

“Will you listen?”

Young voices from conflict zones





CHILDREN AND CONFLICT IN A CHANGING WORLD

The 1996 UN report “The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children”, widely known as the Machel study, for the first time brought the issues faced by children in armed conflict to international attention. Ten years later, a strategic review has now been convened to assess progress and look forward to identify key challenges and priorities for the future of the Children and Armed Conflict Agenda. The resulting report is to be presented to the General Assembly in October 2007, with the publication of more detailed analysis and findings to follow over the next year.

This Companion to the 10 year Machel Strategic Review compiles the views and recommendations of some **1,700 children and young people in 92 countries**. Their thoughts and ideas were collected as a key contribution to the Review through a series of focus group discussions and an online questionnaire¹.

Focus group discussions were conducted by UNICEF, UNFPA and NGO partners in 18 countries, and involved approximately **1385 participants in 125 focus groups**². The discussions were conducted in countries recently or currently affected by armed conflict³. The online survey received **385 responses from a total of 92 different countries**, a majority of which (78%) were from developing countries.

The focus group discussions included children and young people who have experienced conflict themselves, with many of the participants speaking about how their own lives have been affected. Facilitators tried to ensure a safe environment, to use the local language where appropriate and to create a certain ‘comfort level’ for the participants despite the unique challenges in each country⁴.

For example, participants in Rwanda requested to submit their answers in writing, as they felt talking about their experiences in a group setting would open up many wounds. A focus group discussion in Somalia was held through a radio show in which more than 140 children and young people called in to talk about their experiences.

The following pages present a wide range of voices, concerns and demands captured by these discussions and online surveys. For more details and background on the survey that led to this companion report, please visit www.unicef.org/voy

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¹ The survey process was organized by partners including the Global Youth Action Network (GYAN), United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict (SRSG CAAC), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and the Women’s Commission for Refugee Children and Women.

² See Annex III for full breakdown of focus groups. There was an intentional effort to include children and older youth who had lived through conflicts and were able to reflect on their experiences.

³ Focus groups, organized at the initiative of various partners took place in Afghanistan, Angola, Burundi, Central African Republic, Haiti, Iraq, Kosovo (Serbia), Liberia, Nepal, Occupied Palestinian Territory, Philippines, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Sudan and Uganda. These countries were either included in the 2006 Annual Report of the Secretary General on Children and Armed Conflict (A/61/529-S/2006/826) or were visited by Mrs. Machel to prepare the 1996 study.

⁴ See Annex II for full gender, age and regional breakdown of online survey respondents.

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We are displaced children.

We are children who have been used by armed groups.

We are orphans.

We are street children.

We are girls who sell our bodies to survive.

We are children who have to work

We are children who can't go to school.

We are children with disabilities.

We are children living with HIV.

We are detained children.

We are girls who have been raped.

We are children taking care of our brothers and sisters.

We are children without a childhood.

***“We have all lost a part of our life, and it will never come back.” –
Young man, 18, Burundi***

We are from Afghanistan, Angola, Burundi, the Central African Republic, Colombia, Haiti, Iraq, Kosovo (Serbia), Liberia, Nepal, the Occupied Palestinian Territory, the Philippines, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Uganda and many other countries.

We won't tell you our names because it could be dangerous for us.

We all have one thing in common: Our lives have been affected by armed conflict. That is why, even though we come from different places and our problems are not always the same, we speak with one voice.

We have not given up all hope yet. We still want to go to school and play with our friends. We want to help build peace in our societies and make this world a better place. We still have big dreams.

For some of us, getting together for the sake of this report gave us a rare opportunity to sit with our friends and share our stories. It has also been an opportunity to finally tell you what we feel and think.

But talking is not enough. Will we see any change after you meet to talk about us? Will you hear our voices and act on what we tell you?

We have tremendous energy and a strong will to fight for our futures. Many of us are already taking action. Will you join us?

WE LIVE IN VIOLENCE

“They are not human. They worship guns. They don’t have sisters and brothers, they only have a gun.” – Girls and young women, 14–17, Somalia

“There has been violence all our lives. People see violence, they grow up with it, and they know it. They repeat it. There is no food, no work, no education, but there is pressure from the family. And there is nothing to stop violence, there is impunity.” – Young people, 15–19, sex not specified, Haiti

“We were mobilized by our clan militia heads to come to the playground. All of us were young people about the same age. They told us to defend our village. We were in the queue with our guns. When the Marehan clan attacked us we defended our village.” – Boys and young men, 14–17, Somalia

“Girls also are enrolled in the army, to fight or to carry ammunition and other loads.” – Young people, 15–23, sex not specified, Burundi

“After I was taken to the front, they give me blood to drink which they said was the first test, and will make me more and more brave.” Young man, age not specified, Liberia

“Orphans and street children join militias at clan checkpoints to rape, loot and kill the people. They are security guards of the warlords. The oldest of them is 17 years old. They are sent by the warlords. If you try to advise them they will kill you. We see them taking drugs before they go to fight and the possibility to escape from them is rare.” – Girls and young women, 14–17, Somalia

“People are drunk and fighting. Everything is different than home. My father hits my mother and drunken people destroy light bulbs and buildings.” Girl, 14, Sri Lanka, internally displaced persons (IDP) transit centre

“My father used to hit my mother and all of us. He has no job and the family’s needs are enormous. The only way for him to express his frustration is by shouting and hitting.” – Girl, 14, Occupied Palestinian Territory

In wars, we suffer from and witness some of the worst forms of violence committed against us and the people we love. Some of us have been *born in the midst of this violence*. It has become a way of life.

Many of us, especially the boys, are *forced to join various armed forces*. They then put us *in the front of the battlefields* or force us to spy on the opposition. *They brainwash us* into believing that we are fighting to defend our rights and our communities. Even the girls are put through this.

