



CHILDREN IN ARMED CONFLICTS

How to better
protect them?



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Secours Islamique France (SIF) is an independent, humanitarian, and non-profit Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO). Founded in 1991 in France, SIF provides humanitarian and development assistance around the world, as well as social assistance in France. SIF works to meet the basic needs of the most vulnerable, driven by a sense of solidarity and respect for human dignity, and by the humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence. SIF is a signatory to the Code of Conduct for the IFRC (the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement).

GLOSSARY

Armed conflict: an armed confrontation between the armed forces of States (international armed forces), or between governmental authorities and organised armed groups or between such groups within a State (non-international armed conflict).

Child: as defined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years, unless majority is attained earlier under the law applicable to the child.

Rights of the child: as vulnerable human beings, children have specific fundamental rights that ensure their protection, enable their physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development, and allow them to fulfil their potential. All of these rights are linked, are of equal importance, and cannot be taken away from children. The Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is legally binding, lists and explains these rights and sets out governments' responsibilities for applying and enforcing their application and enforcement. This is the most universally accepted international human rights treaty and has been ratified by every country in the world except the USA, i.e. 196 countries.

Child protection: child protection is the prevention of, and response to, abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence against children. Protection is a right of the child. Article 6 of the CRC recognises that every child has the inherent right to life. This is one of the CRC's guiding principles¹. Article 19 makes specific mention of protecting children "from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse".

International Humanitarian Law (IHL): in addition to setting out human rights' legal provisions, IHL also applies to armed conflicts. This is a set of rules that, during armed conflicts, seek to protect people who are not or are no longer participating in the hostilities and restricts the methods and means of warfare (ICRC). These rules apply to both international and non-international armed conflicts.

Protection during armed conflict under the IHL: this includes measures to ensure the full and equal respect of the rights of those people not involved in or no longer taking part in the hostilities (civilians, including children, wounded and sick combatants, and prisoners of war) without discrimination as to age, gender, ethnicity, political or social affiliation, religious beliefs or other considerations. Article 38 of the CRC reaffirms the IHL provisions, stating that "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".

Child protection in humanitarian responses: this involves preventing and responding to acts of physical and psychological abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence against children as part of the humanitarian response to a crisis (Minimum Standards for Child Protection).

Minimum Standards for Child Protection (CPMS)²: minimum standards for child protection in humanitarian action. The CPMS have been developed by the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, a global network of operational agencies, academic institutions, policy-makers, donors and practitioners. Its mission is to support the efforts of humanitarian actors to achieve high-quality and effective child protection interventions in humanitarian contexts. The Alliance facilitates inter-agency technical collaboration on child protection, sets standards and produces technical guidance.

¹ The CRC has four guiding principles: non-discrimination (Article 2), meaning that the Convention applies to all children without distinction; best interests of the child (Article 3); the child's inherent right to life, survival and development (Article 6); and, finally, the child's right to freely express their opinion and to have that opinion taken into account in any matter or procedure affecting the child (Article 12).

² alliancecpha.org/en/child-protection-minimum-standards-working-group

➔ EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2023, nearly one in five children around the world was living in or had fled from a conflict area. This report outlines the challenges for protecting children in armed conflict and sets out the responses provided by Secours Islamique France (SIF), especially in Gaza, Syria and Nigeria. It explores the limitations of existing mechanisms and frameworks, reviews the action taken by the French government, and provides recommendations for France to improve its efforts to protect children in situations of armed conflict.

CHAPTER 1 **The impact of armed conflict on children and SIF's responses, which are child-centred and focus on child protection**

The number of children killed in armed conflicts in 2023 was 3 times higher than 2022. Children caught up in armed conflict are exposed to death, injury, epidemics, malnutrition and are more vulnerable to protection-related risks, such as forced recruitment into armed groups and military forces, forced labour, child marriage, sexual abuse and gender-based violence. The systems in place to ensure child protection and to guarantee their rights, in their homes, schools and communities, are weakened or destroyed, exacerbating their vulnerability.

SIF provides emergency responses and long-term interventions, always using a child rights-based approach. SIF focuses on the most vulnerable children, those least able to access their rights, and implements programmes in partnership with children, their families, communities and the authorities, as well as with humanitarian organisations, in order to provide a tailored response and ensure sustainable interventions. Taking into account the specific impacts of armed conflict on children, their vulnerability and their diversity, SIF prioritises multi-sector child-centred programmes, aiming at protecting children from the immediate dangers of war and from all types of abuse. This involves systematically considering specific child protection challenges and implementing targeted activities to address them: access to identity documentation, emergency education, psychosocial monitoring and support, child protection case management, and strengthening child protection systems. It also includes tackling gender-based violence, improving the livelihoods of children's caregivers, ensuring access to water, sanitation and hygiene, and ensuring food security.

CHAPTER 2 **The limitations of legal frameworks and international mechanisms for ensuring child protection in armed conflict**

There is an international legal framework in place designed to guarantee the protection of children in armed conflict. The standards for protecting children in armed conflict are set out in International Humanitarian Law, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, United Nations Security Council resolutions, as well as a range of soft law instruments. There is, therefore, an international consensus on protecting children in situations of armed conflict. Yet, despite this, violations persist and the number of grave violations of the rights of the child is constantly on the rise. The United Nations have set up a Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism, (MRM) to identify and verify these violations and hold parties in conflict accountable; however, its effectiveness is being limited by difficulties accessing armed conflict zones and a lack of resources. Sanctions mechanisms, whether judicial or not, are failing to have the required impact. Tackling impunity remains a major challenge. States have a key role to play in enforcing compliance with the collective standards, strengthening the monitoring mechanisms in place, and ensuring that the perpetrators of violations are held accountable for their acts.

CHAPTER 3 **France's commitment to child protection in armed conflict must be renewed**

On the diplomatic front, France has played a leading role within the UN Security Council to advance the protection of children in situations of armed conflict. France has notably initiated the key UN Security Council resolutions that defined the grave violations committed against children during armed conflict and established the MRM. It also initiated the adoption of the Paris Principles and Commitments to combat the recruitment of children into armed groups and forces, and supported the adoption of the various soft law instruments. Given the increase in armed conflicts and the lack of international funding allocated to child protection in crisis situations, political support for this issue needs to be ensured at all times. Key initiatives and milestones, such as the multi-country initiative on compliance with International Humanitarian Law (IHL) planned for 2025 and 2026 and the 20th anniversary of the Paris Principles in 2027, provide France with an opportunity to step up

ambitions. Furthermore, while France has shown that it is able to drive progress on the diplomatic front, its humanitarian action on child protection remains more limited in scope. Although France's Humanitarian Strategy includes specific measures, funding allocated to the sector remains insufficient and child protection challenges and needs are not yet systematically included in humanitarian interventions. The massive and unacceptable cuts to the 2025 Official Development Assistance (ODA) budget will make it even more difficult for France to honour its commitments.

CHAPTER 4 **SIF's recommendations for France**

Despite international consensus on child protection, and despite UN initiatives, the rights of the child continue to be violated with few or no consequences. This situation is being exacerbated by the lack of suitable humanitarian funding available at the global level for meeting children's needs, as well as of the funding available through France's international solidarity policy. With the world facing increasingly complex and multi-faceted conflicts, with peace processes being difficult to put in place, and given the increasing disregard for international humanitarian law, international human rights and the rights of the child, there is an urgent need to find a way to ensure that collective standards on protecting children in armed conflict are applied and reinforced. France must ensure there is political support for child protection in armed conflict at the highest level and renew its commitment.

The detailed list of SIF's recommendations for the French government and Parliament is available in Chapter 4 of this report.





➤ INTRODUCTION

In 2023, nearly one in five children around the world was living in or had fled from a conflict area³ and, in 2022 and 2023, 40% of all forcibly displaced people were under the age of 18⁴.

Following a period of relative calm in the 1990s and early 2000s, the number of wars being fought continues to rise⁵. Children are more exposed to the risk of conflict today than they were 20 years ago. **There are currently over 120 armed conflicts taking place around the world⁶**. With war breaking out in both Sudan and Gaza over the course of the same year, **the number of civilian deaths, including children, shot up by 72% in 2023⁷**. In June 2024, the United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Human Rights highlighted that the number of children killed in 2023 was triple that of the previous year⁸.

Conflicts are also lasting longer. The wars in Yemen, the Sahel, Ethiopia and Ukraine, which broke out several years ago, are all still ongoing. The war in Syria went on for nearly 14 years and the security situation in the country remains highly unstable. The use of explosive weapons in populated urban areas is further amplifying the intensity of conflicts by causing more combat-related fatalities and increased risks for child survival.

Children, both girls and boys, can also be deliberately targeted, whether by bombs aimed at schools and hospitals, or by kidnappings and recruitment into armed groups and forces as fighters, cooks or sex slaves. Armed conflicts result in all of the systems set up to protect children in their homes, schools and communities being damaged or destroyed. Basic social services, critical for children's health and development, are also directly affected.

Vulnerable due to their age and dependence on adults, children bear the brunt of armed conflicts, despite countries being under the obligation to respect their rights. In this report, SIF draws attention to the violence being suffered by children, the lack of respect for international standards and the impunity afforded to the perpetrators of rights of the child violations. SIF also calls for renewed commitment to protecting children caught up in armed conflicts.

² OCHA, *Global Humanitarian Overview 2025*, 2024.

³ UNHCR, *Global Trends, Forced Displacement in 2022*, UNHCR, *Figures At A Glance*, 2024.

⁴ Crisis Group, *10 Conflicts to Watch in 2024*, January 2024.

⁵ ICRC, *ICRC in 2024: Upholding humanity in conflict*, December 2024.

⁶ *High Commissioner for Human Rights Highlights the Cruelty of War and the Urgent Need to Find the Way Back to Peace as he Presents his Global Update at the Opening of the Fifty-Sixth Regular Session of the Human Rights Council*, Volker Türk, June 2024. *Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights*, A/79/36, July 2024.

⁸ *Ibid.*





CHAPTER 1

THE IMPACT OF ARMED CONFLICT ON CHILDREN AND SIF'S RESPONSES

THE IMPACT OF ARMED CONFLICT ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Armed conflicts restrict or prevent children, their families, and the wider community from accessing basic services, which has a catastrophic impact on children's rights, including their rights to health, water and food, as well as to education and protection. Services may be located in unsafe or inaccessible areas, deteriorate, or become unavailable due to damage, or to lack of equipment or personnel. Already structurally vulnerable basic services tend to deteriorate extremely rapidly, and are frequently all the harder to restore as conflicts are becoming more drawn out. In addition to making it difficult to meet the key challenge of raising sufficient funds, the increasingly protracted nature of armed conflicts complicates efforts to find the human resources required to run basic services, as the people with the necessary skills may be killed, displaced, or unable and/or unwilling to return to war-torn areas.

In crisis situations, including armed conflicts, SIF's aim is to first provide sufficient emergency assistance to children and their community to protect them from the imminent dangers of death, injury and illnesses linked, for example, to damaged infrastructure, or to a lack of water or food. In parallel to the emergency response, and to effectively respond to prolonged crises, medium and long-term actions are also developed to address the lasting effects of crises on children and on the formal systems⁹ designed to support their rights. These actions can include rebuilding or rehabilitating basic infrastructure, building the capacities of service stakeholders and institutions, and advocating for improved public policies. All of these actions are implemented using the rights of the child-based approach (see below).

