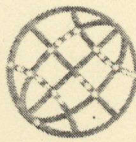


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**CHILDREN IN ARMED CONFLICT:
AN IMPORTANT PRIORITY FOR
CANADA'S FOREIGN POLICY AGENDA?**

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Canadian Centre for Foreign Policy Development

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The rights of children are a central theme of the foreign policy agenda (1). This essay briefly reviews the foreign policy focus and suggests that particular attention should be given to children exposed to armed conflict, not least as one of the key elements of the human security agenda. As Canada prepares to take up its two-year term (2000-2001) as a member of the United Nations Security Council, some suggestions are made on how Canada might encourage that body to give increased attention to the effects of armed conflict on children in its deliberations on international security.

For many years, Amartya Sen, the 1998 Nobel laureate in economics, has argued that economic analysis and public policy should examine human diversity, good governance, the freedom to achieve and the "capability (of ordinary people) to function" in society. He has called for a "broad view of development efforts, going far beyond the focus on improving national output and the distribution of incomes", to one which stresses basic human needs and quality of life issues, such as life expectancy, access to education, health care and other social services (2).

He has argued that famine is not merely a humanitarian tragedy, a consequence of the vagaries of nature, but the consequence of bad political decisions and economic policies: "past mistakes of policy have been responsible for the death of many millions and the suffering of hundreds of millions" (3). World hunger has "legal, constitutional, political implications and social relevance" as well as economic roots and Sen insists that the connections between these interrelated factors have to be "explored and systematically integrated" (4). It is such a concern with placing human life and human dignity on the political and economic agenda that is at the heart of the concept of "human security".

Canada, together with a number of like-minded countries, is arguing that the safety and well-being of people must be at the centre of discussions of international security. Foreign policy and international relations must be assessed in terms of their impact on individuals and on communities. This means that "human rights are increasingly seen as



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**Children in armed conflict:
An important priority for Canada's foreign policy agenda?**

**Nigel Fisher
Visiting U.N. Fellow
Canadian Centre for Foreign Policy Development**

The rights of children are a stated priority on Canada's domestic and foreign policy agenda (1). This essay briefly reviews the rationale for such a foreign policy focus, and suggests that particular attention to the rights and well-being of children exposed to armed conflict makes sense as one of the cornerstones of Canada's emerging human security agenda. As Canada prepares to take up its two-year term (1999-2000) as a member of the United Nations Security Council, some suggestions are offered on how Canada might encourage that body to give consistent attention to the effects of armed conflict on children in its deliberations on international security.

What is "human security"?

For many years, Amartya Sen, the 1998 Nobel laureate in economics, has argued that economic analysis and public policy should examine human diversity, good governance, the freedom to achieve and the "capability (of ordinary people) to function" in society. He has called for a "broad view of development efforts, going far beyond the focus on improving national output and the distribution of incomes", to one which stresses basic human needs and quality of life issues, such as life expectancy, access to education, health care and other social services (2).

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Canada, together with a number of like-minded countries, is arguing that the safety and well-being of people must be at the centre of discussions of international security. Foreign policy and international relations must be assessed in terms of their impact on individuals and on communities. This means that "human rights are increasingly seen as

inseparable from questions of international peace and security, international trade and development assistance" (5). Canada's human security agenda is articulated, for example, in its international leadership in the movements to ban the production, sale and use of antipersonnel landmines, to limit international trafficking in small arms and light weapons, to create the International Criminal Court, to address exploitative child labour and violence against children. It is also recognized that such an agenda can best be addressed through a broad, multidisciplinary "alliance of national and international authorities, civil society and non-governmental organizations" (6).

Giving priority to children

Within a human security framework, why does prioritization of children make sense? A number of reasons suggest themselves. Firstly, children are the most vulnerable group in society. The extent to which priority is given to the rights and well-being of children, whether in domestic or foreign policy, is an excellent measure of society's commitment to human rights and human development in general.

