

## Child Soldiers and United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

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### **Abstract**

*The United Nations' eighth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) focuses on “decent work and economic growth.” A primary objective of this goal is to urgently and effectively eradicate severe forms of child labour. This initiative includes abolishing forced labour, ending modern slavery and human trafficking, and preventing children's use as soldiers. Historically, children have been significantly impacted by the devastating effects of wars, being exploited for various military activities globally. Currently, child soldiers, irrespective of gender, participate in civil wars and conflicts in numerous countries worldwide. Despite the United Nations classifying the military recruitment of child soldiers as a war crime, thousands of children actively participate in conflicts. A significant portion of child soldiers are girls, often subjected to sexual slavery and forced into “marriages” with male combatants. A crucial concern regarding child soldiers is their retraining and reintegration into society. Another significant consideration is the classification of these children — whether they should be viewed as criminals or victims. This study explores the global use of child soldiers, specifically in some instances. A pivotal aspect of this examination is understanding the international legal framework, UN SDGs and the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration process. These models, implemented by the United Nations in partnership with local governments, aim to reintegrate post-conflict children, both boy and girl child soldiers.*

**Keywords:** *Child Soldiers; UN Sustainable Development Goals; International Crime; Demobilization; Disarmament and Reintegration*

### **Introduction**

Children under 18 who are enlisted or utilized by armed factions in war zones for combat or other roles like espionage, transport of weapons or provisions, or as couriers are known as child soldiers. Often a grim result of contemporary conflicts, these young individuals are typically abducted or manipulated into joining these factions and are thrust into battle and other complex tasks. They frequently endure both physical and psychological maltreatment, including forced labour, sexual abuse, and witnessing extreme violence and death. The United Nations estimates that hundreds of thousands of children below 18 years old are engaged with various armed entities (UNICEF, 2021).

In various conflicts, children are involved in active combat and undertake support roles fraught with danger and hardship. Boys and girls are assigned multiple functions, ranging from fighters to cooks, spies, messengers, and even sex slaves. Disturbingly, modern warfare has seen the emergence of using children in acts of terror, including deploying them as suicide bombers. The United Nations receives annual reports of children as young as eight or nine involved in armed groups. Irrespective of their assigned roles, children associated with

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conflicting parties experience high levels of violence, either as witnesses, direct victims, or reluctant participants. Consequently, some sustain injuries leading to lifelong disabilities (UN, n.d.a).

Utilizing child soldiers is considered a grave breach of international humanitarian and human rights law. Efforts have been made globally to confront this issue. For instance, the United Nations has endorsed multiple resolutions decrying the engagement of child soldiers and advocating for child protection in conflict zones. In 2000, the UN introduced the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child concerning children's involvement in hostilities. This document urges nations to institute measures that prevent recruiting children under 18 and safeguard them during wars. Currently, 173 nations have ratified this protocol. Seventeen countries have neither signed nor ratified the protocol, and seven have yet to ratify it (UN, n.d.b).

Children recruited as soldiers are often subjected to unimaginable forms of violence and abuse. They are forced to participate in combat, carry out reconnaissance missions, and engage in other activities that put their lives at risk. In addition to the physical harm they face, they are also exposed to psychological trauma, which can have long-term consequences on their mental health and well-being. The recruitment of child soldiers is a problem that affects countries worldwide, with cases reported in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America. Children are often coerced into joining armed groups due to poverty, lack of education, and the absence of social support structures. In other cases, they may be kidnapped, forcefully recruited, or tricked into joining.

As for the research methodology, this study adopted a qualitative research methodology based on a deductive approach. Within the scope of the literature review of the research, this research, which has generally adopted qualitative research methodology, secondary data sources have been used in terms of resource use within the framework of obtaining scientific data. In this context, priority was given to scientific (e-) books, (e-)articles, (published e-) theses, (published e-) papers and (e-) reports obtained from public and university libraries and/or virtual environments. The sources mentioned above have been scanned, found and examined. In this way, the primary and secondary sources that will support the research findings were obtained and read; the information contained in the sources was classified following the provisional outlines of the study, subjected to an analytical examination and imported into the research following the ethical publication rules. While consulting the sources, more emphasis was given to the well-known international organizations (e.g. UN, UNICEF, ICRC) data to access credible and unbiased information. This approach has been a fundamental guiding principle in selecting and evaluating sources.

