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## Protecting Children in War and Conflict: European and global implications for child rights

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Bergen Belsen, 1945: A fifteen-year old girl dies in a concentration camp less than two months before its liberation, leaving behind a diary of a life lived in hiding in the back room of a town house in Amsterdam while war engulfed the world. Her name, of course, was Anne Frank.

Vietnam, 1972: A naked, burned young girl, nine years old, runs screaming down the road, chased by a cloud of Napalm. Her name is Phan Thi Kim Phuc.

Soweto, 1976: In the arms of a fellow student, a dying, 13-year-old boy is carried away from the student protest in which he has been shot by the police force of Apartheid South Africa. His name was Hector Pietersen.

Turkey, 2015: The lifeless body of a three-year old boy lies at the Mediterranean water's edge. His name was Alan Kurdi.

Aleppo, 2016: A dazed and bloodied five-year-old boy sits in the back of an ambulance, after surviving an airstrike from his own government. His name is Omran Daqneesh.

These are just five of the many children who have become icons of the horror of conflict and war. Their suffering provokes our deepest shock and outrage. It goes to our essential humanity. We all remember what it was like to be a child at their age: how innocent we were. The potential we had that was ready to be realised. And, of course, how vulnerable we were, reliant on those around us to protect us.

The suffering of children in conflict and war goes against every moral precept, law and principle. It makes a brutal mockery of that eternal idea that through the eyes of a child you will see the world as it should be.

As the great child rights champion Graca Machel has said, “children must be zones of peace”.

The achievement of that goal, so far away, is what I would like to talk with you about tonight.

I have been in public service for 25 years. And as leader of my party, as Prime Minister, and now as CEO of Save the Children International, I have always believed, that if you can improve the lives and futures of children, then you can transform the world for the better. Children will one day be making the decisions that shape the world: in their families, in their communities, in their work places, in government and across the international community.

The perspectives, experiences, beliefs, knowledge, skills and attitudes that will determine how they carry out those tasks almost always have their roots in childhood.

And so just as, in the words of the Declaration on the Rights of the Child, “Mankind owes to the child the best it has to offer”, it is also a truth that the fate of the world is truly determined by the lives of its children.

These truths mean that it is both a moral and strategic imperative for the international community to protect the world’s children – our children – from the horrors of armed conflict.

And yet 15 million children are directly caught up in violent conflict, 10 million children have fled conflict and one billion children live in countries affected by armed conflict. Over a third of the world’s child deaths happen in countries that are affected by conflict or that have sizeable refugee populations.

Everyone should read the latest report of the UN Secretary-General on Children in Armed Conflict. It is a horror story. What I keep wondering about is: why is the world not more outraged?

How can it be that girls as young as five are being raped.

That young boys are still forced to become child soldiers.

That children are being attacked in supposedly safe places. Their schools. Hospitals.

These events are happening every day around the world. If violence against children is like disease in the way it spreads through populations, it reaches epidemic proportions in war zones.

The UN Security Council codified six violations against children in 2005:

One – the recruitment and use of children as soldiers;

Two – the killing or maiming of children;

Three – sexual violence against children;

Four – attacks against schools or hospitals;

Five – the abduction of children; and

Six – the denial of humanitarian access.

These all-too-common violations are horrific enough, yet of course they exist on top of the incredibly difficult circumstances that children affected by armed conflict already live in: destroyed communities, increased hunger and disease; homelessness; the absence of schooling and the breakdown of every part of society as we who have not lived through war imagine it.

The multitude and depth of these impacts all contribute to the unrelenting fear and stress that these children live in.

Of the children who do survive, many suffer physical injuries.

And long after those physical scars have healed, the psychological effects of exposure to conflict and violence continue to destroy lives. Children often struggle with post-traumatic stress, reflected in disturbed behaviour, emotional and sleep problems.

Alongside these health problems is the impact on children's education. Conflict often means lack of schooling. This means that even when children escape the conflict or the conflict ends, they are enormously disadvantaged.

And as such, too often violence leads to more violence; and conflict leads to more conflict.

