

# CHILDREN AND CONFLICT IN A CHANGING WORLD

## Executive Summary

### Of the Strategic Review report to the General Assembly, A/62/228

**Purpose of review.** The 10-year strategic review of the Graça Machel study, “The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children,” is a multi-faceted assessment on children affected by armed conflict. Attention to children and armed conflict issues in the decade since the landmark 1996 “Machel Study” focused on particular countries and themes, such as demobilizing children unlawfully recruited by armed groups and their reintegration into society. The purpose of the Strategic Review is to mobilize attention to the full scope of issues, addressing *all* impacts, on *all* children, in *all* situations affected by conflict. The Strategic Review report identifies emerging challenges and priorities and the responses required for the next decade

**Changing nature of conflict.** Although the number of major armed conflicts has decreased, the nature of conflict has changed. Intrastate conflicts, while lower in intensity, have now become the major form of conflict. By recognizing these low-intensity conflicts<sup>1</sup>, the Strategic Review notes that the number of global conflicts in 2006 actually rose to 56, as compared to the 30 global conflicts cited in the original Machel study. Likewise, these diverse forms of armed conflict have presented new threats for children. Armed conflicts today often feature small, ill-trained and lightly armed groups, benefit from the proliferation of small arms, can be fueled and prolonged through exploitation of natural resources and economic motivations, and often involve shifting landscapes of transnational organized crime or forms of terrorism. Civilians, especially children, are increasingly targeted and bear the brunt of consequences.

**Consequences for children.** The impact on children is more brutal than ever. War violates every right of the child. The direct consequences of war have received improved attention in the last decade – unlawful recruitment, sexual violence, displacement, killing and maiming, separation from family, trafficking and illegal detention. But in addition to these effects, the indirect consequences of war – including the loss of basic services, such as water, sanitation, health and education, as well as the rise of poverty, malnutrition and disease – have an equally horrific impact on children. Yet they are often overlooked. The impact of armed conflict on children perpetuates poverty, illiteracy and early mortality, robbing children of their families, security, education, health and opportunities for development. Whether as a cause or consequence, conflict is a significant obstacle to achievement of the Millennium Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

**Progress to date.** The past decade has shown much progress in the development of norms and standards and programmatic guidelines to protect children and respond to their needs and rights in situations of armed conflict. Yet there remain many gaps and challenges in the application, implementation and monitoring of these positive developments.

---

<sup>1</sup> Low-intensity conflicts refer to those conflicts with fewer battle deaths and/or those wherein the parties to the conflict do not involve a State.

**Challenges for the future.** The Strategic Review recommends expanded action in four areas: achieving universal implementation of international norms and standards, as a priority to end impunity; prioritizing the care and protection of children in armed conflict; strengthening capacity and partnership; and preventing conflict and building peace.

**End impunity, achieve universal adherence to international standards.** Global efforts to end impunity for crimes against children in war have featured significant achievements in the last decade. This was a clear priority of the original Machel Study and the World Fit for Children outcome document of the United Nations Special Session on Children, adopted by 180 countries in May 2002. Much has been achieved through ratification of the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, the recent implementation of a monitoring and reporting mechanism on child rights violations during armed conflict called for by the Security Council, UN Resolution 1612, and the adoption by many States of the Paris Commitments and Paris Principles to prevent the unlawful recruitment of children. International attention to justice and accountability – including through the work of truth commissions, the International Criminal Court, tribunals, and national courts – has played a positive role in several countries in recent years. Yet significant gaps remain in implementation and an alarming prevalence of serious violations of children’s rights continues on the ground. States need to ensure universal compliance and implementation of international standards and norms, and to support and protect the rights of children who become involved in justice processes as victims and witnesses.

**Prioritize the needs of children.** More effort is required to strengthen and expand capacities across *all sectors* to improve the care and protection of children. To achieve a comprehensive response for all children affected by armed conflict, States must ensure access to quality basic services and allocate adequate resources for long-term reintegration and recovery programmes. Proven interventions in health and nutrition need more consistent support and an intensified emphasis must be given to supporting protection systems and providing education to the generation of children to whom conflict has denied schooling. Member states must also focus attention on the financial and security needs of women and children in post-conflict situations, placing greater priority on keeping families together and ensuring community-based long term programming.

**Prevent conflict and build peace.** States and other actors should prioritize the needs of children in all peace making and peace building processes, including with specific provisions in peace agreements and post-conflict structures. Indeed, investing in the protection and well-being of the child is integral to building peace and preventing conflict. Only thus can future grievances be mitigated and capacities for responsible leadership, dialogue and reconciliation be built and sustained beyond the next generation. Recognizing the special role children and young people play in the consolidation of peace and peace-building, efforts should be made to involve them actively in these processes.

**Everybody has a role to play.** States, the UN system and civil society must fulfill their responsibilities by working together and with other stakeholders to provide comprehensive responses to care for and protect all children affected by armed conflict.

**Participation of children and young people.** While opportunities for conflict-affected children and youth are expanding, their participation in decision-making remains limited. More serious effort should be made to remove the systemic and cultural obstacles to participation, understand the motivations of young people and respond with a view to partnering to enable their participation in promoting non-violent change.