

UNICEF

United Nations Children's Emergency Fund Children in Conflict

Overview

Children in conflict zones face severe hardships that can have long-lasting consequences on their lives and development. Over 468 million children in the world are living with the drastic effects of wars and conflicts, which equates to more than one in six children on the planet living in a conflict zone.¹ These children are often exposed to violence, displacement, loss of family, and disruption of education, which can lead to psychological trauma, malnutrition, and exploitation.² The global community has recognized the urgent need to address these challenges.

Non-profit organizations, some of which have consultative status in UNESCO, respond by spreading awareness and raising funds that are used to provide emergency relief, access to education, as well as mental health services, all with the intent of maximizing the protection and rights of children in conflict.³ Working with over 190 countries, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) aims to save the lives of children in conflict zones, as well as to defend their rights and help them reach their potential.⁴

What is UNICEF?

The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, also known as UNICEF, was established in 1946 after WWII with goals to safeguard the rights and well-being of children in conflict zones, recognizing that these vulnerable populations require urgent and sustained support.⁵ The organization's primary goals include providing immediate humanitarian aid, ensuring access to education, protecting children from violence and exploitation, and offering psychological support to those affected by trauma.⁶

¹ *Number of Children Affected by Conflict Doubles Since War Child's Inception*, War Child, 9 Feb. 2024, www.warchild.net/news/number-of-children-affected-by-conflict-doubles-since-war-childs-inception/#:~:text=468%20million%20children%20globally%20are,50km%20radius%20of%20armed%20violence.

² "Countries in Conflict: Worst Places to Be a Child." *Save the Children*, www.savethechildren.org/us/charity-stories/worst-conflict-affected-countries-to-be-a-child.

³ "What We Do at Save the Children Canada." *Save the Children Canada*, www.savethechildren.ca/what-we-do/.

⁴ "What We Do." *UNICEF*, www.unicef.org/what-we-do#:~:text=UNICEF%20works%20in%20over%20190,from%20early%20childhood%20through%20adolescence.

⁵ "UNICEF History". *UNICEF*, www.unicef.org/history.

⁶ "About UNICEF." *UNICEF*, www.unicef.org/about-unicef.

To prevent and work towards solving the issue, UNICEF collaborates with governments, NGOs, and local communities to implement comprehensive programs that address both the immediate and long-term needs of children.⁷ These initiatives include setting up temporary learning spaces, facilitating family reunification, promoting peacebuilding efforts, and advocating for more vigorous international policies to protect children in conflict. For instance, UNICEF and their collaborators have helped release over 10,000 children from armed forces in over 15 countries, as well as reintegrated more than 12,000 children back into their communities.⁸ Through these actions, UNICEF aims to build resilient communities and create a safer, more just world for children.

Challenges Faced By Children in Conflict Zones

Conflict zones refer to regions that are affected by political instability or war that essentially disrupt the day-to-day lives of the area's inhabitants.⁹ As previously mentioned, children face a multitude of challenges that occur as a direct result of these disruptions. Challenges such as interrupted education, decline in hygiene and consequently health, as well as malnutrition and psychological effects, like PTSD, can stem from all aspects of war that these children must endure.

Interruption of Education

Following World War II, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was established to protect the right to education for all, free from discrimination.¹⁰ However, in times of humanitarian crisis, especially in war-afflicted nations, this right is frequently violated or neglected. The interruption of education during conflict can lead to severe repercussions, seeing as education plays a crucial role in preparing and guiding future leaders to maintain peace and stability.

⁷ "UNICEF Civil Society Partnerships." *UNICEF*, www.unicef.org/partnerships/civil-society.

⁸ "10 Ways UNICEF Saves and Improves Children's Lives around the World." *UNICEF*, 31 July 2018, www.unicef.org/stories/10-ways-unicef-saves-and-improves-childrens-lives-around-world.

⁹ Prasad, A N, and P L Prasad. "Children in Conflict Zones." *Medical Journal, Armed Forces India*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, 21 July 2011, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4921424/#:~:text=Conflict%20zone%20refers%20to%20war,the%20community%20affected%20%5B1%5D.

¹⁰ "How Does War Affect Education?" *Concern Worldwide US*, 13 Sept. 2023, concernusa.org/news/how-does-war-affect-education/#:~:text=Children%20in%20poor%20countries%20and,well%2Dbeing%20that%20education%20provides.