Whether they become our leaders of tomorrow or members of society, it is our responsibility to ensure that the world's children will be able to play their unique role defined not by the violence and suffering inflicted on them, but by their potential and character.

Of course this is a significant challenge. For a number of reasons.

First: Children in armed conflict often have no one to represent them. Often they have no government and no powerful political constituency to take up their cause. Children are not just vulnerable because they are small, it is also because they often can't speak up for themselves. That lack of voice and agency gives the international community an increased responsibility.

Second is the challenge of delivery. Even when we know what the solutions are, the context on the ground can make implementation hard or even impossible. The situation in Aleppo in 2016 was a devastating example of the realities of working in war zones.

Third, and above all, dealing with conflict is complex and the international community can often show a lack of political courage and foresight. Children are, shamefully, not given the priority that they require, be it in investment, focus or strategic agreement.

This context and this cause calls on us to create a new, global movement that is powerful enough to offer the children in armed conflict survival, protection and hope.

It sounds ambitious – and it is. But if ever our resolve wavers, we can take heart from one fact: we have done this before.

In 1919, in the shadow of World War 1, Europe was suffering a severe humanitarian crisis. 4 to 5 million children were starving in Central and Eastern Europe. The rates of infant and child mortality were at record highs.

That same year, a British woman called Eglantyne Jebb proclaimed, “All wars are waged against children” and began handing out leaflets with pictures of Europe’s starving children to encourage action to lift the allied blockade on defeated countries. She faced enormous resistance – many believed that Britain should help its own, rather than the enemy’s children. And so, with a broad coalition of support that included one of the LSE’s founders, George Bernard Shaw, she set up the first children’s charity that had an international focus.

The charity she founded is called Save the Children.

In the 1920s it went on to feed and educate thousands of Russians refugees in Turkey. And the 20,000 children left orphaned in the wake of the Civil war in Finland. And Eglantyne’s vision grew steadily – to go beyond emergency relief to making Children’s Rights an essential part of the world order. As she said: “every generation of children offers mankind anew the possibility of rebuilding his ruin of a world”.

You can’t say we haven’t had a consistent message down the years!

Eglantyne had huge success: she drafted the first ever Declaration of Children’s Rights, which was adopted by the League of Nations in 1924. 65 years later, it inspired the most wide-ranging expression of the principle that all children, and not just ‘our children’, have the same inalienable rights: the 1989 UN Convention of the Rights of the Child.

It sits as part of a global twentieth century rights based agenda that stretches from the UN Charter and Universal Declaration of Human Rights to the European Human Rights Convention and International Refugee Regime. Together, these frameworks delivered immense progress for human beings and promised even more.

And, highly relevant to our topic today, they include specific protections for children in armed conflict.

These protections have been extended over time as the unique vulnerability of children has been recognised in international humanitarian law.

The Geneva Convention, signed after the Second World War, was a watershed moment for recognising that human rights always apply.

Now, even wars have rules. We have an International Criminal Court to enforce them. Which just last year, adopted a policy to facilitate the prosecution of crimes against children.

In 1996, Graca Machel delivered a ground-breaking report for the UN on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children. It led to the creation of a UN Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict to monitor and report violations. Another report you must read!

We've recently seen the power of impartial and robust reporting, when Saudi Arabia reacted extraordinarily strongly to being cited by the Secretary-General for killing children in Yemen.

And with this we have seen a number advances in the system for monitoring and accountability. In particular, sexual violence against children and attacks on schools and hospitals.

Despite the recent rise in violations of humanitarian law in conflicts, there is still real scope to make progress for children through longer term development work.

The power of this combination of a rights based agenda and development work cannot be underestimated. Take Afghanistan as an example. One of the poorest countries in the world, beset by war for four decades, it has nonetheless reduced child deaths by almost one third in the last fifteen years. This was down to improving some of the basics – such as a tripling of the number of births attended by a skilled health worker, and a doubling of the coverage of life-saving vaccines. International donors, supported by organisations like mine and operating both in government and opposition-controlled areas of the country, helped to make this happen.

