



REFLECTING ON 25 YEARS OF THE CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT AGENDA

Laura Cleave^①, Abdikarim Hassan^②, Myrah Oloo^③, Achaleke Christian Leke^④

- ① *Dallaire Institute for Children, Peace and Security*
- ② *Legal Consultant*
- ③ *Giants of Africa Alumnus*
- ④ *Local Youth Corner Cameroon*

EDITORS' NOTE:

This commentary is in a somewhat different form from others published in Allons-y and reflects our commitment to methodological pluralism and the importance of experiential knowledge. It takes the form of a transcribed discussion between three members of a youth advisory committee established as part of the Knowledge for Prevention research project on the early warning of the recruitment and use of children in armed violence at the Dallaire Institute, and the Dallaire Institute's research advisor Laura Cleave.

LAURA CLEAVE

Thank you for being here to reflect on the successes and challenges of 25 years of the Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC) agenda. The CAAC agenda was established by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly following the release of Graça Machel's novel report on the impact of armed conflict on children. In this report, now widely considered to be the cornerstone of the CAAC agenda, Graça Machel emphasized the disproportionate effect that conflict and violence have on children.

Today we are very lucky to be joined by our Knowledge for Prevention (K4P) Youth Advisory Committee, whose advocacy and research span from Cameroon to Kenya, Northern Ireland, Somalia, South Sudan, and the United States.

Our Youth Advisory Committee was created to advise on how children and young people can be better engaged as part of peacebuilding and early warning efforts to prevent children's recruitment into armed conflict. Our committee continues to demonstrate the power of young people as changemakers and relationship-builders, both in their respective communities and across the globe.

So, to begin our discussion today, I would ask, how would you describe the context for children and youth in your communities?

ABDIKARIM HASSAN

I think discussions around issues affecting children and youth in my community have increased. Child protection and youth issues are now more consistently being considered in key decision-making processes, from child advocates being represented in government and cores ministries, i.e., the child protection units within the Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Defence.

So, the discussion is well placed, and people are well informed on the issue of children's engagement in conflict. But again, there are still challenges to effect change with respect to the issue of children, specifically the issue of children in armed conflict. This has to do with limited resources, as Somalia is still in a transition period from a decades long conflict. Necessary resources to adjust and effect policies are yet to be fully implemented and many government offices and civil society organizations still rely on donors and the international community to implement daily activities and daily service delivery for children. There are also the challenges related to the prevalence of poverty in the country, which still hinders many youths and children to be fully engaged in positive programmes, such as education and so forth.

And once you know the overall challenge in the community with respect to the prevalence of poverty, we find that children are being misused by recruitment cells into conflicts. We have not yet invested a lot of time and resources in the fostering of knowledge and community engagement. There is a tendency to be reactionary in our approaches, to only help or come to the aid of children after the fact and not before. So, that's why it is important to invest in early warning and community-based programming.

MYRAH OLOO

So, my answer is a little bit more general. If you look at the age structure of Kenya, roughly 40% of the population is below the age of 14. The government does do a lot to help us, for instance through initiatives such as the Youth Enterprise Fund which provides funds for people who have entrepreneurial ideas and who want to start their own companies.

And then there's also the National Youth Service (NYS), which is a program that helps young people get involved in the security field, for instance the military and basic training.

There is also the Ministry of Youth that does focus a lot on programs centred around youth.

However, as the youth demographic that is part of a large population, we fall victim to many unique problems – whether it's poverty, unemployment, etc. When we look at the age group up to 25, we are looking at about 65% of the population. I believe that the unemployment rate at the national level is about 7%, and for youths specifically (16 to 35) it is about 17%. This represents a large disparity.

So, I'd say the context for youth and young children in my community is that the policies and guidance are there, but like my colleague before me has said it's all about resources. It's all about execution and this I believe is where we fall short. For example, in 2021, we've had a huge downfall in terms of education and young people returning to school. Yes, the policies are there that state that we must go to school, but the execution is where I think the problem rests. So, it is important that we do a little bit more to ensure that what we say is what we do in our community.

Although I feel like youth are generally seen and heard, we need to strive to act and create safer environments for all.