### **Use of Child Soldiers in contemporary conflicts**

Across the globe, thousands of children are enlisted and exploited in armed conflicts. From 2005 to 2022, over 105,000 children have been officially identified as recruited and utilized by conflicting parties. However, the actual count is considered significantly higher than the verified numbers suggest (UNICEF, n.d.a). Unfortunately, the use of child soldiers in armed conflicts is still a reality in many parts of the world. According to the United Nations, over 10,000 child soldiers currently serve in various countries' armed groups (Jha, 2018).



Uganda serves as an early and exceptional case, albeit a negative one, in the context of using child soldiers. This case highlights the unfortunate and troubling phenomenon of employing children in armed conflicts. According to the Berlin Conference, Uganda became a British protectorate in 1894. After gaining independence in 1962, a military coup occurred in 1971, leading to massacres and ethnic conflicts. Uganda's invasion of Tanzania, British support for Tanzania, and internal conflicts within Uganda contributed to the development of local government structures. The Acholi people felt threatened by the destructive activities of Ugandan soldiers. They formed the Uganda People's Democratic Army and the Holy Spirit Movement, which later transformed into the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) led by Joseph Kony. The LRA abducted children as child soldiers and aimed to establish a new Christian government in several countries. Between 1986 and 2005, 66 thousand children were kidnapped by the LRA, facing severe consequences if disobeyed (Dalaman and Parlak, 2020: 191).

During the armed conflict in Syria, government forces and affiliated militias have been implicated in the forced recruitment and utilization of child soldiers (United States Department of State, 2021). Furthermore, in the subsequent year, regime forces were reported to have recruited or utilized 43 children at checkpoints (U.S. Department of State, 2022). In addition, armed groups aligned with the Syrian government and pro-regime militias have been known to forcibly conscript children as young as six years old (U.S. Department of State, 2021). These groups recruited and deployed child soldiers in combat roles. Throughout this period, the Syrian government failed to implement preventative measures against the recruitment and utilization of child soldiers by government forces and pro-regime militias, and no efforts were made to hold these groups accountable for their involvement in child soldiering (U.S. Department of State, 2021; U.S. Department of State, 2022a).

Yemen was initially included in the CSPA (Child Soldiers Prevention Act) list in 2010 and has remained on the list for thirteen consecutive years. According to reports, the Yemeni government and aligned forces have been recruiting and utilising child soldiers since 2009 (U.S. Department of State, 2010). This recruitment primarily involves Yemen's official armed forces and the Security Belt Forces, a paramilitary group supporting the government. The recruitment and deployment of child soldiers by both entities were reported to have taken place between April and December 2021 (U.S. Department of State, 2022). The intensification of these recruitment practices can be attributed to the 2014 Houthi takeover of the Yemeni government, which escalated conflict in the region. According to a 2019 report by the UN Group of Experts on Yemen, all warring factions have enlisted and deployed more than 3,000 children in their operations (U.S. Department of State, 2020). Allegedly, government forces have utilized child soldiers for tasks such as guarding checkpoints and military installations. There are also unverified reports of children being employed as uniformed combatants by government forces during battles (U.S. Department of State, 2019). An international organization reported that between April and December 2021, at least 54 children between the ages of 9 and 17 were recruited and deployed by armed groups in Yemen (U.S. Department of State, 2022).

These instances are just a few examples of the numerous conflicts worldwide where children are coerced into military service. Girls are also forcibly engaged in armed activities. For instance, during the Ethiopian civil war that concluded in 1991, approximately 25% of the opposition forces consisted of girls. Tragically, many of these young females face sexual

exploitation due to their forced enlistment, with many being compelled to become “wives” to the soldiers. Following the conclusion of conflicts, these girls often encounter rejection from their families and communities, who perceive them as impure or unsuitable for marriage. Left with limited options for survival, many of these former girl soldiers are pushed into engaging in prostitution (Wessells, 1997:33).

