Putting Children First: Building a Framework for International Action to Address the Impact of Small Arms on Children

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Executive Summary

Small arms and light weapons (SALW) are recognised as increasing the lethality, duration and intensity of conflict with the effects of these weapons lasting for many years. The negative impacts of SALW are often greatest for the most vulnerable groups, including children. There is widespread international recognition of the negative effects of small arms on children, but efforts to control small arms and those to protect children have rarely been linked.

The United Nations 2001 Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects and the UN Special Session on Children provide unique opportunities to examine the complex issues surrounding small arms and their impact on children, in particular, how the presence, proliferation and misuse of small arms and light weapons affect the lives of children.

Impact of small arms on children

There are clear risks to children from SALW. The identified impacts of small arms on children in conflict and post-conflict situations include:

Death and injury

Two million children have been killed and six million more psychologically damaged, seriously injured or permanently disabled in conflict in the last decade. SALW, as the weapons of modern conflict, are likely to have killed a large number of these children.

Human rights abuses

Small arms are used to commit human rights abuses against children in both conflict and post-conflict situations.

Displacement

Children are at risk of displacement as a result of the widespread availability and misuse of small arms. It is estimated that more than 22 million children have been displaced by war within and outside their countries.

Psychological trauma

Children, who are victims as well as perpetrators of violence, often suffer extreme trauma, as do children who have been exposed to armed violence against family members.

Insecurity

The widespread availability of small arms often fuels environments of extreme insecurity which undermine reconstruction and development efforts. Children suffer in an environment of constant insecurity. SALW may also be considered as tools for survival, used for crime and violence to earn money and food to support families.

Culture of violence

The widespread availability of small arms in post-conflict societies can lead to the development of a sustained culture of violence. Small arms fuel rampant urban violence, which has a significant impact on children. SALW are sometimes viewed as symbols of power, dominance and worth.

Loss of opportunities

The presence of small arms can have a significant effect on future opportunities for children. The continued presence of these weapons in post-conflict societies can affect efforts to sustain peace and prevent sustained development.

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Current initiatives

A range of international, regional, national and non-governmental organisation initiatives have, to varying degrees, sought to address the small arms and children's agendas. International initiatives have focused on encouraging awareness raising and debate on the issue of children and small arms. In addition to the Conference and the Special Session, the United Nations Security Council has adopted two resolutions on children in armed conflict, 1261 (1999) and 1314 (2000), which make specific reference to the impact of small arms on the conditions for children in conflict and the need for action.

Regional initiatives have encouraged the greatest advances on children's and small arms issues. Some declarations and agreements, in West Africa and South Asia for example, have linked small arms and children. On the whole, however, regional efforts have been most effective on the small arms issue; few have taken action with regard to the impact of small arms on children. At the national level, initiatives have tackled key issues associated with children and small arms. National efforts have also been important for building a constituency which promotes progressive action for children, linking this action to issues of small arms and armed conflict. Non-governmental organisations also have played a role in putting the issues of children's rights and small arms on the international agenda.

Framework for action

The issue of small arms and children needs to be addressed within a specific framework that is neither children's rights nor small arms specific. The key is to establish norms and standards, as well as to facilitate coordination and complementarity, for action on small arms and children. Countries, international and regional organisations and NGOs all have specific areas to implement in the proposed framework for action.

Controlling the trade in small arms

States must exercise responsible behaviour with regard to the transfer and management of small arms as well as provide assistance to prevent and combat illicit manufacture, trafficking, possession and misuse of SALW. They should also adopt strict controls on civilian possession of small arms, including a prohibition on the civilian possession of military assault weapons, and consider national minimum requirements for small arms possession and use.

Child soldiers

Measures must be taken in conjunction with small arms initiatives to eliminate the use of child soldiers, including prohibiting arms exports to groups that use child soldiers, addressing the special needs to child soldiers in peace negotiations and disarmament, demobilisation and reintergration programmes and ratifying and implementing the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict.

Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR)

Children have special needs during DDR. Measures to be taken should include: recognition of the special needs of child soldiers, with special attention to girls; providing skills training and education programmes for former child combatants; and supporting community-based programmes to help communities accept and assist former child soldiers and child victims of war.

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Framework for action

Needs of girls and gender dimensions

The impact of conflict on girls and women, in particular the abuses perpetrated against them, have been recognised as requiring specific attention. Rape and sexual violence, including that perpetrated with small arms, should be addressed within broader efforts to rehabilitate refugee and displaced communities. Furthermore, measures should include education programmes for boys and men that develop alternative concepts of masculinity not associated with weapons.

Norms and standards for the protection of children and adolescents

The cultures of violence perpetuated by small arms must be countered and sustainable options for children developed. Measures to be taken should include: the creation of zones for children that are weapons free; the development of norms of behaviour surrounding the use and possession of small arms; and the incorporation of child protection advisors in peace-building efforts.

Education and awareness building

The effects of small arms on the development of children and their communities can be countered by effective programmes that provide peaceful alternatives to conflict, violence, and crime. Efforts should be focused on areas such as creating secure conditions within which children can be educated and encouraged to interact socially and supporting the participation of children and youth in rebuilding civil society.

Future action and research

The linking of small arms and their impacts on children is a relatively new concept. Efforts must be made to further quantify the impact of small arms on children and to determine best practices and priorities. Areas for action include structured data collection processes to identify the impact of small arms on children and the coordination of agency and donor approaches and responses to rehabilitate war-affected children and children affected by SALW in post-conflict situations.

Issues for the UN Small Arms Conference and Beyond

The Programme of Action for the Conference already reflects international concern of the impact of SALW on children in its preamble. Furthermore, it offers considerable scope to take action to protect children against the impact of SALW through draft measures on marking and tracing, weapons collection and destruction, and disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes. All are issues of importance to the conditions of children, and given their vulnerability, they should be given special consideration within the Programme of Action.

