



# **The Responsibility to Protect Children: An International Policy Priority**

Children and Armed Conflict Working Group  
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## Acknowledgments

In June 2004, representatives from Canadian civil society organizations and government officials participated in a consultation entitled Next Steps on Children and Armed Conflict for Canada: A Strategic Discussion. The ideas and recommendations that emerged from the consultation were incorporated into this outcome document. This outcome document will be submitted on behalf of the Children and Armed Conflict Working Group to the International Policy Review.

The Children and Armed Conflict Working Group is grateful for the financial support of the Government of Canada provided through the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA).

## About the Children and Armed Conflict Working Group (CACWG)

The CACWG is a Canadian network of international development agencies, peacebuilding and human rights organizations, academic researchers, youth groups and concerned individuals that share and analyze information regarding children in conflict zones. The goal of CACWG is to improve protection for the security and rights of children threatened and affected by armed conflict.

## About the Canadian Peacebuilding Coordinating Committee (CPCC)

The CACWG is a division of the CPCC, which is a network of Canadian non-governmental organizations and institutions, academics and other individuals from a wide range of sectors, including humanitarian assistance, development, conflict prevention and resolution, peace, faith communities, human rights, governance and democratization. The network is engaged in processes of dialogue between civil society and government and the development of peacebuilding policy and programming.

## For more information, please contact:

Children and Armed Conflict Working Group  
Canadian Peacebuilding Coordinating Committee  
1 Nicholas Street, #1216, Ottawa, Ontario, K1N 7B7, Canada  
Tel: (613) 241-3446 Fax: (613) 241-4846  
Email: [cpcc@web.ca](mailto:cpcc@web.ca)  
Website: [www.peacebuild.ca](http://www.peacebuild.ca)

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# The Responsibility to Protect Children: An International Policy Priority

## Introduction

Canada has provided leadership in the international effort to end the involvement of children in armed conflict, as combatants, as deliberate targets, and as victims who often bear the brunt of the impact of war. Progress has been achieved since the ground-breaking report by Graca Machel in 1996, entitled *The Impact of War on Children*.

As Canada conducts an international policy review, priorities are being re-evaluated. Should protection of children threatened by armed conflict continue to be a priority? If yes, what should Canada's strategy be to protect the security and rights of children affected by war?

In June 2004, a consultation between non-governmental organizations (NGOs) who work with children and government officials was held to consider the status of current efforts and possible next steps. Below are key points from that discussion for consideration as part of the international policy review.

## I. Persistence is needed to protect children and youth from armed conflict

New international norms have been established, such as a ban on the use of child soldiers and the inclusion of education in emergency assistance. Awareness has been raised about the impact of war on young people. But the reality is that millions of children still lack protection for their security and basic rights in situations of armed conflict. Implementation is key; political leadership is needed to make the transition from principles and policies to action on the ground.

Now is not the time to pull out. Canada is a leader on human rights, and child rights in particular. Leadership requires persistence. This is recognized in Canada's National Action Plan for Children, *A Canada Fit for Children*, which includes the following commitment:

*"Canada will continue to make the protection of war-affected children and their communities (including refugee and internally displaced children) and the protection of their security and rights a foreign policy priority. These efforts will be informed by an understanding of how girls and boys experience armed conflict differently, and the*

*importance of involving conflict-affected children in the design, implementation, and evaluation of programmes undertaken for their benefit. In our work to protect children from the impact of armed conflict, we will take action to stop the flow of small arms to forces that use them to abuse children. We will also ensure Canada's compliance with international humanitarian law and human rights law (such as the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflicts). We will continue to work actively in support of resolutions and reports from the United Nations Security Council and General Assembly that call on the United Nations and Member States to take effective action in incorporating the rights and well-being of children in armed conflict in their policies and programs. Beyond these fora, we continue to encourage regional and country-specific approaches to better protect conflict-affected boys and girls. We will also encourage agencies involved in humanitarian, peace-building, and development work to integrate the rights of the child into their programming.*

*We will continue to support integrated efforts to address their needs including on issues related to: the prevention of military recruitment of girls and boys, and their demobilization and reintegration; the special protection needs of refugee and displaced children (including advocating for enhancing their access to legal and physical protection); access to education, vocational training and conflict resolution training; family reunification; health care, including sexual and reproductive health; psycho-socio rehabilitation; sexual and gender-based violence; support for the inclusion of children in peace processes and agreements; and improving the sensitivity to the needs of children reintegrating and returning to post-conflict situations.” (A Canada Fit for Children; Canada's Action Plan in Response to the May 2002 United Nations Special Session*

*on Children, p. 77 and 78)*

## II. Focus on youth is key to global security

Children are often seen as a “soft” issue; but, in reality, a focus on youth is essential for security. People under the age of 18 account for between 40% and 60% of the total population in many conflict-prone countries. Ignoring their role in security is a strategic mistake.

