

# Working together to protect children in armed conflict

**A CALL  
TO ACTION**

## What can be done to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of children affected by armed conflict?

Armed conflicts and wars are happening around the world, and children and youth are suffering. During the 1990s, more than 2 million children died as a direct result of armed conflict, and an estimated 20 million children were forced to flee their homes.<sup>1</sup>



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In the fall of 2007, government leaders will gather at the **United Nations** Headquarters in New York to come up with solutions and make recommendations on how to protect children in war. These leaders will look at the progress made since a 1996 report – which was prepared by a woman from Mozambique named Graça Machel – made innovative recommendations on what can and should be done.

The issue of children and conflict cannot be addressed without you! You can make sure government leaders and other decision makers know your opinions, thoughts and ideas by reading this brief report and answering the accompanying questions. Your ideas will be included in a report that will be a key document during the upcoming discussion at the UN.

## What to do

Read the background information below, answer the questions and send your answers back to us by **8 June 2007**. There are two ways you can send your answers:

- **Online:** Fill in the online questionnaire and click on submit.
- **Focus group:** Print out the questions, talk to young people and return the answers to [voy@unicef.org](mailto:voy@unicef.org), with 'Children and armed conflict' in the subject line. Use the *Facilitator's Guide* for help with conducting a focus group. We are especially interested in focus group responses from [countries that have been affected by armed conflict and war](#).

**Thank you for your valuable contribution!**



All highlighted words can be found in the **Glossary**, where important organizations, agreements and phrases used in the text are further explained.

## INTRODUCTION

There are a number of armed conflicts and wars happening around the world today. You might hear news from Iraq or Darfur (Sudan) or other places where armed conflicts are taking place. Sometimes people fight over money and land, sometimes over political or religious beliefs, and sometimes over food, water and other natural resources. Whatever the reason, these conflicts have terrible consequences for everyone involved, especially for children and youth.

*"It is very difficult to live in war. You just wait for the moment you will die."  
– Sanel, 12-year-old boy, Bosnia and Herzegovina<sup>2</sup>*

### What is in this report?

In this report you will read about Graça Machel, former UN special expert on children and armed conflict, and her groundbreaking study from 1996 on children in armed conflict. Machel's report made a number of recommendations on what can and should be done to protect children and youth. You will also read about some of the progress and achievements made since then and how the nature of conflicts has changed, making it necessary to come up with new ideas and solutions to help children.

### How are children affected by armed conflict?

Children are often unable to protect themselves in these situations and suffer in a number of ways:

- Between 8,000 and 10,000 children are killed or maimed by **landmines** every year.<sup>3</sup>
- During the 1990s more than 2 million children died as a direct result of armed conflict.<sup>4</sup>
- More than 250,000 **child soldiers** are involved in conflicts worldwide.<sup>5</sup>

A 'child soldier' is any person under age 18 associated with armed forces or armed groups. This includes not just children who carry arms, but also cooks, porters, messengers and girls recruited for sexual purposes or for forced marriage.

### Are there international laws that protect children?

Yes, there are! The most important document for children is the **Convention on the Rights of the Child**, which is the foundation for **human rights** for all children. The Convention is a legal international document that almost all countries have **ratified**, which means they have committed to respect and enforce the rights listed in the convention. It also means everyone, including citizens such as you, can hold the government of a country accountable for **human rights violations** against children.

In addition, the fourth **Geneva Convention from 1949** specifies that wars and conflicts must not target civilians, including children, who are not taking part in the conflict. The '**Refugee Convention**' from 1951 spells out the rights of **refugees** who are forced to flee their country when it is not safe to stay.