Child rights-based approach

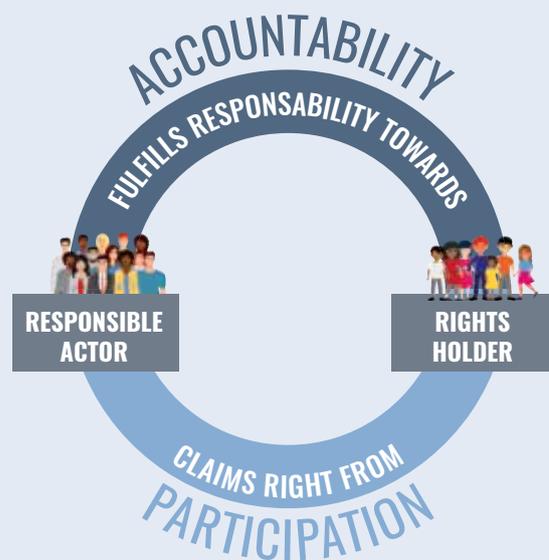
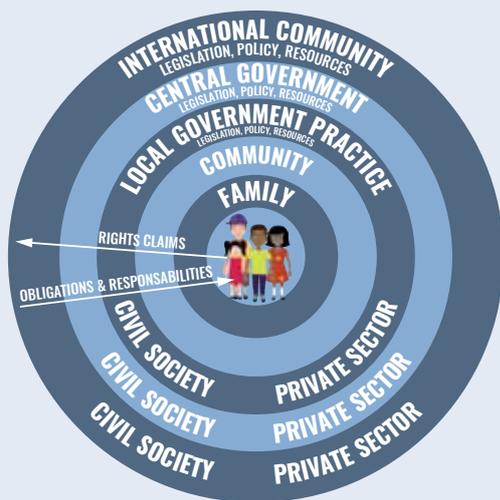
SIF has adopted a child rights-based approach (CRBA), the aim of which is to tackle the root causes of failures to realise the rights of the child by focusing on the most vulnerable and marginalised children. This approach uses the social ecological model for children to ensure that all problems encountered by children, and the solutions available at all levels, are systematically taken into account to develop suitable responses:

- Children, holders of specific rights, and who require appropriate protection, are provided with support to become agents of their own development and to claim their rights.
- They are raised in families or by others, who themselves are part of communities that make up society (family, community, civil society, private sector). Those with duties and responsibilities towards children are empowered and provided with support to help them realise the rights of the child.
- These different levels within society are also influenced by States, institutions¹⁰ and, more generally, by the international context¹¹. These are the duty bearers who are responsible for ensuring that the rights of the child are respected, promoted and protected.

⁹ Official state and local authority systems that provide people with access to basic services, or systems managed and set up by State-recognised institutions (education, health, water, sanitation, protection, etc.). There are also informal systems that operate in parallel to these formal systems. These are not part of the official system and are thus not recognised by the State; however, they are seen as being effective and stable and have legitimacy among communities. They can provide access to services to people in areas where the State or local authority systems have broken down, are absent or not fit for purpose.

¹⁰ These are State services (central government and deconcentrated agencies) and local authorities.

¹¹ For more information on the socio-ecological approach, please see Standard 14 of the CPMS.



Diagrams illustrating the rights of the child-based approach¹²

Using this approach, SIF works in partnership with children, families, communities and States to implement comprehensive programmes to prevent and respond to violations of the rights of the child. SIF also develops programmes in partnership with other international and local stakeholders, including Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), to ensure a multi-sector approach.

The implementation of a CRBA reinforces the relevance and positive impact of projects, including by sustainably and positively transforming formal systems to ensure they become more respectful of the rights of the child and more resilient to crises (especially through capacity-building and advocacy campaigns).

SIF is a member of

+ GROUPE ENFANCE

SIF is a member of Groupe Enfant, a network of 19 French NGOs created in 2014 to promote the realisation of children’s rights worldwide. SIF has contributed to the “Checklist”¹⁴ and to several other practical factsheets developed for use by sector professionals to facilitate integration of the CRBA into the project cycle. SIF has also helped to develop factsheets on the right to education¹⁵, and on the rights of the child in crisis situations¹⁶ and provided project case studies for the Groupe Enfant publication on the implementation of the CRBA in crisis situations¹⁷.



¹² Save the children, *Child Rights Programming: How to Apply Rights-Based Approaches to Programming*, 2006.

¹³ [Groupe-enfant.org](http://groupe-enfant.org)

¹⁴ Groupe Enfant, *Checklist to Integrate the Child Rights-Based Approach into the Project Cycle*, 2020.

¹⁵ Groupe Enfant, *Droits de l’enfant et éducation*, 2021.

¹⁶ Groupe Enfant, *Droits de l’enfant et contextes de crise*, octobre 2024.

¹⁷ Groupe Enfant, *Mise en œuvre de l’approche fondée sur les droits de l’enfant (AFDE) en contextes de crise – Capitalisation de pratiques inspirantes*, July 2024.



▷ ENSURE ACCESS TO WATER, SANITATION AND HYGIENE

In conflict areas, children under the age of 5 are 20 times more likely to die of waterborne diseases, such as cholera or typhoid, linked to unsafe water and sanitation than from direct violence as a result of war¹⁸. Facilities are often damaged in the conflicts and water resources become polluted by debris and the remnants of war. Warring parties sometimes also deliberately destroy or take control of water resources and distribution, using water as a weapon, which is in contravention of IHL and of UN security Council

Resolution 2417 (2018) prohibiting the use of famine as a weapon of war. As healthcare services collapse, and medical staff, medicines and equipment become scarcer, infant mortality and morbidity rates increase, notably as a result of waterborne diseases. Attacks on hospitals, which constitute a grave violation of both the rights of the child and IHL, are also becoming more frequent. The Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition recorded 2,562 attacks on healthcare services in 2023¹⁹.

Installing water purifiers in the Mile camp for Sudanese refugees in Chad

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), more than 60,000 people have been killed in the armed clashes that broke out in Sudan in 2023. 14 million children are in need of humanitarian assistance²⁰. Chad, which neighbours Sudan, hosts around one-third of the refugees to have left Sudan in camps in the east of the country. In 2024, SIF distributed 200 water purifiers in the Mile refugee camp located in the Wadi-Fira region of Chad with a view to preventing the spread of deadly waterborne diseases. These water purifiers are able to filter 180 litres of contaminated water an hour, making it safe to drink. Used by households, they operate via a handpump and so do not require electricity. SIF has delivered training to the community on operating these water purifiers so that they can be used by as many people as possible, and for as long as possible. These devices make logistics easier as they can be used instead of chlorine tablets, and mean people are no longer forced to dig deep wells in the overcrowded camps in search of clean water. By removing bacteria, these water purifiers enable people to get water from their nearest spring, even if this water is initially unsafe.

¹⁸ UNICEF, *Water under Fire*, March 2019.

¹⁹ Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition, *Critical condition, Violence against health care in conflict*, 2023.

²⁰ The UN and the crisis in Sudan. Due to the fighting, it is not possible to systematically record the number of people killed, therefore these figures may be significantly under-estimated.

Preventing cholera in Al Zhouriyeh displaced persons camp in Syria

In December 2021, the displaced people living in Al Zhouriyeh camp were faced with the risk of a cholera epidemic. SIF, who had been working in the camp to provide displaced children with access to education and with protection services, adapted our project to work on improving hygiene conditions and access to drinking water. We also delivered cholera prevention awareness-raising sessions to parents and children.

SIF worked with the United Nations Population Fund (UNPF) to disseminate tailored messages to children, and to pregnant and breastfeeding women. Personal hygiene kits containing toothbrushes, toothpaste, towels, shampoo and hairbrushes were issued to all the children in the camp. In conjunction with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC), we used purifying tablets to ensure that the water stored in the SIF education centre's water tanks was safe for the children to drink. Where necessary, SIF referred children and parents to the camp's medical facilities being run by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and SARC.

We were able to reorganise our activities to deal with the cholera epidemic by reallocating available funds, made possible by the flexibility of our donors. This highlights the importance of ensuring there is a flexible emergency funding and multi-sector coordination mechanism in place to respond to changing needs, which include preventive measures, ensuring that the response takes all rights of the child into account, and forging partnerships with organisations with complementary skills to coordinate responses.

▷ ENSURE FOOD SECURITY²¹ AND LIVELIHOODS²²

Malnutrition rates in food crisis areas continue to grow, particularly in regions affected by armed conflict. There were 36.4 million children aged under five suffering from acute malnutrition in 2023²³.

Armed conflicts fuel food insecurity via war tactics such as confiscating and destroying land and agricultural resources, livestock and other livelihood assets, or obstructing access to humanitarian aid in violation of IHL and of UN Security Council Resolution 2417 (2018) prohibiting the use of famine as a weapon of war. Armed conflict also has an indirect impact on food systems and livelihoods by triggering higher food prices, making areas difficult or impossible to access thereby impeding the flow of goods, and by preventing people from growing crops in their fields as these contain explosive weapons. People forced to flee their homes to escape the conflict have to leave their livelihoods behind and thus find themselves unable to ensure their food security. These situations can result in families adopting negative coping strategies that are harmful to their children (neglect, child labour, child marriage, etc.).

Malnutrition can have very serious impacts for children. In addition to the risk of mortality, malnutrition can cause growth retardation that



affects children's size and weight and which has an irreversible effect on their physical and cognitive development. Malnutrition increases children's likelihood of catching infectious diseases as it weakens their immune system. Malnutrition also affects children's mental health, leading to anxiety and depression. Over the longer term, malnourished children are more likely to suffer from learning difficulties and behavioural issues, which can negatively impact their school performances and social integration.

²¹ Food security: food security exists when all people at all times have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life (CPMS).

²² In the context of food security, livelihoods are the methods used by households to obtain and maintain access to basic necessities such as food, water, shelter, clothing, health care and education (Committee on World Food Security).

²³ Global Network Against Food Crises, Food Security Information Network, *Global Report on Food Crises, Joint Analysis for Better Decisions, 2024*.

Distributing emergency food parcels and improving livelihoods in Yemen

9 years into the conflict in Yemen, 10 million children remain in urgent need of humanitarian assistance²⁴. More than 2.7 million children are acutely malnourished and 49% of children under the age of five suffer from stunting or chronic malnutrition²⁵. Working in Yemen since 2018, SIF has run a number of campaigns to deliver food parcels that meet the nutritional needs of children and their families and which also help reduce the financial pressure on households. SIF has targeted internally displaced people who have received no other humanitarian assistance, live in remote hard-to-reach areas and have no income-generating opportunities.



Zarrena V., the SIF head of mission in Yemen, explains: “Here in Yemen’s displaced person’s camps, people have just one thing on their minds: finding food. They are racked by hunger, which is taking a huge toll, as well as being traumatised by what they went through before and during their flight from their homes. For these people in distress, food support is vital to their survival: they are entirely dependent on humanitarian assistance”. A situation that is exacerbated by the soaring price of food, 90% of which is now having to be imported due to shortages. More than 80% of Yemen’s population live below the poverty line (€3.30 per day).

Supported by the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs Crisis and Support Centre, SIF has been providing cash transfers to families to enable them to eat better, avoid getting into debt and prevent them from adopting negative coping strategies that cause harm to their children (neglect, child labour, child marriage, etc.). More generally, cash transfers can also successfully support local markets and strengthen communities’ resilience. Families have also been provided with vocational training and support for setting up community savings groups.

Rehabilitating irrigation channels in Syria

During the conflict in Syria, the damage to irrigation systems, coupled with persistent drought, prevented many farmers from working their land resulting in the loss of vast areas of farmland and a dramatic drop in production. This has led to a decline in livelihoods for thousands of families, exacerbating an already critical food crisis. In 2023, nearly 50% of Syria’s population were suffering from food insecurity and 70% were dependent on humanitarian assistance. In partnership with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 2021, then with the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the Syria Humanitarian Fund in 2022 and 2023, SIF has rehabilitated more than 90km of irrigation channels in the governorates of Aleppo and Hama



in order to revitalise farmland, restore farming families’ livelihoods and improve their food security. Our projects have also had a positive impact on the local job market, creating short-term infrastructure rehabilitation jobs and supporting longer-term employment in the agricultural sector.

²⁴ UNICEF, *9 years into the conflict in Yemen, millions of children are malnourished and stunted*, 26 March 2024.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

THE SPECIFIC IMPACT OF ARMED CONFLICT ON CHILD PROTECTION FROM VIOLENCE

→ AN INCREASE IN GRAVE VIOLATIONS OF THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

The United Nations has identified **6 grave violations of the rights of the child** that occur during armed conflict and these are defined in UN Security Council Resolution 1261 (1999):

1 the killing and maiming of children through military acts that directly or indirectly target children, resulting in their death or injury from cross-fire, landmines, cluster munitions, explosive devices, the shelling of their homes, bombardments, or during searches and arrests.

2 the recruitment and use of children, which includes the compulsory or voluntary conscription or enlistment of children by government armed forces or non-state armed groups, regardless of the role they are assigned (combatants, cooks, porters, messengers, spies, etc.). Girls are also recruited, sometimes as sex slaves or to be forced into marriage.

3 the abduction of children, which includes the temporary or permanent capture, arrest or enforced disappearance of a child.

