

Towards Eliminating Child Labor in Armed Conflict:

Relevance to UN PKO: @PKO Now! No.110

The thoughts and views expressed in this column belong solely to the author and do not represent those of the Secretariat and the Government of Japan.

Kiyomi Takano
Program Advisor
September 16, 2020

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which aim to make the world a better place by 2030, were adopted at the UN Summit in September 2015¹. Of which Goal 8 Target 7 (SDG8.7) sets a global goal to eliminate all forms of child labor including child soldiers by 2025, five years earlier than the time frame for achieving the other goals and targets.

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO)², and Save the Children³, the number of child laborers worldwide has dropped dramatically since 2000, from 246 million children to 152 million in 2016 due to the increase in importance of education and the introduction of policies to prevent child labor in many countries in recent years. The number indicates one in ten of all children worldwide (9.6%) are child laborers⁴; however, in places affected by armed conflict⁵, the percentage of child laborers increases to one in six (17%).

The achievement of SDG 8.7 is becoming even more important since living and working in conflict zones that destroy towns and cities and take away families impedes children's childhood and educational opportunities that are fundamental to their healthy development. This article highlights the factors of child labor in conflict, which is poorly understood compared to child labor in general, as well as the efforts of United Nations Peacekeeping Operations to eliminate child labor in conflict.

What is child labor like in armed conflict?

Here are some specific examples of child labor.

Some children living in conflict-affected countries⁶, work on construction sites, in car repair shops, metal working factories and other industries, while others join the armed group to earn a livelihood⁷.

The roles of child labor can be classified into two: combat and support. Combat means actually taking part in combat or taking a role like guarding or carrying out terrorist attacks, while supportive roles are cooks, scouts, porters and messengers⁸.

The role of girls in child labor in conflict is often overlooked because a large proportion of boys are involved in child labor; however, they may be forced into sex slavery or early marriage to combatants in addition to taking on the role of soldiers.

With regard to such child labor, in 1999 the ILO, in its Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, defined work including forced participation of children in armed conflicts, and work which is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children, as the worst forms of child labor⁹. All the 187 member states of the ILO including conflict-ridden Afghanistan, Syria and South Sudan to date, have ratified this Convention¹⁰. This result shows child labor, especially in harsh environments, is recognized as an issue on a mass global scale.

What is happening to child labor in armed conflict?

In 2018, more than 7,000 children joined armed forces or groups during conflict; boys account for 84%, girls for 11%, and the final 5% are not specified by sex¹¹.

Another study found that in countries affected by armed conflicts, the percentage of children engaged in child labor is 77% higher than the global average, and the percentage of children engaged in dangerous and hazardous work¹², is 50% higher than the global average¹³.

While the number of child laborers worldwide is decreasing, the number of child laborers is increasing in the sub-Saharan Africa region strongly affected by armed conflict¹⁴.

Factors increasing the number of child laborers in armed conflict

When conflicts cause major changes in family and social structures, children are forced to work due to a variety of factors. This section discusses the three main factors that increase the number of child laborers.

The first factor is that children are forced to work due to financial problems created by the conflict. In conflict settings, when a parent loses his or her job or a child is separated or bereaved from his or her parent, the child has to support the family's finances.

In South Sudan and Syria, it is not rare to see parents send their children abroad as migrants to keep them away from danger, or for children to become refugees or migrants of their own volition¹⁵. In some cases when only children are left at home; they are at greater risk of being caught up in the forced labor and human trafficking trade¹⁶.

The second factor is that children are more likely to join armed groups or engage in other forms of labor as a result of having nowhere to go due to the occupation and destruction of schools by armed groups¹⁷.

The reasons behind the attacks on schools by the armed groups are that the curriculum and textbooks differ from a belief the armed groups hold, or that the armed groups hold the belief that girls should not be educated. For example, militants opposed to girls' education in Pakistan shot Ms. Malala Yousufzai in 2012¹⁸.