So nearly a century after Save the Children was founded, the advance of this rights based agenda in every part of global society, improved humanitarian and development delivery and enormous economic growth have together led to a situation where children are healthier, happier and safer than at any time in history.

We have made important gains. But conflict is still widespread.

Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, South Sudan, Northern Nigeria.

In each of these places, what we are seeing are new and worrying incarnations of long perpetrated violations of children's rights.

Children are continuously used as the soldiers and weapons of war. In South Sudan, 17,000 children have been recruited into armed groups. In Nigeria, Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan – Boko Haram, ISIS and the Taliban force children to strap vests on and blow themselves up.

The vital infrastructure that supports children is deliberately attacked. In Yemen, three health facilities were repeatedly hit in 23 incidents throughout 2015. In Syria, of the 60 schools Save the Children supported in Idlib and Aleppo in 2016, 44 were damaged by bombing.

And children are the deliberate targets of conflict. In North East Nigeria, hundreds of children have been abducted in a brutal insurgency that has driven over 2 million people from their homes.

Perhaps the greatest source of suffering for children in conflict is forced displacement. Estimates are that over 65 million people around the world have been forced from their homes.

Over 1 million of them have made their way to Europe and, as tonight is hosted by the European Institute, I would like to address this specifically.

As we know, the influx of refugees is pushing Europe's political co-operation to the limit – and Europe's commitment to the rights based ethos on which it was built has weakened.

Children are now dying on their way to Europe. If they arrive safely, they are often detained or held in detention-like conditions. Immigration detention is never in a child's best interest and is a clear contravention of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

As we sit here this evening, hundreds of children are still stuck in Greece, denied the opportunity to be reunited with their families. Thousands of children are spending another winter in flimsy shelter, without access to adequate education or healthcare.

I believe European Member States should have stepped up. This is simply not what we had expected or hoped for from Europe.

As happened in 1919, Save the Children has had to scale up our work in Europe. We operate a search and rescue vessel in the Mediterranean. We provide the basics of food, shelter and protection to children in Greece and the Balkans. We support protection and integration for child refugees in Germany and Sweden.

And as in 1919, when Eglantyne raised funds to support German and Austrian children, there is a growing notion that these children are not 'our children' and not our responsibility.

This is a dangerous reaction – not just for the future of those children but for the very future of Europe itself.

There are three simple reasons for this.

The first is that by neglecting their obligations to the vulnerable, European countries risk irreparably weakening the international frameworks, norms and principles that have taken decades to build and implement. This is not just a European question: if Europe does not adhere to the agreed norms and standards, why should others?

The second is that these children will be a part of Europe's future, whether it is in the countries where they were born or in new homes. What do we think their future attitude towards European society will be if their experience tells them they don't matter to European governments and the European public? As we have seen all too vividly in the last two years, the attitudes and beliefs of a population matter. Our rights based ethos, built on compassion, is not only a moral imperative, but also a strategic one.

And third, it is simply the right thing to do. If you are a parent, you will tell your children that the value of beliefs is not in holding them, but in practicing them – especially when it is hard.

For seven decades since the Second World War, Europe's ability to promote a rights based agenda abroad has hinged on the standards it has set at home. To stop now will be to weaken its future.

Europe's dilemma is just one example of how the future is inextricably linked to the lives of our children in the present. I am worried that our resolve and commitment to children's rights seems to be weakening.

Across the world, the suffering of children in armed conflict challenges all of the progress secured since the Second World War.

As Graca Machel has said "It is unforgivable that children are assaulted, violated, murdered and yet the world's conscience is not revolted nor our sense of dignity challenged. This represents a fundamental crisis of our civilisation."

I also believe it represents a fundamental crisis of our future.

And so I am here with you tonight. You are students and members of one of the greatest institutions of thinking, ideas and innovation in the world – founded for the betterment of society.

In fact, the reason I love speaking with students so much is that you embody the words of George Bernard Shaw: "Some see things as they are and say, 'why'? I dream of things that never were and say 'Why Not?'"

That is the scale of the ambition the world needs now for its children – especially those in armed conflict. Nearly a century after one British woman decided to act, we must create a new, global movement that is powerful enough to offer the children in armed conflict survival, protection and hope.