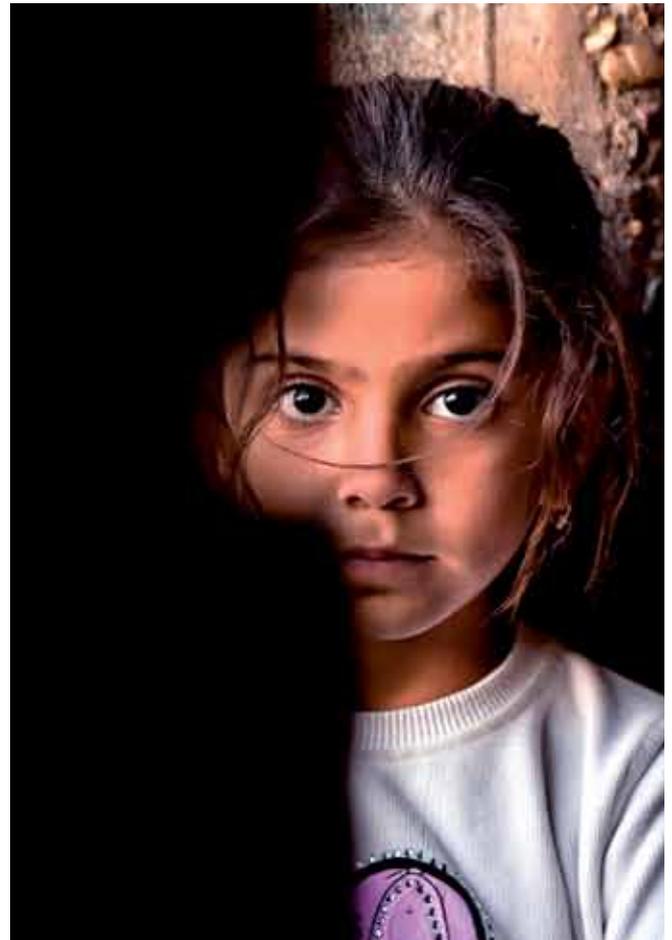
4 sexual violence against children, which includes sexual slavery and/or trafficking, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy and marriage, enforced sterilisation, sexual exploitation and/or sexual abuse.

5 attacks against schools and hospitals that target and partially or totally destroy teaching and healthcare facilities, use them for military purposes or cause damage of any sort to schools and hospitals or their personnel.

6 denial of humanitarian access to children, through which armed forces intentionally hold up or block essential humanitarian aid from reaching children.

The number of grave violations verified each year continues to increase, with 32,990 grave violations verified by the UN in 2023, the highest figure in almost 10 years²⁶.

The United Nations condemned the shocking 21% increase in grave violations in 2023 compared to the previous year, noting that all over the world, children bore the brunt of multiplying and escalating crises. This increase is predominantly due to a rise in the use of explosive weapons in highly populated areas and to indiscriminate attacks against civilians and civilian objects, including infrastructure. And, while these figures are already too high, they represent only a fraction of the alleged violations: difficulties accessing conflict areas, security issues, and the fact that the children having experienced these violations do not always report them means it is impossible to comprehensively identify and verify all the violations that take place.



Obstacles to delivering humanitarian aid in Gaza

Since the beginning of the conflict, SIF has been working to reach children in need in the Gaza Strip but has frequently faced obstacles impacting the implementation of the activities. Continued insecurity, attacks against humanitarian workers, and the complete or partial closure of the various crossing points hampers severely the delivery of aid.

SIF had planned to deliver food parcels to 8,000 displaced families (approximately 44,800 people) in Dair al Balah and Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip between July and October 2024. With our local partner Beit Lahia Development Association (BLDA), we had also planned to distribute hot meals to 500 families twice a week for over 4 weeks, prioritising families with children under 5 and/or with pregnant and breastfeeding women. We were only able to finally carry out these activities in January and February 2025. However, SIF successfully delivered 32 tonnes of meat to Gaza via Egypt in September and October 2024.

In the north of Gaza, SIF was able to deliver 20 tonnes of Ready-to-Use Therapeutic Food (RUTF) to treat severe acute malnutrition, and around 20 tonnes of Ready-to-Use Supplementary Food (RUSF) to treat acute moderate malnutrition in children over 6 months old. Deliveries had been scheduled for August 2024, but these essential food items were only allowed into Gaza at the end of November. SIF worked with the local partner, the Palestinian Agricultural Development Association (PARC), to deliver these therapeutic food items to 7 hospitals and healthcare centres in the city of Gaza²⁷ to feed children under 5 and pregnant and/or breastfeeding women.

The number of children killed and maimed in Gaza remains unknown. The acronym WCNSF (Wounded Child, No Surviving Family) used by medical and humanitarian staff reflects the impact of the conflict on children. The needs of children in Gaza remain critical. Prior to the conflict, SIF supported 4,800 orphans in Gaza as part of our sponsorship programme. Since the outbreak of the conflict, however, supporting these orphans has been extremely challenging as the children and their families or guardians, and our local teams, have had to constantly move locations to escape the bombing. We sometimes lost contact with them for several weeks. According to current information, more than 30 children we supported through our programme are either dead or missing. Faced with the ongoing desperate plight of the children in Gaza, SIF is planning on providing support to a further 1,500 orphans.

²⁷ Al-Sahaba Hospital, Al-Helo Hospital, Friends of the Patient Hospital, Caritas Jerusalem Clinic, Al-Daraj Primary Health Care Clinic, Sheikh Radwan Primary Health Care Clinic, and Al-Shati Primary Health Care Clinic.



→ AN INCREASED RISK OF ABUSE, NEGLECT, EXPLOITATION AND MALTREATMENT DUE TO ARMED CONFLICT

In humanitarian crises, children are more exposed to protection-related risks such as enforced labour, child marriage, exploitation and various forms of violence, including abuse, gender-based violence and sexual abuse. SIF strives to prevent

harm to children and to protect them from becoming or being victims. The programmes we implement also seek to provide children with the security and stability they need to grow.

Do no harm to children: our Child Safeguarding Policy and compliance with protection standards

SIF ensures compliance with the principle of 'do no harm' at all times: our work and that of our partners must do no harm to children (or anyone else), either intentionally or inadvertently, and must not exacerbate rights violations or create social tensions²⁸. This is especially important in crisis situations as children's usual protection networks may be weakened or no longer exist. In some contexts, and particularly in crisis situations, defending certain rights of the child can generate reluctance and tension among communities and the authorities (such as ensuring education for girls or adopting positive discipline practices to eradicate the use of corporal punishment). It is therefore vital to involve local stakeholders in programmes to properly tailor interventions, promote dialogue to tackle norms and behaviours that are detrimental to children's rights, and minimise any negative impacts.

The Child Safeguarding Policy guides all our day-to-day activities and interventions. It ensures that our staff and projects do no harm to the children with whom we are in direct or indirect contact and that these children are not exposed to risk of harm and/or abuse. This policy formalises the procedures in place to improve our prevention initiatives and our ability to effectively manage all child protection and safeguarding related incidents. All of our staff, volunteers and partners must comply with this Child Safeguarding Policy and ensure that it is implemented. SIF's interventions are also based on international standards, including: the Keeping Children Safe Standards (KCS), the SPHERE Handbook, the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS), as well as the Minimum Standards for Child Protection (CPMS), the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies Minimum Standards (INEE), and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee guidelines (IASC).

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Accountability towards the affected children

By taking into account the opinion of the people and communities affected and at risk, including children, fostering their involvement and by reporting back to them, we ensure that the humanitarian response we provide is appropriate, effective and meets their actual needs. SIF puts in place feedback and complaint management systems, which include tools adapted to children, such as suggestion boxes, children's clubs, and children's complaints committees, which are overseen by child representatives in charge of collecting and forwarding complaints to our teams. These tools are devised and designed by the children themselves during brainstorming sessions to ensure that they are adapted to their needs and are actually used.



▷ ENSURE ACCESS TO IDENTITY DOCUMENTS

In conflict situations, it is common for children to be left without documentation to prove their identity as these identity papers are often destroyed, left behind, or lost if children become separated from their family²⁹ or are unaccompanied³⁰. 'Lack of identity' exposes children to greater protection-related risks, such as child marriage, abduction, trafficking, exploitation, and recruitment into the regular armed forces if they are unable to prove their age³¹. Identity documents are also essential for preventing children from becoming stateless, especially if they are forcibly displaced, and for ensuring they have access to basic services, such as health and education.

While documents can be lost as direct result of conflicts, it is important to bear in mind that, around the world, there are 150 million children under the age of 5 (i.e. 2 in every 10 children) whose births have never been registered, and 50 million children whose births have been registered but who have no birth certificate³². It is vital that parents and caregivers are provided with awareness-raising on the importance of registering children³³ and with help obtaining identity papers so that children can access their rights and are better protected, including during armed conflict.

Rehabilitation of registry offices in Syria

Registry offices are the institutions in charge of registering births, deaths, marriages and divorces in Syria. In 2023 and 2024, SIF worked in partnership with UNHCR to rehabilitate 16 registry office buildings in the Homs governorate, helping to restore critical documentation systems. This has helped provide adults and children with the legal identity documents they need to access their rights, particularly with regard to education, healthcare, jobs, housing and land ownership.

²⁹ Children separated from both parents or from their previous legal or customary primary caregiver, but not necessarily from other relatives. These may, therefore, include children accompanied by other adult family members (CPMS).

³⁰ Children who have been separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so (CPMS).

³¹ The 1977 Protocols Additional to the Geneva Convention limit the recruitment and participation of children in hostilities based on their age. While the first protocol requires states to "take all feasible measures in order that children who have not attained the age of fifteen years do not take a direct part in hostilities", the second is stricter as it prohibits children under the age of 15 from being recruited into the armed forces and from directly or indirectly taking part in hostilities. The Optional Protocol to the CRC on the involvement of children in armed conflict places even greater restrictions on children's participation in hostilities by raising the age to 18. The signatory countries of these protocols are therefore required to comply with these age limits.

³² UNICEF, *The right start in life: Global levels and trends in birth registration, 2024 update*.

³³ Births, deaths, refugee status, etc.

▷ PROVIDE PSYCHOSOCIAL³⁴ AND MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT³⁵

Armed conflicts have a significant impact on children's mental health. Childhood is a critical period for a person's cognitive, physical, emotional, linguistic and social development. It is during this period that the foundations are laid for the future adult's well-being and resilience that will impact their physical and mental health, their learning abilities, and their ability to build and maintain relationships with others. The psychological trauma of all that children see and hear

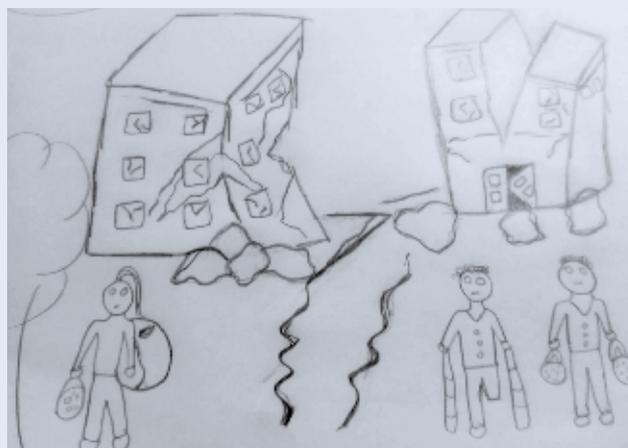
in times of war, the changes to their social environment caused by losing their parents or by the breakdown of family and community ties, the physical injuries they suffer, the hardships they endure, their exposure to bombing campaigns and to prolonged and excessive periods of stress all have an impact on their well-being and development, and long-lasting effects on their social and economic inclusion.

Asking children impacted by the conflict in Lebanon to express their emotions through drawing

The conflict that broke out in Lebanon in September 2024 has caused the deaths of thousands of people, including children, and led to large-scale population displacement. Large numbers of children have had to flee their homes, taking with them just a few personal effects, and have found themselves unable to attend school as the majority have been closed or transformed into collective shelters. This situation has had a devastating effect on their well-being and mental health.

Before the ceasefire, SIF encouraged these children to express their emotions through drawing in order to build an understanding of

how they perceived what they were experiencing and to help reduce their stress and anxiety. The children's drawings revealed their fears and anxieties, and the impact of these on their social and economic inclusion are likely to be felt for the rest of their lives. Aged between 7 and 16 years old, the Lebanese, Syrian and Palestinian children who volunteered to take part in this activity have all been displaced because of the conflict. They were given no instructions as to what they should draw but all of the drawings collected showed a visual representation of the conflict in some form.