Section I

The preamble of the Programme of Action should elaborate on the impact of SALW on children by including references to violence perpetrated against them with SALW as well as references to the long-term social and psychological impacts of these weapons on their development.

Section II

This section should include special reference to the need for further study on the impact of small arms proliferation upon children and other vulnerable groups, such as women and the elderly, and further study on the situation of child soldiers. Beyond this, a number of measures could be envisaged that would have a direct effect on the safety of children and their communities.

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Issues for the UN Small Arms Conference and Beyond

These should be made explicit and should include:

- Programmes for the disposal and destruction of SALW that focus on collecting illicit weapons used by children;
- Effective disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes that include specific recognition of the needs of children;
- Prohibitions in national and regional export criteria on the transfer of SALW to countries or groups which use child soldiers;
- Public awareness programmes that highlight the impact of these weapons on children and the need for education as part of efforts to reverse cultures of violence;
- Restricting civilian possession of military assault weapons in conjunction with measures to regulate the possession of SALW, including through restrictions on the age of the user.

Section III

The Programme of Action notes that States and international and regional organisations should assist and promote conflict prevention measures and encourage the pursuit of negotiated solutions to conflicts. The importance of child and gender-sensitive policies should be considered in respect of these peace negotiations. Assistance for the implementation of DDR programmes should also focus on the needs of child combatants, armed youth and children as victims of warfare.

Section IV

Follow-up meetings to the 2001 Conference should consider how measures implemented under the Programme of Action have benefited children and other victims of small arms and light weapons.

The UN Small Arms Conference and the Special Session provide two important opportunities to take forward concrete steps to minimise the impact of small arms on children. However, attention should also be given to other ways in which these issues can be taken forward, including through the implementation of the proposed Framework for Action.

Introduction

"The spread of light weapons of all kinds has caused untold suffering to millions of children caught up in armed conflict... not only during the conflict but for decades thereafter."[2]

The presence, proliferation and misuse of small arms and light weapons (SALW) has a devastating impact on children in conflict and post-conflict societies.

Children are used to describe the group of people under the age of 18. Adolescents are used to describe the group of people over the age of 11.

Cheap, easy to use and widely available, these weapons fuel many contemporary conflicts and prolong, spread and deepen the consequences of conflict. The presence of SALW increases the risks to children both directly, through death and injury, abuse and displacement, and also indirectly, through psychological trauma, insecurity and the loss of opportunities.

There is widespread international recognition of the negative effects of small arms on children, but efforts to control small arms and efforts to protect children have remained largely separate. The issue of child soldiers has demonstrated the importance of linking children's and small arms initiatives. Yet, to date, this has resulted in neither a full examination of the issues concerning children and small arms nor the full enforcement of norms and standards to protect children. The full impact of SALW on children remains difficult to determine in the absence of a comprehensive examination of the short and long term effects.

This briefing seizes the unique opportunities provided by the UN 2001 Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects, to examine the complex issues associated with small arms and children. Both are key opportunities to examine how the presence, proliferation and misuse of small arms and light weapons affects the lives of children. The briefing draws on primary research from three countries – Mozambique, Colombia and Cambodia. It identifies current initiatives to protect children and control SALW and offers recommendations for a Framework of Action with measures to be taken at national, regional and international levels, including priorities for the UN Small Arms Conference.

The impact of small arms on children

The United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, has called small arms "weapons of mass destruction."[3] With an estimated 500,000 people killed every year by small arms – approximately 300,000 in armed conflict and 200,000 in non-conflict situations – the threat posed by these weapons is evident.[4] The presence of SALW increases "the intensity and duration of violence, crime, displacement and violations of the basic human rights of many millions of people."[5] There is wide agreement that small arms fuel many contemporary conflicts: "Available in abundance, cheap to buy, requiring little training to use, small arms have become the weapons of choice for the present-day conflicts."[6]

Small arms have been the principle weapon used in up to ninety per cent of conflicts in the last decade.[8]

The prevalence of these weapons in conflicts often has lasting consequences as weapons remain after the conflict has ceased. The continued presence of these weapons in post-conflict societies can undermine reconstruction efforts by sustaining cultures of violence that generate insecurity, fuel armed crime and impede development.

There are at least 500 million small arms in circulation today.[10]

Small arms and light weapons are used against the most vulnerable groups, including children, as highlighted by the United Nations Special Representative for Children in Armed Conflict.

2 million children have been killed and 6 million psychologically damaged, seriously injured or permanently disabled in conflict in the last decade. [9]

However, to date, there has been little more than anecdotal evidence of the various ways in which small arms negatively affect the lives of children.[7] The true impact of small arms on children has remained difficult to ascertain due to the lack of research, knowledge and understanding of the short and long-term effects of small arms. However, the potential risks of SALW on children are evident. This section draws together some of the identified risks of small arms for children in conflict and post-conflict situations. Although not an exhaustive list, it highlights the array of dangers faced by children from the presence, proliferation and misuse of small arms. Furthermore, it demonstrates that it is extremely difficult to separate the impacts of conflict on children from the impacts of small arms.

Direct impacts

Death and Injury

The United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament, Jayantha Dhanapala, estimates that more than 80 per cent of the victims of small-arms fire are women and children.[11] The exact number of children affected by small arms is unknown because small arms fatalities and injuries are rarely noted. However, with two million children killed and six million more psychologically damaged, seriously injured or permanently disabled in conflict in the last decade, the figures are likely to be significant.[12] Children are especially vulnerable to death and injury as child combatants both as victims and perpetrators of the violence. At any one time, some 300,000 children under the age of 18 are fighting as soldiers.[13] They are particularly vulnerable targets for recruitment as child combatants due to the light, simple design of modern SALW.