Secondly, the experience of children during their critical growth and learning years at the hands of adult society affects them for life. The values and attitudes that they absorb, the extent to which they are - or are not - encouraged to think critically or solve problems cooperatively, for example, will mould their own approach to political participation, social development, equity and justice. Investment in the physical, social, emotional and cognitive development of young children is an investment in the future citizens and leaders of society. Ensuring due attention to early childhood care and development is one of the most effective ways of positively influencing a wide range of social issues. Conversely, failure to invest in the child has adverse consequences, not merely for the development of the individual child, but for society at large.

Thirdly, some 1.3 billion people, a quarter of the world's population, live in absolute poverty, many of them in zones of conflict or of chronic turbulence. Globally, one in every three people is a child under 15 years of age, while in some parts of the developing world - for example in sub-Saharan Africa - it is closer to one in two. Prioritization of the rights and well-being of children will contribute directly to the achievement of long-term poverty-reduction goals and to "sustainable development".

Why give attention to children in armed conflict?

Children, especially children of poor, marginalized populations, constitute the most vulnerable group in the midst of armed conflict. Least able to protect themselves, they are devastated by the destruction of the social networks which normally assure their care and well-being - the cohesive family, the community, schools and social services - and by the breakdown of the rule of law and of normative frameworks which might assure them some measure of security and protection.

Violent conflict, within states as well as between states, remains a major threat to human security. The post-Cold War world has seen an upsurge in armed conflicts within states, conflicts which engulf entire societies, pitching neighbour against neighbour. The whole social fabric of life is destroyed; homes, schools and communities are on the front line. Distinctions between combatant and non-combatant disappear. In such total war, terror against civilians is deliberate. The great majority of casualties are civilian and well over half of those are children, deliberate victims of armed conflict. In the last decade, millions of children have been killed and disabled in such conflicts, tens of millions displaced, hundreds of thousands conscripted as combatants (7).

The predominance of intra-state conflicts should not obscure the fact that international conflicts also impact heavily on children. The war against Iraq and the subsequent imposition of economic sanctions on that country, have had a disastrous effect on child morbidity and mortality in Iraq. The recent cross-border war between Ethiopia and Eritrea caused significant civilian casualties. The conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo, which now involves the armed forces of several African states, is fought in Congolese communities. Children are both victims and combatants.

Thus *de facto*, a concern with child rights and protection must be at the centre of any international deliberations on security and conflict. Violent social change and turbulence are likely to continue - and perhaps increase - in many parts of the world as old political orders dissolve, as the gap between the rich elites and the most disadvantaged grows and as competition for scarce resources grows. Attention to child protection is essential, given the increasing frequency of armed conflicts, their disproportionate impact on children and by the large numbers of children affected.

Violence breeds violence: research confirms a strong correlation between the early childhood experience of violence and consequent violent and other antisocial behaviour later in life. The violence, threats, grief and anxiety experienced by children during armed conflict have a long-term effect on their mental health, quality of life and adult comportment. Violence to children is inextricably linked to violence by children and to manifestations of adult violence. One of the most effective ways of preventing violence in society is to reduce violence against children and to raise children who reject violence as a method of problem-solving.

A final, but no less important rationale for placing children in armed conflict high on the foreign policy agenda and in deliberations on international security, is an ethical one. In every society, there exist fundamental norms for the care and protection of children. The involvement of children in armed conflict represents an attack on these most basic ethical foundations of society. Protection of children and their rights in the face of armed conflict is one of the strongest ways of asserting a commitment to human security and of re-establishing respect for human rights within states and in international relations.

At the root of the violence committed against children in civil conflict is the

breakdown of social norms and of the rule of law within states in conflict, and the existence of a climate of impunity within which parties to conflict attack children and other civilians without compunction. In such environments, it is rare to find effective spokespersons for children. There exist few or no incentives or threats which might encourage conflicting parties to assure protection for children, rather than to target them. All too frequently, it appears that the international community is unable or unwilling to enforce (or to demand that actors in civil conflicts apply) international humanitarian and human rights standards to protect children and other civilians. There is frequently international reluctance to intervene in the internal affairs of states, or to commit political, economic or military resources to intervention, especially if the conflict is not perceived to be taking place in a region of vital strategic importance. As a result, children are victimized with impunity.