For further details, please see our article and video on the drawings and children's testimonies.



Improve the social and emotional well-being of children in the West Bank

Through the SIF children and young orphan sponsorship programme, 668 children in 7 governorates in the West Bank (Tubas, Jenin, Ramallah, Naplouse, Bethlehem, Salfit and Hebron) are provided with funding for their schooling, as well as psychosocial support and one-on-one or family advisory services, and a range of recreational activities. We have also provided capacity-building to community stakeholders to promote child protection, positive parenting training for children's guardians, training for teachers and school counsellors on positive discipline practices, and have run awareness-raising campaigns on the rights of the child and on promoting their rights in their communities.

All of these activities seek to improve the resilience of children and those responsible for them by enhancing their social and emotional well-being, and aim to protect children from violence, abuse, exploitation, neglect and harmful practices.

³⁴ Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS): any type of local or outside support that aims to protect or promote psychosocial well-being and prevent or treat mental health conditions. MHPSS programmes aim to (1) reduce and prevent harm, (2) strengthen resilience to recover from adversity, and (3) improve the care conditions that enable children and families to survive and thrive (CPMS).

³⁵ Mental health: a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realise their abilities, learn and work well, and contribute to their community (WHO).

▷ IMPROVE INFORMAL PROTECTION SYSTEMS

In the absence of functioning formal protection systems, and when parents and children's caregivers are themselves under severe stress due to armed conflict, which can lead them to resort to negative coping strategies that are harmful to children (neglect, child labour, child marriage,

etc.), it becomes vital that informal protection systems are improved. SIF works to improve family and childcare environments and creates or strengthens community-based informal protection mechanisms.

Creation of safe spaces for women and children in Nigeria

Zamfara state in north-western Nigeria is plagued by widespread violence. Poverty and a lack of jobs and basic services have resulted in a rise in the number of armed groups in the region. Looting, kidnapping and murder are all on the increase and have forced thousands of people from their homes.

SIF has set up safe spaces for women and children, girls and boys, and particularly the victims of gender-based violence and/or sexual abuses. Women and children can come to these spaces to take part in recreational activities and receive psychosocial support. These safe spaces are used to manage cases of violence and to refer women and children to specialist protection and sexual and reproductive health services. Information is provided on humanitarian activities, reproductive and sexual health, preventing and responding to sexual abuse, and childcare.

The safe spaces seek to help and improve the resilience of women and children who have survived or are at risk of abuse, at the same time as building an informal mutual support network. SIF has also set up a telephone helpline. People with disabilities who are in need of psychosocial support are provided with specific assistance to ensure they have barrier-free access to services, particularly through follow-up home visits.

Community protection mechanisms in camps in the West Bank

In 2024, SIF launched a child protection project that has been extended to run through 2025. The project has been implemented in 3 refugee camps: Balata and Askar camps (in Naplouse governorate) and Noor Shams camp (in Tulkarem governorate). We first carried out emergency interventions to improve access to prevention and protection services for children and young adults. The children and young adults in the camps received training on life skills and took part in recreational activities in specially designed spaces. The project subsequently focused on improving community protection mechanisms. This has involved working with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) to create and support community child protection committees. Young volunteers were also trained to run activities in support of children's rights in the camps, including self-protection sessions and childhood protection awareness-raising campaigns, in order to foster behaviour change in the target communities.

In parallel, the SIF social workers held group sessions on psychological first aid, ran one-one-one counselling sessions for children, young people and their families, and identified and referred at-risk children to specialist services. SIF also provided financial assistance to high-risk families to help them meet their basic needs without resorting to negative coping strategies.

▷ PROMOTE INTEGRATED CHILD PROTECTION AND EDUCATION APPROACHES

225 million children living in conflict and crisis situations are in need of educational support³⁶, a figure that is 3 times higher than in 2016 (75 million). Children living in countries affected by conflict are more likely to not attend school. This is especially true for displaced children. Schools are often closed due to the fighting, used as displaced persons shelters or by armed groups for military purposes, and they are coming increasingly under attack. **The Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack identified around 6,000 attacks on schools and universities, students and educators and cases of the military use of education facilities in 2022 and 2023, a rise of nearly 20% compared to the previous two years³⁷.**

Food insecurity and loss of livelihoods can also result in the most vulnerable families taking their children out of school, exposing them to child labour and to recruitment by armed forces. **In conflict situations, girls are 2.5 times more likely to be taken out of school³⁸ than boys**, often being required to take on the housework, go out to work or look after their siblings. They are particularly vulnerable to early marriage. Many children never return to school and will find it extremely difficult later in life to find work in the formal sector and earn a decent wage. Lack of

access to education has a considerable impact on a society's ability to tackle inequalities and ensure social cohesion.

In addition to loss of learning, lack of access to education affects children's access to essential basic services such as water supply and food, as well as to psychological and psychosocial support and child protection services. School provides children with an environment in which to play, reconnect with other children, regain a sense of normality and security, and where they can articulate their trauma through recreational and psychosocial activities. School acts as a gateway to psychological health, mental health and child protection services, as cases can be identified by the teaching community and referred to the relevant services. School is even more important for children who have lost family members due to armed conflict, have become separated from their parents or guardian or are unaccompanied and who are unable to access protection services to support them.

SIF prioritises integrated child protection and education programmes to provide children with access to learning, build their resilience to trauma through psychosocial support activities, and manage child protection cases.

Providing access to informal education and managing child protection cases in Syria

More than 2.4 million children do not attend school in Syria, with another 1 million children at risk of dropping out³⁹. In partnership with UNICEF, SARC and Syria's Ministry of Education, SIF has been working since 2021 on providing access to education and to child protection services for children who are out of school or at risk of drop out.

Children at risk of dropping out of school attend support classes in the learning centres set up by SIF, including one in the Al Zhouriyeh displaced persons camp. To encourage children to return to school, families are provided with awareness-raising through "Back to Learning" campaigns, with a special focus on girls' education. Children are invited to take part in the "self-learning programme" to learn basic skills and are given support to (re)integrate the formal education system. Some parents who were initially reluctant to send their children to school changed their minds once their children had completed the informal education programme.

All the children take part in recreational activities to develop their ability to handle day-to-day challenges and express their fears (stress management, emotional self-regulation, problem solving). Children also attend psychosocial support sessions; children with protection issues are identified and referred to specialist services.

SIF provides capacity-building to those responsible for the children's well-being and education. This includes training for the teachers (teaching methods, class management, inclusive education, psychosocial support and school violence prevention, learning assessments, etc.), as well as for community leaders on managing child protection cases and providing psychosocial support. Support groups have also been created for parents and guardians.

³⁶ Geneva Global Hub for Education in Emergencies, 2023.

³⁷ Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA), *Education Under Attack*, June 2024.

³⁸ UNESCO, *Education for All Global Monitoring Report, Humanitarian Aid for Education: Why It Matters and Why More is Needed*, June 2015.

³⁹ UNICEF, *Peace must prevail for Syria's children*, December 2024.

The intersectionality of children's vulnerabilities

Already vulnerable due to their age and dependence on adults, some children are even more affected by armed conflicts than others as they are marginalised because of their socio-economic situation, their status, their gender, their disability, their sexual orientation, and/or their ethnic or cultural origin. And vulnerabilities often overlap.

Gender-differentiated impacts

In situations of armed conflict, boys account for the vast majority of child victims of recruitment and use by warring parties (85%), abduction (76%), killing and maiming (70%)⁴⁰ because they are more likely to be out in the communities than girls, and may also be more likely to be perceived as combatants⁴¹.



Girls make up one-quarter (26%) of all the child victims of verified grave violations, compared to 73% of boys; however, 98% of child victims of rape and other forms of sexual abuse are girls.

Girls are therefore more exposed to the risks of sexually transmitted disease, teenage pregnancy and maternal mortality. Violations against girls are less frequently reported than those against boys due to social norms and harmful gender-related behaviour that stigmatises against girls, as well as fear of rejection by their community and safety concerns for girls and their families. Crisis situations tend to amplify existing exclusion dynamics, such as gender inequality, highlighting the vital importance of targeted interventions for both girls and boys.

Children with disabilities

In crisis situations, children with disabilities are at greater risk of violence, discrimination, abuse and neglect. They may be unable to protect themselves during attacks and shelling and unable to escape from danger. Access to healthcare, medicine and specialist equipment is often impossible, both during and in the aftermath of armed conflict. Armed conflicts also leave more children with disabilities. **According to UNICEF, for every child killed in an emergency or conflict situation, 3 are injured or left permanently disabled.** The use of explosive weapons in populated areas means that more and more children are being maimed, suffering internal injuries and experiencing long-term psychosocial distress.

Data on children with disabilities in armed conflicts is often non-existent or incomplete. At the European Humanitarian Forum in 2024, the UN Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict criticised the fact that, even after 20 years, there is still no disaggregated data on disabilities in the mechanisms used to report on grave violations of the rights of the child⁴². Identifying these children is complicated by the fact that disabilities are not always visible or acknowledged, and too few people are properly trained to recognise all forms of disability. Data collection, particularly during needs assessments, is often carried out in institutions such as schools that are not attended by children with disabilities, or these children are 'hidden' by their community due to stigma. This lack of data means responses are not adequately tailored to these children, leaving them with fewer opportunities for accessing emergency assistance and basic services and for returning to school.

⁴⁰ UNICEF, *25 Years of Children and Armed Conflict: Taking Action to Protect Children in War*, June 2022.

⁴¹ *Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, Explosive Weapons and the Children and Armed Conflict Agenda*, 2024.

⁴² European Humanitarian Forum 2024, session on Children in crisis: invisible and forgotten victims of armed conflicts and humanitarian emergencies.

Displaced children

According to the UNHCR, 40% of all forcibly displaced people in 2022 and 2023 were under the age of 18⁴³.

According to the UNHCR, 40% of all forcibly displaced people in 2022 and 2023 were under the age of 18. Displaced children are at particularly high risk of abuse and exploitation throughout their displacement and are highly vulnerable to psychosocial distress. The impact of violations of the rights of the child is exacerbated as they lack access to the assistance and protection they are due. Child safeguarding and child protection case management and monitoring are made more difficult by the fact that these children are frequently on the move. Separated, and especially unaccompanied, children are extremely vulnerable. Unaccompanied children have no adult to help them contact child protection or other specialist services and they are not always capable of getting in touch with these services on their own and reporting abuses⁴⁴.

At the end of 2023, 68.3 million people were living in internal displacement (within their own country) as a result of conflict and violence⁴⁵. This figure, the highest ever recorded, reflects the protracted nature of displacement and the failure to provide sustainable solutions. **In some fifty countries, people have been living in internal displacement situations for over 10 years⁴⁶.** There are many children who have known only flight and displaced persons camps and whose future prospects are diminished by exclusion and a lack of access to their rights. In light of this constant (people generally having to move more than once) and prolonged displacement, the emergency response must be accompanied by action to prevent new crises and seek sustainable solutions that take changing needs throughout the displacement cycle into account, especially those of the most vulnerable children.

For more details, please see the SIF position paper *Overcoming the internal displacement crisis, January 2025.*



Access to education for orphans, internally displaced children and children from vulnerable host communities in Somalia

Climate-related disasters and the long-running conflict in Somalia between the army and non-state armed groups, most notably al-Shabaab, have undermined access to education as school infrastructure has been attacked and damaged and children and teachers forced to flee. In 2023, 20% of Somalia's total population were living in internal displacement because of conflict and disasters (3.9 million people⁴⁷). 64% of children in the country are out of school (4.84 million), 25% of whom are displaced children (1.25 million)⁴⁸.

There are multiple barriers to education for displaced children: they often live in areas with no or not enough schools; as they have lost their livelihoods, the cost of education is a barrier for families and for the guardians of orphans or separated children; and children are often required to work to provide for their household. Displaced children can also be unaccompanied (orphan or not), without resources and vulnerable to protection-related risks. All of these barriers increase school drop-out rates. Reports indicate that 90% of children who lost access to education during past droughts in Somalia never returned to school.