*"We left our village when the bombs began falling. Some people stayed, but we were afraid of being killed. The bombs were like earthquakes that didn't stop. You spend many years building up a home, and then, in one moment, it is destroyed." – Aygun, 17 years old, Azerbaijan<sup>6</sup>*

In 2002 it was estimated that 115 million children were out of school. An estimated 43 million children out of school live in fragile states affected by armed conflict.<sup>7</sup>

## How can international laws and conventions make a positive impact on children's lives?

That is a fair question. It can be hard to see the direct impact, but these international agreements are a very important part of improving the lives of children:

- Governments have clear guidelines on what they can and cannot do, and what they should do to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of children.
- It is possible to prosecute people who violate children's rights.
- The **international community** and civil society can put pressure on governments and other groups that violate the rights of children.
- If you know what your rights are, it can be easier to resist and protest actions that violate them.

It is estimated that the global figure for girls associated with armed groups is as high as 120,000.<sup>8</sup>

## So what can I do? Can I influence the political process?

In the fall of 2007, a new report will be submitted to the **UN General Assembly**. The report will review what has happened since 1996 and bring up new issues and recommendations. It is a priority for this new report to include the voices of children and youth.

This is where you come in. We want your ideas, thoughts and recommendations to be heard! By reading this report and answering the questions, you can ensure that decision makers at the UN and in governments hear the voices of children and young people and include them in their decisions!

# THE MACHEL STUDY ON THE IMPACT OF ARMED CONFLICT ON CHILDREN (1996)

## Who is Graça Machel?

Graça Machel was born in Mozambique in 1946 and spent parts of her young life studying in Portugal and learning several languages. When Mozambique became independent in 1975, she was appointed Minister of Education, and within 10 years, the number of children enrolled in school had doubled to more than 80 per cent of all school-aged children.<sup>9</sup> This is remarkable, because during that period, Mozambique experienced civil war and many people were living in poverty.

## How was she able to do this study?

In 1994, then United Nations Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali asked Machel to research how children are affected by armed conflicts and report back to the UN. During the preparation of the report, thousands of children were consulted as Machel travelled to Angola, Cambodia, Colombia, Lebanon, Northern Ireland, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and various places in the former Yugoslavia to talk to those affected by conflict. She placed great importance in the report on what children and young people said. She also talked with adults working in **humanitarian organizations**, governments and **United Nations agencies** to learn as much as possible about this issue. The result was the study *Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*, which came out in 1996.

## What did the study say?

The study was a call for action to both the UN and the international community – and to every citizen of the world – to put the needs of children at the heart of all efforts to resolve conflicts and restore peace. This was the first time anyone had explored this issue so deeply, and the report was groundbreaking in many ways, including suggesting new ways of helping those affected.

*"Attitudes towards rape here are so bad, it has to be the worst thing of all for anyone to have experienced, even beyond death." – Burim D., 17 years old, Kosovo [then part of Serbia and Montenegro]<sup>10</sup>*

Machel described many challenges and dangers that children face in wars. Among these are being injured by landmines, recruited and abducted into armies, **separated** from parents, imprisoned, sexually abused or killed. Many children are left to **lead a household** and take care of their younger brothers and sisters. She also explained how commanders often prefer 'child soldiers' because they can be easily manipulated, are more obedient and are often more fearless than adults.

*"When I was killing, I felt like it wasn't me doing these things. I had to because the rebels threatened to kill me." – 12-year-old boy, Sierra Leone<sup>11</sup>*

In Nepal, between January and August 2005, more than 11,800 students were abducted from rural schools for indoctrination or forced recruitment into the militia.<sup>12</sup>

It was the first time the importance of education, especially in times of conflict, was recognized. Machel also noted the psychological and social effects of conflict on children and how important it is to help young people get through the experience without leaving emotional wounds that can impact the rest of their lives.

