

have seen a burst of new standards that require universal ratification and implementation - the Rome Statute for the International Criminal Court; the Anti-Personnel Landmine Treaty; the new Optional Protocol to the CRC on the recruitment and deployment of young combatants; The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (which Liberia has not yet ratified). There are also the ECOWAS Bamako and Lome declarations, the ECOWAS Moratorium in small arms and light weapons, Security Council Resolution 1261, with its specific provisions on conflict-affected children.

Ratify, legislate, train, inform. There is nothing - unless it is the lack of political will - stopping any country present today from ensuring that the full range of norms and standards are in place nationally and soon. Do these standards apply to non-state parties? Yes. There is a growing international acceptance that non-state entities are equally bound by human rights standards; and there are precedents - as with the Sudan People's Liberation Movement's Agreement on Groundrules, in 1995, whereby it bound itself to international norms and commitments to children and civilians in the midst of conflict.

Are these standards the product of alien, externally-imposed values? No. Positive norms and values exist in every culture regarding care and protection of children in times of war and conflict. These can be rediscovered, re-instated, accepted at all levels of society, to reestablish an understanding that surely must be universally applied - that there are no circumstances under which the targeting and exploitation of children is justifiable, ever.

In a sense, this is the easy part - to ratify, legislate, inform, commit. But how to ensure that these norms and standards are actually applied? Clearly, each country has it within its power to establish independent bodies to monitor, document and report on human rights and their abuse. Surely a timetable for setting up such bodies where they do not exist need not be long, and the possibility of setting up ECOWAS capacity to monitor the protection of war-affected children in member states is cited in the draft Plan of Action. But the question remains: what to do when norms and standards are not applied? We come to the twin issues of accountability and impunity.

2. Ensure accountability, address impunity

The most significant limitation to ensuring accountability and countering impunity is inadequate public, private, national and international objection to the abuse of children during conflict, and inadequate efforts to implement constructive ways by which they can be protected and assisted when abused. But times are changing. There is an accelerating trend internationally to place human security, the rights and well-being of citizens, ordinary people, on the international peace and security agenda. And in this context there is an opportunity for ECOWAS members and their international partners to take a lead. Let's look at three particular issues - the debate over sovereignty versus intervention; naming names of those who violate human rights; and what Olara has called the ECOWAS Neighbourhood Initiative.

Sovereignty and intervention. Kofi Annan and his two predecessors as UN Secretaries-General have all argued that the rights of individuals and communities within states are important enough to call into question the traditional inviolability of state sovereignty. The argument is increasingly heard in international circles that serious breaches of human rights within states almost always create threats to international peace and security and thus justify UN intervention.