As soldiers, we are sometimes given strong drugs and put through *grotesque rituals* to make us “strong” and not afraid.

Some of us who have lost our parents and live in the streets are *tempted to join the militia*: At least they will take care of us.

Violence is all around us every day, not only in the battlefields. Sometimes those who care for us – even family members and teachers – treat us badly and without respect. They may beat us or make us feel as though we are nothing. We know that the war has been hard on everyone, but do we have to be treated this way?

Even *when wars end, the violence does not stop*. It shows itself in many other forms—through gangs, our families and sometimes “violence just for the fun of it.”

Some of us see *small guns and harmful drugs* sold everywhere in our communities. Some of us are easily trapped in this culture of guns and drugs which has changed our communities into violent places that make us feel unsafe and fill us with fear.

“Drugs are the root cause of recent armed conflict. Because of drug trade money, people can acquire arms. These people start using drugs, which makes them act violently, more and more so, until they spur each other on to murder, to rape and to abuse children.” – Young men, 16–18, Haiti

“Children and young people are turned into thieves and become addicted to drugs.” – Girl, 14, Colombia

“There are many of us who do not have jobs or anything. Some people in my family still fear me because they still believe I have the ‘bush trick’ in me; we get the evil eye and are discriminated against. There is nowhere to go. This is my home and my country too. I can’t go anywhere if I run to Guinea. I know no one there. I would still have to struggle. At least here I can manage...” – Young man, 22, Sierra Leone

“It should be remembered that many of us are involved in crime and in violence to help our families. There are still no alternatives for us.”
– Young woman, 17, Haiti

Many of our friends become *drug addicts and sell drugs to survive*. It becomes an escape.

For the ex-combatants among us, when we return to our communities, we do not feel comfortable leaving our houses. Our communities treat us like outcasts. They call us bad names and some tell their children not to play with us. Other children make fun of us at school. They don’t even care about how we feel or what we want.

Joining violence is sometimes the only way to survive and protect our families. We need another way.

WE LOSE OUR HOMES AND THOSE WE LOVE

“During the war, I lost my 10-year old brother and 14-year old sister. Our house was damaged. My father died and now my older brother works.” – Young woman, 15, Afghanistan

“When conflict broke out in our community, we fled our homes and it felt like the bullets were chasing us through the woods.” – Young woman, 17, Philippines

*“In Somalia, we now have ‘seafarers’ who offer us the false promise of a better life, when we pay them to take us across to Yemen. Many of our friends, brothers and sisters **do not survive these trips**, as they often ordered to swim the last part of the journey.” – Age and sex not specified, Somalia*

*“We live in a **huge prison**, deprived of the least simple rights that any individual should have.”—Young woman, 17, Occupied Palestinian Territory*

“The biggest challenge is the freedom of movement and education system.” – Young people, sex not specified, 17–20, Kosovo (Serbia)

*“Our home was damaged during war and we migrated to Pakistan. We lived for 10 years in Pakistan. We came back to Afghanistan. We have a place to build a house, but have **no money to pay for it**. We have rented a house and live there now, but it is very hard for us to pay for it.” – Young man, 17, Afghanistan*

“The war had a very negative effect on our life. I lost my father during the fighting and we were displaced. My father was the supporter of our family and after losing him we felt we had lost everything. I could not go to school after that and my education is still incomplete.” – Girl, 14, Afghanistan

For many of us, war came to our towns and villages before we knew what was happening. We had to run, often with little more than the clothes on our backs. We were forced to flee so suddenly that we became separated from our families and neighbours, sometimes forever.

Can you imagine what it would be like to suddenly lose everything – to be uprooted from your home, your livelihood, your friends and maybe even your family? To start again in a new place is not easy. We miss our teachers and our friends. We miss relatives and neighbours and other people we loved and looked up to for guidance.

Some of us walk across barren deserts or risk our lives to reach another country, in hopes of finding a better life, free of violence and poverty and fear.

For some of us, the problem is not being forced to move. It is being unable to move.

But others of us are forced to seek refuge in a strange country without knowing if we will ever go home again. Those of us who remain displaced within our own countries sometimes have it even worse. The armed forces can still come after us and we can’t reach a safe place.

We are sometimes haunted by the memories of brutal atrocities committed before our eyes. We are not adults yet but our childhoods have ended very abruptly. We must suddenly fend for ourselves and sometimes our families, even if we lack the skills and means to do so.

*“When we were living in the IDP camp there were people everywhere in a very small space. It was **horrible**.”* – Girl, 13, Sri Lanka

“There is a permanent school here, but we are often sitting outside it in the sun due to there being no space.” – Girl, 12, Sri Lanka

Those of us who make it to refugee camps and other settlements often find ourselves *treated without any respect*. We sometimes lose hope and wonder why the world fails to understand or accept us.

Those of us who try to live in a new culture *feel unwelcome*. People in the host communities sometimes say we are not fit to play with their children. Even the teachers in the schools sometimes refuse to teach us or to treat us the same as the local kids. Some of us even feel like going back to our communities to join the fighting forces, just to feel like we belong somewhere.