Specific humanitarian laws of war, such as the prohibition of attacks on schools, have been put in place to protect and minimize the impact of war on children.¹¹ Despite these preventative measures, it has become increasingly dangerous for children to attend school during times of conflict. In 2020, UNICEF reported 535 verified attacks on schools. Even more so, between 2020 and 2021, the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack records over 5000 attacks on academic institutions that have been used for military purposes, harming over 9000 students and educators.¹²

Schools are often destroyed, closed or repurposed for military use. In places like Syria and South Sudan, millions of children have had their education interrupted or permanently halted, leading to a lost generation of students. Lack of education deepens poverty, reduces future employment prospects, and contributes to cycles of violence and instability. According to reports from UNICEF, nearly 48% of school-aged children in conflict zones do not have access to education.¹³ Displacement, attacks on educational facilities, and the recruitment of children into armed groups are major barriers to education for children in these regions.¹⁴

After an extended period of time, returning to the classroom environment and adjusting to the change can be a difficult process, oftentimes unsuccessful. In 2013, a 16-year old Syrian boy named Samer stated “I won’t go back to school. I have lost my will now after missing two years.”¹⁵ Falling behind on material and having to catch up can be demanding, if not discouraging, and most schools do not have the resources necessary to properly support and accommodate those students falling behind. Numerous other children just like Samer have also missed out on the quality education that they have a basic right to secure.

Decline in the Health of Civilians

As a war tactic to weaken communities, hospitals and other facilities are often attacked or forced to focus their efforts on managing the crisis at hand, all while struggling with supply shortages. As a result, healthcare becomes less accessible, particularly in regions that are already

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Mohamed, Amira, and Anmar Homeida. “Hunger in the Shadow of Conflict: Analyzing Malnutrition and Humanitarian Challenges in Sudan - Conflict and Health.” *BioMed Central*, BioMed Central, 5 Aug. 2024, conflictandhealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13031-024-00604-6.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ “How Does War Affect Education?” *Concern Worldwide US*, 13 Sept. 2023, concernusa.org/news/how-does-war-affect-education/#:~:text=Children%20in%20poor%20countries%20and,well%2Dbeing%20that%20education%20provides.

underserved or have weak health infrastructures.¹⁶ This leaves children at risk of death from developing infections and illnesses that could have otherwise been preventable.¹⁷ Seeing as healthcare professionals are often targeted and stretched thin, patients with chronic illnesses are forced to wait extended periods of time to receive medical attention which can lead to complications with their health.¹⁸

Additionally, the availability of clean water, sanitation, hygiene (WASH) and proper nutrition is typically disrupted. Water supplies are often polluted, and treatment facilities are frequently damaged, increasing the risk of water-borne diseases like cholera and diarrhea. UNICEF reports that individuals living in conflict zones are three times more likely to engage in open defecation, four times more likely to lack essential sanitation, and eight times more likely to be without clean drinking water. Children under the age of five are especially vulnerable, as they face a higher likelihood of dying from WASH-related illnesses than any other age group.¹⁹

Conflict drives mass displacement, both within countries and across borders, as people are forced to flee. Many endure long, arduous journeys, often ending up in overcrowded refugee camps with poor sanitation. In Ukraine alone, 6.5 million people have been displaced internally, while another 3.2 million have sought safety in neighboring countries.²⁰ Contrary to popular belief, the movement of people itself does not cause the spread of diseases. Rather, the heightened vulnerability of displaced populations makes them more prone to contracting communicable diseases such as HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis.

Malnutrition

Food shortages are widespread during conflicts. Although the use of starvation as a weapon is banned under the Geneva Convention, military operations often disrupt food production and supply chains, causing prices to surge and increasing the likelihood of acute malnutrition. Malnutrition among children is particularly severe in countries like Sudan, Yemen, and Afghanistan, where conflict exacerbates food insecurity. UNICEF estimates that in 2022,

¹⁶ El Gharib, Sarah. "5 Ways War Impacts Global Health." *Global Citizen*, 7 Apr. 2022, www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/how-war-impacts-global-health/?gad_source=1&gclid=Cj0KCOjw3vO3BhCqARIsAEWblcCnYFAeNtd7CWIIso4X_nm2fxeLPC2boDJVuO1NiMLVIDeUVj5pAxAaAkUWEALw_wcB.