Human Rights Abuses

The number of children killed and injured by small arms draws attention to the immediate risks of these weapons but do not reflect their sole impact on children. Small arms are used to commit human rights abuses against children in both conflict and post-conflict situations. Although there is a growing body of international law, norms and standards specifically designed to safeguard the rights of children, they are being breached with impunity.[14]

The impact of small arms on children

Direct impacts

The availability of inexpensive weapons has allowed a growing number of individuals and groups to gain access to SALW with little, if any, training, discipline or accountability. Female adolescents are often victims of this indiscipline, forced to endure rape, sexual abuse and violence.

"You can run away from physical abuse but you can't run away from bullets"[16]

Many later attempt to conceal the abuse for fear of personal and family shame, but with a rising number of young girls exposed to sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDS and pregnancy, the abuse is having a lasting impact on development.[15]

Displacement

Children are at risk of displacement as a result of the widespread availability and misuse of small arms. Refugees and internally displaced people often share a common fear: "The fear that people with guns will use them on vulnerable communities."[17] It is estimated that more than 22 million children have been displaced by war within and outside their countries.[18] The immediate risks of displacement for children include death, injury, violence, abuse and military recruitment - many of these result from the misuse of SALW. In addition, however, children driven from their homes and communities are often left without adequate food, shelter or healthcare. The insecurity generated by the prevalence of small arms often makes it difficult for humanitarian agencies to provide aid to those who are displaced. Even in refugee camps, children are vulnerable to specific threats and intimidation, including rape, injury, forced prostitution, slavery and forced recruitment into armed groups often with SALW being used to intimidate if not actually used to injure or kill.[19] Furthermore, the continued availability of small arms in societies emerging from conflict often discourages refugees and internally displaced people from returning to their homes and communities because of the ongoing fear of armed violence. Consequently, displacement for children may extend long after the conflict has ceased.

Education in Angola

The proliferation and misuse of small arms and light weapons is destroying the potential of children in Angola. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has described Angola as "the country whose children are at the greatest risk of death, malnutrition, abuse and development failure." Small arms-fuelled conflict has prevented millions of children from receiving an education. Schools are unable to open due to insecurity; parents are afraid to send their children to school for fear of abduction; and teachers are unable to do their jobs. At the end of last year only 45 per cent of school age children were in formal education. The mass displacement of civilians within the country is putting immense strain on educational resources within the capital. There is a severe lack of classroom space, high pupil-to-teacher ratios, a lack of trained teaching staff and a shortage of learning and teaching materials. Therefore, even those children receiving an education, are severely disadvantaged. The loss of education for children in Angola will have lasting consequences. The illiteracy rate in the country is an estimated 42 per cent – among six to fourteen year olds this figure rises to 70 per cent. Five million of Angola's population of twelve million is under the age of fifteen. The majority of conflict-affected children will be illiterate, as they reach adulthood this will severely undermine the potential for development in the country.

The impact of small arms on children

Indirect impacts

Psychological Trauma

The risks of small arms for children extend beyond their use to kill, injure and displace but these impacts are generally more difficult to ascertain. Little is known, for example, about the long-term affects of psychological trauma suffered by children from exposure to small arms violence. Children who have been victims as well as perpetrators of violence often suffer extreme trauma. Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes do not always address the special needs of child combatants and as a result it can be extremely difficult for these children to reintegrate into post-conflict society.

Bosco: "I killed another child. I did this three times. Now I see dead people and blood in my dreams and I know the spirits of the children are coming to haunt me."[21]

Children who have been exposed to violence against family members may also suffer trauma that makes it difficult for them to re-establish their lives after the end of conflict. Adolescents are thought to be severely affected by the loss of family members as they take over adult roles and responsibilities but are often ignored by aid and support programmes.[20]

Child Combatants in Mozambique

Six hundred thousand children were killed during the conflict in Mozambique – small arms were the most commonly used weapon. The widespread availability of these weapons encouraged the recruitment of child combatants, some as young as six years of age. At the time of demobilisation more than a quarter of all soldiers in Mozambique were under the age of 18 – 40 per cent of RENAMO forces and 23 per cent of FRELIMO forces.[23] These children were exposed to brutal violence both as victims and perpetrators. Yet, despite the widespread use of child combatants, disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes (DDR) largely excluded children. Adult soldiers were offered cash payments, vocational training, promotion of small-scale activities and credit facilities but similar provisions were not made for child combatants. A number of intergovernmental and non-governmental reintegration programmes were established to fill the gap and address the specific needs of children. Many of these programmes have been very successful, in particular Rebuilding Hope, established in 1996. However, these programmes have been unable to reach all child combatants, and for other children it has been extremely difficult to reintegrate into post-conflict society. Former child combatants in Mozambique often suffer from emotional problems including extreme pessimism, isolation, depression, aggression, frustration, and various phobias.[24] Many have no formal education. Without the help of special DDR programmes, many former combatants have been reluctant to return to education, and many have been faced with a lack of opportunities. In such circumstances some former child combatants have been reluctant to relinquish their weapons and have continued to rely on them for survival. As one former child combatant stated: "What is there for people like me to do? A gun gives me a job!"[25]

The impact of small arms on children

Indirect impacts

Insecurity

The widespread availability of small arms often fuels environments of extreme insecurity which undermine reconstruction and development efforts. The presence of small arms can stifle efforts to rebuild communities because they prevent the 'normalisation'of society. The prevalence of SALW often results in these weapons being are used to settle disputes violently. Children, although not always the direct targets of the violence in post-conflict situations, suffer in an environment of constant insecurity because traditional family structures and support systems are weakened. Small arms and light weapons may also be considered as tools for survival, used for crime and violence to earn money and food to support families.