WE FACE RAPE AND EXPLOITATION

“The attackers tied me up and raped me because I was fighting. About five of them did the same thing to me until one of their commanders who knew my father came and stopped them, but also took me to his house to make me his wife. I just accepted him because of fear and don’t want to say no because he might do the same thing to me too.”– Girl, 14, Liberia

“Little girls are especially affected because they are victims of sexual violence. For girls who are prostitutes and girls who are raped it is very difficult. Sometimes people don’t pay the prostitutes, and there is always the risk of early pregnancy, when the girls are too young and physically too small. It is hard for girl-mothers to stay with their families, which means they go on as prostitutes.” – Young people, 15–19, sex not specified, Haiti

“The girls when captured are made wives and if the girl is not yet of age they get damaged.” – Young man, 16, Sierra Leone

“I lost my father and my mother because of the war. A neighbour took me into his home to look after his children in Bujumbura. He raped me and I found myself pregnant, unwillingly. I came back home pregnant but I was chased away, so I returned to Bujumbura. I provoked an abortion and because of it was put in prison. I had been sentenced to life but thanks to a presidential pardon, my sentence was reduced to 20 years.” – Young woman, 20, Burundi

“Every week a woman dies in childbirth on the road to the hospital.” – Young woman, 19, Liberia

“[Girls who have been raped] now take care of children born from the killers. It’s a trauma on top of trauma.” – Young women, 19–29, Rwanda

“It is hard to raise a child when you are yourself a child.” – Young woman, age not specified, Burundi

“Girls have been raped and this has resulted in HIV/AIDS.” – Young women, 19–29, Rwanda

Many of us, especially the girls, have suffered rape or other forms of sexual assault. This includes even the youngest among us.

Sometimes there are several attackers. Often the brutality of the attack, especially against our younger brothers and sisters whose bodies are not fully developed, leads to *devastating physical injuries*. In every case, it is *damaging to the spirit*.

In times of war we also are *forced to marry* men we have not chosen, when we are still little girls. The army men force us – we don’t want to, but at least then we get their protection.

Rape sometimes leaves the girls among us with *unwanted pregnancies*. We are afraid of giving birth when our bodies are not ready, and when there is no doctor or nurse to help us.

Unwanted pregnancies lead some of us to have *dangerous abortions* performed by people without the skills to do this. For those of us in countries where this is illegal, we may suffer severe legal consequences on top of everything else we have endured.

As if being raped is not enough, the girls among us sometimes have to *raise the children of our attackers* – with no help at all.

Rape can put us at increased risk of contracting *HIV/AIDS or other sexual infections*. When this happens, we often find ourselves stigmatized and ostracized by our communities and unable to get the care and support we need.

“Because of the scourge of HIV/AIDS, when you are a girl, you think you’d better die of a bullet rather than AIDS. So we go fight next to our brothers.” – Young woman, 17, Burundi

“As far as gender is concerned young boys faced different types of physical abuse whereas young women were raped during the war and they were traumatized. Because of the mentality in Kosovo these women do not talk much about what they have experienced.” – Young men, 16–19, Kosovo (Serbia)

“My sister is only 15 years old but every night she goes out to have sex with humanitarian workers and peacekeepers for money. I tried to stop her before but I have given up since I do not have anything to give her. We all rely on the money she gets to support the family.” – Young man, 17, Liberia

“As boys under 18 in prison are poor, adult men give them money in exchange for sex.” – Young man, 20, Burundi

Taboos against discussing rape mean that many of us cannot talk about what has happened to us. But how can we heal if we must suffer in silence? How can we prevent it from happening to other young people if we have to pretend the problem doesn’t exist?

We sometimes have to *sleep with older men* in exchange for money, food or medicines. At times that is the only way to survive. Some of the *adults who sexually exploit us* are the very people we trust to protect us: humanitarian workers, peacekeepers, even schoolteachers. In some places, teachers give passing grades to the girls, or waive our school fees, in exchange for sex.

Girls and young women are not the only victims of sexual abuse and exploitation. But it is even harder for boys to talk about than it is for girls.

In some of our countries, *sexual violence is so widespread it has become normalized*. People accept it as part of everyday life, something they can’t do anything about. What kind of a world are we living in if we accept rape as normal?

WE MISS OUT ON SCHOOL

“This is a year of ignorance.” – Young woman, 16, Occupied Palestinian Territory

“Often during armed conflicts, schools and other education institutions are closed for one reason or another. This has a negative impact on children and young people’s state of mind.” – Girls and young women, 13–20, Iraq

“No new schools are opened, the old ones are closed. Parents don’t have the money to send their children. Children have nothing to do, they learn nothing.” – Young men and women, 15–19, Haiti

“For the time being, there are many violent attacks that may happen at any time, some of us may die in the street, or in school or even at home, which means no safety for anyone at any time.” – Girl, 12, Occupied Palestinian Territory

“If there is no work, there is no money for children to go to school. Many people took up violence because there was nothing else, so they were ready to work for rich people who asked them to fight for them.” – Young men and women, 15–19, Haiti focus group

“Sometimes parents go to the village and we have to stay and take care of younger sisters and brothers, and our belongings.” – Girls, 10–14, Sri Lanka, asked why they miss school

“During displacement the extra chores that we had to do to help our families were about the same, but after we resettled it is more common for the girls to have to help out with the family and have less time for play and schooling.” – Girls and young women, 13–18, Sri Lanka

“[Girls] also can’t attend schools due to some family restrictions. The male members of the family think that if girls go to school it is a shame for us and what will people think of us!” – Young woman, 15, Afghanistan

“The principal in the school is very strict – we have no shoes and he does not accept Bata [local plastic slippers] in school.” – Girl, 14, Sri Lanka

We believe that education is essential to our future and that we have a right to dream of a better life.

But when we lose months or years of school because of war, we worry that our dreams will escape us. When we should be learning, we are growing up in ignorance. As a result of this ignorance and lack of hope many of us are tempted into more violence and other dangerous activities. It can even lead to the continuing of war.

Some of our *school buildings have been destroyed in the fighting*. Even when the buildings remain, our schools are not always the safe spaces we need them to be. Our school may be targeted in the conflict. Our *teachers are sometimes killed* or must run for their lives. Some of us cannot go to school for fear we will be abducted or killed by mines or ambushes.

