



International «Protect Children from War» conference

Conclusions

Paris, 21 February 2017



The government of France and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), in collaboration with the Paris Principles Steering Group (PPSG), co-hosted the international ministerial conference «Protect Children from War» in Paris on 21 February to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the adoption of the Paris Commitments to Protect Children Unlawfully Recruited or Used by Armed Forces or Armed Groups (Paris Commitments) and The Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups (Paris Principles).

This conference brought together representatives of 73 member states, 11 regional and international organizations and 20 civil society organizations to reaffirm their commitment to operationalize the Paris Principles through legal and policy reforms and through dedicated resources to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children by armed forces and non-state armed groups, and to support release and reintegration initiatives. Building on the momentum of 10 years of work, the conference reviewed progress toward the implementation of the Paris Commitments and Paris Principles over the past decade: sharing lessons learned and best practices, identifying gaps and challenges, and mapping the next steps to end grave violations against children, and in particular prevent the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict situations.

This international conference and the sustained exchanges between states, international organizations and civil society organizations, particularly those directly acting on the ground, enabled a strong reassertion of the international community's will to protect children in armed conflicts and eradicate both their use and recruitment by armed forces and armed groups. Special attention was paid to intensifying collective action aimed at more effectively preventing grave violations committed against children in armed conflicts and stopping them immediately wherever they occur.

The participants underlined the importance of the universal adoption of the Paris Principles and Paris Commitments and are pleased to see that three states, Burma (Myanmar), Kazakhstan and Tunisia, endorsed these texts at the end of this conference.

Meeting in three high-level panels, the conference participants discussed the current trends and challenges and made concrete recommendations for the way forward. A brief summary of these discussions is described below.

Preventing the recruitment and use of children by armed forces and armed groups - release and reintegration of children

Participants discussed the progress made on protecting children affected by armed conflict, particularly concerning the implementation of good practice, norms and standards consistent with international law, including the Paris Principles and Commitments, so far endorsed by 105 member states. Participants voiced concern over the continued recruitment and use of children by parties to conflict, and other violations and abuse committed against children in situations of armed conflict.

Participants stressed the need to reaffirm international commitments and respect international humanitarian and human rights law, emphasizing the importance of developing, strengthening and enforcing national legal frameworks. Examples of actions included universally endorsing and implementing the Paris Commitments and Paris Principles, and developing and enforcing national laws that criminalize child recruitment by government forces and non-state armed groups; deterring people from using schools and hospitals for military purposes and criminalizing attacks on schools and hospitals in contravention of international humanitarian law; standardizing judicial procedures pertaining to child recruitment across different areas of law in accordance with international juvenile justice standards, such as the deprivation of liberty as a measure of last resort, and for the shortest time possible.

Conference participants underlined that actions to prevent the recruitment and use of children by armed forces and armed groups should include the promotion of free and universal birth registration, so that all children have a birth certificate within the state's jurisdiction. Particular care needs to be given to children in vulnerable situations.

Likewise, participants highlighted the importance of strengthening community-based protective environment for children in order to prevent recruitment. Work in this area should include: supporting government and community protection systems; raising awareness among children and communities, early identification of and action against the recruitment and use of children; and strengthening girls' and boys' resilience.

The participants called on the parties to conflicts to unconditionally and immediately release children incorporated into their armed forces. They also expressed the need for governments, with support from their international, regional and local partners, to review and strengthen their armed forces' recruitment procedures, including for associated paramilitary militias and other volunteer groups, to mainstream the application of codes of conduct and establish child protection units within the structures of military and security forces. Participants stressed the primary role of national governments, with support from humanitarian and development partners, donors and local communities, in providing practical protection and services to all children affected by armed conflict.

The participants applauded the progress made within the framework of the «Children not Soldiers» campaign, which was launched by the Special Representative to the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict and UNICEF in 2014, in order to accelerate the elimination and prevention of the recruitment and the use of children under 18 in armed conflicts by the armed forces listed in the annual Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation of Children and Armed Conflict. The participants highlighted the importance of stepping up efforts to combat the recruitment and use of children and other violations committed by non-state armed groups.

In addition, they highlighted the need to design prevention and reintegration programmes which are age-appropriate, culturally-sensitive, and take into account the different needs of boys and girls, and provide access to education, vocational training and livelihood options, as well as the need to empower children and recognize their role in building sustainable peace. Participants noted that effective prevention, release and reintegration programmes should be community-based and include other children affected by armed conflict, such as and not limited to unaccompanied and separated children, members of host communities and internally displaced or refugee children. Such programmes should include interventions to address stigmatization and foster community acceptance of children formerly associated with armed forces or armed groups, including girls with children born out of conflict.

Participants recognized the need to considerably increase resources for children affected by armed conflict and their access to those resources, and to allow for predictable, consistent and long-term multi-sectoral finance for reintegration programmes. Participants also recognized the key role of education within release and reintegration efforts.

Participants acknowledged the important role civil society organizations play in preventing conflicts (through local reconciliation initiatives, etc.), protecting children and helping reintegrate children associated with armed forces or non-state armed groups, and other vulnerable children in conflict-affected communities.

It was noted that the adoption and implementation of Action Plans under the Security Council's Children and Armed Conflict agenda had proven useful in a number of situations to combat the recruitment and use of children. Based on this assessment, participants urged those concerned to work with the United Nations and its partners toward the development of Action Plans and other measures to combat all grave violations committed against children.

