

Canada in an “Era of Implementation”:

National Action Plan for Children and Armed Conflict

Introduction

Canada provided significant leadership to ensure that *A World Fit for Children* includes important commitments to protect the security and rights of children in armed conflict or conflict-prone situations. Implementation of these commitments should figure prominently in Canada’s National Action Plan as well.

Significant progress has been made in the advancement of international norms for child protection since the release of Graca Machel’s ground-breaking study on *The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children* in 1996; attached is a mapping of progress on specific policy issues addressed during the First International Conference on War-affected Children, hosted by Canada in 2000. Implementation of these norms remains a major challenge, leading UN Secretary-General Kofi Anan to call for an “era of implementation” in his last report on children and armed conflict to the UN Security Council. Persistent leadership by Canada in the implementation phase is needed to achieve practical results for children threatened by armed conflict.

To achieve this objective, the Children and Armed Conflict Working Group (CACWG) would like to offer a number of suggestions for inclusion in Canada’s National Action Plan for Children. In addition to two general recommendations, members of the working group have suggested specific actions to implement specific commitments in *A World Fit for Children*.

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The first three, general recommendations relate to processes Canada could use to achieve the objective of improving protection for the security and rights of children.

Mainstream Respect for the Rights of Children

Implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) would address many of the causes of armed conflicts, as part of conflict prevention. Canada is a signatory to the CRC, but there is no mechanism to ensure that it is regularly taken into account in either diplomacy or development programs. CIDA’s Child Protection Policy stops short of mainstreaming child rights, in the same way as it considers gender a cross-cutting issue. The impacts of development programs for children are as significant as for gender, especially in those countries where boys and girls under 18 account for a significant portion of the population.

In the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT), protection for children is treated as a specific file within the Global Issues division; it may or may not be taken into consideration in bilateral relations with specific countries. In the annual consultations on human rights, for example, gender and sexual orientation issues are routinely included in reports on specific countries, but the rights of children are only occasionally given attention.

Recommendations:

1. As part of Canada's National Action Plan for Children, CIDA could mainstream respect for the rights of children, in the same way it has mainstreamed gender considerations, especially in country development strategies for countries where girls and boys under 18 are a significant portion of the population and in its humanitarian assistance programming.

2. DFAIT could mainstream respect for the rights of children by including diplomacy for children in its bilateral and regional diplomatic relations and including consideration of the impacts for children in its trade relations, especially in its relations with countries where girls and boys under 18 are a significant portion of the population.

Enhance co-operation with actors outside of government

Since the Winnipeg Conference there has been no mechanism for sustained co-ordination. CIDA is funding individual projects in individual situations. The impact of these projects could be much greater if they fit into a larger strategy. DFAIT is pursuing regional and UN initiatives that need grounding in the practical experience of agencies working in the field.

Local level peacebuilding facilitated by youth and civil society organizations needs to be linked to diplomatic efforts in bilateral and international arenas in order to be effective. Psycho-social assistance programs for youth need specific attention in the context of more comprehensive post-conflict strategies that strengthen the societies into which youth are reintegrated.

The Canadian public has shown its support for this priority, and many people, including youth, are looking for ways to be involved. This is an agenda on which there is a considerable level of agreement among government and civil society groups. Effective public engagement requires a more coordinated strategy between government and civil society agencies.

Recommendation:

The Government of Canada should establish a taskforce to develop and co-ordinate a practical, targeted, implementation strategy, in order to maximize the effective impact of Canada's leadership role. The taskforce would include representation from DFAIT, CIDA, youth organizations, and non-governmental agencies working with children.

SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SPECIFIC COMMITMENTS

Participants in the Children and Armed Conflict Working Group were asked to suggest specific actions that Canada could take to implement the specific provisions that relate to children and armed conflict in *A World Fit for Children*. Within a comprehensive approach, based on the CRC, the following specific actions are suggested in relation to the appropriate sections of *A World Fit for Children*.

I. Compliance with International Law

Specific Commitment in *A World Fit for Children*:

Par. 43 (b) *Protect children from the impact of armed conflict and ensure compliance with international humanitarian law and human rights law.*

Recommendations for action by Canada

- I.A. Working with like-minded governments and non-governmental organizations, Canada should develop a strategy to strengthen existing mechanisms to implement and enforce a child's right of access to humanitarian assistance and other child protection provisions in the Geneva Conventions, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and other instruments of humanitarian law.**
- I.B. Canada should provide assistance to developing countries to help them ratify and implement important international agreements that protect the security and rights of children. By providing assistance to help developing countries ratify and implement important international agreements that affect children**

II. Education in Crisis and Education for Peace

Specific commitments in *A World Fit for Children*:

Par. 40.16 *“Meet the specific learning needs of children affected by crises, by ensuring that education is provided during and after crises, and conduct education programmes to promote a culture of peace in ways that help to prevent violence and conflict and promote the rehabilitation of victims.”*

Par. 44.33 *“Provide for the rehabilitation and social integration of children removed from the worst forms of child labour through inter alia ensuring access to free basic education and, whenever possible and appropriate, vocational training.”* (Child soldiering is listed as one of the worst forms of child labour)

Recommendations for action by Canada:

- II.A. Education should be included as an essential element in Canada's humanitarian assistance policy and programming, and Canada should make education a priority in its interventions in multilateral mechanisms to coordinate humanitarian assistance.**
- II.B. CIDA should link implementation of its child protection strategy**

with implementation of its basic education strategy.