In many of our countries, even when there are schools, our parents *cannot afford the high school fees* and uniforms.

Even when there are schools we can’t always go. They say *we don’t have the papers* – but when we had to flee do you think we had time to take our identity cards? Or our school certificates?

For those of us who have lost our parents, we *may have to quit school* to take care of our younger brothers and sisters and the elderly members of our families.

Attending school is hard for all of us but *even harder for the girls*. Water collection and other chores can be so time-consuming that we girls end up missing school to carry them out. Some of us miss a few days of class every month because we have no way to handle our menstruation and are ashamed to leave the house.

"I cannot sit exams as my close relatives died in the shelling. I am too restless to sit in exams. When I read the papers about other shelling it comes back to me and I cannot think about anything else." – Young man, 17, Sri Lanka

"I was in fifth grade when the war came to my village 10 years ago. Since then, I have not gone back to school. I cannot go back now and sit in the same class; I am too old for that. But I still want to learn."
– Young woman, 22, Liberia

In many of our camps we *don't have water and soap to keep clean* and then we are too ashamed to go to school. And even if we go, we have a hard time concentrating because we keep thinking about what happened to us and our relatives being killed.

When we spend years and years running away from wars, we *miss many years of school*. We feel ashamed to go back and sit in the same class with our younger friends and siblings. If basic education is a right for all, why do we have to be deprived of it because of war?

WE STRUGGLE TO SURVIVE

“Our only hope is to pray that we do not get sick. If you do, only God can save you from dying.” – Young man, 18, Sierra Leone

*“There was **no food and water**. People had to risk their lives to find food.” – Young man, age not specified, Sierra Leone*

*“We fled our homes without bringing anything. When we went back to our house, **all of our possessions were gone**.” – Young man, 17, Philippines*

*“We got stuck in our house which became a **front line between two warring sides**, we panicked, and we have not had any food to eat.” – Boy, 13, Somalia*

*“Our parents have lost their livelihood, and for us this means that we don’t get food everyday, that we **are hungry sometimes**.” – Boy, 14, Sri Lanka*

*“My father was killed and both my grandmother and my 4-year-old brother got injured. **They did not get health assistance**.” – Girl, 13, Somalia*

*“Children have lots of problems, for example we have health problems. There are **very few clinics and health centres** here and we have very limited access to them.” – Boy, 14, Afghanistan*

*“We are getting **sick from the sun** [due to lack of proper shelter] and we have no shoes.” – Girl, 13, Sri Lanka*

“There are no clinics in this village and the closest one is hours away on foot. Even when you manage to get there, there are people who are more sick than you are, waiting for treatment in long lines. I just do not waste my time to go.” – Young man, 18, Liberia

*“After my parents were killed **my brother took responsibility**. He is a labourer and earns every day only 200 or 300 Afs which is very little for a large family. I also work with him.” – Boy, 13, Afghanistan*

Wars destroy more than our homes, they force us into a life of struggle. We are left to find ways to survive – to find food, water and new homes.

When we get sick or injured, we sometimes have no hospital where we can get treatment or medicines.

At the very time medical care may be needed the most, conflict makes them even harder to reach. Roads are sometimes destroyed. Or we cannot travel freely because we are afraid of getting caught in the fighting.

Even when we finally make it to a hospital or clinic, we often find it has been destroyed or lacks the very things we need. The few facilities that are functioning are often so far away, or in such dangerous areas, that some of us have been attacked while trying to reach them.

Our families try to take care of us, but many times they can’t provide for us or send us to school. For some of us this means that we have to help take care of ourselves and our families. We do all kinds of work, often for small pay: sell cigarettes, shine shoes, become maids.

You cannot imagine what many of us must do to survive, especially if we have been separated from our families and find ourselves homeless and destitute, with no money and no way of earning it. When we are very desperate, when we are starving or have to find food for our families but have absolutely no other way to get it, some of us resort to **selling sex to survive.**

*"I am not ashamed to be a street vendor, because I **have no choice.**"* – Young man, 18, Angola

*"Many girls find themselves in the street going into **prostitution**, because of poverty. It really is a terrible thing."* – Young woman, 18, Burundi

"Nothing goes for nothing." – Girl, age not specified, Liberia

*"My father stopped working and my brother could not continue his university studies. **God knows how we are living.**"* – Boys, 10–13, Occupied Palestinian Territory

*"**Most of the children in Afghanistan work on the streets.** At the age when they should just study, they are forced to work and earn a living for their families."* – Girl, 14, Afghanistan

*"If [the organization] doesn't provide machines after training, [the training] is **as good as useless.** It's like teaching someone to hunt without giving them a spear."* – Young men, 18, Uganda

*"Armed conflict [may be] finished, but we still have **other types of wars** – poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, youth delinquency and many more."* – Young man, 16, Angola

"Why do we have to be punished?" – Girl, 14, Occupied Palestinian Territory

Because of all of this, some of us have been forced or misled into *criminal activities, drug abuse and violence.* Some of us are forced to become beggars on the streets, or sell drugs while others are forced to steal to survive. Most of us have to do *dangerous jobs.*

Those of us who are old enough want to get jobs, but these *wars deprive us of opportunities* to get the training we need to get them. When organizations come into our communities, they assume they know what skills we want. So many of us end up learning the same thing and find that our new trade is not useful in our community.

Why don't you ask us what we need?