Culture of Violence in Cambodia

The continued prevalence of small arms in Cambodia perpetuates the culture of violence that was generated by more than two decades of conflict and violence in the country. The widespread availability of these weapons has a significant impact on children in the country. The adult population of Cambodia is now made up of children who suffered this violence. The juvenile population is made up of their children. As one newspaper commented: "We can't see past the atrocities and the killing… the fighting has imposed an ideology of violence on everybody."[26] Small arms are used to settle all ranges of disputes. The widespread immunity for small arms violence has created a new generation of children who consider small arms as tools for survival. This is detrimental in a country where children make up 47 per cent of the population. Unless SALW are dealt with effectively the legacy of these weapons will continue to impose hardship on the people of Cambodia, especially children. The Working Group for Weapons Reduction in Cambodia reported that more than 100,000 weapons have been collected, almost half of which have been destroyed, since 1993. The remaining number of small arms in Cambodia are unknown – estimates range anywhere from 10,000 to more than 100,000. Weapons collection and destruction programmes are crucial for dismantling the cultures of violence, abuse and insecurity in Cambodia.

Culture of Violence

The widespread availability of small arms in post-conflict societies can lead to the development of a sustained culture of violence. Small arms fuel rampant urban violence that has a significant impact on children. Male adolescents are particularly vulnerable to small arms-fuelled urban violence. In Brazil, for every female adolescent killed by small arms, 24 male adolescents are killed. In these situations SALW are often viewed as symbols of power, dominance and worth. However, they lead to an endless cycle of violence that undermines development and can, at worst, re-ignite conflict.

The impact of small arms on children

Armed Crime in Colombia

Colombia is flooded with small arms. Small arms violence has become a way of life for children in Colombia. Two out of three displaced children have witnessed the murder or attempted murder of a family member.[27] Aside from the conflict, this has been largely due to the rise of urban crime and violence, fuelled in part by the widespread availability of small arms. Colombia has the highest firearm homicide rate in the world – approximately 58 per cent of the global total – and small arms are used in more than 90 per cent of homicides. 85 per cent of homicides relate to urban violence. The growing legitimisation of violence, and the resulting gun culture, is perhaps taking its greatest toll on Colombia's children. Colombia has witnessed a rise in the number of youth gangs involved in criminal activities in its major cities. These adolescents have acted as bodyguards and carried out assassinations for drug cartels, as well as engaging in armed crime and violence unrelated to the drug trade. The small arms used by these gangs are often identified as originating through the drug trade.[28]

Loss of Opportunities

The presence of small arms can have a significant effect on future opportunities for children. The continued presence of these weapons in post-conflict societies "not only undermines a country's ability to sustain peace but represents a major stumbling block to sustainable human development."[29] According to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in Latin America, where SALW are easily available and the rates of weapon-related death and injury high, the costs are estimated at 14 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) in terms of health and damage to person and property.[30] As a result vital infrastructure needed for development projects is damaged by arms-related insecurity and foreign-funded development projects can either be cancelled or postponed to prevent the assets from being diverted toward criminal activities. In both the short and long-term children are severely affected by the lack of sustainable development.

Child soldiers

A child soldier is "any child under the age of 18 who is compulsorily, forcibly, voluntarily recruited or otherwise used in hostilities by armed forces, paramilitaries, civil defence units or other armed groups."[31]

Though child soldiers are not a new phenomenon, the reliance on children to wage war has become a symptom of the massive proliferation and misuse of small arms and light weapons. At any one time at least 300,000 children under the age of 18 are actively fighting alongside adults in government forces, rebel opposition groups, and guerrilla armies.[32] These children are subjected to life threatening risks – even those beyond the normal dangers of war. For example, child combatants have been made to walk across fields to clear landmines. Children are often forcibly recruited for service – through kidnapping, intimidation or threat – although some children are 'voluntary' recruits. These children may join to protect or provide for their families or to seek revenge for the loss of a family member. However, 'voluntary' recruits often demonstrate just how vulnerable children are to the risks posed by SALW. They often express the belief that their personal security was greater inside armed movements than outside among the street children, refugees, and displaced persons.[33]

The impact of small arms on children

Child soldiers

Children have long been afforded special protection in international treaties and increased efforts have been made in the last decade to improve the situation of those children in unstable, violent or conflict situations. One important element in this regard has been the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) which was adopted in 1989. The CRC has been ratified more quickly and by more governments – all except the US and Somalia – than any other human rights instrument. The founding premise is that children are born with fundamental freedoms. The Convention, therefore, recognises that children must be allowed particular protection in light of their special needs and vulnerabilities. The need for such protection is no more necessary than in the midst of conflict. Reflecting earlier child rights standards, the CRC states that no one under the age of 15 should be recruited for use as a soldier.[34] After the CRC other international bodies developed standards and norms regarding the use of children in conflict. The International Criminal Court (ICC) statute, adopted in July 1998, made it a war crime to conscript or enlist children under the age of 15 into the armed forces or armed groups or to use them as active participants in hostilities.[35] International Labour Organization Convention (ILO) 182, adopted in June 1999, banning the worst forms of child labour, marks the first specific legal recognition that the use of child soldiers is a form of child labour, and defines forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict as a worst form of child labour and prohibits forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict.[36]

Many governments and non-governmental organisations remained unsatisfied with the adoption of the CRC 15-year standard and decided to create an instrument by which all children under the age of 18 would be protected from participation, conscription, and recruitment as combatants. In May 2000 the UN General Assembly adopted the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Protocol specifically:

- Requires States Parties to “take all feasible measures” to ensure that members of their armed forces under the age of 18 years do not participate in hostilities;
- Prohibits the conscription of anyone under the age of 18 into the armed forces;
- Requires States to raise the age of voluntary recruitment from 15 and to deposit a binding declaration on the minimum age for recruitment into its armed forces; and
- Prohibits the recruitment or use in hostilities of children under the age of 18 by rebel or other non-governmental armed groups, and requires states to criminalise such practices.[37]

The Protocol is now open for signature and ratification – it enters into force once ratified by 10 countries. As of May 2001, 80 countries had signed the Protocol but only five have ratified it.[38]

The UN Conference provides an opportunity to reconfirm international commitments to eliminate the use of child soldiers. The inherent link between SALW and child soldiers has been recognised. Therefore, it follows that any programme of action to end the use of child soldiers must address the issue of small arms, just as efforts to control small arms must address how, and by whom these weapons are used. Without such complementarity these measures will be unable to succeed.[39]

Current Initiatives and Standards on Small Arms and Children

Areport prepared by Graça Machel on The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children brought the issue of small arms and children onto the international agenda. It has been followed by a range of international, regional, national and non-governmental initiatives that have, to varying degrees, sought to address the small arms and children's agendas. However, to date, measures to protect children and measures to control the proliferation and misuse of small arms have remained largely separate. Therefore, while these approaches have generated awareness on the issue of SALW and their impact on children, little action has been taken. The challenge remains to develop a framework to improve coordination at all levels in order to develop and implement effective policies to protect children from the negative effects of SALW.

International Efforts

International initiatives have focused on encouraging awareness raising and debate on the issue of children and small arms. The United Nations Security Council has adopted two resolutions on children in armed conflict, 1261 (1999) and 1314 (2000), which make specific reference to the impact of small arms on the conditions for children in conflict and the need for action. Resolution 1261 "…recognises the deleterious impact of the proliferation of arms, in particular small arms, on the security of civilians… particularly children" and resolution 1314 highlights "…the linkages between the illicit trafficking in small arms and light weapons and armed conflict which can prolong armed conflict and intensify its impact on children." The UN has also been an important forum for widening the debate on the issues associated with small arms and children. For example, the UN Panel of Governmental Experts on Small Arms has drawn greater attention to the special needs of children affected by SALW in post-conflict situations.[40] This led to UNICEF initiating a major programme on the impact of small arms on children in 2000. The UN has also initiated the Special Session on Children to be held in September 2001.

Regional Efforts

Regional initiatives have encouraged the greatest advances on children's and small arms issues. Some declarations and agreements, in West Africa and South Asia for example, have linked small arms and children. On the whole, however, regional efforts have been most effective on the small arms issue; few have taken action with regard to the impact of small arms on children. For example, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Moratorium on the Importation, Exportation, and Manufacture of Light Weapons in West Africa and the European Union Programme for Preventing and Combating Illicit Trafficking in Conventional Arms, have been extremely powerful in setting a progressive small arms agenda. However, these initiatives do not provide specific recommendations for improving the conditions of children, although they make a potentially important contribution by seeking to reduce small arms availability and proliferation.[41]

National Efforts

National initiatives have been important in tackling key issues associated with children and small arms and individual countries have made efforts to further these agendas. A number of countries have supported disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programmes for ex-combatants and have funded weapons collection and destruction programmes. For example, in Brazil on 24 June 2001, the Rio de Janeiro state government in cooperation with the non-governmental organisation Viva Rio, destroyed 100,000 guns in front of a crowd of 20,000 people. National efforts have also been important for building a constituency which promotes progressive action for children. In September 2000 the Canadian government hosted the International Conference on War-Affected Children in Winnipeg, which included a special session on the impact of small arms on children. However, national initiatives have often suffered from a lack of coordination between agencies and a lack of international consensus on measures to be taken.

Non-Governmental Initiatives

Non-governmental organisations have played a major role in putting the issues of children's rights[42] and small arms[43] on the international agenda. They have pushed governments further and faster than they might have otherwise have been inclined to go. For example, the International Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers has secured five political declarations following regional conferences – the Maputo, Montevideo, Berlin, Kathmandu and Amman Declarations – which encourage action to refrain from supplying arms to groups that use child soldiers. The UN Small Arms Conference has acted as a catalyst to bring greater collaboration between the children's and small arms NGO communities. At the third preparatory committee meeting for the July Conference, NGOs and UN agencies developed common language for the Programme of Action. The UN Small Arms Conference is an important opportunity to further develop a comprehensive coordinated approach for small arms and children initiatives that have up to now suffered from a lack of cooperation.

Building a Comprehensive Framework for Action

The impacts of small arms and light weapons on children are complex. Therefore, it is imperative that these issues are considered in concert with discussions on armed conflict, post-conflict reconstruction and development and non-conflict related armed violence and crime. International organisations, regional groups, national governments, local agencies, NGOs and communities all have specific roles to play in implementing the necessary standards and regulations. Without a unified approach, which commands wide-ranging support and commitment, recommendations will do little to protect children around the world from the lasting legacy of small arms.

The issue of small arms and children needs to be addressed within a specific framework that is neither children's rights nor small arms specific. The key is to establish norms and standards as well as to facilitate coordination and complementarity for action on small arms and children. The following framework is based on this need. Countries, international and regional organisations and NGOs all have specific areas to implement in the following framework and responsibilities to develop policies that effectively reduce the proliferation of SALW and their resulting negative impact on children.

