

3. Preventive actions

This discussion has already started to lead us into the realm of preventive and preemptive action - one of the other clauses in the draft Plan of Action proposes rapid ratification and implementation of the ECOWAS conflict prevention mechanism signed at last December's ECOWAS summit. Will ECOWAS lead in developing mechanisms to address non-violent resolution of conflicts through neighbourly arbitration?

There are many roads to the implementation of equitable development policies which help foster national cohesion. All of them require not only national commitments, but sustained international support too. But as our focus is on young people and children, and with the Dakar World Education Forum taking place this week, may I make a brief pitch for investment in quality education as one of the best investments in a nation's future and in peace?

The case for universal quality education in which children learn to think for themselves, learn how to solve problems, work and cooperate with others - this case has been made and proven again and again. It would be a great example of leadership if this conference would lead to plans for educational recovery in Sierra Leone and Liberia, outlining investment requirements and commitments sought from communities, national governments and the international community - sustained, long-term commitments. Will Canada seek to build and lead the consortium of international partners required for a long-term commitment, to make universal education, vocational skill development, capacity-building and training a real possibility in these two countries? UNICEF would certainly like to be your partner in such an endeavour.

4. Children as Zones of Peace

The draft Plan of Action before this conference proposes the institution of a West African Day of Cease-fire. President Rawlings has suggested not a day, but a Week of Truce for our children, a week which would start in West Africa and which could even become global.

In the shadows behind these proposals is a 20-year old concept that is as relevant today as it was in 1980: the concept of Children as a Zone of Peace. This concept is based on the simple principle that children have a supervening right to protection from the consequences of any armed conflict, that there is never a justification for targeting or involving children in armed conflict.

Thus could not the Plan of Action incorporate the full range of measures that would reinvigorate the Children as Zones of Peace concept in the widest possible sense? Cease-fires yes, days and weeks of peace, and also protected humanitarian corridors, plus the institution of the practice that schools, child centres, health facilities be inviolate zones of peace, and that the needs of children are taken into account in peace accords and demobilisation plans, as in Sierra Leone. Not new ideas, but ones that need to be re-affirmed and implemented. And again, when warring parties fail to respect children in this way, let the actions to counter impunity, to demand accountability, which we have previously mentioned, come into force.