WE LOSE OUR CHILDHOODS

“The children all the time cannot stop thinking about war so we cannot concentrate on one thing. Anything can happen, anytime.” – Young woman, 18, Sri Lanka

“We are always under pressure and really this is not a kind of life that any human being should live.”
– Young woman, Occupied Palestinian Territory

“I hate nights because they scare me. I ask my mother to let me sleep in her room during the attacks.” – Boy, 10, Occupied Palestinian Territory

*“While I was playing football with friends, I heard an explosion, I rushed to the place where the explosion happened and I saw Hassan, our 14-year old neighbour who was dead. We collected his scattered body. **I could not sleep for nights; I used to dream of people drenched in blood.**”* – Boy, 13, Somalia

*“I was sick, confused and drunk in myself, I can’t eat, **I see my brother in my dreams**, I was bleeding so many times and was very sick. No medicine. Everybody was running here and there.”* – Girl, 10, Liberia, after witnessing her brother’s murder

“There is no summer camp for this year. We can not get together with our friends anymore. That is so sad.” – Girl, 13, Iraq

“There are no trees to play under and no playground to go to.” – Girl, 10, Sri Lanka, IDP transit centre

“We were scared working inside our homes; we were scared working outside our homes. We never knew what was going to happen.” – Girls and young women, 14–18, Nepal

“They made some of us orphans, killed some or all of our relatives, made us homeless and some of us disabled. They denied most of us the love of our parents.” – Young woman, 18, Rwanda

The shocking sounds of guns and bombs and the terrible things we see during wars ... you can’t imagine how these affect us

We, the younger children, are afraid to sleep alone in our rooms. We have dreams and nightmares of our past experiences but we are afraid to even talk about them. The nights become very terrible for us.

We sometimes see our friends and relatives killed or maimed. We miss them terribly and are traumatized by what we saw happen to them. We also think that it could be us next.

When all these things happen we cannot go to school and the play centres. For some of us girls, this deprives us of the only opportunity we had to talk out loud and play with our friends. We live in even greater fear and we have no one to share our stories with.

We are always afraid because we know that we are not safe. We always worry that we or a member of our families could be killed, captured or abducted at any time.

When we lose our parents, we younger children especially miss cuddling and being held by them. We miss their love and care. There is nobody to pay attention to us anymore or to give us affection.

WE KNOW YOU ARE TRYING TO HELP US

“NGO/UN have been working in our areas, supporting us. They are all leaving too soon, and this is making everything worse.” – Young woman, 18, Sri Lanka

“We heard about the CRC [Convention on the Rights of the Child] from radio news and when somebody is breaking the CRC we can tell them to stop because we know we have rights.” – Young man, 18, Sri Lanka

“These documents are for diplomatic people, they are just ink on paper.” – Young man, 15, Liberia,

“The government personnel are busy to keep themselves on their seats.” – Young man, 16, Occupied Palestinian Territory

“They (in the government) just do not care about us. Even if they did, I guess they do not have the money to help.” – Young man, 15, Sierra Leone

“Many times we hear about a programme, then it is not there. When we ask they say the funding is over.” – Young people, 10–18, sex not specified, Occupied Palestinian Territory

“If you go to the Fourah Bay road there are many beggars and they are assisted by children. When I see them I never feel good because the children are all my peers. Why shouldn't they go to school, why shouldn't they get the opportunity? And most of them are war affected. Their mothers are dead or they only have one parent who probably has amputated limbs. So please, they should build homes for them, and then educate them.” – Young woman, 16, Sierra Leone

“During the war I lost one leg and now I have an artificial leg.” – Young woman, 15, Afghanistan

“[The UN] needs to go to the grass roots.” – Young man, 15, Nigeria

We thank the international community for all the laws, conventions and treaties that you have signed to try to protect us. Some of these documents give us the confidence and strength to stand up for our rights.

But for many more of us, they are dreams that are yet to come true. Some of our governments sign these documents but often do little to make them a reality in our daily lives.

Some of our governments have programs that provide some of us with basic services. But in many of our countries, we feel our leaders do not care about us. While we suffer, they are busy playing politics. And some of our governments lack the power to do much even when they want to see a change but are too weakened by war.

We really appreciate the good works of some international agencies and humanitarian NGOs. They bring us food, shelter, clothes, medicines and other services when we need them most. Some help us during the war, in camps and when we return to our communities.

Unfortunately, some of us – the ones who need help the most – are left out. Some of us live with disabilities. Many have lost our parents. Others of us live in the streets or have been put in prison. Many of these programmes forget to make special provision for us.

Those of us who live in some villages and remote towns do not get any help. Some organizations do not stay long enough in our communities. Some programmes and services completely end as soon as the guns go silent.

Some of them also come to help us but they never really ask us what we need. They end up giving us what they think we need.

WE CAN BE A FORCE FOR PEACE

“I believe that a change can occur. War can be stopped.” – Young woman, 15, Pakistan

“There is an Icelandic word, frekja, which has no direct translation in the English language, but applies to pushiness, greed, cheek and nerve. To elbow your way to the front of a line is ‘frekja’. To snatch a toy from your sibling is ‘frekja’. To think that you have the right to cause others pain, mental or physical, is ‘frekja’. I believe that ‘frekja’, mixed with overbearing behaviour, is the cause of war.” – Young woman, 16, Iceland

*“Why don’t we put them [world leaders] in a room alone and unarmed and it’s up to them to finish the conflict by themselves and they’re not let out until they finish it? Even though it’s mean, they have to **live side by side to know each other better**. Isn’t it better than having other people’s lives taken away for them? I have no idea, even children are better at making friends than they are.” – Young woman, 20, Indonesia*

“When meetings take place, there needs to be equal representation and the parties need to treat each other equally and respect each others’ religion and tradition. So far all attempts to build peace have failed.” – Young woman, age not specified, Sri Lanka

“They should just learn to give and take and tolerate each other. Is that not what all religions talk about?” – Young man, 16, Occupied Palestinian Territory

“Teaching others and giving awareness of the importance of sharing and living together in one country, sharing one culture can help. But the adults don’t come to our meetings, and we can’t tell adults what to do.” – Young man, 17, Sri Lanka

“The TRC [Truth and Reconciliation Commission] helped a great deal. People have had the opportunity to apologize for crimes committed and have received forgiveness and this has been one good step towards keeping the peace. The Special Court also played a role in providing justice and revealing those who

We believe that the *greed and selfishness of political leaders* are the cause of war everywhere. Our leaders are so greedy for power and resources that they do not think about us in making their decisions. In their wars, issues are more important than children. They ignore the fact that in all wars, we suffer more than all others.