Controlling the Trade in Small Arms

Reducing the illegal trade in SALW requires greater control of the legal trade. There is extensive evidence to demonstrate that many of the weapons circulating in the illicit market originate as legally transferred weapons. Children as the users and victims of SALW will be the beneficiaries of efforts to control the trade in small arms. Reducing weapons availability will decrease the incidence of child death and injury from small arms and will allow support services and local infrastuctures to operate without an environment of fear. Specific measures that form part of a framework on small arms and children should include mesures that ensure states exercise responsible behaviour with regard to the transfer and management of small arms.
They should include measures to:

- Promote transparency at the regional and international level, including provisions for information exchange;[44]
- Implement an international system for tracing and marking;
- Improve stockpile management to prevent theft and implement policies to collect and destroy surplus weapons;
- Develop international criteria on the export of arms, including prohibiting transfers to conflict regions, that are likely to be used to violate international human rights and humanitarian law;
- Strengthen controls on the legal manufacture of SALW,[45] including local production in conflict zones;[46]
- Provide assistance to prevent and combat illicit manufacture, trafficking, possession or misuse of small arms and light weapons and ammunition, including appropriate assistance in developing laws, regulations and procedures relating to the control of such weapons;[47]
- Establish national minimum age requirements for small arm possession and use;
- Establish strict controls on civilian possession of small arms, including a prohibition on the civilian possession of military assault weapons.

Child Soldiers

International attention has focused on the use of children as combatants and resulted in advances in protecting children from participation in armed conflict. However, as small arms fuel conflicts, children will continue to face recruitment into armed forces and groups. Measures must therefore be taken, in conjunction with small arms initiatives, to eliminate the use of child soldiers. These should include:

- Achieving universal ratification and full implementation of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict without reservationand declarations of 18 as the minimum age for voluntary recruitment;
- Prohibiting the export of arms to groups that use child soldiers;
- Reducing or eliminating military assistance (including arms and training) to governments and groups using child soldiers;
- Addressing the special needs of child soldiers as a distinct element of peace negotiations;
- Supporting programmes dedicated to family reunification for former child soldiers or those that have been displaced due to conflict.

Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration

Children have special needs during disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration and should not be included with adult counterparts. In particular, the impacts of small arms on children's development and well-being must be taken into consideration and alternatives to soldiering provided and strengthened. Children require special care and attention to address the psychological effects of being victims and perpetrators of small arms-related violence. Those designing and implementing DDR programmes should:

- Recognise the special needs of child soldiers, with special attention to girls, in developing reintegration and rehabilitation programmes including education, health, and housing;
- Develop programmes that address psychosocial needs of war-affected children;
- Develop and support skills training and education programmes for former child combatants;
- Develop and support community-based programmes to help communities accept and assist former child soldiers and child victims of war reintegrate;
- Incorporate traditional and cultural frameworks into demobilisation and reintegration programmes.

Building a Comprehensive Framework for Action

Needs of Girls and Gender Dimensions

The impact of conflict on girls and women, in particular the specific abuses perpetrated against them, has been recognised as requiring specific attention. Existing standards to protect the rights of women include the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Small arms in particular amplify the horrors that women and girls experience. In addition to implementing strategies to reduce small arms in a region, steps must be taken to ensure the protection of women and girls from SALW used for crime and violence. States, international and regional organisations, NGOs and communities should seek to:

- Address rape and sexual violence, including that perpetrated with small arms, within broader efforts to rehabilitate refugee and displaced communities and within the context of reconstruction programmes;
- Develop programmes to address HIV/AIDS infection and other sexually transmitted diseases spread through rape and sexual violence and assist girls with children born from rape;[48]
- Develop community awareness and education programmes to counteract the stigma associated with girls that have participated in armed activities;
- Develop education programmes for boys and men to develop alternative concepts of masculinity not associated with guns and arms;
- Reinforce determination for the systematic use of rape, including that facilitated by small arms, to be established as a war crime.

Norms and Standards for the Protection of Children and Adolescents

While the international community has made progress in adopting and implementing a growing collection of international standards protecting children's rights, additional steps must be taken to safeguard the security of children affected by small arms. Children need to have alternatives to gun violence and crime and be treated for small arms-induced trauma in order to fully participate in society. The cultures of violence perpetuated by small arms must be countered and sustainable options for children developed. States, international and regional organisations, NGOs and local communities must:

- Create zones for children, in schools for example, that are weapons free;[49]
- Create norms or codes of behaviour surrounding the use and possession of small arms by civilians and armed forces;[50]
- Provide mainstream support for adolescents in leadership training, skills and vocational programmes, and formal education;[51]
- Register unaccompanied and separated children and ensure their protection and survival;[52]
- Incorporate psychosocial support programmes in rehabilitation and other health efforts;[53]
- Ensure child protection advisors be regular components of peace-building and post-conflict reconstruction efforts.

Building a Comprehensive Framework for Action

Education and Awareness Building

Education and awareness building are key elements in changing the reintegration of youth into post-conflict societies and cultures of violence. The effects of small arms on the psychosocial development of children and their communities can be countered by effective programmes that provide peaceful alternatives to conflict, violence, and crime. Efforts should be focused on:

- Creating secure conditions within which children can be educated and interact socially;
- Supporting and ensuring the participation of children and youth in rebuilding civil society;
- Providing viable economic alternatives and leadership opportunities for war-affected children;
- Developing peace education and non-violent conflict resolution programmes;
- Developing community peace-building incentives focusing on development crucial for the well-being of children, such as the rebuilding of schools, healthcare facilities, and recreational areas.