### **Child Soldier Use According to International Law**

International law aims to establish a clear distinction between civilians and combatants during armed conflicts. This distinction entails specific privileges and obligations. Civilians are entitled to protection and should not be targeted during armed conflicts. On the other hand, combatants can be lawfully targeted and killed in action. One of the most significant privileges accorded to combatants is the authority to engage and kill opposing combatants without being considered criminals.

Additionally, when captured, combatants are granted the status and rights of prisoners of war. However, individuals and groups engaging in unlawful combat (such as rebels, insurgents, and other non-qualifying combatants) are not entitled to these privileges. If captured, unlawful combatants may face criminal charges and penalties. Consequently, international law has long been concerned with preventing the use of children as combatants, regardless of their status as lawful or unlawful combatants, in armed conflicts (Rosen, 2007: 300).

Recruiting and utilizing child soldiers in armed conflict in various capacities constitutes a severe violation of international law, constituting war crimes and crimes against humanity. Numerous international agreements explicitly acknowledge and condemn this issue as a criminal act. The Rome Statute, which establishes the International Criminal Court, specifically addresses this matter and classifies such actions as war crimes (ICC, n.d). Additionally, the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, focusing on children's involvement in armed conflict, explicitly prohibits the recruitment and participation of individuals under the age of 18 in hostilities. Ratified by numerous nations, this protocol represents a global commitment to safeguard children from the detrimental effects associated with armed conflicts (ICRC, n.d.a).

Recognizing the gravity of the situation, the United Nations Security Council has taken measures to address the predicament of child soldiers by issuing resolutions that condemn their recruitment and deployment. These resolutions also establish mechanisms to monitor and combat this profound issue (UNHCR, n.d). It is crucial to acknowledge that child soldiers are not perpetrators but rather victims who endure manipulation, coercion, and exploitation. Initiatives are currently underway to provide essential support and rehabilitation to those affected by their coerced involvement in armed conflicts.

The critical legal instruments about child soldiers:

1. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is the most universally accepted human rights instrument, ratified by every country in the world except two. The Convention incorporates the full range of human rights - civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights - of children into one single document. The UN General Assembly adopted the Convention on 20 November 1989 and entered into force in September 1990. (CoE, n.d)



2. Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (OPAC): Adopted in 2000, OPAC outlines specific commitments to prevent recruiting and deploying children in armed conflicts. It establishes 18 as the minimum age for recruitment and participation in hostilities, forbidding the forced recruitment of those below this age. (ICRC, n.d.a).
3. Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC): Instituted in 1998, the Rome Statute grants the ICC jurisdiction over war crimes, encompassing the recruitment and employment of child soldiers. According to Article 8(2)(e)(vii) of the Rome Statute, conscripting, enlisting, or deploying children under 15 in armed conflicts is classified as a war crime (ICC, n.d).
4. Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocols: These documents protect civilians, children included, during armed conflicts. They prohibit violent acts, torture, and inhumane treatment of civilians and explicitly forbid recruiting and deploying child soldiers (ICRC, n.d.b).

Despite the key international legal instruments mentioned above, addressing the issue is still problematic. The international law inherently poses several difficulties for implementation. The lack of enforcement power of international law in cases of non-compliance and unwilling states creates the basis for challenges in implementation. The ICC can provide a partial solution since not all states are signatories to the Rome Statute and there are difficulties of cooperation with local authorities in handing in the suspects for trial in the International Criminal Court. For these reasons, another concern is the accountability issue in using and recruiting child soldiers. International law and all its arrangements can provide a framework and standards for human rights. Implementing these arrangements and criminal prosecution of the perpetrators lies in the hands of states and local legal authorities. For this reason, it is essential to develop strict legal frameworks at the state level. Despite its difficulties, the Lubanga case<sup>2</sup> (Case, 2019; Ambos, 2009) is a crucial step forward in improving international jurisdiction; however, this is still too premature for implementing international legal arrangements effectively.