II.C. In keeping with its allocation of resources to areas where Canada adds value to international strategies, CIDA should increase funding for initiatives which:

- **Incorporate psycho-social programming elements in education for children who have been affected by war;**
- **Combine education and training with alternative livelihoods for adolescents who are at high risk of becoming involved in armed conflict;**
- **Develop peace education and conflict resolution skills in elementary education and non-formal education programs.**

III. Mental health and Psycho-social programming for children affected by war

Specific commitments in *A World Fit for Children*:

Par.37. 18 and 19: *Provide special help to children suffering from mental illnesses or psychological disorders. Promote physical, mental, and emotional health among children, including adolescents, through play, sports, recreation, artistic, and cultural expression.*

Par 44. 22. The section on child soldiers includes “*implement effective measures for their rehabilitation, physical, and psychological recovery and reintegration into society.*”

Recommendations for action by Canada:

III.A. Community-based programs that integrate psycho-social rehabilitation, education, skills-training, landmine risk awareness, vocational opportunities for children, access to reproductive health services, and economic livelihoods for young people should be supported by Canada through increased funding by CIDA and through advocacy for this approach by Canada in international donor co-ordination meetings on specific humanitarian emergencies and post-conflict reconstruction strategies.

III.B. Active participation by girls and boys in different age groups in the development, implementation, and evaluation of community-based programs could be emphasized by Canada in its funding strategies and its advocacy with multilateral agencies.

III.C. The inclusion of play, sports, recreation, artistic and cultural activities in programming for children can be emphasized by Canada through its own programming and through advocacy in international donor meetings.

IV. Girls and Conflict

Specific commitment in *A World Fit for Children*:

Par. 44.32 *Develop specific strategies to protect and provide for the special needs and particular vulnerabilities of girls affected by armed conflict.*

Recommendations for action by Canada:

IV.A. Canada should focus on programming that reduces the vulnerability of girls through awareness-raising and capacity-building at the community level, including a focus on girls in health care and education, through specific projects, good practice models, and implementation of applied research.

IV.B. Canada can contribute to international improvements for girls by implementing a strategy to reduce the invisibility of girls affected by armed conflict.

V. Refugees and Internally Displaced Children

Specific commitments in *A World Fit for Children*:

Par 44.17 *Provide protection and assistance to refugees and internally displaced persons, the majority of whom are women and children, in accordance with international law, including international humanitarian law.*

Par 44. 27 *Resolve to strengthen international cooperation, including burden-sharing in and coordination of humanitarian assistance to countries hosting refugees, and to help all refugees and displaced persons, including children and their families, to return voluntarily to their homes in safety and dignity and to be smoothly reintegrated in their societies.*

Par 44. 28 *Develop and implement policies and programmes, with necessary international cooperation, for the protection, care and well-being of refugee children and children seeking asylum and for the provision of basic social services, including access to education in addition to health care and food.*

Recommended actions by Canada:

V. A. Canada should immediately end the moratorium on accepting separated children into Canada and adopt a national policy on separated children within one year.

This issue has been raised by child advocates for several years. Specific proposals for a national policy based on a good practice model have been tabled, with the support of a broad range of social agencies. Further delay is no longer acceptable.

V.B. Canada should focus attention on children in refugee and displaced person camps through increased support for programming that reduces vulnerability to military recruitment, prevents sexual abuse in camps, and education in preparation for return home or resettlement in a new location.

VI. Birth Registration and Family-tracing, Reunification

Specific commitments in *A World Fit for Children*:

Par. 44.1 *Develop systems to ensure the registration of every child at or shortly after birth, and fulfill his or her right to acquire a name and a nationality, in accordance with national laws and relevant international instruments.*

Par. 44. 29 *Give priority to programmes for family tracing and reunification, and continue to monitor the care arrangements for unaccompanied and/or separated refugee and internally displaced children.*

Recommended action by Canada:

VI. A. Canada can provide leadership to revitalize the international commitment to achieve universal birth registration by 2015.

VI. B. Birth registration should be included as a component of all country-based development programming and humanitarian relief programming.

VI. C. Canada can advocate for adequate funding of family tracing and reunification programming in donor co-ordination meetings for specific conflict situations.

VII. Children in Peace Processes

Specific commitment in *A World Fit for Children*:

Par. 44.21. *Ensure that issues pertaining to the rights and protection of children are fully reflected in the agendas of peacemaking processes and in ensuing peace agreements, and are incorporated, as appropriate, into United Nations peacekeeping operations and peace-building programmes; and involve children where possible in these processes.*

Recommended action by Canada:

VII. A. Canada should make one of its “niche” diplomatic contributions a focus on youth participation in the development of practical provisions for inclusion in peace agreements and demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration programs.