Future Action and Research

The linking of small arms and their impacts on children is a relatively new concept on the policy-making, aid providing, and academic fronts. Several organisations have begun to assess the role of small arms in their assistance programmes and fieldwork,[54] but this has not been systematically universalised. Efforts must be made to further quantify the impact of small arms on children and to determine best practices and priorities. Action is needed at every level. Community-based organisations should work with national governments, regional organisations and international agencies to determine what information is needed to best serve children and assess the most effective ways to reduce the negative impacts of small arms on them. Future action and research areas should:

- Develop a more structured and thorough data collection process to identify the impact of small arms on children;
- Consider the impact of small arms on children in government and NGO-sponsored research, fieldwork, and publications;
- Encourage government funding for research and analysis of the impact of small arms on children in particular areas of concern;
- Identify key priorities within programmes to assist children in post-conflict situations;
- Co-ordinate agency and donor approaches and responses to rehabilitate war-affected children;
- Develop and implement a rights-based framework to protect children in conflict.

Issues for the UN Small Arms Conference and Beyond

The United Nations Small Arms Conference Programme of Action (A/CONF.192/PC/L.4/Rev.1) already reflects international concern of the impact of SALW on children by recognising the "devastating consequences on children" of the illicit trade in SALW in the preamble. Furthermore, it offers considerable scope to take action to protect children against the impact of SALW through its measures on marking and tracing, weapons collection and destruction and disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes. All are issues of importance to the conditions of children. However, given the vulnerability of children to the risks of small arms, they should be given special consideration within the Programme of Action.

It is imperative that the links between small arms and children be explicit in the conference document and that specific measures be identified that are tailored to the needs of children. In addition, there is considerable scope for action in the implementation and follow-up to the Conference itself. Therefore, the following recommendations, which build on the Framework for Action of the previous section, focus both on the inclusion of specific recommendations for the Programme of Action, and measures to be taken in the follow up to the Conference.

Elements for the Programme of Action

Preamble

The preamble of the Programme of Action notes the effect that small arms proliferation has on children in general (Section 1, para. 4). However, given the specific ways in which children are affected by SALW, reference to the direct and indirect impacts small arms have on children should be included within the preamble. This should include references to violence perpetrated against children by SALW and the long-term social and psychological impact of SALW to a child's development.

Section II: Preventing, combating and eradicating the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons in all its aspects

Section II of the Programme of Action calls for the establishment of national coordination agencies or bodies and the appropriate infrastructure responsible for policy guidance, research and monitoring of effects to prevent the proliferation of small arms (para. 2). In the Programme of Action, special reference should be made to the need for further study on the impact of small arms proliferation upon children and other vulnerable groups, such as women and the elderly, and the situation of child soldiers.

In addition, the important role played by civil society to raise awareness of the impact of small arms, as well as its role in the implementation of measures to control SALW, such as through weapons collection programmes or disarmament programmes, should be recognised in para. 39. Further financial support should be made available to civil society to carry out this work, in particular, for practical, community-level programmes that they operate.

The Programme of Action details specific measures to be taken at the national, regional and global levels to prevent, combat and eradicate the illicit trade in SALW. Some measures will have a direct effect on the safety of communities and the children in them and such areas should be made explicit. These include:

- Programmes for the disposal and destruction of SALW that focus on collecting illicit weapons used by children and prioritising the destruction of these weapons (para. 15);
- Effective disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes that include specific recognition of the needs of children (para. 21);
- Introducing prohibitions in national and regional export criteria on the transfer of SALW to countries or groups which use child soldiers (para. 9);

Elements for the Programme of Action

- Public awareness programmes to reduce demand for SALW that highlight the impact of these weapons on children and the consequences for children directly involved in conflict as victims and combatants (para. 19). They should also include efforts to promote a culture of peace, which should include a reference to the need for education as part of efforts to reverse cultures of violence (para. 39);
- Restricting civilian possession of military assault weapons should be viewed in conjunction with national measures to regulate the possession of SALW, including through restrictions on the age of the user, with a minimum age requirement (para. 20).

Section III: Implementation, international cooperation and assistance

The implementation of measures by States, international and regional organisations and others will be vital to the success of controlling SALW. The Programme of Action notes that States and international and regional organisations should assist and promote conflict prevention measures and the pursuit of negotiated solutions to conflicts wherever possible (para. 4). The importance of child and gender-sensitive policies should be considered in respect of these peace negotiations as well as in UN peace operations.

In addition, assistance in the implementation of DDR programmes should also focus on the needs of child combatants, armed youth and children as victims of warfare (para. 16).

As has been noted, further research needs to be undertaken to better understand and respond to the impact of SALW on children. Therefore paragraph 18, which calls on States, regional and subregional organizations, research centres and civil society to develop and fund action-oriented research should include a prioritisation of research on the impact of SALW on children and a survey of programmes which are addressing these issues. Emphasis should be placed on action-oriented research, in particular, research that seeks out programmes that have concrete impacts on children.

Section IV: Follow-up to the United Nations Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects

Section IV calls for a Review Conference no later than 2006 to review progress made in the implementation of the Programme of Action as well as a biannual meeting of States. These follow-up meetings should consider how measures implemented under the Programme of Action have benefited children and other victims of SALW.

This year marks an excellent opportunity for the small arms and children's rights communities. The UN Conference provides a forum for discussion on the impact of small arms proliferation on children while the Special Session on Children will be an opportunity to develop activities which address how children can be safeguarded against SALW. Key to the success of both the Conference and Special Session is proper implementation and follow-up. In this regard, it is fundamentally important that States keep the issue of the impact of small arms on children and war-affected children high on their policy agendas.

Conclusion

The constant reinforcement of the link between children and SALW should be a significant element of the UN Small Arms Conference and the implementation of the Conference commitments. Similarly, the UN Special Session on Children, scheduled for September 2001, should highlight the link between SALW and children, specifically building upon the outcomes of the UN Small Arms Conference. In this regard, SALW should be considered in concert with discussions on armed conflict in general, but also as a separate danger that affects the lives of children in non-conflict situations as well. The current document for the Special Session "A World Fit for Children" currently contains only one reference to the dangers of SALW in a recommendation to "curb the illicit flow of small arms and eliminate threats posed by landmines, unexploded ordinance and other war materiel that victimise children."[55] There is a section dedicated to "protecting against abuse, exploitation and violence" which should include actions to protect children from the impact of small arms. Furthermore, the effects of small arms should be included in other sections of the outcome document, including in the health and education sections.