The UN has launched several initiatives to end the recruitment and use of child soldiers, including the “Children, Not Soldiers” campaign (Eyþórsdóttir, 2016). DDR/R (Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration) programs strive to foster recovery and development in regions transitioning from conflict to peace by addressing security challenges that surface during this period. These challenges often stem from former combatants who are disassociating from armed groups or militias and attempting to readapt to civilian life. The process of DDR/R is multifaceted, encompassing political, military, humanitarian, and socio-economic dimensions. These programs are designed to aid all individuals previously associated with armed factions, including men and women, boys and girls. Assistance is provided irrespective of their roles, whether they were active combatants

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<sup>2</sup> In the case of *The Prosecutor v. Thomas Lubanga Dyilo*, the ICC prosecuted Thomas Lubanga, the leader of a Congolese armed group, for war crimes, including the recruitment and use of child soldiers. The case marked the first conviction by the ICC, highlighting the criminal responsibility of an adult perpetrator involved in the recruitment and use of child soldiers.

or served in other capacities, such as sex slaves, porters, messengers, or cooks (UN DDR, n.d.).

The DDR process involves several activities providing education, training for different jobs, and psychological support for children to integrate them into society smoothly. Thus, the DDR efforts not only aim to disarm the child soldiers but also to rehabilitate and reintegrate them into their community with some basic skills to have a job and decent life in the post-conflict period. This can provide long-term stability and ensure the peace process within the society. However, much more needs to be done to protect children from being recruited into armed groups and to support the rehabilitation and reintegration of former child soldiers into society.

### **The United Nations and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**

The United Nations (UN) has set out 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be achieved by 2030. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 8 is focused on promoting “Decent Work and Economic Growth.” While the goal does not explicitly mention the reintegration of child soldiers, it includes several relevant targets. For example, Target 8.7 calls for the “eradication of forced labour, modern slavery, and human trafficking,” which are all issues that can impact child soldiers. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)-16 aims to foster peaceful, inclusive societies and is integral to promoting sustainable development. It seeks to ensure justice for all while developing effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels. The recently launched SDGs are expected to impact millions of lives positively. Member States committed to inclusive progress upon adopting this fresh development agenda and pledged to “endeavour to reach the furthest behind first” (UN, n.d.b). The adopted stance highlights the symbiotic relationship between sustainable development and peace, acknowledging that one cannot exist without the other amidst a world grappling with unprecedented challenges, including violent conflicts in regions like the Middle East and Africa, affecting millions of lives.

Contrary to the notion that children are marginally affected by conflict-related violence, they are indeed the primary victims, with existing protective measures facing significant challenges (UNICEF, n.d.a). Currently, in countries including South Sudan, Syria, and Yemen, children are being killed, maimed, recruited as soldiers, abducted, and subjected to sexual violence. These children lack access to essential, life-saving humanitarian aid, with schools and hospitals under attack. While children comprise nearly half of the global population impacted by conflict, they often remain unseen victims. Being highly vulnerable, they experience the most neglect, yet they are not just victims; they are crucial to building resilient, peaceful societies as outlined in the new development agenda. Recognizing and nurturing the potential of boys and girls affected by conflict is fundamental to realizing the promises of the SDGs (UNCAAC, n.d.).

It is imperative to devise an agenda addressing the unique needs of children in conflict zones. The new developmental blueprint underscores the significance of peace, justice, and robust institutions while setting specific children-related goals. These goals encompass providing access to quality education and healthcare, terminating the recruitment and use of child soldiers, and eliminating all forms of violence against children. Initiatives aimed at global efforts to prevent the recruitment of child soldiers and rehabilitate those who have been exploited should align with five pivotal SDGs: good health and well-being (SDG 3), quality



education (SDG 4), gender equality (SDG 5), decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), and peace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG 16) (UN, n.d.f).

### **Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages (SDG 3)**

Health services play a vital role in saving and sustaining lives. However, the increasing targeting of hospitals in armed conflicts has become a significant concern (ICRC, 2011). These deliberate attacks pose a grave threat to healthcare workers and patients, with children affected by conflict being particularly vulnerable (UN, 2017). Consequently, the sustained violence against healthcare facilities and medical personnel has led to a staggering increase in mortality rates, especially among children (WHO, 2019). Moreover, this violence results in the displacement of doctors and medical personnel, depriving communities of their much-needed expertise during critical times (MSF, 2018).