ACHALEKE CHRISTIAN LEKE

For Cameroon, there are different contexts for children depending on where you are in the country, so the situation of children and youth is always evolving. Depending on the area of the country, rises in conflict and limited opportunities affect young people and children differently. Firstly, in terms of education, our country currently runs a free education system where our children and young people – from primary right to higher education – pay a minimum amount for tuition. Yet, there are communities where children have not had access to schooling for over three years. This creates a significant challenge in terms of response.

Another key area which I want to flag is around employability and income generating opportunities. At present in Cameroon, unemployment is very high and opportunities for employability remains low.

In terms of government response, there is the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Civic Education, as well as the Ministry of Social Affairs, which account for youth and children. These ministries have programmes which they have developed around employability and income generation, for instance the special three-year plan for young people where the state provides funding in the form of loans to young people to set up their businesses, follow up and support them. There are also a wide variety of other programmes that are supported by the entrepreneurial spirit of youth themselves.

Displacement of children, and the increasing vulnerability of street children - particularly as in many cases the children themselves have chosen to leave the home due to poor treatment by parents – and refugee and internally displaced children remains of grave concern. These children experience conflict differently and are particularly vulnerable to abuse and atrocities of their rights. The Government has tried to respond to this, but it is a complex issue and bureaucracy often hinders response. Civil society movements are also responding to the increased vulnerability of children (i.e., through livelihood support, educational support, etc.).

The reality is that the implementation of our National Youth Policy rests around 30%. Yet, when it comes to children, there is not presently an institutional policy around children beyond policies around the protection of children and their education around child abuse and exploitation. To a certain degree, government, policymakers, and other development stakeholders have been able to ensure that this is mainstream within all institutions. Even civil society organisations are mandated to develop a child a protection policy.

Speaking from a peace and security lens, I believe that recent UN Security Council Resolutions around peace and security have been able to amplify these processes of not just protecting children or young people, but also engaging them in developing and monitoring initiatives.

LAURA CLEAVE

Reflecting on the past 25 years of the CAAC agenda, and especially the early findings of the Graca Machel report regarding the disproportionate impact of conflict on children, what advances have been made in protecting children from being engaged in violence? And what concerns do you have for effectively implementing a protection agenda?

ACHALEKE CHRISTIAN LEKE

Unfortunately, CAAC-based policies are not effectively being translated into real-time work on the ground in situations of concern. Investment in child protection often misses or overlooks the fact that the reality of children is constantly evolving – particularly given access that children and young people now have to the internet, for good or for bad. Over the past 10 to 15 years, access and exposure to information has shifted, which has affected children's ability to think and react to situations that affect them. This means that programming around children needs to take into consideration the changing natures and realities of childhood today.

Another challenge that we are facing is that programming still considers children from a more beneficiary perspective. I'm aware that we need to continue to strive for greater child protection, but we also must recognize the faculty of children and the creativity and reflection that they bring to the table. Programming must also evolve in terms of how we perceive children and how we meaningfully address their perspectives. Children should be developed in the development of protection-based programming.

From my experience working with children in the field, children have the potential to master and shape peacebuilding tools. If violent extremist groups can teach children to be able to carry guns, peacebuilding agencies can equally teach and work with children on how they can build peace. Imagine a generation where we have children whom at the age of three or four already understand the principles around peaceful mediation and dialogue. That child stands the chance of not falling prey to radicalization and recruitment.

In this context, the conversation of children being the “leaders of tomorrow” is already outdated as well. Today, we are seeing children who are leading on peacebuilding in their communities.

ABDIKARIM HASSAN

Reflecting on the children and armed conflict agenda, to some extent certain mandates have been successfully mainstreamed in many countries. Yet, violations against children continue to be underreported or overlooked, and the consideration that needs to be given towards existing norms within communities has yet to change. Communities are still susceptible to recruitment of children, and the issue of monitoring grave violations against children including recruitment remains challenging in conflict-based contexts. Data on child recruitment remains limited, particularly for non-state actors. Largely it is children who are able to leave armed groups who are counted within recruitment data. But this misses important interventions to prevent such a practice in the first place and to understand the scope of the issue. Investment in funding child protection policies to enhance recruitment prevention efforts must then be prioritized.