*"I had bad dreams, and I woke up thinking that somebody wanted to kill me. Now I wake up still from bad dreams. I don't remember my dreams, but I feel afraid when I wake up. At this time, I am still constantly afraid." – 16-year-old boy, [then] East Timor, who took part in conflict at age 14<sup>13</sup>*

The 1996 Machel study highlighted several areas where children are especially vulnerable and made recommendations<sup>14</sup> on what should be done, including:

- **Peace and security** – The needs of children must be at the heart of all actions to end fighting.
- **Monitoring and reporting** – A priority for UN workers should be keeping an eye on violations of child rights.
- **Health, psychosocial well-being and education** – These should be the centre of all assistance and support for children in emergencies.
- **Adolescents** – Education, skills-building and health care for young people should be a priority, and adolescents should participate in all aspects of community development.
- **Gender-based violence and sexual exploitation** – All wartime rape and other sexual violence should be prosecuted as war crimes.
- **Internally displaced children** – In each emergency, there should be one UN agency that has the overall responsibility to protect and help children and youth who have been forced to leave their homes but remain within their country.
- **'Child soldiers'** – The recruitment of soldiers under 18 years of age should be banned.
- **Landmines** – Any use or trade in landmines should be banned, and children should be educated on how to avoid them.
- **Prevention** – Sending weapons to conflict zones should be banned.
- **Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict** – The UN should appoint a person to follow up on the report and make sure the issue is kept on the international agenda.

*"We were playing. We were playing." – Khalia, age 14, in a hospital recovering from the loss of his leg after stepping on a landmine near Kandahar (Afghanistan)<sup>15</sup>*

## Did the report say anything about the role of young people?

Yes, certainly! Machel placed great importance on the role of young people as they contribute to the planning and shaping of programmes in their communities. She viewed young people as powerful **peer-to-peer educators** and activists who can help other youths. She also talked about how the media can reach young people by providing information and supporting **reconciliation** efforts.

## Did people listen to her? Did the report help?

The report had great influence on the international community and helped put the needs of children and young people in armed conflict higher on the international agenda, said Boutros Boutros-Ghali, the UN Secretary-General at the time. The report also encouraged UN agencies to pay attention to children and youth, and many UN agencies and humanitarian organizations now have programmes that focus on children.

## What has happened after the study? Has there been any progress?

In the years following the release of the study, there have been many achievements related to the recommendations from Machel. This shows that reports submitted to the UN can make a real difference! In fact, there has been change not just internationally, but also among national governments, humanitarian actors and local communities.

### International progress

At the international level, the United Nations and its agencies have tried to take a stronger role in advocating for children's rights. They work for international laws and standards and put the spotlight on countries where violations are taking place. Some achievements include:

- In 1998, the **Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict**, with a mandate to be a public advocate and moral voice on behalf of children, was established in the UN.
- The **Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict** was adopted by the UN in 2000 and forbids recruitment into armed forces of anyone under 18 years old.
- In 2001, the UN Security Council started to "name and shame" parties to conflict that recruit or use children. In 2005, the Council called for countries to begin monitoring and reporting on grave violations of children's rights.

### National action

Governments are responsible for what is happening in their own countries, but they are not the only ones with authority. The leaders of popular movements and other people in charge can also have great influence. Some actions taken to help children at the national level include:

- In Sierra Leone, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission gave special attention to the experiences of children in the armed conflict, and the first-ever child-friendly version of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission report was produced in 2004.
- The Government of Afghanistan returned 1.5 million children to school in 2002 following the conflict, with support from humanitarian agencies.<sup>16</sup>
- In 2005 in Afghanistan, Angola, Cambodia, Sri Lanka and Thailand, more than 4 million people received training on how to recognize and avoid landmines through Mine Risk Education programmes.<sup>17</sup>

*"Every child in this country has got a story to tell – a heartbreaking one. Unfortunately only a handful of these would be told and made known to the world. But the devastating impact hinges and endures the time." – Boy, Sierra Leone, in a statement to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission<sup>18</sup>*



## Humanitarian response

Many international groups, local and international **non-governmental organizations (NGOs)** and governments provide humanitarian assistance to children affected by armed conflict. Their role is to provide services and other support, such as health care, food, shelter and education. Among the achievements in this area:

- A concerted effort by a group of NGOs and UN agencies helped reunite 67,000 children with their family members in the Great Lakes Region of Africa between 1994 and 2000.<sup>19</sup>
- Child rights training has been introduced for **UN peacekeeping forces**, so they can better protect children in conflict areas.
- Since 1998, an estimated 16,400 children have been demobilized and reintegrated in Sudan.<sup>20</sup>