The impact of small arms on children is complex and will require a long-term approach that recognises that the effects of conflict on children extends far beyond the end of hostilities. Indeed, each recommendation is a long-term programme in its own right. The UN Small Arms Conference will only be able to address one aspect of the problem – the broader impact of the illicit trade in small arms on children. This raises the importance of the Special Session on Children which should build-upon the momentum of the UN Small Arms Conference to address the link between small arms and children. Both are unique opportunities to learn more about the nexus between small arms and children, the steps that can be taken to reduce the impact of these weapons on children, and to prioritise the needs of children. However, the Conference and Special Session notwithstanding, a Framework for Action is the way forward to improve the lives of children by lessening the impact these weapons have on them.

Endnotes

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18 Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs "Protecting Civilians in Armed Conflict" available from http://www.reliefweb.int/ocha_ol/civilians/, Children in War Section.

19 *The Machel Review 1996-2000:ACritical Analysis of Progress Made and Obstacles Encountered in Increasing Protection for War-Affected Children* p.10.

20 The Machel Review 1996-2000 determined that: "Adolescents are at extreme risk during armed conflict. They are targets for recruitment into armed forces and armed groups; they are targets of sexual exploitation and abuse; and they are at great risk of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS. Although adolescents have been neglected in the delivery of health services, education, vocation training and life skills, they continue to be the greatest hope and the greatest resource in rebuilding war-affected communities. Their active participation in community-based relief, recovery, and reconstruction programmes will strengthen and sustain these initiatives while increasing adolescents'sense of purpose, self-esteem, and identity." *The Machel Review 1996-2000: ACritical Analysis of Progress Made and Obstacles Encountered in Increasing Protection for War-Affected Children*. p.3-4.

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31 *The Machel Review 1996-2000: ACritical Analysis of Progress Made and Obstacles Encountered in Increasing Protection for War-Affected Children*. p.5.

32 For more information on the use of child soldiers worldwide and in specific countries, see the website of the International Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers at www.child-soldiers.org

33 Goodwin-Gill, G. & Cohn, I. in *Child Soldiers*, p.173., in Adams, V. "Soldiers sent back to school," *Living Marxism* (archives), Issue 81, July/August 1995, available from: http://www.informinc.co.uk/LM/LM81/LM81_Soldiers.html.

34 Article 38 of the CRC reads, "States Parties undertake to respect and to ensure respect for rules of international humanitarian law applicable to them in armed conflicts which are relevant to the child; States Parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure that persons who have not attained the age of fifteen years do not take a direct part in hostilities; States Parties shall refrain from recruiting any person who has not attained the age of fifteen years into their armed forces. In recruiting among those persons who have attained the age of fifteen years but who have not attained the age of eighteen years, States Parties shall endeavour to give priority to those who are oldest; and In accordance with their obligations under international humanitarian law to protect the civilian population in armed conflicts, States Parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure protection and care of children who are affected by an armed conflict." (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989).

35 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, 1998.

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40 United Nations "Report of the Group of Governmental Experts on Small Arms", A/54/298, 19 August 1999, para.100.

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42 They include the International Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers which was created in 1998 to research and monitor the use of child soldiers worldwide as well as to advocate measures to end the use of child soldiers. The coalition has established partners and national coalitions in nearly 40 countries, encompassing more than 500 organizations. These national campaigns are promoting ratification and implementation of the Optional Protocol, the development of programmes for rehabilitation and reintegration, and sustained assistance to children and their families in war-affected areas. The Child Rights Information Network (CRIN)[42] is a global network that disseminates information about the Convention on the Rights of the Child and child rights in general. CRIN has more than 1,100 participating organisations in over 100 countries. CRIN has information and resources dedicated to the situation of children in armed conflict.

43 Organisations are working to combat the proliferation and misuse of small arms and light weapons, many through the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA). IANSAis a network of over 300 organizations and individuals from 70 countries, aimed at preventing the proliferation and misuse of small arms. IANSAalso has a newly created children's caucus, working to bridge the children's rights and small arms communities and work for coordinated approaches to conflict related issues.

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46 Oxfam, "Reaching for the Gun: The Human Cost of Small arms in Central Mindanao, Philippines," February 2001, p. 35

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48 Muhumuza, R. "Demobilization and Reintegration of Child Soldiers: Lessons from Uganda", World Vision Uganda, March 2001, page 11.

49 Author interview with UNICEF staff Lieke van de Wiel, Bert Theuermann, Iain Levine, Ayda Eke, New York, 23 March 2001.

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51 *The Machel Review 1996-2000: ACritical Analysis of Progress Made and Obstacles Encountered in Increasing Protection for War-Affected Children.* p.11.

52 *The Machel Review 1996-2000: ACritical Analysis of Progress Made and Obstacles Encountered in Increasing Protection for War-Affected Children.* p.10.

53 *The Machel Review 1996-2000: ACritical Analysis of Progress Made and Obstacles Encountered in Increasing Protection for War-Affected Children.* p.23.

54 Most notably, organisations such as Oxfam, Human Rights Watch, and World Vision have implemented research work on the impact of small arms on children. Their success in such endeavours should serve as a model to other organisations conducting such fieldwork and aid programmes.

55 United Nations,"*Third revised outcome document: Aworld fit for children"*, 7 June 2001, A/AC.256/CRP.6/Rev.3.