The process of rebuilding health infrastructure and reintegrating doctors and nurses into post-conflict communities is a time-consuming endeavour that profoundly impacts the health of both genders and the overall development of a country (World Bank, 2019). Therefore, it is imperative to prioritize the protection of hospitals and health services during times of conflict in alignment with the development agenda's aspiration of “Ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all at all ages” (UN, 2015).

In addition to the references mentioned above, numerous other examples highlight the detrimental effects of violence on health services during armed conflicts. For instance, in Syria, hospitals have been destroyed, and medical personnel have been targeted, resulting in a severe shortage of healthcare professionals and facilities (Al-Jazeera, 2020). Similarly, in Yemen, insufficient funding and attacks on hospitals have led to a widespread scarcity of medical supplies and personnel (BBC News, 2021). These instances underscore the criticality of prioritizing the protection of health services during times of conflict to safeguard the well-being of all individuals, particularly those who are most vulnerable.

### **Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (SDG 4)**

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) affirm every child's right to quality education (UN, n.d.d). Nonetheless, in various conflict zones, educational processes are often disrupted, leading to school closures, destruction, or damage, leaving millions of children without access to education. Such interruptions during displacements jeopardize the safe continuance of children's learning (UNICEF, 2019). Prolonged conflicts threaten to deprive entire generations of education, underscoring the importance of facilitating learning even in emergencies (UN, 2015). Maintaining educational continuity during conflicts is pivotal for post-war recovery and sustainable peace-building.

Once peace is restored, priority should be given to reconstructing educational facilities. History indicates that rebuilding skilled teaching staff and necessary physical infrastructure for quality education can span decades (GPE 2018). Investing in education is integral to realizing the SDGs' promise. The absence of education impedes development, limits economic prospects, exacerbates grievances, and potentially triggers renewed instability. Children bereft of fundamental skills cannot be anticipated to contribute to their nations' development (UN, n.d.d).

SDG 4 advocates for lifelong learning opportunities for everyone, which is vital for children who have either been engaged as child soldiers or have experienced prolonged educational disruptions. Reintegrating into conventional schooling might be challenging or unfeasible for such children (UN, n.d.e). Effective and non-discriminatory reintegration of former child soldiers is imperative for both the welfare of the children affected by conflict and the broader community. Facilitating vocational training opportunities for these children is essential to prevent them from hindering or reversing developmental progress as they grow up (UNICEF, n.d.b).

Substantial resources are needed to facilitate the release and reintegration of former child soldiers, with a particular focus on addressing girls' unique needs (UNICEF, 2019). Financial backing for reintegration initiatives should be a primary consideration in development programs in the aftermath of conflicts. Ensuring education during crises is fundamental to the SDGs. Prioritizing the reconstruction of educational institutions post-conflict is crucial to guarantee access to quality education for children. Furthermore, promoting lifelong learning for all necessitates the reintegration of former child soldiers, with concerted efforts and resources dedicated to addressing the distinct needs of girls.

### **Achieve Gender Equality and Empower All Women and Girls (SDG 5)**

The fifth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG-5) is dedicated to achieving gender equality, a critical aspect of promoting sustainable development worldwide. Subgoal 5.1 focuses on the urgent need to end all forms of discrimination against women and girls, regardless of their age or geographical location. This encompasses various dimensions of discrimination, such as cultural norms, practices, and laws that perpetuate gender-based inequalities.

Similarly, sub-goal 5.2 emphasizes the imperative of eliminating all forms of violence against women and girls, both in public and private spheres. This encompasses a wide range of issues, including but not limited to trafficking, sexual exploitation, domestic violence, and harmful practices like child marriage and female genital mutilation (UN, n.d.g). By addressing these pervasive forms of violence, societies can create safer environments where women and girls can thrive and fulfil their potential.

It is essential to recognize that these challenges are not limited to peacetime but can also exacerbate during times of armed conflicts and crises. In such situations, women and girls face heightened risks of violence, exploitation, and abuse. Efforts to achieve SDG-5 must, therefore, prioritize the protection of individuals of all genders during times of crisis, ensuring their safety and well-being.

Furthermore, child soldiers remain a pressing concern that intersects with SDG-5. Children, particularly girls, are often forcibly recruited and used as combatants in armed conflicts. This grave violation of their rights perpetuates cycles of violence and hampers their access to education, health, and other essential services. Addressing this issue requires comprehensive strategies that protect children from recruitment and provide them with the necessary support for rehabilitation and reintegration into society.





**Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all (SDG 8)**

This goal is closely connected to the imperative of preventing the use and recruitment of child soldiers in any form. Within the framework of Sustainable Development Goal 8, precisely Goal 8.1, there is a specific focus on implementing immediate and robust measures to eliminate forced labour, put an end to contemporary forms of slavery and human trafficking, and ensure the prohibition and eradication of the most severe types of child labour, including the recruitment and utilization of child soldiers. The target is to cease all forms of child labour by the year 2025.

A critical aspect of achieving Sustainable Development Goal 8 lies in prioritizing the needs of former child soldiers. This is because Goal 8 advocates for decent work and economic growth, and providing the necessary support and resources to these individuals is essential for their life reconstruction. To facilitate this support, it is crucial to design and implement programs and policies that are specifically tailored to address the unique challenges faced by ex-child soldiers. Such initiatives should be accompanied by broader efforts aimed at stimulating economic growth and development in areas that have been impacted by conflict.

In line with these objectives, Target 8.7 calls for eradicating forced labour, modern slavery, and human trafficking. These are all pressing issues that can significantly affect child soldiers. By addressing these underlying problems, we can work towards creating a safer and more sustainable future for these vulnerable individuals (UN, n.d.g).

**Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels (SDG 16)**

Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16) is a crucial component of the United Nations' agenda for fostering peaceful and inclusive societies that are essential for sustainable development. Its primary objectives include ensuring equal access to justice, establishing effective and accountable institutions at all levels, and promoting inclusivity in governance and decision-making processes. Among the various challenges that SDG 16 seeks to address, the issue of child soldiers stands out as a grave violation of international law and human rights, demanding urgent attention in conflict-affected regions worldwide.

One of the core targets of SDG 16, as outlined in Target 16.1, is the significant reduction of all forms of violence and related death rates, regardless of geographical location. This target recognizes violence's detrimental impact on communities and underscores the need for comprehensive strategies to promote peace and security. Furthermore, Target 16.2 explicitly aims to end the abuse, exploitation, trafficking, and violence against children while also seeking to eradicate the cruel act of torturing children.

SDG 16 emphasizes the importance of strengthening national institutions at all levels, particularly in developing countries, to achieve these targets. Target 16.a highlights the significance of international cooperation in building the capacity of these institutions to effectively prevent violence, combat terrorism, and address crime (UN, n.d.g). SDG 16 aims to create a global network of institutions dedicated to upholding peace, security, and justice by fostering collaboration between nations.

While the United Nations organizes and conducts various events and activities to create awareness and take measures towards achieving the SDGs, including SDG 16, it is evident that additional efforts are needed to accomplish the targets fully. In this regard, the SDG Summit 2023 becomes a critical milestone. Scheduled to take place during the United Nations General Assembly high-level week in September 2023, the SDG Summit will convene Heads of State and Governments to discuss and strategize the collective action required to advance all SDGs, including SDG 16 (UN, n.d.g). This high-level engagement underscores the significance of SDG 16 and its interlinkages with other sustainable development goals.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that several other events specifically target individual SDGs alongside the SDG Summit. These events provide focused platforms for stakeholders to share knowledge, exchange best practices, and forge partnerships to pursue the respective SDGs.

SDG 16 serves as a crucial pillar of the United Nations' vision for a more peaceful and inclusive world. SDG 16 aims to create a global environment conducive to sustainable development by addressing child soldiers, reducing violence, and strengthening institutions. While progress has been made, it is evident that sustained efforts and collective action are necessary to achieve the targets outlined within SDG 16 fully. The upcoming SDG Summit 2023, along with other targeted events, presents valuable opportunities to accelerate progress and build momentum towards realizing the vision of SDG 16 and the broader sustainable development agenda. International efforts such as “Call for Action to End the Detention of Children in Conflict,” which was shared by the Governments of the Malta and the United States, along with UNICEF, Children in Conflict and War Child, at a side-event of the 78th UN General Assembly in New York on September 21, 2023, are necessary for raising the awareness of the international community on these issues (UNICEF, n.d.c).