Preventing and responding to grave violations against children in situations of armed conflict

Conference participants emphasized that preventing and responding to all grave violations against children during armed conflict is critical to the effective protection of children. The participants recognized the interlinkages between grave violations and recognized the role that the Paris Principles and Paris Commitments have played over the last decade in preventing and eliminating other types of grave violations against children in armed conflicts, in particular killings and maiming, and sexual violence and abduction. They agreed that more must be done to create and maintain a protective environment for children in situations of armed conflict and to expand and strengthen those initiatives that have proven successful. Preventing violations is crucial and of the highest priority.

To this end it is important to strengthen the core functions of the state to end and prevent violations against children. They identified areas that need more attention and commitment, including taking measures to ensure accountability and fight the impunity of perpetrators of violations against children, to strengthen national policies and legislation to protect children and to raise awareness of gender inequality and the systematic targeting of girls.

The participants welcomed the appropriate nature of action plans agreed between parties to conflict and the United Nations, in accordance with UN Security Council resolutions, not only in order to end grave violations of children's rights in situation of armed conflict, but also to adopt preventive actions. Indeed, every action plan is established in order to respond to specific situations, and provide guidance with concrete steps in order for the party to better implement international and national norms. The removal of a state or armed group from the United Nations Secretary-General's list indicates that they are striving to improve the protection of children.

The participants discussed the suffering caused to children in military operations, through the excessive and indiscriminate use of explosive weapons and the indiscriminate impact of weapons accidentally activated by victims. The participants noted the need to adhere to and implement international law, and to consider the possibility of better identifying practical measures to take before, during and after military operations to reduce harm to civilians and better protect children.

The participants noted the need to develop the technical capacity of national armed and security forces prosecutors, and child protection training for judicial, police and prison staff, humanitarian organizations, civil society and community structures and groups. This capacity-building includes the development and dissemination of evidence-based programming tools to strengthen measures that prevent the (re-)recruitment and use of children by parties to conflicts, and support their reintegration in communities.

Participants recognised the potential of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, in particular Target 16.2 (end abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children) and Target 5.2 (eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls) to prevent and respond to grave violations against children in armed conflict.

The consequences of armed conflicts on children

The participants reviewed developments in contemporary armed conflicts as well as the challenges to address reduce their impact on children.

Participants recognized the negative impact of the growing and deliberate number of attacks on schools and hospitals, and on their protected staff, in an increasingly complex political and security environment. Occupation of schools increases the likelihood of attacks and jeopardizes the safety of children, increases the risk of recruitment and prevents children from returning to school, a precondition for reintegration and the prevention of re-recruitment.

Participants also recalled the Safe Schools Declaration, aimed at reducing the use of schools and universities by parties to armed conflict and minimizing the negative impact of armed conflicts on the safety and education of children. Participants agreed to encourage, when necessary, the implementation of good practice in order to increase the protection of education in times of conflict. Two states, France and Canada, announced their endorsement of the Safe Schools Declaration.

The participants underlined the need to guarantee quality education and access to health services, including psychological assistance, to children living in conflict areas or those fleeing an armed conflict, including children who are victims of the worst forms of child labour, in order to address psychosocial stress and symptoms of post-traumatic stress. The participants also underlined the long-term impact of attacks committed against schools, hospitals and the protected staff in them, especially the persistent feeling of being insecure while going to school after conflict and the increased number of children displaced with their families and the restrictions imposed on humanitarian access. They stressed the importance of using appropriate curricula, pedagogical tools and language to guarantee effective learning and ensuring that teachers and educational staff are properly trained to address the specific educational needs of children in situations of armed conflict, including migrant and refugee children.

Conference participants identified the vulnerabilities faced by internally displaced, refugee and migrant children and called for urgent action in origin, transit and reception countries to protect them, particularly separated and unaccompanied children, from exploitation and violence, illegal trafficking and slavery, and the risk of

being recruited by armed groups or armed forces. Other strategic interventions discussed by participants to improve the protection and wellbeing of children include ending the detention of children because of their or their parents' immigrant status, and not separating members of the same family, which is the best way of protecting children and giving them legal status. Another key point is to ensure that internally displaced, refugee and migrant children have access to good services such as education and healthcare.

Participants call for investment in sustainable data collection mechanisms respecting confidentiality and effective search tools increasing the knowledge base in advocacy, policy and programming on grave violations against children. Special reference was here made to Targets 16.2, 8.7 and 5.2 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. To this end, it was suggested that national data collection and information systems should be improved in order to identify vulnerable children and effectively monitor progress.

In addition, participants recognized and welcomed the efforts of the Paris Principles Steering Group in drawing up the Field Handbook on Child Recruitment, Release and Reintegration, as well as its continued support to countries in armed conflict situations to alleviate humanitarian suffering and improve the wellbeing and protection of children, their families and communities./.

(The members of the Paris Principles Steering Group, co-chaired by Save the Children and UNICEF, include: Child Soldiers International, Child Fund, Conflict Dynamics International, Geneva Call, the government of France, ICRC, ILO, International Centre for Transitional justice International Rescue Committee, Romeo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative, Save the Children, United Nations DPKO, UNDP, UNICEF, Office of the UN Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, War Child, and World Vision International.)

Source of English text: French Foreign Ministry.