At last, the low cost of labor for children and their vulnerable position in society have caused the increase in the number of child laborers. In recent years, improvements in weaponry have led to the development of lighter weapons that enable children to handle them; it also gave armed groups the idea to recruit children¹⁹.

According to the 2019 Secretary General Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict, children were being used by armed forces in 15 out of 20 countries²⁰, where conflict is occurring, with the majority of them being forced, sometimes through violence, to join the armed groups²¹. In some cases, children abducted by the armed forces are forced to join the armed forces as soldiers and are then beaten into a subordinate position, ordered to kill, or forced to use drugs to withstand any situation²². There are some children who volunteer to join the armed forces in order to support their families; however, the reality is that many of them join without knowing what they will be made to do or what will happen to them.

Problems the countries in armed conflict are facing and their explanations

Children often face the loss of educational opportunities and future employment opportunities due to armed conflict, and they also suffer emotional stress due to the harsh environment in armed conflict. These problems caused by armed conflict inflict a large loss on the nation's future. This section details three problems faced by countries in conflict with child laborers.

First, the countries in armed conflict with out-of-school child laborers are more prone to a situation of long-term economic stagnation. Typically, armed conflict amplifies military spending and puts a strain on a national economy, resulting in a large number of people falling into poverty and an increase in the number of child laborers to support households.

For example, according to UNICEF, in Syria the armed conflict has increased the number of poor families and more than three-quarters of children are working. The number of Syrian child laborers who are unable to attend school in Jordan, where they have been displaced, is also increasing rapidly²³.

The work of out-of-school children with low labor costs will reduce a country's GDP per capita in the future and keep the country in poverty in the medium to long term²⁴. As economists Mueller and Tobias (2016) say, a four-year civil war reduces a country's GDP per capita by 18%; and, six years after the end of a civil war, the average GDP per capita

is still 15% lower than in a state without a civil war²⁵.

Ending the civil war as quickly as possible is important for the nation's economic recovery; however, long-term economic stagnation is inevitable unless children's schooling is made a priority.

Second, the issue of youth employment is another problem. In the countries in armed conflict, in addition to the increase in the number of poor families due to the economic downturn, the number of children enrolled in school is decreasing and the proportion of child laborers is increasing due to the occupation and destruction of schools by armed groups.

Even as children who have missed out on educational opportunities grow up and try to find a stable job, not many places accommodate out-of-school youth. Sadly, it will be the same, even if they are able to seek refuge outside the country.

This reality is not only taking away the children's future, but also their nation's future. For example, 400,000 young Afghans enter the labor market every year, but many of them do not have the vocational skills required for their job²⁶. Consequently, not just in Afghanistan, youth from conflict-affected countries frustrated with the unemployment situation, join the armed groups in order to earn money; this leaves conflict-affected countries in a precarious situation in the medium to long term²⁷.

The common denominator between the above two problems is that the solutions are closely related: conflict resolution, economic recovery, and the expansion of education.

A study by Spain-based Caixa Bank shows that just one additional year of schooling for a child can lead to a 6-10% increase in income as a result of improved human capital, which capitalizes on human knowledge and capabilities²⁸.

A country with a large population that receives a quality education rather than labor as a child has the potential to recover its economy in the future. Also, if a country can become

economically self-reliant, education can be enhanced and children will understand that nothing will be solved by violence or the taking of lives while growing up. This means that the expansion of education will lead to building a sustainable society that is free of conflict.

Finally, there is a need for better medical care. The oppressive working conditions and the visible horrific scenes in armed conflicts can cause a number of harmful effects on children, including trauma, mental stress disorder and malnutrition, which can stunt their physical and mental growth and independence²⁹.

Improved health care reduces the physical and emotional burden on children and supports their healthy development; besides, this results in preventing the recurrence of conflict, as children and youth who have suffered the pain caused by the effects of conflict want to build a safe society when they become leaders of their society. Although many international NGOs such as Care International, support health care for children who have fled as former child soldiers and refugees, there is still a need to further improve the availability of doctors and health care facilities that can care for children's physical and mental problems.