All these goals related to the Child Soldier problem can help eradicate this problem; however, more must be done to become optimistic. Despite these efforts, the Child Soldier issue is a fact and will likely be so for the foreseeable future. Several initiatives concerning the goals mentioned above need to be pursued vigorously. Agendas in international society are changing constantly depending on the global environment, and these issues must be kept alive to attract global attention. States or other actors in the international system cannot cope with this problem, as with all other global issues. Thus, comprehensively harmonized actions should be developed and applied for successful results. The key here is the internationality. Unilateral actions do not have much change since this is clearly a global issue requiring a global approach. The real stories about the child soldiers can be practical tools for raising public awareness, such as the story of Ishmael Beah, who was forcibly recruited into the armed forces during the war in Sierra Leone when he was 13. After two years, Ishmael was removed from the army and put in a rehabilitation centre. He is a UNICEF Goodwill ambassador and wrote a book (*A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*) about his memories during the war as a child soldier. His story gives hope to many children around the world UNICEF (n.d.d.).

## **Conclusion**

The utilization of child soldiers remains a pressing and deeply concerning issue in numerous conflict zones across the globe. Despite implementing various initiatives, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and efforts in Disarmament, Demobilization, and



Reintegration (DDR) processes, the recruitment and involvement of children in armed groups persist at alarming levels. This persistent problem has far-reaching and long-term consequences, particularly in terms of rehabilitating the affected societies during the post-conflict periods. Therefore, it is imperative to establish a comprehensive mechanism that integrates and collaborates with the UN SDGs related to child soldier issues and the DDR process, as combined and coordinated efforts have the potential to yield better outcomes in this ongoing struggle.

Tragically, children are often viewed as expendable and are shamelessly exploited by armed groups, serving as mere cannon fodder without regard for their safety, well-being, or fundamental human rights. The lack of accountability for those responsible for recruiting and using child soldiers further perpetuates this grave issue. This lack of accountability enables the continuation of the practice and undermines efforts to address the root causes of child soldier recruitment.

To effectively tackle the root causes, concerted and multifaceted efforts are required. Poverty and lack of education are among the key factors contributing to children's vulnerability to recruitment by armed groups. Therefore, governments must take decisive steps in addressing these underlying issues, including implementing measures to alleviate poverty and enhance access to quality education. Moreover, governments must strengthen their legal frameworks to ensure that those who recruit and use child soldiers are held fully accountable for their actions, thereby deterring future involvement in such heinous activities.

In addition to national efforts, the international community must continue to play an active role in supporting the rehabilitation and reintegration of former child soldiers into their communities. This support should encompass not only the provision of essential services and resources but also the establishment of comprehensive and sustainable programs that address the unique challenges faced by these individuals. By doing so, we can facilitate their successful transition back into society and help them rebuild their lives meaningfully. In this vein, "Call for Action to End the Detention of Children in Conflict," as mentioned above, has been a robust example of raising the international community's awareness. Real-life stories such as the one of Ishmael Baeh mentioned above are precious for raising this issue on the higher levels of the global agenda.

However, it is essential to recognize that relying solely on international law, while undeniably significant, is not sufficient to combat the use of child soldiers effectively. A comprehensive approach is required, involving heightened awareness and the implementation of legal measures at both the local and international levels. This includes raising awareness among communities, empowering local actors, and engaging in diplomatic efforts to enforce existing legal frameworks and promote the adoption of new ones where necessary. Concentrated steps aiming at the same goal and harmonisation of them are essential for success. Several international organizations (UN, UNICEF) and states and civil society organizations are taking initiatives and developing programs for addressing the child soldier problem. Concentration and harmonising these efforts can promise more success in this struggle. A lead actor who can align all efforts with each other in pursuing identified goals can be more effective in this endeavour.

In conclusion, the use of child soldiers represents a grave violation of human rights that demands urgent and unwavering action from governments, international organizations, and

civil society. Through collective and concerted efforts, we can hope to end this reprehensible practice and protect children from the horrors of armed conflict. By upholding the principles of justice and human rights, we can work towards eradicating the scourge of child soldiers and strive for a more peaceful, just, and equitable world for all.

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