MYRAH OLOO

From the past 25 years, I think a success of the CAAC agenda is the awareness that has been raised around children’s vulnerability to conflict and violence. At the country level, knowledge of children’s rights and legal frameworks for child protection have increased.

However, I think 25 years may not be a long enough time to fully appreciate societal change and how it can affect one society. Some countries have been in conflict for over 20 years, and we must consider the children who have grown up in such environments and who are now adults themselves.

Accountability remains a core issue. It is one thing to raise the issue, or even to sign a peace agreement. However, it’s another thing to uphold what is written in the peace agreement. And in this context, peace and ceasefire agreements rarely include provisions related to children and child protection.

Child protection programming and policies continue to look at children as one that needs protection rather than as a group who holds rights. They do not recognize that children have the ability to bring peace to their communities – which can be seen as disempowering and does not give children the space to recognize the power that they have in shaping societal progress and sustainable peace.

As such, we need to see children more involved in peacebuilding. If children and youth already comprise such a vast proportion of the population, we are already leaders. And whether we're leading ourselves, whether we're leading our peers, we are already leaders and we need to be treated like leaders who should be discussed and involved in matters that affect us.

LAURA CLEAVE

A recent report by the Danish Refugee Council discusses the normalisation of violence during childhood years, drawing on case examples of how children internalise violent contexts even within the games that they may play on the playground at school. So, from your perspective, what is needed to break cycles and normalizations of violence from the earliest stages?

ACHALEKE CHRISTIAN LEKE

Normalising violence and crime are becoming very common within schools and other places where children may go. As such, we need to create programming that targets curriculums and reshapes perspectives to normalize peace.

From our side, we have a program called the Spread-Love campaign, where we are working in primary and secondary schools to teach children how to love. Love might seem to be an elusive word, but having such conversations helps children to start looking at things differently.

Thus, the culture of dialogue is critical, and something that is lacking in our context and can be seen as taboo. My organization is working hard on this to start and sustain community dialogues – trying to make the culture of dialogue like a lifestyle. But, even when we look at schools, there is still a culture of punishment that limits opportunities for dialogue and discussion. In such spaces, there is not space for children to talk among themselves. The findings in the Danish Refugee Council report would likely have been the same 10 or 20 years ago as well. Hence, we need to foster cultures where children have the opportunity to grow up differently. What if a child starts learning about peace in a softer way from games or activities when they begin nursery school? This is how you create champions of peace.

Funding for peace also needs to change. From our side, we have been running a program for children for three years, yet funding goes to the biggest organisations in lieu of local civil society organizations. If we continue to overlook local organizations and expertise, reports like the one that was mentioned before will continue to be produced and findings will never change.

The way we fund peacebuilding needs to change. There needs to be a reflection in programming and stakeholders who invest and work in these spaces. I work with these children every day, and I can tell you what the challenges are. We need to be able to look at things differently and ensure that children are taught and brought up in a way that will prevent us from having conflict tomorrow.

ABDIKARIM HASSAN

It's important to note that children always have and continue to face the highest repercussions of armed conflict and cycles of violence. Recognizing that we have rules in society, we need to prioritize implementation and the enforcement of laws, so that we can create a safe environment for children. We must invest in safe environments – such as education and resources – that can challenge cycles of violence and children's engagement in conflict. Rather than waiting for children to grow up, prioritizing life skills and education for peace at an earlier age can augment conflict mediation and prevention.

We must also invest caregiving support – for instance for parents and guardians – so that they are able to sustain environments of peace for children within the household. Oftentimes if children are not receiving love and care at home, then they may be more enticed to leave and find comradery and security elsewhere. Children who have been traumatized at home may be more susceptible and prone to conflict. Yet, from the point of view of the families, they may also be struggling financially and providing for their children, so opportunities for income generation could go a long way to changing household narratives around protection and creating safe spaces for children to live and grow.

MYRAH OLOO

To echo the point above on reprimanding children with corporal punishment, such forms of punishment during children's formative years shape the way they see power. Growing up, the greatest players in a child's life are their parents and their teachers. These are the people who they view as above them, in terms of holding decision-making power. So, when we do introduce violence in this context, it attributes violence and power as one.