The suffering of children during armed conflict is often invisible to international decision-makers. As a direct consequence, the particular requirements of children are rarely taken into account in international efforts to resolve political crises or to bring armed conflicts to a negotiated end. **It is in the political arena that Canada's advocacy on behalf of children, together with like-minded countries and within a human security framework, can have a significant and innovative impact.**

An agenda for action: children in human security

What can Canada do - as a member of the U.N. Security Council and elsewhere - to ensure that the rights of children in armed conflict are systematically considered in global deliberations on peace and security?

Canada can help to ensure that Security Council addresses the situation of children whenever it deliberates on armed conflict. The Council can consider appropriate responses to the targeting of children, can condemn their abuse and exploitation and can identify ways of pressuring parties to conflict to comply with international humanitarian law and human rights instruments for the protection of children in armed conflict. With the formation of the international Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, the recruitment and use of children as combatants is becoming an increasingly important issue on the international agenda. The Security Council can ensure that the demobilization of child soldiers is a clearly identified priority within any framework for demobilization of combatants. In most internal conflicts today, child fighters constitute a significant proportion of armed forces, regular or irregular. Child soldiers have a range of special needs: for protection at the time of demobilization; for interim care and counselling; for appropriate education or vocational training to earn a living; and for the difficult, long-term process of post-conflict social reintegration. Failure to address these issues can contribute to the marginalization of such youth and their consequent resort to crime and violence.

The Security Council can ensure that peace accords take into account the particular requirements of children. To date, few if any peace accords even mention children. One analyst of the Guatemalan Comprehensive Agreement on Human Rights noted that "children's

rights *per se* have never been raised by either party, neither as a point of contention nor of consensus, in the entire peace process" (8), despite the fact that children played a major role as combatants, were victims of widespread violence and abuse and were displaced in huge numbers. Future societal stability demands attention to the rehabilitation of child victims of violence, while joint commitment of former warring parties to child protection and development can be an important step towards reconciliation and reconstruction.

The Security Council has not traditionally taken children into account in its definition of the mandates of peacekeeping and peace operations. Canada can help remedy this. Training of peacekeepers on child rights should be obligatory. Their accountability for their conduct towards children needs to be clearly specified if the child abuse and child prostitution that has been a feature of several peacekeeping missions is to end. Sweden has pioneered the systematic inclusion of child rights in pre-deployment training of peacekeepers and Canada has also moved in this direction.

Whatever the political rationale behind the imposition of economic sanctions, there is now little argument that they have an extremely adverse impact on vulnerable groups, foremost amongst whom are children. As a member of the Security Council, Canada will be in a privileged vantage point to advocate that the United Nations assume its share of the responsibility for the impact on vulnerable groups of sanctions which the Council has authorized. There is a need for a more systematic approach to humanitarian sanctions, for better methods of assessing the impact of sanctions on children, even for recognizing measures taken by sanctioned regimes to provide a safety net for children and other vulnerable groups.

These are some of the ways in which Canada can promote the cause of children exposed to conflict during its tenure on the Security Council. It is not alone in this endeavour and does not have to start from scratch. In a special session held in June 1998, the Security Council expressed its "grave concern at the harmful impact of armed conflict on children" and acknowledged its continued obligation and "intention to pay serious attention to the situation of children affected by armed conflicts" (9). This statement was stimulated by the presence and presentation, at the debate, of Olara Otunnu, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict. He can be a useful collaborator with Canada and like-minded countries in combined efforts to ensure that the Security Council fulfils the commitments that it has made. The Special Representative, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, UNICEF and UNHCR are collaborating on the development of training modules for peacekeepers in child and human rights. The Office of the Emergency Relief Coordinator has led a coalition of humanitarian and development agencies in the United Nations to assess the humanitarian impact of sanctions. Canada can draw on the support of these and other allies within and outside the United Nations system.