*"When I was fighting, I never thought about being educated. Now I'm enjoying it. I want to become one of the successful people in life. I want to become a doctor." – 22-year-old male, Papua New Guinea, involved in conflict at age 11<sup>21</sup>*

## Community initiatives

Communities interact daily with children and have perhaps the best opportunity to protect, heal and reintegrate those who are affected by conflict. Initiatives can come from children and young people, families, community groups, religious leaders and many others. Among the achievements at the community level:

- Youth groups have provided more leadership. In 1998 and 1999, for example, the Children's Movement for Peace in Colombia was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.
- In Indonesia's Banda Ache Province from 2001 to 2003, young people serving in the children's parliament acted as models to Muslim and Christian peace negotiators as they crossed cultural and religious barriers.
- In Nepal, nearly 60,000 boys and girls are active in nearly 3,000 children's clubs. The participants have become change agents in their communities and are involved in child rights advocacy and awareness-raising on social issues.<sup>22</sup>

*"Sometimes I think we [children of northern Uganda] were just born at the wrong place at the wrong time." – Winston, 19 years old, Uganda*

## THE SITUATION TODAY: UNFINISHED BUSINESS

In spite of progress and achievements, conflicts are still taking place in a number of countries – and hundreds of thousands of children still suffer the consequences. Also, the conflicts have become more complex, and the challenges children face have changed.

### Where are today's conflicts taking place?

The **United Nations Security Council** has focused on protecting children in armed conflict for the past few years. Since 2002, the UN has prepared a list of armed forces and groups that have recruited and used children. Countries where specific armed forces and groups have been listed include Afghanistan, Burundi, Chad, Colombia, Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo,

Liberia, Myanmar, Nepal, the Philippines, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Sudan and Uganda. Other situations that have been considered by the UN Security Council in terms of conflict and its impact on children's rights include Eritrea, Ethiopia, Haiti, Lebanon, Iraq, the Occupied Palestinian Territory and Timor-Leste.

While preparing her study in 1996, Machel visited places including Angola, Cambodia, Colombia, Lebanon, Northern Ireland, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and places in the former Yugoslavia. Although peace agreements were signed at various times in these countries, children and young people still suffer from the consequences of the conflicts, so it is important to keep monitoring these situations.

## **LOOKING FOWARD**

The task of protecting children in war is far from completed – there is so much more to be done. This ongoing review of progress is an opportunity to see what remains to be done and what the emerging challenges are. We have to make sure that the spirit of the Machel report carries on.

You can contribute to this. We ask you to look at progress and new challenges and help us define the future agenda on children and armed conflict.



# GLOSSARY

## KEY INSTITUTIONS

**Humanitarian organizations** – UN agencies and NGOs that help people in need, including those who are affected by conflict and hunger.

**Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children Affected by Armed Conflict** – An office in the UN created in 1997 to advocate, raise awareness and encourage action on behalf of children affected by armed conflict.

**United Nations (UN)** – The international organization created in 1945 to bring all nations of the world together to work for peace and development, based on the principles of justice, human dignity and the well-being of all people.

**UN agencies** – The UN has several branches that work in different areas of development, human rights and security.

**United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** – A branch of the UN that works to promote the right of all children to survival, protection, development and participation.

**UN General Assembly** – The main decision-making body in the UN, it is very involved in administration and operations. Each member country has one vote in the General Assembly.

**UN peacekeeping forces** – The UN sometimes sends troops to a conflict area to protect the civilian population and to try to keep stability.

**UN Security Council** – The body in the UN that deals with matters of security. It has five permanent members (China, France, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom and the United States — and 10 non-permanent members, with the membership rotating among countries. The Security Council tries to stop conflicts and maintain peace through international pressure.