The above three problems faced by the countries in armed conflict explain that education and health care are essential for the economy and national recovery.

In Cambodia, which has experienced civil wars, and Yemen, where civil war is currently protracted, the school enrollment rate has improved and the number of child laborers has decreased by reducing school fees (such as entrance fees and textbook fees)³⁰.

While some countries in armed conflict strive to resolve conflict issues with the aim of stabilizing the national economy, there are other armed conflicts in which the support and intervention of developed countries related to the factors of the conflict (e.g., resources and land concessions) are essential. From now on, the countries in armed conflict and the international community need to take these issues seriously and make the provision of a safe living environment, quality education and medical care to the child laborers involved in the conflict a top priority, rather than making policies only on paper to deal with the damage and harm caused by the conflict.

Relevance to UN peacekeeping operations

How do United Nations peacekeeping operations (hereinafter referred to as “UN PKO”) work with child laborers and children in conflict settings? Here are some examples of how UN PKO works with children living in conflict-affected countries.

In 1999, the United Nations Security Council (hereinafter referred to as “UNSC”) adopted its first resolution on “Children and Armed Conflict” (UNSC Resolution 1261), dedicated to the protection of children in conflict³¹. Since then, many resolutions on the topic of the protection of children in conflict have been adopted. Amongst others, in relation to UN PKO, UNSC Resolution 1261 addresses the appropriate training on protection and rights of children for personnel participated in peacekeeping operations³², Resolution 1314 (2000) underlines the inclusion of Child Protection Advisers in peacekeeping operations³³, and Resolution 1379 (2001) proposes the need to incorporate child protection provisions “when considering the mandates of peacekeeping operations”³⁴. In addition, UNSC Resolution 1612 adopted in 2005, outlined “The Six Grave Violations against Children during Armed Conflict”, and called for a monitoring mechanism for human rights violations against children. It is now one of the responsibilities of UN PKO that monitor violations and report on violations to the Security Council³⁵. The six grave violations are: killing and maiming of children; recruitment or use of children as soldiers; sexual violence against children; abduction of children; attacks against schools or hospitals; and denial of humanitarian aid access for children.

UN PKO is actively engaged in child protection as part of civilian protection. Its main objective is to prevent children from joining the armed forces, and in addition to monitoring and reporting, they engage in a wide range of activities, including negotiations with the armed groups, advocacy for the state and involvement in legal reform.

Since UN PKO’s mission is not to protect children directly, they work closely with UNICEF and other UN organizations such as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) by providing them with information so that they can provide appropriate humanitarian

assistance³⁶.

Here are some specific examples of UN PKO efforts. In South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo, they have succeeded in getting the armed groups to agree on an action plan to end the human rights violations of children³⁷. Moreover, in the Darfur, region of western Sudan, the African Union/United Nations Hybrid operation in Darfur (UNAMID) has helped solve the problem of former child soldiers being sentenced to death for crimes against humanity³⁸; in South Sudan, the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) collaborated with the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) in implementing an action plan to stop the recruitment and use of children in the armed groups.

What can we do?

International conventions³⁹ have already established the right of all children to be protected from child labor, and while these legal frameworks can help to eliminate child labor, they are not perfect on their own. Today, the world is at a critical juncture due to the spread of COVID-19 around the world, making it even more necessary to share information across borders. We no longer live in a world where only the developed countries are at ease and watch from the sidelines as other countries experience disasters. Some countries are cooperating with other countries to strengthen their ability to respond to disasters even if they are in the same position.

The theme of "child labor in armed conflict" discussed in this report, is difficult to relate to our lives and may make you feel pessimistic and despair about the environment in which children are placed. However, these issues are recognized by one of the SDGs that should be achieved, including by developed countries. The SDG Implementation Guiding Principles⁴⁰ emphasize the great importance of "the efforts of individual citizens who regard the SDGs as their own affairs". Developed countries that are involved in some armed conflicts, such as resource conflicts, have a responsibility to monitor armed groups to prevent children from joining them, and to firmly condemn any violations, with the aim of achieving SDG 8.7.