International peace and security are as much threatened by disillusioned, marginalized youth with easy access to weapons as by nuclear submarines off the coast of Canada. Engaging youth in creating a world where their rights and the rights of others are protected is the only way to sustainable peace.

In his presentation at the consultation, General Roméo D’Allaire highlighted the strategic role that youth leaders play from a security perspective. Youth can either be a powerful force for peace, or they can be agents of instability in troubled contexts. In countries emerging from conflict, youth need support to make a successful transition from association with armed forces to non-military means of livelihood and advancement for themselves and their communities.

### III. Benefits of making youth a priority focus

Strategically, protection for children has made the most progress on the human security agenda promoted by Canada. The UN Security Council has passed five resolutions; the fifth one, Resolution 1539, includes a willingness to consider specific actions by the international community in specific situations of armed conflict. If Canada wants to see progress on The Responsibility to Protect, pushing ahead on child protection will set important precedents.

Positively, a focus on children can be an important rallying point for alternative approaches to conflict resolution. Vaccination campaigns for children, for example, can be a motive for a temporary ceasefire.

The recent focus on youth is changing the mode of engagement with non-state armed groups. The Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, for example, specifically addresses compliance by non-state actors with human rights laws. Security Council missions in conflict zones have engaged directly with non-state forces on the question of child protection; this can be a way to bring them into discussion about non-military resolution of conflicts.

At the same time, the tendency to label youth associated with fighting forces as terrorists since September 11th, 2001 is

not a productive approach. More research is needed on the impact of anti-terrorism initiatives on youth; anecdotal evidence suggests that erosion of protection for youth in the name of anti-terrorism creates long-lasting resentment and grievances. A more constructive approach is needed where youth are involved; Canada can be a leader in solutions based on respect for the rights of all children.

A focus on children and youth integrates the different components of international policy, a stated goal for the International Policy Review, within a specific context and through the eyes of the most vulnerable. If the security and rights of the most vulnerable are protected, national, regional, and global security will be enhanced.

## II. Strategy for Canada

An effective strategy for the next five years will include the following components:

### *A. Support implementation of Security Council resolutions on Children and Armed Conflict*

Security Council Resolution 1539 is the most powerful resolution on civilian protection. It pushes forward The Responsibility to Protect agenda that Canada is promoting. The challenge is implementation.

At the moment, fifteen countries in conflict are asked to prepare action plans for

child protection. Canada should use its influence in these situations to support child protection efforts through diplomacy, assistance, and where appropriate, pressure to encourage compliance with international laws.

Canada should amend its arms control legislation to end the shipment of arms into any country or region where they are likely to be used by forces that violate the security and rights of children. Belgium passed such legislation in 2003.

In addition to assistance in situations of conflict, youth should be an important focus for conflict prevention initiatives through diplomacy and international assistance programs.

### ***B. Diplomacy for Children***

The European Union has adopted a protocol entitled Guidelines on Children and Armed Conflict that requires its diplomats to pay attention to what is happening to children in conflict and conflict-prone situations. Canada could do the same. Compliance with international norms for child protection should be included in bilateral diplomacy as a matter of Canadian policy.

Canadian diplomats working on regional alliances, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Organization of American States (OAS), or other strategic alliances, such as the G-8, the new L20, and the Francophonie, should use these occasions to promote specific initiatives to improve protection

for the security and rights of children.

### ***C. Use Human Security Network to support international initiatives***

Children and armed conflict should continue to be a high priority for Canada's work with the Human Security Network. The alliance should be encouraged to play a more strategic role in specific situations where children are threatened, as well as promoting international standards within the UN, training, and other joint initiatives.

### ***D. Support international and national civil society networks on child protection***

Experience has shown that civil society networks on child protection can be an effective tool to marshal the resources of communities, national governments, and international organizations in a strategic way. Canada should focus on capacity-building initiatives within civil society as a key component of its security strategy.

### ***E. Implications of terrorism and war on terrorism for youth***

Canada could provide leadership by undertaking strategic and applied research to better understand the impacts of the focus on terrorism and anti-terrorism laws and policies for young people. Based on improved understanding, more effective strategies could be developed to address the factors that result in young people becoming engaged in terrorism activities.