## KEY INTERNATIONAL AGREEMENTS

**Convention on the Rights of the Child** – An agreement that sets out the legal rights for all children (0-18 years), including the right to an education, health, information, participation, skills and opportunities to grow and develop. The Convention has been ratified by almost all countries in the world.

**Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict** – An addition to the Convention that gives special protection to children in armed conflict.

**Convention relating to the Status of Refugees ('Refugee Convention')** – The international agreement that declares the rights of those who are forced to flee their home country because they are not safe.

**Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War (Geneva Convention)** – The international agreement created after the Second World War to set the rules for conduct during war, with special attention given to protecting civilians.

## TERMS OR PHRASES

**Child-headed household** – A household where the oldest person, or the person taking care of other children, is under 18 years old. There are many child-headed households in war-affected countries, where the parents might have been killed or are missing.

**'Child soldier'** – A child soldier has been defined as any person under 18 years of age who forms part of an armed force in any capacity, and those accompanying such groups, other than purely as family members, including girls recruited for sexual purposes and forced marriage.

**Gender-based violence and sexual exploitation** – Incidents and abuse that violate the rights and dignity of girls and women. This often takes place in conflict areas where girls and women are insufficiently protected.

**Human rights** – International law has agreed that all human beings, regardless of their race, culture, gender, religion or physical characteristics, have the basic and universal right to be treated fairly and without cruelty.

**Human rights violations** – Actions, attitudes or abuses that violate the basic rights of a human being. These violations break international law.

**Internally displaced person (IDP)** – Someone who has been forced to leave their home, due to human rights violations or war, for example, but has not moved to another country.

**International community** – A term used to describe the collective attention and awareness of the UN, governments, media and non-governmental organizations.

**Landmine** – A device that is placed on the ground and explodes when triggered by a vehicle or a person. Landmines are used to secure disputed borders and to restrict enemy movement in times of war. Landmines have been employed in most countries, especially during internal conflicts.

**Non-governmental organization (NGO)** – An organization that is not associated with a government. NGOs often work in communities to protect and help those in need.

**Peer-to-peer education** – Education through interaction among a group of people of the same age and status, for example, talking with your friends to learn about HIV and AIDS.

**Psychosocial well-being** – Psychosocial impact refers to the social and mental well-being of a child affected by armed conflict. Children are affected both psychologically (e.g. they may experience nightmares, anxiety and fear) and socially (shame and isolation).

**Ratify** – When countries ratify an international agreement, such as a convention, they commit to respect and enforce the agreement in their own countries.

**Reconciliation** – The effort to seek forgiveness and regain trust and friendship between people who have been in conflict.

**Refugee** – Someone who has been forced to leave his or her home for such reasons as human rights violations or war. Because refugees do not feel protected by, or safe in, their home country, they move to another country.

