



Protection of Innocent Children Victims of Conflict in Africa



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Introduction

Conflict in Africa is not a new thing. Over the years, there have been numerous cases of conflicts within the continent in the form of civil wars, inter-country conflicts, and other forms of armed violence including terrorist activities (ACERWC, 2016). Unfortunately, these situations and crises have had very devastating effects on children, being the most vulnerable population.

According to Save the Children International's (SCI) report on Stop the War on Children (2020), the number of children living in conflict areas across the world has almost doubled, reaching 415 million in 2018. In Africa, there are 170 million children who live in conflict zones, that is, 1 in every 4 children (SCI, 2020).



The regions in Africa that experience armed conflicts are the West Africa region, the Central Africa region (UNICEF, 2021), and the East Africa region (ACERWC, 2016). According to UNICEF's report (2021) and SCI's report (2020), the countries within the West and Central Africa region that have been reported with the most serious violations on children during armed conflicts are the Central African Republic, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria and Mali. In the East African region, these countries are South Sudan and Somalia (ACERWC, 2016).

Conflicts within these African countries have seen a

number of grave violations being committed against children. Children, especially the girls, have been subjected to infant deaths, exploitation, sexual and gender-based violence, and trafficking (ACERWC, 2016). The African Committee of Experts of the Rights and Welfare of the Child (2016) stated that children are 24 times more likely to die in armed conflict because of injury and diseases.

Moreover, children who are victims of armed conflict are often killed or more likely to be separated from their families, sexually assaulted, abducted, trafficked or even recruited into armed groups (ACERWC, 2016). The rights that children do not get to enjoy during conflicts are the right to education, good health, clean water and sanitation, parental care, nutrition; children are more likely to become sick and malnourished (ACERWC, 2016).

There are many interventions that have been put in place to lessen the impact of armed conflict on children in Africa. Some of them include both national and regional laws that countries have passed, the use of technology to report cases of child victimisation, as well as shelters to accommodate the children victims. This paper will shed light on these interventions and how African States can contribute to protect children in armed conflict crises.

Background

According to the United Nations, the world marks the international day of innocent children victims of aggression every 4th of June. This day came to be as a result of the attention brought about by the large number of Palestinian and Lebanese children who were victims of Israel's acts of aggression (UN, 2022). Therefore, this day acknowledges the pain suffered by innocent children all over the world who are the victims of physical, emotional and mental abuse (UN, 2022) as a result of living in conflict zones.



Children in Armed Conflict Situations in Africa

As stated earlier, there have been ongoing conflicts in Africa, many of them being civil wars amongst different communities, inter-country conflicts and terrorist attacks. The following countries have been engaging in armed conflicts for a number of years, which has had adverse effects on the well-being of children:

a. The Democratic Republic of Congo

The DRC is one of the countries that has experienced decades of conflict. The current conflict being witnessed in the DRC within the North Kivu province is due to the refugee crises and the spillover from the 1994 Rwanda Genocide (Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), 2022). After the Hutu community fled to the eastern region of the DRC, they formed armed conflict groups. The Congolese government was unable to control and defeat the various armed groups, and war eventually broke out (CFR, 2022).



The war in the DRC resulted in the displacement of 75,000 people (UN, 2022), deaths of civilians including children, rape of women and girls, and forceful recruitment of men and boys (Aljazeera, 2022). The persistent armed conflicts have over the years interfered with children's basic rights to education and healthcare (ACERWC, 2016).

b. South Sudan

The United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) reported that between 17th February and 7th April 2022, about 72 civilians were killed, at least 11 injured and 64 cases of sexual violence were recorded (UN, 2022). About 40,000 people fled the violence because of the many violations that have occurred such as rape and gang rape, beheadings, attacks on humanitarian workers, among others.