¹⁷ Wolfe, Deborah. "How Armed Conflict Impacts Children." *World Vision Canada*, 15 Aug. 2023, www.worldvision.ca/stories/child-protection/how-armed-conflict-impacts-children#:~:text=Armed%20groups%20often%20aim%20to,are%20both%20preventable%20and%20curable.

¹⁸ El Gharib, Sarah. "5 Ways War Impacts Global Health." *Global Citizen*, 7 Apr. 2022, www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/how-war-impacts-global-health/?gad_source=1&gclid=Cj0KCOjw3vO3BhCqARIsAEWblcCnYFAeNtd7CWIIso4X_nm2fxeLPC2boDJVuO1NiMLVIDeUVj5pAxAaAkUWEALw_wcB.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

almost 8 million children under the age of five faced the risk of death from severe wasting, which occurs when children become dangerously underweight for their height.²¹ In 2020, food prices in Ethiopia and Yemen alone rose by as much as 50%, leaving millions at risk of starvation.²²

It is seen, according to the International Food Policy Research Institute, that around 112 million of the children suffering from malnutrition live in conflict-affected regions. This represents two-thirds of the total malnourished children in low-income countries.²³ Moreover, food shortages are often worsened by rising prices, climate change, and displacement, making it difficult to provide them with the nutrition needed for healthy development²⁴.

Psychological Effects

Additionally, children in conflict zones endure profound psychological trauma due to violence, displacement, and abuse. They are often witnesses to, or victims of, extreme violence, including sexual abuse, torture, and the death of family members. Many are forcibly recruited as child soldiers, exposed to a world of violence and exploitation. These traumatic experiences lead to long-lasting mental health issues, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression.²⁵ Humanitarian organizations have highlighted the need for comprehensive psychological support programs for these children to address the long-term impacts of trauma.

Individual Case Studies

Children in Yemen

A 2022 study by Save the Children titled “No Place is Safe in Yemen” sheds light on the profound and devastating effects of Yemen’s ongoing conflict on children. The study was based on surveys from 400 children and 100 caregivers, along with key informant interviews in eight governorates. It highlighted the extreme trauma Yemeni children face, as many have witnessed

²¹ “Global Hunger Crisis Pushing One Child into Severe Malnutrition Every Minute in 15 Crisis-Hit Countries.” *UNICEF*, 22 June 2022, www.unicef.org/press-releases/global-hunger-crisis-pushing-one-child-severe-malnutrition-every-minute-15-crisis.

²² El Gharib, Sarah. “5 Ways War Impacts Global Health.” *Global Citizen*, 7 Apr. 2022, www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/how-war-impacts-global-health/?gad_source=1&gclid=Cj0KCQjw3vO3BhCqARIsAEWblcCnyFAeNtd7CWIIso4X_nm2fxeLPC2boDJVuO1NiMLVIDeUVj5pAxAaAkUWEALw_wcB.

²³ Carroll, Grace J, et al. *Evaluation of Nutrition Interventions in Children in Conflict Zones: A Narrative Review*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, 7 Sept. 2017, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5593106/.

²⁴ Noorallah, Tibyan, et al. “Child Malnutrition Is a Devastating Consequence of the Conflict in Sudan.” *The BMJ*, British Medical Journal Publishing Group, 6 Feb. 2024, www.bmj.com/content/384/bmj.q296.

²⁵ Mohamed, Amira, and Anmar Homeida. “Hunger in the Shadow of Conflict: Analyzing Malnutrition and Humanitarian Challenges in Sudan - Conflict and Health.” *BioMed Central*, BioMed Central, 5 Aug. 2024, conflictandhealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13031-024-00604-6.

the deaths of family members, friends and teachers. Schools and hospitals have also been frequent targets, leading children with nowhere to turn for education or healthcare. The conflict has led to severe psychological distress, with many children displaying signs of anxiety, depression, and PTSD.²⁶

Another UNICEF report, “Children on the Brink”, emphasized that child recruitment has dramatically increased, with cases of children as young as 10 being drawn into the conflict. The study found that 848 children were documented as being used in combat roles in key conflict zones like Sana’a, Taiz, and Aden. Additionally, the report verified over 1,560 grave violations against children, including deaths and injuries, further highlighting the toll the conflict has taken on the youngest and most vulnerable population.²⁷