When each of us gradually changes our attitudes, for example, by becoming more concerned about issues that are happening in other countries, there will be a possibility to not only change the life of one child in a distant country, but to improve the economy and social structure of that country as well. I hope that this column will raise readers' awareness of child labor in armed conflict and provide a springboard for your own action on the SDGs⁴¹.

End Notes

¹ It is an international goal for a sustainable and better world by 2030, in the “2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”, adopted at the UN Summit in September 2015, and consists of 17 goals and 169 targets. SDG 8 introduced, is the goal to “promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all”.

(Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. What are the SDGs?
(<https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/oda/sdgs/about/index.html>); United Nations. 8 Decent work and economic growth. Retrieved September 24, 2020
(<https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2016/goal-08/>)

² The ILO has published a report on child labor every four years since 2002, with the 2017 report being the most recent.

³ Save the Children (2020). Stop the war: 2020 Gender matters [PDF file].(<https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/16784/pdf/ch1413553.pdf>)

⁴ International Labour Organization (2017). Global Estimates of child labour: results and trends, 2012-2016. International Labour Organization: Geneva.

⁵ Countries affected by armed conflicts include 11 countries: Afghanistan, Central African Republic, Colombia, Iraq, Mali, Mali, Nigeria, Philippines, South Sudan, Ukraine, Yemen, and Democratic Republic of Congo. Information on Libya, Myanmar, Somalia, Sudan and Syria is not available and are not included. (ibid. [4])

⁶ There are 415 million children under the age of 18 living in conflict zones, and the number is growing every year. (ibid. [3])

⁷ Human Rights Watch (2016). They bear all the pain: Hazardous child labour in Afghanistan [PDF file]

(https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/afghanistan0716_brochure_lowres.pdf); Save the children & UNICEF (2015). Small hands heavy burden: how the Syria conflict is driving more children into the workforce [PDF file] (<http://childrenofsyria.info/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/CHILD-LABOUR.pdf>)

⁸ ILO. Child labour and armed conflict. Retrieved June 1, 2020
(<https://www.ilo.org/ipecc/areas/Armedconflict/lang--en/index.htm>); UNICEF. Children recruited by armed forces. Retrieved September 17, 2020
(<https://www.unicef.org/protection/children-recruited-by-armed-forces>); Schauer, E., & Elbert, T. (2010). The Psychological Impact of Child Soldiering. NY: Springer.

⁹ ILO (1999). Worst forms of child labour convention, 1999 (No. 182) [PDF file].

(https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---declaration/documents/publication/wcms_decl_fs_46_en.pdf)

¹⁰ ILO. Ratifications of C182 - Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182).

Retrieved August 5, 2020 from

https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:11300:0::NO::P11300_INSTRUMENT_ID:312327

¹¹ *ibid.* ([3])

¹² "Hazardous work" refers to work that may "directly harm the physical, mental, social, and/or educational development" of children. (Save the Children (2018). The many faces of exclusion: End of Childhood Report 2018 [PDF file]

(https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/13429/pdf/endofchildhood_report_2018_english_0.pdf)

¹³ *ibid.* ([4])

¹⁴ *ibid.* ([12])

¹⁵ UNHCR. Every day, children are forced to flee conflict alone. Retrieved June 10, 2020

(<https://www.unhcr.org/no-child-should-be-left-alone.html>)

¹⁶ Council of Europe (2020). Combating human trafficking and disappearances of refugee children. (<https://pace.coe.int/en/news/7781>)

¹⁷ ILO. World Day Against Child Labour 2017: protecting children from child labour in conflict and disaster-affected areas (Available in Japanese). (https://www.ilo.org/tokyo/areas-of-work/child-labour/WCMS_554843/lang--ja/index.htm)

¹⁸ Walsh, D. (2012, October 9). Taliban Gun Down Girl Who Spoke Up for Rights. The New York Times. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/10/world/asia/teen-school-activist-malala-yousafzai-survives-hit-by-pakistani-taliban.html>)

¹⁹ Schauer, E., & Elbert, T. (2010). The Psychological Impact of Child Soldiering. NY: Springer.