In addition, CFR (2022) reported that there was a food crisis in South Sudan during the civil war that ended in 2018. As of April 2021, it was estimated that about 7 million people did not have enough food to sustain themselves (CFR, 2022). It is, however, not clear the number of children who have been affected by the ongoing violence.

c. Nigeria

In Nigeria, children have been exposed to violent extremism such as recruitment into the Boko Haram terrorist group (SCI, 2020). According to the SCI 2020 report, 1,947 children were reported to have been recruited into armed conflict. Further, children were abducted by the Boko Haram terrorist group, a total of 276 children were abducted in 2014. This was the highest number of children to be abducted



by the terrorist group.

In 2020, UNICEF reported that more than 1,300 children were abducted in the West and Central Africa region alone. The consequences of the abductions are that the children are more likely to be sexually abused, injured or killed (UNICEF, 2020).

Interventions that Protect the Rights and Welfare of Children in Armed Conflict

From the violations that children in armed conflict are exposed to, there are a number of best practices that African countries have adopted to ensure the safety and protection of victims of armed conflict. Some of the interventions that are in place include:

1. Costing and implementation of international, national and regional laws on child protection

African countries have a role to play towards safeguarding the rights and welfare of their children during armed conflicts. This role is highlighted in the different laws that each country has passed, in addition to the regional laws. The major international and regional laws that countries have ratified



are the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and its optional protocols, and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and its protocols. African countries have adopted the provisions of these laws into their own national laws.

At the national level, African countries have put in place laws on child protection, as well as frameworks that support the implementation of these laws. In Kenya, for example, the National Assembly is in the process of passing the Children's Bill 2021. The bill has extensive provisions on the protection of children across the country

The major challenge with the existing laws is that they are underfunded, ineffective and unsupported (ACERWC, 2016). Governments are not supporting the implementation of these laws, which make it difficult to put their provisions into practice in order to protect the children. Another challenge is that some of these national governments have a hand in the conflicts by funding them, which makes them reluctant to advance the protection of children (ACERWC, 2016).

2. Technology / Digital interventions

In the 21st century, there has been progress made towards helping children report cases of violence being committed against them. One of the ways to report such violations, even in armed conflict situations, is the toll free helpline 116 established by Childline Kenya.



As far as education is concerned, there has been progress that has helped children living in conflict zones to continue with their education. The introduction of virtual learning platforms has helped children continue with school even in the midst of conflict.

Further, there have been monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that use technology to map out conflict prone areas and report the number of people who have been affected by the conflicts. This data is then used to provide the needed humanitarian aid to the affected people, including children (Sheila Carrette, Kent Garber).

3. Rehabilitation and reintegration of children involved in armed conflicts

Communities across Africa have partnered with civil society organisations and non-governmental organisations to establish rescue centres for children victims of armed conflict. These centres offer psychosocial support to help children recover from the psychological, emotional and physical trauma they experienced during armed conflict.



On the other hand, children who were forcefully recruited by armed conflict groups and committed offences are also being held accountable for their actions. This is done by detaining them in juvenile facilities separate from the adults and thereafter reintegrated back to society.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It is now known that children are deprived of so many of their rights during armed conflict situations, being one of the vulnerable groups in society. They are recruited by terrorist groups and armies, they are killed and injured, and separated from their families. Their rights to education, healthcare, sanitation, clean water and nutrition are the most affected. This is because the schools and hospitals are destroyed during the conflicts and civil wars.



Thus, it is important to have children victims of aggression protected at all costs so that they can enjoy their childhood, especially post-conflict.



Recommendations

In agreement with the recommendations provided in the SCI, ACERWC and UNICEF reports, further recommendations to enhance child protection for innocent children victims of aggression are:

- Governments to strengthen their partnerships with the community-based civil society organisations and NGOs to help children victims of conflict get the support they need;
- Have in place a two-fold accountability mechanism: accountability for the violations committed against children, as well as accountability for the children who participated in conflicts and committed offences;
- Strengthen the existing child protection mechanisms during armed conflicts and create awareness of these mechanisms;
- African countries need to adopt the Safe Schools Declaration to avoid the armed conflict groups from using schools and other learning institutions as battlegrounds.
- African countries to fund the implementation of child protection frameworks and mechanisms during conflicts.



For Further Reading:

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