We must guarantee the rights we have created for all children and finally live up to the promises we have made to them about a better future and a more peaceful world.

The cause is great, the task is urgent and we know that, together, it is possible.

As we approach our centenary – that is what we at Save the Children will re-commit ourselves to, from campaigning and convening to delivery on the ground.

This is the time to do it. Both because it can't wait and because there are a number of opportunities, we have to make this reality.

In 2015, the world agreed to the UN Sustainable Development Goals – a global agenda that has ending all forms of violence against children as one of its foundations, as part of Goal 16. Every part of society can contribute to their realisation, which would transform the world for children.

We also have a new UN Secretary-General who as a former UN High Commissioner for Refugees knows first-hand how much war destroys children's futures. He has already declared 2017 as a year of peace and he must be supported as strongly as possible in any progress he can make.

And we have a European Union that is in need of renewal. While it may seem counter-intuitive, there is no better time than now for Europe to reassert itself as the pre-eminent child rights champion, through a focus on the protection of children in armed conflict, both within its borders and in those countries that are shouldering most of the burden. As we saw in Brexit, the EU's vital role and success as a peacemaker has largely been forgotten.

And yet, it is the best argument for a continental political union with influence around the world – yes, trading prosperity and social justice but above all – peace. That is the foundation of a rights based world order and can be the revitalisation of the EU's purpose in the 21st Century.

A rights based international order must begin with stronger accountability for war crimes committed against children.

The job of the International Criminal Court, one of the best weapons we have in the global fight to end impunity, did not get any easier in 2016 after the withdrawal of Russia and a number of Africa countries. We cannot let it fail.

One of the things we can prioritise though is to end immunity for the sexual exploitation and abuse by UN peacekeeping personnel.

Sexual exploitation and abuse of children by UN peacekeepers is particularly disturbing. This abuse inflicts life-long harm on the very children and vulnerable people peacekeepers are supposed to protect.

We know that reports of sexual exploitation and abuse increased in 2015 – and we know that reports have increased every year since 2013. We also know that sexual exploitation and abuse of children is increasing. It's not right that peacekeepers who rape, demand sexual favours in exchange for food, are never prosecuted.



The new Secretary General has already condemned the crimes being committed under the UN flag, and we should work with him to find the solutions that will end this horrific practice.

We need to think outside of the box. If countries providing peacekeeping forces can't – or won't – hold perpetrators to account, we need different solutions. One idea could perhaps be that, in the absence of functioning judicial systems, we create independent special courts designed to hold peacekeepers to account.

In addition to identifying good ideas, we should also make better use of the systems already in place, like the UN-led Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on Grave Violations Against Children in Conflict. This mechanism is run by UNICEF and its partners, and it collects information on crimes committed against children to share with the UN Security Council. But it's chronically underfunded.

We need to increase funding in order to improve the quality of data and frequency of reporting, the coverage of reporting, and the much-needed assistance for the victims of violence brave enough to tell their stories.

More than 50 per cent of those affected by war are children, but less than 5 per cent of humanitarian funding is spent protecting or educating them. This has to change.

And we need you. We all have a role to play. If you want to change the world for the better, there is no greater cause than the protection of children in armed conflict. Inaction has consequences: violence and conflict are a vicious generational cycle. To break it, we have to transform the experiences, perspectives and prospects of those who are children today and will shape world in the future.

It is possible. Everywhere I have seen Save the Children's work I meet these incredible children – who inspire us with their resilience and the hope in their eyes. The question we always ask ourselves is “how long do we have until that light of hope is turned off and what can we do to keep it there, to help it grow?”

These children are my – are our – urgent inspiration. The conditions they live in and the threats they face drive us to work with urgency. Their dreams and hopes inspire us to create a better life and world for them – and if we succeed, they will create a better world in the future.

I hope you will ask yourselves – “What can I contribute? What can I do? How will I practice my beliefs?”

Because as in the words of one child, written in her diary as war raged across Europe, “How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world”.

Thank you.

**END**