We also believe that that *if only adults are willing to listen and talk to each other*, they will not need to take up arms and make wars that cause us so much suffering.

Many of us children face a lot of suffering and are even killed in the name of *religion*. We are taught that all our religions want us to love one another and to live in peace, so why don’t they live by what they teach us? If that were the case, most wars would not start.

When you treat others differently because of their race, colour, economic situation, ethnicity, tribal origin, this sometimes results in war. Everyone likes to be treated equally, with dignity and respect. After all, *are we not all humans?*

We are often used to make war, but almost never included in making peace.

***For example, Truth and Reconciliations Commissions* can be a good forum for us to tell our stories and forgive each other. This helps rebuild trust and peace in our communities.**

Some of these Commissions have involved young people. But generally they leave many of us out. They often do not give those of us in rural areas the opportunity to tell them our own stories. Our parents sometimes do not allow us to go and participate in the Commissions. *We*

were the main perpetrators during the war.” – Young people, 15–19, sex not specified, Sierra Leone

“Before, one would not hear children on the radio but now the opportunity exists for children to speak on the radio and maybe sometimes the government may act on the needs expressed by the children.” – Young people, age and sex not specified, Sierra Leone

“We have a DDR [Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration] process for peacebuilding which is going well, but still we do not feel secure – especially women and children.” Girl, 14, Afghanistan

“The DDR is good, but they train us and send us to work in communities who do not trust us. The people give us no jobs, so some of us sell our tools to live. They should address trust in our communities.” – Young man, 19, Liberia

“We ARE the future and people should be aware of that. Right now, **we are inheriting a very unstable world.**” – Young woman, 16, Colombia

also worry about what might happen to us if share our experiences.

We see radio and other media as another chance to be a part of our country’s healing and reconciliation. The media gives us the opportunity to talk about our experiences and to encourage the community people to forgive each other. The media is sometimes the only platform we have to air our voices.

DDR programmes try to collect all the guns and other harmful weapons in our societies. They help us build new lives and give us hope by providing support and training to help us move beyond the past and fit into our communities again.

But DDR programmes sometimes leave many of us out even though we have been affected by the conflict too. Some programmes concentrate only on combatants. And when some of the girls among us try to register we are turned away because we do not have guns, even if we were members of one of the fighting forces. Some people in our communities buy guns simply to register for these programmes.

We want to be part of peace and reconciliation in our communities. We have ideas to push peace forward. We want to sit with you and discuss how to reconcile our communities, rebuild and develop our countries.

WE HAVE A ROLE TO PLAY

“We agree that we have destroyed this country. And it is us – the young people – that should be empowered to rebuild our communities... We need basic training to make this country good again. It can’t be the NGOs that do all the work for us. It has to be us.” – Young man, 18, Liberia

*“Young people and children should start to see themselves as responsible **for their own destinies.**” – Young man, 23, Nigeria*

“We feel and understand what’s happening, so we want to do something to change it.” – Age and sex not specified, Indonesia

“There is a tendency to blame the government for not having done things better for young people and yet the young people themselves do nothing about it. We as young people need to be proactive and engage the government and international organizations on issues affecting us. Involvement of young people at various levels of programming is vital for the success of a programme.” – Young man, 18, Angola

“We enjoy our participation in the summer camps and feel good when we help younger children there.” – Young man, 18, Occupied Palestinian Territory

“I belong to the Scout group and I like it because I am able to learn discipline, control and group work.”

“Youth websites, magazines and radio programmes give us a chance to express our opinion.” – Age and sex not specified, Somalia

“There is a programme on children’s rights on the radio, so we can give our views.” – Age and sex not specified, Rwanda

*“We the children should raise our voices so more people listen to us. Some kids like me have the passion, but we **just don’t know how to do it.**” – Boy, 14, Democratic People’s Republic of Korea*

In the midst of all these problems that we face because of war, we are taking different actions to help ourselves and our families and communities. The burdens are so huge that we have to carry some of them. In some societies there is nobody else to help.

We have started many programmes, organizations and groups to respond to our needs and help our communities.

We have many ideas and some of us are trying to put them into action. As advocates for peace, as service providers, as leaders for change in our communities, many of us are working for change in our lives and communities.

Through our youth centres, groups and programmes, some of us are creating valued safe spaces where we play together, learn from each other and support each other in the ways that we can. For some of us who have lost our parents, members of our youth groups are sometimes the only people we can turn to. We sometimes even teach one another the little that we know.

We sometimes use sports and games to help each other forget about our past and just to have fun. Some of us like expressing ourselves through concerts, songs or drawing. We all love to play together.

Through the media, especially the radio, some of us express ourselves and contribute to discussions in our communities. We like to have radio stations in our communities that address issues that concern us and include our inputs and voices.

*"We could express our concerns and raise voices, but chances are very limited due to **cultural barriers**. Adults are seen as the key decision makers at all times."* – Age and sex not specified, Somalia
*"They think **we do not know anything**."* – Girl, 14, Afghanistan

"I volunteer my time because I want the community to know someone cares about them."
– Young man, age not specified, Uganda

In some of our communities, the media gives us the opportunity to *talk about our experiences* and to encourage the community people to forgive each other. The media is sometimes the only platform we have to air our voices.