To relieve families and guardians of the financial burden of paying for education, SIF has been sponsoring orphans, displaced children and children from vulnerable host communities in the Kismayo district (in which there are over 170 displaced persons camps⁴⁹) since 2020. SIF provides a monthly grant to cover school costs, the cost of uniforms and learning materials. The children receive lessons on life skills and are provided with psychosocial support. Communities and families are provided with child protection awareness-raising sessions on the risks faced by the children and on identifying child protection cases.

⁴³ UNHCR, *Global Trends, Forced Displacement in 2022. UNHCR, Figures at a Glance, 2024.*

⁴⁴ UNICEF, *Beyond Borders. How to Make the Global Compacts on Migration and Refugees Work for Uprooted Children, 2017.*

⁴⁵ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, *Global Report on Internal Displacement 2024.*

⁴⁶ UN Secretary-General's High Level Panel on Internal Displacement, *Concept Paper on Issues and Challenges before the Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement, 2020.*

⁴⁷ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), *Internal Displacement in Africa: An Overview of Trends and Developments (2009-2023), 2024.*

⁴⁸ Somalia Education Cluster, UNICEF, *Somalia Out of School Children, 2023.*

⁴⁹ UNHCR, *Somalia: IDP Site Verification Kismayo, June 2023.*

▷ FOSTER SOCIAL COHESION

The best solution for ensuring children are properly protected involves eradicating armed conflict. Interventions for preventing armed conflict are vital for reducing the risk of violations of the rights of the child. From an operational perspective, for SIF this involves ensuring fair and inclusive access to basic services and implementing specific activities to strengthen social cohesion, particularly by focusing on mediation between communities on the potential causes of inter or intra-community tension and encouraging the active involvement of children and young people.

It is essential to analyse the root causes of conflicts to ensure all social cohesion initiatives are effective. In regions affected by climate change, for example, there is intensified competition for natural resources, such as water. While access to natural resources is not necessarily the direct cause of armed conflict, the lack of disaster risk reduction strategies and mechanisms to arbitrate tensions between communities to fairly manage resources can shape the dynamics of violence.

Strengthening social cohesion in Nigeria and tackling the stigmatisation of victims of violence with the participation of young people

In the region of Zamfara in Nigeria, affected by violence by armed groups, groups of young people are being supported by SIF to use conflict and gender-sensitive approaches to undertake peace-building initiatives and promote social cohesion. They are trained on conflict resolution, focusing on preventing and reintegrating children suspected of being associated with armed groups.

Inter and intra-community discussions on social cohesion between young people and key stakeholders, such as local authorities, traditional leaders and religious leaders, are held within committees. All participants receive capacity-building on facilitating community dialogue, particularly among young people, in conjunction with social protection managers and youth leaders from the Zamfara Ministry of Women's Affairs and Social Development.

Committee members are also invited onto radio shows to discuss topics linked to social cohesion and to tackling the stigmatisation of victims of violence and people once associated with armed groups. Sessions are held with families and communities to discuss the acceptance of women, girls and children who have been the victims of, or born from, sexual abuse and their reintegration into family and community life.

Disaster risk reduction and joint management of natural resources in Somalia

People displaced by armed conflict in Somalia have lost the majority of their possessions and sources of income, especially their animals and their land. Climate-related disasters are creating further tension between communities around access to natural resources.

In conjunction with the Jubaland Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs and Disaster Management, with whom we have been working since 2021, SIF has developed early warning systems and plans to enable people to access water and food during droughts. We have raised community awareness of risks, preparation and response initiatives through radio spots that were broadcast to 800,000 people. At the community level, disaster risk reduction and natural resource management committees have been set up that include young people, elders, women's groups and religious leaders. These committees analyse the risks, map the areas at risk, identify vulnerable population groups, and develop and implement tailored disaster risk reduction plans. They have developed 6 early warning systems and already coordinated emergency interventions. SIF has also introduced adaptation measures to help people cope better with climate change: rehabilitating water infrastructure, installing water storage tanks, delivering training on climate-adapted farming and livestock breeding practices in 'farmers' field schools' and 'livestock breeders' field schools'. The aim is for communities to become experts on their own environment and for their livelihoods become more resilient to disaster.

SIF has also integrated social cohesion initiatives into our response. Peace committees have been created who, in conjunction with 'peace ambassadors' appointed from within communities, conduct activities to promote peaceful co-existence and conflict transformation, including conflicts relating to the shared management of natural resources (meetings, surveys, radio shows, etc.).

▷ STRENGTHEN FORMAL SYSTEMS

In terms of prevention, SIF also works more generally through our development response on building the capacities of institutions and authorities to strengthen the resilience of formal protection systems during crises. For instance, prior to the war, SIF provided capacity-building to local authority-based social development centres in Lebanon to help them organise psychosocial support activities for the families using their services.

This also involves strengthening formal systems in other sectors to ensure they become more child-centred and are able to provide an effective

and joined-up child protection response in the event of a crisis. It is crucial that sectors that do not work specifically on child protection issues are also supported (the education sector obviously has a key role to play, but so do the water, food security, health and shelter sectors, for example).

In the event of a crisis, advocacy campaigns can also be implemented as part of humanitarian coordination efforts in order to ensure that aid agencies and the authorities make child protection a priority action area.





CHAPTER 2

THE LACK OF EFFICIENCY OF INTERNATIONAL FRAMEWORKS AND STANDARDS ON CHILD PROTECTION IN ARMED CONFLICT

Alongside the operational response to minimise child protection risks, it is primarily up to States and non-state parties involved in conflict to take responsibility for ending violations of the rights of the child and ensuring children's protection. Unfortunately, conflict prevention and resolution measures, the application

of international standards, and the fight against impunity all seem insufficient: the number of verified grave violations has been increasing each year since 2005, reaching 32,990 verified cases in 2023, which is the highest number of cases in almost 10 years⁵⁰.

CONTINUOUS VIOLATIONS OF INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW AND CHILD PROTECTION LEGAL INSTRUMENTS

There is a range of international regulatory frameworks in place for ensuring the rights of the child are realised and protected, including in armed conflict situations (see below), as well as specific instruments on child protection in armed conflict. In addition to legally binding international treaties, there are several 'soft law' instruments on child protection in armed conflict, which, although not binding, can have a considerable influence on the actions of States and parties in conflict. Unfortunately, it is evident that these instruments are being largely ignored.

Although more and more countries are adopting all these legal regulations as time goes on, the increase in the number of violations of IHL and the rights of the child shows that these instruments are not enough to compel States to comply, and they hold even less sway with non-state parties, who often do not consider themselves bound by these rules of law.

There are mechanisms in place to oversee and monitor implementation of the treaties, such as the regular reviews carried out by the Committee on the Rights of the Child that monitors implementation of the CRC, or the regular reports that State parties to the Geneva Conventions are required to submit on implementation of the Conventions' provisions. While these mechanisms help highlight State parties' failure to comply with their obligations, they do not have the power to force States to take action. Soft law monitoring mechanisms have even less scope as they predominantly rely on voluntary reports submitted by their signatory parties.

It is crucial that all parties are held accountable. This is the main aim of the UN action programme to protect children during conflict (see below). Unfortunately, this too lacks both the coercive power for tackling the impunity of the perpetrators of violations and the resources for putting sufficient protection measures in place.

⁵⁰ *Children and Armed Conflict, Report of the UN Secretary General, June 2024, (A/78/842-S/2024/384), June 2024.*

IHL, with the 1949 Geneva Conventions⁵¹ and its 1977⁵² and 2005⁵³ Additional Protocols, which are binding on both States and non-governmental armed forces, grants special protection to children. Children benefit from the general protection afforded to civilians not taking part in hostilities⁵⁴ and, due to their specific vulnerability, there are also special protection measures in place whereby children “shall be the object of special respect”. The provisions detail this special protection for children (for evacuation, assistance and healthcare, identification and family reunification, education, arrests and detention, and exemption from the death penalty). The 1977 Additional Protocols were also the first international legal instruments to address the recruitment and use of children in hostilities.

International refugee law, with the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees⁵⁵ and its 1967 Protocol⁵⁶, supplemented by the provisions in Article 22 of the CRC recognising the rights of refugee children and children seeking asylum.

The 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)⁵⁷ and its Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict⁵⁸ takes into the account the need to protect children from the effects of armed conflict. It lists all the rights of the child, including the right to protection from all forms of violence, at all times and in all situations, and it requires State parties to ensure children are protected in armed conflict. In 2000, the United Nations adopted the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, which condemns the recruitment and use of children in conflicts and raises the minimum age for participation in hostilities to 18.

The 1999 International Labour Organization Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour (Convention no.182)⁵⁹, requires member States that have ratified the Convention to take immediate measures to prohibit and eliminate the worst forms of child labour. The forced recruitment of children for use in armed conflict is identified as one of these worst forms of labour, along with the use of children for prostitution, the production and trafficking of drugs and for work that “is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children”.

The **Paris Principles and Commitments on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups** (2007) that have replaced the Cape Town Principles of 1997⁶⁰. Initiated by France, and now signed by 115 countries, the Paris Principles seek to combat the recruitment and use of children in conflict, secure the release of children from armed forces or armed groups and support children’s reintegration into civilian life.

The **Safe Schools Declaration and Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use During Armed Conflict** (2015). Signed by 120 countries, it seeks to protect education, teaching establishments, students and teachers from attacks during times of armed conflict.

The **Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers** (2017). Signed by 107 countries, this is a set of commitments focused on child protection in UN peacekeeping operations that priorities preventing the recruitment and use of child soldiers.

The **Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences arising from Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas** (EWIPA⁶¹) (2022). 87 countries have so far endorsed the EWIPA Declaration. It sets out stricter standards for protecting civilians during armed conflict and recognises that children are particularly vulnerable to “severe and long-lasting indirect effects”, including those that “stem from damage to or destruction of critical civilian infrastructure”.

⁵¹ Geneva Convention (I) for amelioration of the condition of the wounded and sick in armed forces in the field / Geneva Convention (II) for the amelioration of the condition of wounded, sick and shipwrecked members of armed forces at sea / Geneva Convention (III) relative to the treatment of prisoners of war / Geneva Convention (IV) relative to the protection of civilian persons in times of war.

Ratified by 196 countries.

⁵² Protocol I ratified by 114 countries and Protocol II ratified by 169 countries.

⁵³ Known as Protocol III, this has been ratified by 79 countries.

⁵⁴ Especially, the right to life and to physical and moral integrity, the prohibition of coercion, corporal punishment, torture, collective punishment and reprisals (GC IV, art. 27 to 34 and PA I, art. 75), as well as the requirement to distinguish between the civilian population and combatants, and the requirement to ensure the civilian population shall not be the object of attacks (PA I, art. 48 and 51, PA II art. 13).

⁵⁵ Ratified by 145 countries.

⁵⁶ Ratified by 146 countries.

⁵⁷ Ratified by 196 countries.

⁵⁸ Ratified by 173 countries.

⁵⁹ Ratified by all 187 ILO member states.

⁶⁰ Cape Town Principles and Best Practices on the Recruitment of Children in the Armed Forces and on the Demobilisation and Social Reintegration of Child Soldiers in Africa, adopted in April 1997.

⁶¹ Explosive weapons in populated areas.

A UN ACTION PROGRAMME THAT IS NECESSARY BUT LIMITED IN ITS SCOPE OF ACTION

For the first time in 1996, a United Nations report⁶² raised international awareness of the scale and scope of how children's rights are violated in situations of armed conflict⁶³. Following one of the report's recommendations, in 1997, the United Nations General Assembly created the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict⁶⁴. This was the first step in developing an action programme to improve the protection of children in situations of armed conflict. In 1999, the UN Security Council included children in armed conflict on their agenda and condemned the recruitment and use of children by armed forces and armed groups⁶⁵. **This was followed by key resolutions 1539 (2004) and 1612 (2005)**, which defined the "grave violations affecting children the most in times of war"⁶⁶ and established the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) to monitor, document and report on grave violations⁶⁷.

The MRM documents grave violations and helps identify the perpetrators so that they can be held to account. Through the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for

Children and Armed Conflict, the United Nations publishes an annual report that lists the parties to armed conflict guilty of violations. The Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict created in 2005 then meets to determine the actions to be taken with respect to the parties concerned. The aim is to encourage the signature and nationwide implementation of tangible and time-bound action plans to end violations and improve prevention initiatives. These can involve adopting measures to prevent the use of explosive weapons, updating military planning to include assessments on the impact of conflict on children, prohibit the military use of schools and hospitals, or measures to liberate children from armed forces and groups. Special monitoring and reporting teams manage the monitoring mechanism in-country, where they collect information and negotiate and implement action plans⁷⁰.