VIII. Training in Child Rights and Protection

Specific commitment in *A World Fit for Children*:

Par. 44.25 *Provide appropriate training and education in children's rights and protection as well as in international humanitarian law to all civilian, military and police personnel involved in peacekeeping operations.*

Recommended action by Canada:

VIII. A. Training in protection for the security and rights of children should be mandatory for Canadian military, police, and humanitarian workers. Improved training programs should be developed with the active participation of young people who have experienced war and experts who have worked with children in conflict zones.

VIII. B. As part of development assistance programming, Canada could include training programs for police, lawyers, and judges in developing countries on the rights of children and child-friendly procedures.

IX. Child Soldiers

Specific commitment in *A World Fit for Children*:

Par 44.22 *End the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict contrary to international law and ensure their demobilization and effective disarmament, and implement effective measures for their rehabilitation, physical and psychological recovery and reintegration into society.*

Recommended Action by Canada:

- IX. A. A Canadian strategy for effective implementation of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict should include the following components:**
- **Addressing the use of child soldiers in bilateral diplomatic and trade relations, including the option of withholding full recognition from governments who refuse to end the forced recruitment of children into military and para-military forces.**
 - **Assistance to developing countries to adopt and implement the protocol;**
 - **Support for effective, international monitoring of implementation of the protocol;**
 - **Advocacy and support for targeted initiatives for young girls and young boys in demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration programmes, including the early demobilization of children in peace processes.**

X. Impunity

A. Specific commitment in *A World Fit for Children*:

Par. 44.23 *Put an end to impunity, prosecute those responsible for genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes, and exclude, where feasible, these crimes from amnesty provisions and amnesty legislation, and ensure that whenever post-conflict truth and justice-seeking mechanisms are established, serious abuses involving children are addressed and that appropriate child-sensitive procedures are provided.*

Recommended Action by Canada:

X. A. Canada should take a leading role to ensure that the International Criminal Court (ICC) does prosecute a case of crimes against children, as provided in the ICC statute.

XI. Small Arms, Unexploded Ordnances, and War Material

Specific commitment in *A World Fit for Children*:

Par. 44.26. *Curb the illicit flow of small arms and light weapons and protect children from landmines, unexploded ordnances, and other war materiel that victimize them and provide assistance to victimized children during and after armed conflict.*

Recommended action by Canada:

XI. A. Given Canada's role in the small arms issue, Canada should use Security Council Resolution 1460 to press for appropriate action to stop the flow of small arms to specific forces who abuse children.

XI. B. Canada can help to ensure that victims of landmines and the use of small arms receive appropriate psycho-social assistance and vocational training.

XII. Conflict Prevention and Youth

Specific commitment in *A World Fit for Children*:

Par. 44.5 *Take steps with a view to the avoidance of and refrain from any unilateral measure not in accordance with international law and the Charter of the United Nations that impeded the full achievement of economic and social development by the population of affected countries, in particular children and women, that hinders their well-being and that creates obstacles to the full enjoyment of their human rights, including the right of everyone to a standard of living adequate for their health and well-being, and their right to food, medical care, and the necessary social services. Ensure that food and medicine are not used as tools for political pressure.*

Recommended Action by Canada:

XII. A. The Department of Foreign Affairs and CIDA can support the development

of expertise in youth-centred conflict prevention by working with youth-centered organizations on strategies for youth involvement in conflict prevention; by holding “think tank” forums on conflict prevention from children’s perspectives; and by collecting and disseminating good practices relating to children and conflict prevention.

XII. B. The Department of Foreign Affairs should implement a strategy to increase public awareness about corporate responsibility to adhere to international standards for human rights and to prevent practices that contribute to conflicts involving children, using strategies such as public disclosure of human rights reports in zones of conflict.

XII. C. The Department of Foreign Affairs should develop practical tools to incorporate compliance with international agreements to protect the rights of children into bilateral trade agreements and new agreements under the WTO, including appropriate mechanisms to adjudicate complaints based on human rights.

Conclusion

Progress is being made to protect the security and rights of children before, during, and after armed conflict. Effective implementation of international norms remains a challenge that requires persistent, creative, and coordinated action. Concerted effort by Canadians, through governmental agencies and non-governmental channels, under the umbrella of the National Action Plan for Children, will be an investment with rich returns for security and prosperity in Canada and around the world.

The **Children and Armed Conflict Working Group (CACWG)**, is an informal network of international development agencies, human rights organizations, academic researchers, youth groups and concerned individuals. The goal of CACWG is to improve protection for the security and rights of children threatened by armed conflict through information-sharing, links to international initiatives; opportunities for policy dialogue with Canadian government departments and agencies; capacity-building activities; and cooperation in awareness-raising activities in Canada.