Some of us are taking part in the peace and reconciliation efforts in our communities. Some of us have participated in commissions and tribunals. *Some of us are helping to shape our government's decisions* through our groups and children's parliaments, youth councils and networks. *We love being involved* in making the decisions that affect us.

But a good number of us are still *not having our voices heard*. Sometimes even when we speak out, we are not really considered and included when the decisions are made.

Some of us try to participate but some adults are not willing to work with us. For many of us, they say it is against the customs. This is hard, especially for the girls.

Many of us are giving up our *time and energy* without expecting compensation. *All we want is real change* so that what we have been through does not happen to the generations to come.

WHAT WE WANT

We want our rights to be respected

Wars are no excuse for violating our rights. We all have rights – the orphans, the disabled, children in prison, children living on the streets, children from remote villages, all of us, girls and boys – and we ask you to raise awareness of these rights and to promote them. We want to learn more about our rights so that we can demand them. We want our parents, teachers, and the people from communities, development organizations and government offices to be trained on children’s rights so that they can respect and protect them.

We want justice and to be safe from violence

We want strict laws to protect us from being used as soldiers, “bush wives” and slaves or otherwise exploited during wars. We also want strict laws against those who sexually abuse and violate us. Make sure that anyone who uses us in these ways is severely punished. Please make sure that not one of them goes free. We want safe, confidential and accessible ways for girls and boys to report violence, harassment and exploitation.

When there are wars, we want safe spaces and “conflict-free” zones where we can continue to learn and play

We want to learn

We want you to quickly rebuild the schools that have been destroyed and to build new ones where there are no schools. Train more teachers – especially women teachers – in our communities so that all of us can get the attention we need in class. We want special catch-up classes for those of us who have missed years of school because of the wars. We want free educational materials, libraries, laboratories and computers so we can all get a good-quality education that will prepare us for the challenges of today’s world. We want all schools to be free for all of us.

We want to be healthy

We want hospitals or health clinics to be rebuilt or established in all our communities. We want medicines and medical staff to be available at these hospitals and clinics. The services must be friendly to us and free of cost. All girls and boys must have equal access to a full range of health information and services. Please make sure that services include a complete reproductive health package and support to those of us who have survived rape and exploitation.

We want jobs and a means to survive

We want relevant training for those of us who are old enough to work so that we can find safe jobs for ourselves and be useful to our communities. For those of us who are younger, we want jobs for our parents so they can take care of us. We want technical and vocational training institutions in all our communities that will lead to real jobs. For those of us who have missed out on school, the vocational and livelihood training should also teach us how to read, write and do mathematics. We also need the right tools and machines to apply our skills.

We want more support and care for the excluded and forgotten

Those of us who are orphans, children living or working on the streets, children with disabilities, children in prison, children heading households, any marginalized children, cannot be forgotten any longer. We need to receive food even if we can't go to the places where you distribute it. We need to have equal access to health services, free of all costs. We need to go to school for free at all levels and be trained in relevant skills. And because we are still children, we need special, accessible, recreational facilities. We want equal opportunity for girls and boys alike. We want to be treated equally and given the same chance to learn and develop our potential.

We just want to be children

We want programmes to heal our minds from the trauma of the experiences we have been through and to keep us away from violence, drugs and other crimes. These programmes and services must give all of us greater opportunities to play and participate in recreational pursuits like sports, cultural and other non-formal activities. We want these programmes to last long enough to give us an opportunity to rebuild our lives.

We want to participate

We want to reach out and help other children, in our communities, children from other parts of the conflict, or children in other countries. We want you to support our groups, organizations, networks and parliaments in our work and our efforts to contribute to change.

We want more opportunities to take part in making decisions that affect us. We ask that you empower us and our organizations – our youth councils, networks, groups and organizations, children's parliaments and other youth-driven groups – to be able to participate in a way that counts in all decisions that affect us. We do not want to be called in when you have already made the decisions. We want to work hand in hand with you.

ANNEX I

BACKGROUND NOTE

A background note on the Machel Study and a call for action, along with a questionnaire and a guide for facilitating focus groups, was prepared in April 2007 (http://www.unicef.org/voy/takeaction/takeaction_3788.html). UNICEF and UNFPA country offices and NGO partners (African Child Peace Initiative, Al-Mustaqbal Society, World Vision, Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, Jaffna Social Action Centre, Horn Afrik, PYALARA, Canaan Valley Institute, Tamer Institute for Community Education) were encouraged to conduct focus groups in countries recently or currently experiencing armed conflict (Afghanistan, Angola, Burundi, Cambodia, Chad, Colombia, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea/Ethiopia, Haiti, Iraq, Lebanon, Liberia, Nepal, Northern Ireland, Myanmar, Occupied Palestinian Territory, Philippines, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Timor-Leste, Uganda, and countries in the former Yugoslavia.)

An online survey was also made available and distributed through the UNICEF Voices of Youth network and other child and youth organizations and networks, including Global Youth Action Network (GYAN), TakingITGlobal (TIG), Global Youth Coalition on HIV/AIDS (GYCA), the United Network of Young Peacebuilders (UNOY Peacebuilders), Child Rights Information Network (CRIN), the Youth Peer Education Electronic Resource (Y-PEER), African Youth Alliance (AYA) and many more.

The questionnaires developed for the focus groups and online survey are listed below:

FOCUS GROUPS

Consequences of war

What are the greatest challenges you have faced as a result of conflict?

Are these challenges different for boys and girls, and do they differ according to the ages of the children and youth?

Coping with war

What is the best action you or someone in your community has taken to help with the problems children face because of conflict?

What has your government done to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of war-affected children?