A party can be delisted when the UN verifies that violations for which the party was listed have ended for at least one report cycle (i.e. one year).

▷ THE PROGRESS MADE BY THE ACTION PROGRAMME

Although the focus of the MRM is on verifying grave violations rather than all violations of the rights of the child, it does provide a constant reminder of the impacts of armed conflict on children and, more broadly, fosters a culture of child protection among the parties involved.

Since the creation of the MRM, the United Nations has signed 40 action plans with parties to conflict, 21 of which are currently under implementation. Around 15 parties have been delisted after having honoured their commitments. According to the Special Representative's latest report, **more than 200,000 children have been liberated from armed groups and forces since the start of the MRM programme**⁷².

In some countries, the MRM has led to the adoption of child protection legislation and protocols, and the delivery of training to parties to improve child protection in situations of armed conflict. Efforts have also been made to tackle the impunity of perpetrators of violations by encouraging countries' justice mechanisms to include the age and gender of victims in their approaches. And in 2023, the International Criminal Court (ICC) adopted its revised policy on children⁷³.

The UN Security Council has improved its inclusion of child protection in their peacekeeping operations⁷⁴ and UN special political missions⁷⁵ by including specific child protection initiatives in their mandates and appointing child protection counsellors to be deployed in-country.

⁶² Report presented by the expert appointed by the UN Secretary-General, Graca Machel, *Impact of armed conflict on children*, 1996 (1/51/306).

⁶³ UNICEF, *25 Years of Children and Armed Conflict: Taking Action to Protect Children in War*, June 2022.

⁶⁴ Resolution 51/77, *The rights of the child*, A/RES/51/77, 20 February 1997. <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/>

⁶⁵ UN Security Council Resolution 1261, S/RES/1261, 25 August 1999.

⁶⁶ See Part 1.

⁶⁷ These resolutions were further supported by the following resolutions: 1882 (2009), 1998 (2011), 2068 (2012), 2225 (2015), 2427 (2018).

⁶⁸ <https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/subsidiary/wgcaac>.

⁶⁹ Resolution 1612 (2005).

⁷⁰ UNICEF co-chairs the team in all countries on the agenda of the Office of the Special Representative. In countries with a peacekeeping or peacebuilding mission, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General and head of the Department of Peacekeeping Mission (DPKO) or the Department of Political Affairs (DAP) mission, also co-chairs. In country situations with no peacekeeping mission, the UN Resident Coordinator co-chairs the Task Force Teams on the ground collect information and engage in advocacy to negotiate and implement Action Plans. <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/tools-for-action/monitoring-and-reporting/>. <https://www.mrmtools.org/>

⁷¹ *Annual Report of the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict*, June 2024 (A/78/842-S/2024/384).

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ ICC, *Policy on Children*, December 2023.

⁷⁴ A peacekeeping operation is a mission carried out by international military forces, often under the authority of the United Nations, to help countries in conflict develop the solutions required for long-lasting peace. These operations can include protecting civilians, facilitating the political process, and assisting in the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of former combatants.

⁷⁵ UN Special Political Missions are non-military missions authorised by the Security Council or General Assembly to support peace processes and conflict prevention efforts and consolidate peace in countries in crisis.

▷ THE LIMITATIONS OF THE ACTION PROGRAMME

The MRM depends on the information collected and verified in-country by the United Nations child protection task forces, who have to be rapidly trained and deployed as soon as the relevant task force personnel are authorised and receive funding. The capacity of the MRM to verify grave violations relies entirely on these task forces being on the ground. Unfortunately, there are not enough of these task force personnel in place. In addition to which, the job requires identifying and verifying information in highly unstable and hard-to-reach environments where there can also be cultural constraints. The United Nations continues to urge States to provide political and financial support to increase the number of UN child protection task force field staff.

This lack of human resources means that many presumed violations cannot be verified, adding to those that are quite simply never reported. The type of conflict and resources allocated to the MRM can result in significant variations in the type and amount of information collected. Thus, when looking at overall trends, a fall in the number of reported violations could be due to insufficient data being collected in certain conflict zones. Furthermore, due to lack of resources, the MRM struggles both to identify violations against the hardest-to-reach children and to report on the intersectionality of vulnerabilities⁷⁶.

The impartiality of the MRM is also sometimes contested, undermining the credibility of its mandate. It goes without saying that listing and delisting parties guilty of violations requires the strictest objectivity. The MRM can only be effective if it remains credible and is consistently applied to all perpetrators of violations, in all situations. A number of States and civil society organisations, such as Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict⁷⁷, have repeatedly highlighted this point and called for the criteria set out in the 2010 annual report on children in armed

conflict to be respected⁷⁸. There are many cases where verified violations are attributed to parties in conflict in the reports, yet these same parties do not appear in the list of perpetrators in the annexes.

In the 2024 report, 75 parties are listed as perpetrators of grave violations including 10 State parties and 65 armed groups. More than 50 of these have been on the perpetrator list for at least 5 years as they continue to commit violations and abuse against children. There are often as many violations attributed to government security and armed forces as there are to non-state armed groups.

Applying the principle of accountability to all violations and bringing the perpetrators to justice remains a real challenge. Resolution 2068 (2012) reiterated the UN Security Council's readiness to adopt targeted and graduated measures against persistent perpetrators and urged the member States concerned to bring the perpetrators of these violations "to justice through national justice systems and, where applicable, international justice mechanisms". While some progress has been made in tackling impunity at the legal level, with the historic convictions handed down in 2012 by the Special Court for Sierra Leone against the former president Charles Taylor⁷⁹, and by the ICC against Thomas Lubanga⁸⁰ for recruiting and using child soldiers, prosecutions and convictions remain rare. Existing international sanction mechanisms (asset freezing or arms embargoes, for example) are also ineffective for holding the perpetrators of violations to account, whether these are State or non-state parties. Through the UN Security Council, the international community has a key role to play in improving this situation, as do those States able to influence parties in conflict and strengthen international standards and child protection measures in situations of armed conflict.

⁷⁶ European Humanitarian Forum 2024, session Children in crisis: invisible and forgotten victims of armed conflicts and humanitarian emergencies.

⁷⁷ Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, *A Credible List, Recommendations for the Secretary-General's 2024 Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict*, Policy Note, April 2024.

⁷⁸ Annual Report of the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, 13 April 2010 (S/2010/181).

⁷⁹ Special Court for Sierra Leone, *Prosecutor v. Charles Ghankay Taylor, Sentencing Judgement*, 30 May 2012, SCSL-03-01-T-43136.

⁸⁰ International Criminal Court, *Decision on Sentence, Situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, In the Case of the Prosecutor v. Thomas Lubanga Dyilo, ICC-01/04-01/06*, 10 July 2012.



CHAPTER 3

ACTION TAKEN BY FRANCE

A DIPLOMATIC EFFORT TO BE PURSUED AND RENEWED

France has signed up to all of the Geneva Conventions and international legal instruments on the rights of the child. France ratified the CRC in 1990, as well as its 3 Optional Protocols on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (2000), on the Sale of Children, Child Pornography and Child Prostitution (2000)⁸¹, and on a Communications Procedure (2004)⁸².

On the diplomatic front, France has played a leading role within the UN Security Council to advance the protection of children in situations of armed conflict. France was notably behind the key UN Security Council resolutions 1539 and 1612, which defined the 6 grave violations committed against children during armed conflict and established the MRM. France supported the creation of the UN Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict and was the first member State to chair this group, from its creation in 2005 through to 1 January 2009⁸³. France then supported Germany's efforts when chair to adopt resolution 1998 (2011), which directed the Working Group to consider options for increasing pressure on persistent perpetrators of violations and abuses committed against children. More broadly, through the position it takes, France encourages the wider use of existing legal measures and sanctions to tackle child rights violations⁸⁴. More recently, France has supported resolution 2601 (2021) safeguarding the right to education in situations of armed conflict. At the European level, France was actively involved in the 2003 adoption of the European Union's guidelines on children and armed conflict⁸⁵.

In addition to its involvement in the Working Group, France helped develop, and is signatory to, all soft law instruments relating to the protection of children in armed conflict. France was notably behind the adoption of the Paris Principles and Commitments on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups in 2007 alongside UNICEF⁸⁶. In 2017, France launched a campaign to encourage other countries to adopt

these Principles, which have now been ratified by 115 countries. At the Global Ministerial Conference on Ending Violence Against Children held in Bogota in November 2024, France committed to further promoting the Principles and also pledged to host a Ministerial Conference on child protection in armed conflict in 2027, which will mark the twentieth anniversary of the Paris Principles and Commitments⁸⁷. France has also reiterated its commitment to protecting schools from attacks by supporting the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) in its efforts to adopt a preventative plan of action to protect education from attack. The first draft of this plan was presented to member States at the UNESCO Executive Board's 220th session in October 2024⁸⁸ and is set to be adopted in 2025⁸⁹. It is to be noted that France made no specific commitment to protecting children in situations of armed conflict at the 34th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

France has thus played a key role throughout the 2000s and 2010s to promote child protection in armed conflict and continues to support all existing frameworks. In light of the increase in conflicts and current child protection challenges, it is vital that France uses all its available diplomatic and operational resources to redouble its efforts to ensure the collective standards are met and reinforced, and also to tackle impunity.

In September 2024, France announced it would jointly lead a new multi-country initiative on IHL and the protection of civilians, which provides an ideal opportunity for issuing new tangible and ambitious child protection recommendations. The overall goal of this initiative is to make IHL a real political priority, and to re-centre the debate about armed conflict on the urgent need for the international community to set higher expectations of parties to armed conflict that require their universal, systematic and faithful application of IHL.

⁸¹ Ratified by 178 countries.

⁸² Ratified by 52 countries.

⁸³ Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict Annual Reports: <https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/subsidiary/wgcaac/annual>

Letter dated 20 July 2009 from the Permanent Representative of Mexico to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council: S/2009/378, 22 July 2009.

⁸⁴ Groupe URD, Bilan des engagements de la Stratégie Humanitaire de la République française 2018-2022, Une aide humanitaire plus efficace face aux crises de demain ?, January 2023.

⁸⁵ These guidelines were revised in 2024: EU Guidelines on Children and Armed Conflict, 2024.

⁸⁶ The Paris Commitments were adopted at the Free Children from War ministerial conference co-hosted by France and UNICEF.

⁸⁷ France's transformative pledge, Protecting children in armed conflicts, Ministerial Conference on Ending Violence Against Children, November 2024.

⁸⁸ UNESCO, Decisions adopted by the Executive Board at its 220th session, 31 October 2024.

⁸⁹ France's transformative pledge, Protecting children in armed conflicts, Ministerial Conference on Ending Violence Against Children, November 2024.

Lastly, the aim is to produce recommendations on the challenges associated with specific IHL topics, such as the prevention of violations or conduct of hostilities rules⁹⁰. This initiative is to culminate in an international conference to be held at the end of 2026. Unfortunately, child protection is not one of the specific workstreams⁹¹. France therefore needs to exert its influence to ensure that child protection is included in the initiative as both a specific and cross-cutting issue.

High-level political support of child protection in armed conflict needs to be ensured at all times. It is therefore disappointing that neither the rights of the child nor their protection in armed conflicts are included in the conclusions of the French Presidential Council for International Partnerships (CPPI) of April 4, 2025 even though France affirms its solidarity with the most vulnerable populations affected by crises and conflicts⁹².

A HUMANITARIAN STRATEGY TO BE IMPLEMENTED

The Humanitarian Strategy of France adopted in 2023, prioritises **“protecting children, promoting their rights and advancing education in emergencies”**; but its ambitions appear to fall short of what is required.

It is encouraging that it includes children’s rights as a holistic, cross-cutting and systematic priority, as provided for by law: **“France is committed to adopting a child rights’ based approach and placing the protection of childhood and children’s rights, including the right to education, at the heart of its cross-cutting and systemic priorities for humanitarian action, in keeping with the Programming Act of 4 August 2021 on inclusive development and combatting global inequalities”⁹⁴.**

France thus reaffirms its commitment to protecting children in crisis situations but states only that it will renew its efforts to promote the Paris Principles and Commitments and rally support for the Vancouver Principles, and that **“it will continue its involvement in the fight against impunity by providing support to dedicated international mechanisms”**. It is disappointing that the strategy contains no new proposals for strengthening international standards to protect children in situations of armed conflict as defined by IHL.