Beyond the opportunities offered by Security Council membership, Canada has embarked on, or could consider, a number of other areas of action and advocacy.

Consistent with its commitment to integrate human rights concerns into its foreign policy, Canada is actively supporting the strengthening of international standards and institutions. Canada played an important role in drafting the treaty on the International Criminal Court, within the statutes of which crimes against humanity, including those committed in internal conflict, are clearly specified. The enslavement and trafficking of children, the use of children below fifteen years of age in conflict, as well as a number of particular instances of gender violence, are now specified as crimes against humanity. As of early October 1998, no country has yet ratified the ICC treaty. It is hoped that Canada will soon do so and that it will encourage other countries to do likewise. If the treaty were to come into force during the next twenty-four months, Canada could use its tenure on the Security Council to encourage the Council to rapidly refer possible war crimes or crimes against humanity to the ICC. At the very least, the Council should be dissuaded from requesting temporary suspension of any of the Court's proceedings (unfortunately, this eventuality is provided for in the draft ICC treaty).

In early 1998, Canada provided the first seed grant to the newly-formed international Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers. Canada is currently examining how it might comply with the provisions of a proposed Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, namely that no child below the age of eighteen years should be recruited into the military or used in hostilities. As Canada seeks an international leadership role in promoting human security and in the protection of children in armed conflict, it is important that its own statutes are consistent with the highest standards for the protection and well-being of children. Current provisions in the Defence Act which allow for the recruitment of young people below the age of eighteen years do not meet that requirement.

In zones of active armed conflict, Canada has long supported the humanitarian activities of international agencies and non-governmental organizations. But this is not enough. As parties to conflict disregard universal norms for child protection and target children with impunity, greater international commitment is required to intercession for children, to direct mediation and negotiation efforts on behalf of children in conflict zones. Canada has a strong international reputation and record as a conciliator and peacekeeper. It could build upon this reputation by supporting advocacy for children in conflict zones. UNICEF has past experience in successful advocacy of days of peace, corridors or zones of tranquillity for children, to permit health care or humanitarian relief to reach children, but such successes are rare in today's violent internal conflicts. Likewise, the Office of the U.N. Commissioner for Refugees intercedes for the protection of refugees. But it cannot be said that there exists today a specific, consistent and credible advocacy movement for children in armed conflict which has the power to persuade those targeting children to desist, or to sanction them effectively if they do not.

One of the main functions of Olara Otunnu, the recently-appointed Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children in Armed Conflict, is to be such an international advocate for children, and to intercede with warring factions on behalf of children in zones of conflict. Already, in visits to Sierra Leone, Liberia, Sudan, Sri Lanka

and Kosova in 1998, he has sought, with some success, the commitment of conflicting parties to protect children, to desist from using or targeting them, or to allow them access to humanitarian relief. The Special Representative needs political backing, which Canada and other supporters could provide. In addition, Canada might wish to develop its own mediation capacity for children, as well as to support indigenous civil society groups or regional mediation initiatives. Canada can also encourage and support regional organizations to develop and apply codes of conduct (based on international standards and regional cultural norms) regarding child protection during armed conflict and post-conflict recovery; mechanisms to monitor and assure compliance with such standards and to address the impunity of those who continue to target children; regional peacekeeping initiatives; and other initiatives to ensure deployment of capacity to aid children exposed to armed conflict.

Conclusion

The Nobel citation for Amartya Sen stated that his work "has restored an ethical dimension to the discussion of vital economic problems"(10). Canada has the opportunity to do likewise in the international political arena, as it pursues the concept of human security with a coalition of like-minded partners, particularly during its two-year tenure on the U.N. Security Council. A focus on children and specifically on children in armed conflict, can be a potent element of Canada's agenda, since, in international norms and in every society, "there is a Corridor of Peace in our inner being, always, for a child to run through for protection" (11). When children are both prime targets of, and actors in, armed conflict, it is time to take them out of the social welfare or humanitarian closets to which they are usually assigned and place them squarely on the political agenda.

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