Democratic Republic of Congo

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is facing a profound crisis in child protection, with children increasingly targeted in armed conflicts across the nation. According to UNICEF, 2023, has seen record-high levels of child rights violations, including killings, abductions, forced recruitment, and sexual violence. The persistent instability fuels this dire situation, affecting children in both urban and rural areas. Children, some as young as five, are often forcibly recruited by militias or subjected to violence, stripping them of basic rights, safety and security. Addressing this crisis requires immediate international support, stronger protections, and sufficient humanitarian funding, of which only a fraction has been received.²⁸

DRC remains an epicenter of child suffering, with children bearing the brunt of a prolonged conflict. Save the Children reports that the DRC leads globally in documented grave violations against children, including killings, abductions, and sexual violence. Thousands have been forced to flee their homes, leaving children exposed to malnutrition and disease in overcrowded camps. The DRC’s humanitarian crisis demands urgent international intervention,

²⁶ Okasheh, Hani. “No Place Is Safe in Yemen: The Impact of Seven Years of Conflict on Children in Yemen.” *Save the Children’s Resource Centre*, Save the Children International, 2022, resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/no-place-is-safe-in-yemen-the-impact-of-seven-years-of-conflict-on-children-in-yemen/.

²⁷ UNICEF Yemen. “Children on the Brink.” *UNICEF Yemen*, Mar. 2016, <https://www.unicef.org/emergencies/yemen-crisis>.

²⁸ “DR Congo: Children Killed, Injured, Abducted, and Face Sexual Violence in Conflict at Record Levels for Third Consecutive Year.” *UNICEF*, 28 Sept. 2023, www.unicef.org/press-releases/dr-congo-children-killed-injured-abducted-and-face-sexual-violence-conflict-record.

as limited funding and resources hamper efforts to protect children and provide necessary aid in the region.²⁹

International Treaties

The *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC), adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1989, is a landmark treaty that establishes children's rights globally, including the right to life, education, protection from violence, and participation in decisions affecting them. Ratified by nearly every country, it obliges states to safeguard children's well-being and address violations. The CRC includes protocols on child involvement in armed conflict, trafficking, and exploitation, aiming to create a safe and supportive world for all children.³⁰

The *Geneva Conventions* are key international treaties that establish humanitarian standards in armed conflicts, aimed at protecting those not actively participating, including civilians, medical personnel, and prisoners of war. Adopted in 1949 and expanded with Additional Protocols in 1977 and 2005, the Conventions outline obligations for humane treatment, medical care, and protection of human dignity in war. They are fundamental to international humanitarian law, guiding states and non-state actors alike in conflict.³¹

The *Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court* (ICC) provides the legal basis for the ICC, empowering it to prosecute individuals for serious international crimes like genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. The statute also sets principles for fair trials, witness protection, and cooperation with member states, aiming to ensure justice for victims and prevent future atrocities. It represents a major step in international justice by focusing on individual accountability for severe violations of human rights.³² Delegates and their nations should consider the positive impacts of these treaties and how they can cooperate to adopt similar measures to further combat the ever-worsening issue of children in conflict.

Questions to Consider

²⁹ "DRC Remains Epicentre of Child Suffering in War as Country TOPS World List of Grave Violations against Children." *Save the Children International*, 27 June 2023,

www.savethechildren.net/news/drc-remains-epicentre-child-suffering-war-country-tops-world-list-grave-violations-against.

³⁰ "Convention on the Rights of the Child." *UNICEF*, www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention.

³¹ "The Geneva Conventions and Their Commentaries." *International Committee of the Red Cross*, www.icrc.org/en/law-and-policy/geneva-conventions-and-their-commentaries.

³² *Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court* | *Ohchr*, www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/rome-statute-international-criminal-court.

1. What measures does your country currently implement to protect children from violence and exploitation during conflicts, and how effective are they?
2. What strategies are most effective for reintegrating child soldiers or children who have been involved in armed groups back into their communities?
3. Is your country often involved in armed conflicts where children are caught in the crossfires?
4. How are displaced children being supported in your country, and what additional resources or strategies are needed to assist them?
5. How can state members collaborate to enforce the Optional Protocol of the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict?

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