Furthermore, the various aspects of children’s right to protection against violence as defined in Article 6 of the CRC are not included in the text, such as preventing and tackling family separations, physical and emotional abuse and child labour. Only mental health is included, and this only in relation to education in emergencies, which appears to be the key priority.

Education in emergencies is indeed vital for children and must absolutely be prioritised yet, at the same time, France must not ignore the other basic rights of the child, as per the RCBA, and must strengthen its child protection response when implementing its strategy by building on past experience. To help achieve this, it is essential that all objectives and initiatives are rigorously monitored and that regular evaluations are carried out to measure their impact⁹⁵.

The monitoring information published by France is somewhat patchy. The French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs Crisis and Support Centre’s 2023 Activity Report includes just a few examples of projects that support children, and these relate predominantly to health and education. The government’s 2023 annual report to Parliament on France’s international solidarity and development policy, the *Rapport annuel du Gouvernement au Parlement portant sur la politique de développement et de solidarité internationale de la France* (based on 2021 official development assistance data), makes no mention of children or the rights of the child whatsoever, nor does it include anything on child protection in humanitarian responses.

More information on France’s efforts to improve child protection in armed conflicts was provided in France’s report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2022. However, this included no specific strategic framework, just a list of actions linked to global initiatives (reiterating its commitment to the Paris Principles and Commitments, its contribution to the International Fund for Survivors of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence, its work as part of Alliance 8.7, a global partnership that seeks to end child labour, and its commitment to ensuring the registration of births).

⁹⁰ *Global Initiative on international humanitarian law* | International Committee of the Red Cross

⁹¹ Working groups will “focus on issues identified as being of grave humanitarian concern in contemporary armed conflict”, which include galvanising political commitment for IHL, strengthening prevention action (i.e. strengthening IHL implementation), protection of civilian objects and infrastructure, new technologies, protection of medical personnel and medical services, IHL’s contribution to peace, and the challenges of contemporary naval warfare.

⁹² *Relevé de décisions du Conseil présidentiel pour les partenariats internationaux*, April 4, 2025.

⁹³ *France’s Humanitarian Strategy 2023-2027*, section 2.5, page 18.

⁹⁴ The Programming Act on inclusive development and combatting global inequalities (LOP DSLIM) adopted in 2021 lists children’s rights as one of the cross-cutting priorities of France’s development and humanitarian policy and recognises that children bear the brunt of political, social and security crises. However, child protection is not one of the sector priorities listed in the annexes of the Act’s partnership framework.

⁹⁵ Tools such as the Child’s Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA) and Child’s Rights Impact Evaluation (CRIE), which have been approved by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, are available to analyse and evaluate the laws and policy measures introduced by countries in their public policies and could be used as part of France’s international solidarity and cooperation policy.

More recently, in June 2024, France presented details of its implementation of the pledge proposed by the European Union and its member States at the 33rd International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in 2019 on “enhancing protection of specific groups in vulnerable situations in armed conflicts and other crises”⁹⁶. Rather than reporting on the achievements made, this mainly focused on France’s strategic commitments, such as promoting the rights of women and girls and tackling gender-based violence, food and education (for

education, France reiterated the commitments set out in its Humanitarian Strategy). There was no specific reporting on child protection.

It is also difficult to obtain a comprehensive overview of France’s spending on child protection in armed conflicts, or in crisis situations more generally. However, from the little data there is available, it can be seen that the budget France has allocated to this remains very low but is increasing, which it needs to continue to do.

MORE FUNDING REQUIRED FOR CHILD PROTECTION IN CRISIS SITUATIONS

It is impossible to precisely estimate how much humanitarian funding France allocates to child protection in crisis situations because there is currently no tool or procedure available for accurately and reliably identifying and measuring spending on either child protection or children’s rights in general, which to an extent the EU gender-age humanitarian marker is able to do, as is the Global Affairs Canada ‘childhood’ policy marker⁹⁷. Neither the data collected by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) nor the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs⁹⁸ contains information on the sums allocated to this sector.

At the bi-lateral level, the figures communicated are the total amounts, all sectors combined, allocated to the main instruments used, namely Programmed Food Assistance (PFA), the Crisis and Support Centre’s humanitarian and stabilisation assistance, and Minka, the Peace and Resilience Fund run by the French Agency for Development (AFD)⁹⁹.

At the multi-lateral level, there is some data on the funds allocated to international organisations and agencies available in the government’s 2023 annual report to Parliament on France’s international solidarity and development policy (Rapport annuel du Gouvernement au Parlement portant sur la politique de développement et de solidarité internationale de la France). France contributes to the European Union’s international solidarity initiatives, as well as to various UN agency programmes¹⁰⁰ but not all the earmarked funding is listed and there is no clear breakdown by sector.

Ultimately, the only data available on the amounts allocated by France to protecting children in crisis situations comes from the OCHA Financial Tracking Service (FTS). It is to be noted that these figures therefore cover multi-lateral assistance and take both conflicts and all other types of crisis, such as disasters, into account.

Since 2023, France has increased its spending on child protection in crisis situations, and had a reported budget of US\$3.4 million in 2024; however, this accounts for only 0.6% of France’s total spending compared to other sectors¹⁰¹:

CHILD PROTECTION	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Amount in US\$	1.4 million	2.2 million	Not provided	331,000	475,000	7.2 million	3.4 million
%	0.8	1.2	Not provided	0.1	0.1	0.8	0.6

⁹⁶ Pledge Report – Enhancing protection of specific groups in vulnerable situations in armed conflicts, disasters and other crises.

⁹⁷ For more information on tracking the funding allocated to the rights of the child in France’s international solidarity policy, please see the study carried out by HAA for Groupe Enfant, *Quel outil de mesure pour suivre efficacement la prise en compte des droits de l’enfant dans les actions internationales de la France?* Tamo Wagener & Mathilde Guntzberger, July 2021.

⁹⁸ French Official Development Assistance Open Data Portal

⁹⁹ According to the Crisis and Support Centre’s 2023 Activity Report, a total of 280 million euros was pledged to the humanitarian and stabilisation response in 2022, both directly via 80 emergency operations and via partner NGOs. And, according to the government’s 2023 report to Parliament on France’s international solidarity and development policy (based on 2021 data), the Minka fund allocated 209.8 million euros in 2021 to countries in the Sahel, the Middle East and Central Africa, and had a total budget of 90.4 million euros in 2021.

¹⁰⁰ The government’s 2023 report to Parliament on France’s international solidarity and development policy notably mentions the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), the World Food Programme (WFP), UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), and the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The International Committee of the Red Cross and Red Crescent (ICRC) and UNESCO also receive voluntary contributions from the funds allocated to international organisations.

¹⁰¹ It is to be noted that some of the reported spending is not allocated to specific sectors (it is ‘not specified’), and that funding allocated to other sectors can also be spent on implementing projects with child protection components.

The *UNICEF Funding Compendium*¹⁰² provides additional information on France's contributions to the post-crisis humanitarian work carried out by UNICEF, the United Nations lead agency for child protection. It is to be noted that UNICEF's

humanitarian work covers several sectors, including child protection. Thus, the amounts provided below were allocated to more than one rights of the child.

CONTRIBUTION TO UNICEF	2021 ¹⁰³	2022 ¹⁰⁴	2023 ¹⁰⁵
For its humanitarian work (in million US\$)	18.5	24.8	31
Total contributions (sum of funding for humanitarian work and ordinary funding (sector-specific or not)) (in million US\$)	37.5	42.5	74

In 2022 and 2021, France was not one of UNICEF's top 20 main public financial partners, either for humanitarian work or total contributions. **In 2023, France was ranked 17th out of a total of 141 government partners** for the two types of contribution¹⁰⁶.

From these FTS and UNICEF figures, it can be seen that France has increased its child protection funding over recent years, as required to keep pace with the challenges arising from the

multiplication of crises and their impacts on children, and to help offset the lack of global funding; and this is also in line with France's diplomatic and strategic commitments. This increase needs to continue as the portion allocated to this sector remains low (only 0.6% in 2024 according to the FTS data). There is therefore considerable room for improvement when it comes to funding child protection efforts.

A severe lack of global funding for child protection in situations of armed conflict

At the beginning of 2025, the United Nations launched an appeal for US\$47.4 billion in funding to help 189.5 million people in 72 countries in crisis¹⁰⁷. However, it is doubtful that this figure will be reached given that, in 2024, only 43% of the required funding was raised and also considering now the freeze on US aid in early 2025¹⁰⁸. **The United Nations warns of the constant gap between humanitarian funding needs and available resources, and highlights that the funds raised for the humanitarian response equates to less than 2% of global military expenditure, which was estimated to be 2.4 trillion dollars in 2023**¹⁰⁹. This lack of humanitarian funding translates into fewer children in countries in crisis provided with the vital assistance and protection they so desperately need.

It can be seen that child protection in humanitarian situations (armed conflict, disasters and other crises) is systematically under-funded compared to other sectors. In 2023, funding coverage for child protection stood at 29.2% (US\$505 million of the US\$1.5 billion required), i.e. just 1.6% of overall humanitarian assistance funding¹¹⁰. UNICEF also experienced a drop of 23% in its emergency response funding in 2023, a decline likely to be exacerbated by the freeze on US aid.

The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, the Global Protection Cluster and the Humanitarian Funding Forecast already predicted before the freeze of the US aid **a US\$1 billion funding gap for child protection funding in conflict settings by 2026**¹¹¹, despite the fact that there are more and more children living in armed conflict zones.

¹⁰² Reports on the origin of income and contributions to UNICEF received from public and private sector resource partners.

¹⁰³ UNICEF, *Funding Compendium 2021*.

¹⁰⁴ UNICEF, *Funding Compendium 2022*.

¹⁰⁵ UNICEF, *Funding Compendium 2023*.

¹⁰⁶ It is important to bear in mind that UNICEF includes contributions from the World Bank and European Commission in this list (ranked 2nd and 3rd respectively), as well as the funding received from OCHA, and Global Partnership for Education (ranked 10th and 11th), organisations to which France also allocates multi-lateral assistance funding.

¹⁰⁷ OCHA, *Global Humanitarian Overview 2025*, 2024.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, Global Protection Cluster, UNHCR, *Unprotected: Analysis of funding for child protection in humanitarian action in 2023*, September 2024. OCHA, Funding Tracking system, Global Sector Overview, 2023.

¹¹¹ The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, Global Protection Cluster, Humanitarian Funding Forecast, Save The Children, *Unprotected. Special Edition: Analysis of funding for child protection in armed conflict in 2021 and 2022*, June 2023.

Moreover, child protection is not the only sector that requires funding in order to protect children in armed conflict. Although essential for child development and protection, emergency education remains severely under-financed by French humanitarian assistance. Again according to the FTS, which is the only data source available, education accounted for 5% of French humanitarian assistance in 2024. Despite the growing needs, for the first time in over 10 years,

there has been a 3% drop in overall humanitarian assistance for education, which fell from US\$1.2 billion in 2022 to US\$1.17 billion in 2023¹¹². In 2023, France announced it would be allocating 40 million euros to Education Cannot Wait (ECW) for 2023-2026. This is more than four times greater than the amount allocated by France to ECW over the last three years; however, according to the latest information available, none of this funding has yet been disbursed¹¹³.

EMERGENCY EDUCATION	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Amount in US\$	1.2 million	4.7 million	13.1 million	7.8 million	23.7 million	30.8 million	29.7 million
%	0.7	2.6	5.9	2.3	3.5	3.5	5

Similarly, France needs to increase the funding it allocates to tackling gender-based violence in situations of armed conflict. According to the

FTS, the amount allocated to this sector in 2024 accounted for just 0.6% of all France's funding.

PROTECTION FROM GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Amount in US\$	Not provided	Not provided	Not provided	2 million	753,000	5.4 million	2.5 million
%	Not provided	Not provided	Not provided	0,6	0,1	0,6	0,6

Massive and unacceptable cuts to the 2025 Official Development Assistance (ODA) budget that will impact humanitarian funding

ODA has been cut by more than 2 billion euros in the 2025 Finance Act, which equates to a drop of 37% in funding compared to 2024. This comes on top of the 742 million euros cutback made in February 2024. Humanitarian assistance could amount to only 500 million euros in 2025, a long way short of the annual 1 billion euros pledged in the Humanitarian Strategy. This gravely concerning situation means that resources that could have been allocated to humanitarian child protection efforts are under serious threat. This drastic reduction in ODA will have a dramatic impact on efforts to support the rights of millions of vulnerable people, including children and young people in armed conflicts. Given the rise in the number of armed conflicts around the world and their impact on the rights of the child, it is vital that France restores and increases its ODA funding to get back on track with its commitment of allocating 0.7% of gross national income.