What have humanitarian agencies such as the UN and NGOs done to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of war-affected children?

How have diplomatic efforts, such as resolutions and treaties prepared by the UN and its Member States, helped children affected by armed conflict?

Peace and reconciliation

What do you think has been the most important factor towards advancing a peace process and building reconciliation in your community and/or country?

What opportunities are there for young people to participate and express their concerns?

Recommendations

Are there any issues and/or groups of young people who are affected by conflict that have not been mentioned and should be addressed?

What would you recommend to be done – and by whom – so that all children affected by conflict have their rights respected, protected and fulfilled?

ONLINE SURVEY

Causes of war

What do you believe are the causes of war?

Consequences of war

What are the greatest challenges children and youth face as a result of conflict?

Are these challenges different for boys and girls?

How about for different ages of children and youth?

Coping with war

How do you think diplomatic efforts, such as resolutions and treaties prepared by the UN and its Member Governments, have helped children affected by armed conflict?

Recommendations

What would you recommend to be done – and by whom – so that all children affected by conflict have their rights respected, protected and fulfilled?

What can children and young people do themselves?

ANNEX II

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

| Country | Focus Groups | Participants | Female | Male | Age Range | Partners |
|--------------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------|------|-----------|---|
| Afghanistan | 1 | 10 | 6 | 4 | 13 - 18 | UNICEF |
| Angola | 1 | 10 | 5 | 5 | 14 - 19 | UNFPA |
| Burundi | 7 | 48 | 23 | 25 | 14 - 21 | UNFPA, UNICEF |
| Central African Republic | 1 | 8 | 6 | 2 | 8 - 14 | UNFPA |
| Haiti | 3 | 32 | 4 | 28 | 15 - 19 | UNICEF |
| Iraq | 1 | 8 | 8 | 0 | 13 - 20 | UNICEF |
| Liberia | 25 | 131 | 61 | 70 | 10 - 31 | African Child Peace Initiative (ACPI), UNFPA |
| Nepal | 7 | 70 | N/A | N/A | 14 - 18 | UNFPA |
| Occupied Palestinian Territory | 15 | 173 | N/A | N/A | 8 - 24 | UNICEF, UNFPA, Al-Mustaqbal Society |
| Philippines | 2 | 20 | 13 | 7 | 13 - 19 | UNICEF |
| Rwanda | 2 | 84 | 44 | 40 | 12 - 29 | UNICEF |
| Serbia | 2 | 13 | N/A | N/A | 16 - 20 | UNICEF |
| Sierra Leone | 5 | 50 | N/A | N/A | 8 - 19 | UNFPA |
| Somalia | 8 | 239 | N/A | N/A | 10 - 17 | UNICEF, World Vision |
| Sri Lanka | 25 | 246 | N/A | N/A | 10 - 18 | UNICEF |
| Sudan | 4 | 52 | N/A | N/A | 7 - 25 | UNICEF |
| Uganda | 16 | 191 | 101 | 90 | 10 - 30 | Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children |
| Total: | | | | | | |
| 17 countries | 125 | 1385 | | | | |

Note: Some numbers are estimates, while in some focus groups the number of participants was not reported. The numbers above represent a conservative estimate.

ANNEX III

ONLINE SURVEY RESPONSES

Breakdown of regions

| Region | Number |
|---|------------|
| Latin America and the Caribbean | 93 |
| Industrialized countries | 82 |
| West and Central Africa | 66 |
| South Asia | 42 |
| Eastern and Southern Africa | 42 |
| East Asia and the Pacific | 31 |
| Middle East and North Africa | 21 |
| Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States | 5 |
| Not specified | 3 |
| Total | 385 |

Breakdown of age

| Age Group | Number |
|---------------|------------|
| 10 and under | 6 |
| 10 - 14 | 25 |
| 15 - 19 | 121 |
| 20 - 24 | 111 |
| 25 and over | 110 |
| Not Specified | 12 |
| Total | 385 |

Breakdown of gender

| Gender | Number |
|--------------|------------|
| Female | 221 |
| Male | 164 |
| Total | 385 |

LIST OF COUNTRIES RESPONDING TO THE ONLINE SURVEY

| | | |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------|
| Algeria | Greece | Oman |
| Angola | Guatemala | Pakistan |
| Argentina | Haiti | Panama |
| Australia | Hong Kong | Peru |
| Austria | Iceland | Philippines |
| Bahrain | India | Poland |
| Belize | Indonesia | Portugal |
| Benin | Iraq | Russia |
| Botswana | Ireland | Rwanda |
| Brazil | Italy | Senegal |
| Burundi | Japan | Serbia |
| Cameroon | Jordan | Sierra Leone |
| Canada | Kenya | Singapore |
| Central African Republic | Korea | Somalia |
| Chile | Liberia | South Africa |
| China | Macau | Spain |
| Colombia | Malawi | Sri Lanka |
| Congo | Malaysia | Sudan |
| Costa Rica | Maldives | Syrian Arab Republic |
| Cote d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast) | Mauritania | Tanzania |
| Cuba | Mexico | The Gambia |
| Cyprus | Moldova | Turkey |
| Dominican Republic | Morocco | Uganda |
| Ecuador | Mozambique | United Arab Emirates |
| Egypt | Nepal | United Kingdom |
| Ethiopia | Netherlands | United States |
| Fiji | Nicaragua | Venezuela |
| France | Niger | Yemen |
| French Polynesia | Nigeria | Zimbabwe |
| Gabon | Norway | |
| Ghana | Occupied Palestinian Territory | |



MACHEL STUDY 10-YEAR STRATEGIC REVIEW

CHILDREN AND CONFLICT IN A CHANGING WORLD

Co-convenors of the Machel Study



Partners to the Youth Report

