

Social, because the anger and psychological scars of these abused children and their families threaten social cohesion and place a heavy burden on social services.

And economic, because all these problems have economic costs, whether it be the need for medical and social support or the loss of productive citizens.

Abuse of children, therefore, has both immediate costs and can lead to future divisiveness and deterioration of their communities.

For these reasons, children are at the heart of human security, as they are all too often among the most deeply affected by an increase in insecurity.

The African Charter on the Rights of the Child has set out a comprehensive agenda for action: on armed conflicts, on refugee children, on orphaned and separated children, and on various aspects of protection. This has provided leadership for the international community.

Last January in Geneva, the international community agreed to an Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child relating to the involvement of children in armed conflict—in particular the recruitment and deployment of children as soldiers. The Protocol will be open for signature this September.

It is time to move from standard-setting to implementation, compliance and concrete action.

That is the goal of this conference.

Its focus is on the needs of individual children, their families and communities, and ensuring that West African governments and regional organizations like ECOWAS [Economic Community of West African States] have the capacity to support new initiatives.

Its themes address a variety of the root causes and symptoms which lead to the involvement of children in war: poverty, lack of alternatives, access to small arms, impunity, conflict prevention, the role of non-state actors and the special gender dimensions of conflict.

Its participation includes youth themselves who have met over the past few days to set their own agenda based on their own needs, rights and goals. They are, after all, the ones most directly involved. Their views are essential. Their voices need to be heard. That is why war-affected youth have been invited and why we need to listen to their concerns.

Civil society is also represented. As with the campaign to ban landmines and the creation of the International Criminal Court, they are leading international efforts to address the needs of war-affected children. Their presence allows us to continue to forge strong partnerships in