¹¹² Education Cannot Wait 2023 Annual Report.

¹¹³ Observatoire 2024 de la Coalition Education. Financement de la solidarité internationale pour l'éducation. La France peine à être à la hauteur de ses ambitions. January 2025.





CHAPTER 4

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FRANCE

Despite international consensus on child protection having been reached through the adoption of collective standards, and despite UN initiatives, the rights of the child continue to be flouted with few or no consequences. There is blatant impunity for perpetrators of violations and a striking lack of accountability for parties in conflict. With the world facing increasingly complex and multi-faceted conflicts, with peace processes being difficult to put in place, and given the increasing disregard for international

humanitarian law, international human rights and the rights of the child, there is an urgent need to find a way to ensure that collective standards on protecting children in armed conflict are applied and reinforced.

We urge France to ensure there is political support for child protection in armed conflict at the highest level and to renew its commitment by adopting the following recommendations:

Recommendations for the government:

► Undertake to step up efforts to prevent and bring an end to conflicts and promote peace, and notably:

↘ Enable the UN Security Council to fulfil its peacekeeping and security mission and end the impunity of the perpetrators of violations of children's rights by continuing to support the Security Council's reform projects. In particular, reactivate the initiative for member states to no longer resort to the veto in the event of mass atrocities, which France is jointly leading with Mexico. This is currently supported by 106 countries, far short of the target of 129 signatory countries for 2018, and has received no new signatories since 2022.

↘ Respect the arms trade treaty by suspending the sale and transfer of arms to parties in conflict where there is a significant risk that these weapons will be used to commit or facilitate IHL violations, and support countries to comply with and implement the treaty.

↘ In accordance with the LOP-DSLIM, prioritise crisis prevention and response in the key processes that guide international solidarity policy, such as the CPPI and CICID. A holistic, long-term approach is required to anticipate crises and address the root causes of fragility. The protection of children in situations of armed conflict should also be systematically identified as a priority.

► Strengthen its commitment to promoting respect for the Geneva Conventions, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, as well as the provisions set out in other international instruments that seek to protect children in armed conflict, and notably:

↘ Protect humanitarian space and ensure the right to assist people affected by crises by working to minimise all risks and obstacles to humanitarian aid.

↘ In accordance with the EWIPA declaration, systematically call upon parties in conflict to refrain from using explosive weapons in populated areas and to protect civilians, as well as the civilian objects and infrastructure that are vital to their survival.

↘ Commit to the "*Strengthening education and the protection of children*¹¹⁴" pledge presented by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) at the 34th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, which is open for signatures until 30 June 2025.

↘ Seize the opportunity presented by the 20th anniversary of the Paris Principles and Commitments in 2027 to bring new member states on board and involve civil society in events to mark the 20th anniversary of the Paris Principles and Commitments.

► Ensure that all current and draft frameworks and mechanisms on protection in armed conflict situations take the specific impact of conflicts on children into account, and notably:

↘ Ensure child protection in armed conflict is included in the work being carried out by the multi-country IHL initiative that is being jointly led by France.

¹¹⁴ *Strengthening education and the protection of children - Statutory Meetings, October 2024.*

↳ Ensure that child protection in armed conflict is included in all relevant events and bodies, including at the global (UN agencies such as the economic and social council of the United Nations (ECOSOC)), regional (European initiatives such as the European Humanitarian Forum and the European council working groupe on “humanitarian aid and food aid” (COHAFA)) and national levels.

↳ Ensure that all multi-lateral agencies to which France allocates funding take child protection in armed conflict into account in their operational and financial strategies and in their humanitarian response plans.

▶ **Systematically condemn all violations of IHL and the rights of the child and strengthen existing accountability mechanisms to tackle impunity, and notably:**

↳ Reaffirm its firm support of the United Nations mandate on children and armed conflict and support new initiatives to expand it, specifically:

- Continue its involvement with the Security Council's Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict and initiate new international dialogue on compliance with the collective standards.

- Support expansion of the United Nations action programme on child protection in armed conflict by systematically including child protection in peace processes.

- Based on the conclusions of the Security Council's Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict, support the adoption of specific recommendations on the use of explosive weapons in populated areas for armed conflicts listed on the agenda and ensure these are monitored.

- Support the MRM as the main grave violation verification and monitoring tool. MRM resources need to be increased to effectively respond to the growing number of armed conflicts on the agenda and to the violations being carried out. This should result in the systematic inclusion of specific measures and child protection experts in all UN peacekeeping operations and special political missions, and in ensuring these experts remain as part of national governance initiatives and in UN country teams during mission transitions and departures.

- Continuously support the inclusion of child protection experts in UN country teams.

- Support initiatives to hold dialogue and develop action plans with State armed forces and non-state armed groups, including initiatives to raise awareness of existing standards and the penalties for violating these standards, and ensure that recommendations are upheld and implemented.

- Ensure that the United Nations includes an objective list of the perpetrators of violations in its annual reports on child protection in armed conflict.

↳ Support all existing (judicial and non-judicial) international accountability mechanisms:

- Ensure that the rights of the child-based approach forms part of all the accountability mechanisms' documentation and investigations.

- Work with them to document, investigate, collate, and secure evidence of all potential violations against children.

- Firmly support the work of the International Criminal Court and ensure its decisions are upheld.

▶ **Align its operational and diplomatic efforts by implementing the Humanitarian Strategy of France and by ensuring that it:**

↳ Builds the capacities of international public officials and government staff on the rights of the child and rights of the child-based approach, including in conflict situations, and on the specific impact that conflicts can have on the rights of the child, especially child protection and safeguarding and protection from exploitation and sexual abuse.

↳ Reaffirms and applies the rights of the child-based approach in its humanitarian response as a cross-cutting and systematic approach, and ensures that the rights of the child are central to its interventions.

↳ Ensures the effective implementation of the 'do no harm' principle in humanitarian responses through the use of conflict-sensitive gender and age analyses, and improves the collection of data disaggregated by gender, age, disability and migrant status, etc.

↳ Includes age and gender-related issues as a cross-cutting component in all areas of the strategy and in all sectors to ensure the differentiated impact of crises on girls and boys is taken into account, as set out in the EU Guidelines on Children and Armed Conflict.

↳ Promotes specific child protection action and ensures that humanitarian efforts contribute to child protection and to reinforcing child protection systems using holistic and integrated approaches as set out in the EU Guidelines on Children and Armed Conflict: psychosocial support services and child protection case management, emergency education, initiatives to tackle gender-based violence, access to healthcare – including reproductive and sexual health services, and also capacity-building and livelihood support for children’s caregivers.

↳ Builds the capacities of local organisations, given that local stakeholders are the first responders and can more easily access crisis areas. France should particularly support organisations working with children and young people and on advocating for children’s and young people’s rights, and affirm their key role in the humanitarian response and in strengthening communities’ social cohesion. France should also support organisations run by women and girls that work to prevent gender-based violence in armed conflict, respond to violations and help victims reintegrate into their community.

▶ **Improve the accountability and transparency of France’s child protection in armed conflict initiatives.**

↳ Report on the practical application of the provisions contained in the treaties and legal instruments that France has ratified and signed on child protection in armed conflict.

↳ Ensure an assessment of child protection in armed conflict initiatives is included in the government’s annual report to Parliament on France’s international solidarity and development policy.

↳ Ensure reporting on its child protection in armed conflict initiatives is included in the Humanitarian Strategy implementation reviews carried out during the National Humanitarian Conferences every two years, as well as in the Humanitarian Strategy’s annual humanitarian action reports.

↳ As specified in the Humanitarian Strategy, produce a report on IHL implementation in 2027 to review implementation of France’s commitments and report on their impact on children, as well as the impact of initiatives aimed at children, specifically those to improve their protection.

↳ Reinforce monitoring mechanisms, the collection of data disaggregated by gender, age, disability and migrant status, and regularly evaluate the impact of France’s action on child protection in armed conflict.

▶ **With regard to funding:**

↳ At the International Conference on Financing for Development being held in Seville in June and July 2025, reaffirm France’s commitment to achieving the target set out in the LOP-DSLIM of allocating 0.7% of gross national income to ODA.

↳ Directly contribute to funding the MRM and to deploying child protection experts to UN missions and in-country teams.

↳ Increase bilateral and multi-lateral spending on child protection, education, mental health and psychosocial support, and gender-based violence interventions for humanitarian action and development programmes.

↳ Progressively and continually increase humanitarian funding for education to move closer to the European commitment to allocate 10% of humanitarian assistance to education in emergencies.

↳ Set up more flexible and direct financing mechanisms in place for local organisations, particularly children’s and young people’s organisations and women’s and girls’ organisations.

↳ Ensure the transparency of funding, particularly as regards the amount and earmarking of financial contributions, to identify coverage gaps and improve the quality and effectiveness of French assistance on child protection in armed conflict and its financing mechanisms.

Recommendations for Parliament:

▶ **Through the annual vote on finance bills, commit to progressively reaching the target of 0.7% of gross national income allocated to ODA as set out in the LOP DSLIM:**

↳ By scaling down the drastic and unjustified cuts to ODA, which jeopardise both France's commitments and the protection of the most vulnerable children in armed conflict zones.

↳ By guaranteeing that the monies collected in taxes on airline tickets and financial transactions are placed in the development fund, Fonds de solidarité pour le développement.

▶ **Monitor government action and the implementation of its child protection in armed conflict obligations and commitments, notably:**

↳ By regularly requiring the government to report on its child protection in armed conflict diplomatic efforts, and its international solidarity policy.

↳ By monitoring arms exports to countries potentially involved in international crime.

↳ By investing in the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child periodic review process, particularly in monitoring the government's implementation of the Committee's most recent¹¹⁵ Concluding Observations on France's international policy, and by ensuring that France includes its interventions to support children in armed conflict in all of its future periodic reports.

↳ By monitoring the LOP-DSLIM upon submission of the government's annual report to Parliament on its implementation, and by questioning the government on its international initiatives to promote the rights of the child and child protection in armed conflict.

↳ By ensuring, via the parliamentary committee, that the ODA evaluation commission¹¹⁶ includes in its action plan the monitoring and evaluation of France's child protection in armed conflict interventions.

▶ **Promote child protection in armed conflict in all parliamentary commissions, groups and missions that deal with issues relating to cooperation and international aid, the rights of the child** (for instance, within the Law Commission, the Foreign Affairs Commission, the Rights of the Child Delegation, and the Parliamentary Club for International Solidarity), **as well as in all relevant ad hoc commissions of inquiry and focus groups.**

▶ **Support cross-party initiatives calling on France to renew its child protection in armed conflict ambitions** by taking advantage of upcoming events, such as the multi-country IHL initiative and events to mark the 20th anniversary of the Paris Principles and Commitments.

▶ **Via parliamentary diplomacy, promote child protection in armed conflict with ODA and humanitarian assistance partner countries**, particularly as part of interparliamentary missions, friendship groups, or the Inter-Parliamentary Union; but also with the wider international community through international initiatives such as the multi-country IHL initiative or events to mark the 20th anniversary of the Paris Principles and Commitments.

▶ **Support civil society, both in France and in the countries with whom France partners as part of its international solidarity policy, as well as organisations working on childhood and youth issues, and children and young people working to defend their rights in partner countries.** And this so as to foster their involvement in jointly establishing the international solidarity policy, including child protection in armed conflict, its implementation and its monitoring and evaluation.

¹¹⁵ Committee on the Rights of the Child, Concluding Observations on the Combined Sixth and Seventh Periodic Reports of France, 4 December 2023, CRC/C/FRA/CO/6-7.

¹¹⁶ Law no. 2024-309 of April 5, 2024 relating to the establishment and operation of the ODA evaluation commission instituted by programming law no. 2021-1031 of August 4, 2021 relating to solidarity development and the fight against global inequalities.

Decree no. 2025-117 of February 8 on the operating procedures of the ODA evaluation commission, JORF no. 0034 of February 9, 2025.



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