**Separated children** – Any person under age 18 who has lost contact with his or her parents and is not in the legal care of another adult. Children are often separated from parents in the chaos of conflict, escape and displacement.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Machel, Graça, 'The Impact of War on Children', Hurst and Company for UNICEF/UNIFEM, London, 2001, p. 1.
- <sup>2</sup> United Nations General Assembly, 'The Machel Review 1996-2000: A critical analysis of progress made and obstacles encountered in increasing protection for war-affected children', Annex to A/55/749, United Nations, New York, 23 January 2001.
- <sup>3</sup> UNICEF, 'Children in Conflict and Emergencies', <[http://www.unicef.org/protection/index\\_armedconflict.html](http://www.unicef.org/protection/index_armedconflict.html)>, accessed 16 April 2007.
- <sup>4</sup> Machel, Graça, 'The Impact of War on Children', Hurst and Company for UNICEF/UNIFEM, London, 2001, p. 1.
- <sup>5</sup> UNICEF, 'Child Protection Information Sheet', UNICEF, New York, <[http://www.unicef.org/protection/files/Child\\_Protection\\_Information\\_Sheets\\_\(Booklet\).pdf](http://www.unicef.org/protection/files/Child_Protection_Information_Sheets_(Booklet).pdf)>.
- <sup>6</sup> United Nations General Assembly, 'The Machel Review 1996-2000: A critical analysis of progress made and obstacles encountered in increasing protection for war-affected children', Annex to A/55/749, United Nations, New York, 23 January 2001.
- <sup>7</sup> Save the Children, *Rewrite the Future: Education for children in conflict-affected countries*, International Save the Children Alliance, London, 2006, <<http://www.reliefweb.int/library/documents/2006/sc-glb-13sep.pdf>>.
- <sup>8</sup> Save the Children, 'Forgotten Casualties of War: Girls in armed conflict', 2005, <[http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/scuk\\_cache/scuk/cache/cmsattach/2800\\_Forgottencasualties33395.pdf](http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/scuk_cache/scuk/cache/cmsattach/2800_Forgottencasualties33395.pdf)>, accessed 30 April 2007.
- <sup>9</sup> UNICEF, 'Impact of Armed Conflict on Children, personal note from Graça Machel' <<http://www.unicef.org/graca/graca.htm>>. Accessed on April 23, 2007.
- <sup>10</sup> Women's Commission, 'Youth Speak Out: New voices on the protection and participation of young people affected by armed conflict', New York, January 2005.
- <sup>11</sup> United Nations General Assembly, 'The Machel Review 1996-2000: A critical analysis of progress made and obstacles encountered in increasing protection for war-affected children', Annex to A/55/749, United Nations, New York, 23 January 2001.
- <sup>12</sup> Save the Children, *Rewrite the Future: Education for children in conflict-affected countries*, International Save the Children Alliance, London, 2006.
- <sup>13</sup> UNICEF, *Adult Wars, Child Soldiers: Voices of children involved in armed conflict in the East Asia and Pacific Region*, UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office, Bangkok, October 2002.
- <sup>14</sup> UNICEF, 'Impact of Armed Conflict on Children: Ten recommendations', <<http://www.unicef.org/graca/10rex.htm>>, accessed 23 April 2007.
- <sup>15</sup> United Nations General Assembly, 'The Machel Review 1996-2000: A critical analysis of progress made and obstacles encountered in increasing protection for war-affected children', Annex to A/55/749, United Nations, New York, 23 January 2001.
- <sup>16</sup> UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children 2004*, UNICEF, New York, 2003, p. 74.
- <sup>17</sup> International Campaign to Ban Landmines, *Landmine Monitor Report 2006: Toward a mine-free world*, July 2006, p. 40.
- <sup>18</sup> Comments made by Chornor Bah, on behalf of children in Sierra Leone, in statement to Truth and Reconciliation Commission.
- <sup>19</sup> Comments made by Chornor Bah, on behalf of children in Sierra Leone, in statement to Truth and Reconciliation Commission.
- <sup>20</sup> 'Free Children from War, Paris, February 5 and 6, 2007', Press Kit, UNICEF and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, France, 2007.
- <sup>21</sup> UNICEF, *Adult Wars, Child Soldiers: Voices of children involved in armed conflict in the East Asia and Pacific Region*, UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office, Bangkok, October 2002.
- <sup>22</sup> UNICEF, 'Backgrounder on the situation in Nepal', *Online Magazine*, no. 272, 1-5 May 2006 (internal document), UNICEF, New York, 2007.

**Focus Countries  
Machel Strategic Review  
Voices of Youth**

**Country/Territory**

1. Afghanistan
2. Angola
3. Burundi
4. Cambodia
5. Chad
6. Colombia
7. Côte d'Ivoire
8. Democratic Republic of the Congo
9. Eritrea/Ethiopia
10. Haiti
11. Iraq
12. Lebanon
13. Liberia
14. Nepal
15. Northern Ireland
16. Myanmar
17. Occupied Palestinian Territory
18. Philippines
19. Rwanda
20. Sierra Leone
21. Somalia
22. Sri Lanka
23. Sudan
24. Timor Leste
25. Uganda
26. Countries in the former Yugoslavia