²⁰ The number of countries in conflict differs from the view taken by the ILO in footnote 5, but this may be due to differences in the definition of a country in conflict and only to the number of countries reported to the UN General Assembly.

²¹ *Ibid.* ([3]); United Nations (2019). General Assembly Security Council: Children and armed conflict [PDF file].

(https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2019/509&Lang=E&Area=UNDOC)

²² *ibid.* ([10];[17])

²³ ILO (2017). Ending child labour by 2025: A review of policies and programmes. Geneva:

ILO; *ibid.* ([9])

-
- ²⁴ The World Bank (1998). Child Labor: Issues and Directions for the World Bank. The U.S.A.: The World Bank.
- ²⁵ Mueller, H., & Tobias, J. (2016). The cost of violence: Estimating the economic impact of conflict. (<https://www.theigc.org/reader/the-cost-of-violence-estimating-the-economic-impact-of-conflict/introduction/>)
- ²⁶ UNICEF (2019). Nine Afghan children killed or maimed daily in world's most lethal warzone: parties must protect children, end targeting of schools and clinics. <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/nine-afghan-children-killed-or-maimed-daily-worlds-most-lethal-warzone>
- ²⁷ Mundy, K., & Dryden-Peterson, S. (2015). Educating children in conflict zones. NY and London: Teachers College Press.
- ²⁸ Canals, C. (2017). Education and economic growth [PDF file] (<https://www.caixabankresearch.com/en/economics-markets/labour-market-demographics/education-and-economic-growth>)
- ²⁹ *ibid.* ([24]); Guy, M. K. (2009). The political and cultural background for using child soldiers [PDF file] (https://irct.org/assets/uploads/1018_8185_2009-2_132-136.pdf)
- ³⁰ *ibid.* ([23])
- ³¹ "S/RES/1261," United Nations Security Council (UNSC), 30 August, 1999.
- ³² *Ibid.*
- ³³ "S/RES/1314," UNSC, 11 August, 2000.
- ³⁴ "S/RES/1379," UNSC, 20 November, 2001.
- ³⁵ United Nations Security Council (2005). Resolution 1612 (S/RES/1612); United Nations (2017). Comprehensive Protection of Civilians Training Materials for United Nations Peacekeeping Operations: Military version [PDF file] (http://dag.un.org/bitstream/handle/11176/400703/RTP_CPOC_Military_-_Instructional_Material.pdf?sequence=10&isAllowed=y)
- ³⁶ United Nations (2020). Policy: child protection in United Nations peace operations [PDF file] (<https://a.msip.securewg.jp/docview/viewer/docNE02DF19639726d43fd1874d11ecd9c02ad3ba7f52b71dbe07e0ec631710b17418f0902bd48c1>)
- ³⁷ United Nations Peacekeeping. Child Protection. Retrieved June 10, 2020 (<https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/child-protection>)
- ³⁸ African centre for justice and peace studies (2019). Will there be justice in Darfur?: persisting impunity in the face of political change [PDF file] (https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/sudan_darfur_12.pdf)

³⁹ International Covenant on the Rights of the Child in Conflict: Geneva Conventions, Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, Rome Statute (ibid. [3])

⁴⁰ SDGs 推進本部 (2019). SDGs 実施指針改定版 [PDF file]
(<https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/oda/sdgs/pdf/advocacy.pdf>)

⁴¹ SDGs Headquarters (2019). Revised version of the SDGs Implementation Guidelines
(available in Japanese) [PDF file]
(<https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/oda/sdgs/pdf/advocacy.pdf>)