegation is not involved in any armed conflict or does not experience the problem of “child soldiers”, how can it help protect the children in the delegations that do?
- Is your delegation part of the international initiatives that have been created to address the recruitment of children by armed forces or armed groups?

References

ILO Convention No. 182. ILO. Geneva, 1999.

https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C182

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. United Nations, New York, 1976.

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>

¹⁷ *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1976* <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>





Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. United Nations, Rome, 1998. <https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/RS-Eng.pdf>

The Paris Principles Principles and Guidelines On Children Associated With Armed Forces Or Armed Groups. United Nations. Paris, 2007.

UN Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of their Liberty. United Nations, New York, 1990. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/united-nations-rules-protection-juveniles-deprived-their-liberty#:~:text=Juveniles%20deprived%20of%20their%20liberty%20shall%20not%20for%20any%20reason,with%20the%20deprivation%20of%20liberty.>

UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice. United Nations, New York, 1985. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/united-nations-standard-minimum-rules-administration-juvenile>

United Nations Children's Fund. *Protecting child rights in a time of crises UNICEF Annual Report 2021.* UNICEF, New York, May 2022.

<https://www.unicef.org/media/121251/file/UNICEF%20Annual%20Report%202021.pdf>

Voluntary protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. United Nations, New York, 1989. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/optional-protocol-convention-rights-child-involvement-children>