Such misuses of power can also be seen at the community level when police act violently – reinforcing the idea of power and violence once again.

So, we need a way of educating these children that there is a different way for

your voice to be heard and a different way for you to be seen. Programs that teach children how to engage and debate peacefully are important. They present children with different tools and resources in their toolkit to convey their feelings.

We must also teach children about decision-making and its various layers – in the room, around the room and outside the room – so that they can recognize themselves and their agency at each stage. And from the point of view of decision-makers, we must convey how space must be created at each stage so that alternative voices can be brought into discussions.

LAURA CLEAVE

You are all such strong advocates and voices for children. Could you reflect on your experience and whether there was a defining moment in your life where you felt empowered as a young person to be part of peacebuilding in your community?

ACHALEKE CHRISTIAN LEKE

For me, I grew up living in violence and seeing it first-hand. I think the defining moment from my experience was when I realized that I had something in me that was unique and that could be of value to others, for example when I discovered my skills in theatre. It was a defining moment when I came to realise that people could find joy in what I was able to offer.

I had another defining moment in my life where someone showed me forgiveness and love in a different way. While I was in boarding school, I learned why teaching people by example can be such a powerful tool. We must strive to recognize the competencies and abilities of children, as that can make a difference for them in the long-term and the way they perceive themselves. Sometimes children go through trauma yet may not recognize that they have been through such an experience. Having someone there to show such a child that they have value and meaning is exceptionally important.

I've worked with former Boko Haram before, as well as with former separatists – from children to young people and adults. We need spaces where people are able to see things differently because they feel that they have something to offer and that they are valued by those around them.

MYRAH OLOO

For me, life has shown me so many different environments and places and has taught me about privilege. I was born in the UK and grew up in Kenya, and I've always thought of myself as a bridge to support others. Growing up in two different countries, it showed me how to relate to people from diverse contexts, and that you can always find commonality with others. Although different areas may have different challenges, every child has value and potential. What I learned was that it is possible to love a country, even when you recognize its problems and faults. And to truly love a place, you cannot sit idle you need to actively work to change the landscape.

The school I attended taught us about charity and giving back. I remember we took a trip to Samburu, which is in the north of Kenya, and I spoke to a girl called Frida. She shared about how in her home area there were cattle raids and during one of those raids they killed a few people in her community. They did this to fund political campaigns. It broke my heart because the government that is set out to protect these children and societies were the ones destroying them.

Despite this, Frida wants to become a lawyer and get involved in the justice system that has done her wrong, so that she can be part of the solution. We have a lot that we can do to support young people like Frida, and that is where I see my role. Youth have such potential and we need to ensure that we can give them the right environment and platform.

ABDIKARIM HASSAN

Somalia disintegrated into conflict when I was very young. My father was a businessman and would travel around many parts of Somalia, until the conflict became widespread. Over 30 years of civil conflict has meant that many of the youth, like myself, have grown up in violence. So, I grew up with this resentment that all hope had been lost for Somalia and for our entire generation of youth in Somalia.

But my hope was restored by the resilience of the youth in Somalia, especially in areas like Mogadishu that had been ravaged by conflict. Despite such fragility, youth have always picked up the pieces and continued to build a better future. When I returned to Somalia from school in 2011, it was inspiring to see youth fighting for their rights to go to school, to carry onto university, to seek greater well-being than what had been provided to them. And I was shocked by the fact that you know these are youth who haven't had any form of government, who haven't had a day's peace of mind from years of shelling and being forced to migrate and adapt.

And from then on, I felt that hope was not lost, and that I should be part of the process to build peace. From there I began to work in a school, another defining moment for me, which led me to Elman Peace where I worked for over six years on child protection and reintegration.

When we look at the breakdown of a country like Somalia that has such a high population of youth, that should give us hope, not worry. Where children and youth can engage more meaningfully, we will see not only a brighter future for themselves, but for also for their country.

The K4P Youth Advisory Committee was formed to bring the perspective of youth to the prevention of the recruitment and use of children as soldiers and to help advance the predictive, early warning work undertaken by the Dallaire Institute. Since its inception, the Committee has provided guidance on the SRSG for Children and Armed Conflict's 25-year review of the CAAC agenda, participated on the Dallaire Institute's Children, Peace and Security podcast, reviewed the Dallaire Institute's youth engagement strategy, and hosted research labs and collaborative dialogues with key partners. The Dallaire Institute would like to thank the Committee for their continued engagement and for their advocacy for the rights of young people across the globe.

K4P Youth Advisory Members:

Laura Cleave – Dallaire Institute for Children, Peace and Security, Canada

Ruth Frimpong – Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre, Ghana

Bazilika Joan Lado – EVE Organization for Women's Development South Sudan

Achaleke Christian Leke – Local Youth Corner Cameroon

Abdikarim Hassan – Legal Consultant, Somalia

Myrah Oloo – Giants of Africa Alumnus, Kenya

Aubrey Marie Seader – Arts and Peacebuilding Researcher, United States

Aisha Zannah – Future Prowess Islamic Foundation, Nigeria

Laura Cleave is a Research and Learning Advisor at the Dallaire Institute for Children, Peace and Security in Kigali, Rwanda. Laura is the lead researcher and coordinator of the Knowledge for Prevention (K4P) project, which focuses on the development of an early warning system for the recruitment and use of children as soldiers. In this capacity, Laura chairs the K4P Community of Practice and the K4P Youth Advisory Committee, contributes to academic and policy articles, and organizes the Dallaire Institute's annual international symposium focused on prioritizing children in early warning systems. With over five years of experience in the humanitarian and not-for-profit fields, as well as in the Canadian public sector, Laura has worked across the globe, including in Ireland, Morocco, Rwanda, South Korea, and Canada's northern territories, and has visited over 50 countries to date. She has a Master's in International Peace Studies from Trinity College Dublin.

Abdikarim Hassan is a consultant working with civil society and government agencies to build an effective enabling environment for children in Somalia. Much of his focus has been working with the Ministry of Justice as a senior legal advisor advising the institutions in the legal harmonization of necessary protection laws. Abdikarim, before his current role, worked with ELMAN Peace Center as the Protection Program Manager in Mogadishu, Somalia. In his role, Abdikarim oversaw the Centre's work with Children Associated with Armed Forces and Groups (CAFAAG) to effectively facilitate demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration (DDR) of Elman Peace's beneficiaries into civilian life. Abdikarim is an LL.M. graduate from Loyola University Chicago School of Law. He is an internationally recognized expert for community-based approaches to reintegration in an armed conflict where no peace agreement has yet been concluded. He has also worked in Lake Chad Basin countries facing similar conflict as Somalia. Abdikarim currently pursues post-graduate research on the legal landscape affecting DDR processes and lectures human rights law at different universities in Somalia.

Myrah Oloo is a youth leader and an alumnus of the Giants of Africa program who strongly believes in supporting and empowering youth across Africa. She has adapted a role to facilitate and act as a voice for the forthcoming generation of changemakers. Myrah is currently studying in the UK, and originally from Kenya. Her dream is to one day be the president of Kenya.

Achaleke Christian Leke is a peacebuilding, violent extremism, and international development expert from Cameroon with 15 years of experience as a practitioner and academic. His passion for peace was inspired by his childhood growing up in Fiango Kumba, which was known for crime and violence. The realities of violence drove him to build violence-free communities with young people at the forefront.

He currently serves as the Executive Director of Local Youth Corner Cameroon; a youth-led peace-building organization based in Cameroon. He was recently appointed by the African Union as African Union Youth Ambassador for Peace for Central Africa Region. Achaleke's experience as a practitioner, researcher and scholar has provided him with the unique opportunity to contribute to local, national and global conversations, initiatives and implemented over 600 projects on youth empowerment, peacebuilding, counter violent extremism, and sustainable development.

He has been named trice in the list of 100 Most Influential Young Africans; named UNESCO RealLife Hero, 2020; decorated as the winner of the Luxembourg Peace Prize in 2018; named Most Influential Young Cameroonian in 2016; named the Commonwealth Young Person of the Year 2016 and received by HRM Queen Elizabeth II.