Leadership and Impunity: The Politics Behind the Traumatization of Children During Armed Conflicts

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This article addresses some fundamental questions regarding the nature of identity-based armed conflict within states, conflict which abuses and consciously targets children and women, leaving them physically scarred and psychologically traumatized. It argues that the poor quality of leadership and the lack of accountability of those wielding military, economic or political power, are significant root causes of the abuse and traumatization of children, witnessed most graphically in times of armed conflict within states. Exploitative leaders benefit from a sense of invulnerability, of safety from any kind of accountability for their actions – in other words, from a pervasive climate of impunity. The are four courses of action that are particularly worthy of attention: the designation of children as zones of peace; the identification and public naming of those who target and exploit women and children for their own financial or political gain; the development of a more rigorous normative framework, and international vigilance to ensure increased compliance with human rights and humanitarian norms; and finally, the strengthening of democratic institutions which allow for peaceful management of conflict and for equitable development. Taken together these areas offer a number of opportunities to mould positive environments in which leaders are encouraged to exercise their power and authority for the betterment of all their citizens, for the equitable development of their societies, and in the development of channels and institutions which allow differences and conflicts to be settled by peaceful means.

KEY WORDS: War, Armed conflict, Politics, Children, Traumatization, Leadership, Democracy

Introduction

There have always been civilian casualties in armed conflicts. But in the great majority of today’s conflicts, which take place within, rather than between states, over ninety per cent of casualties are civilian; and the great majority of these are children and women. Such armed conflict knows no boundaries, no front lines. Civilians are targeted intentionally and repeatedly. In such environments, almost all children – whether victims or perpetrators of violence - suffer the traumatic effects of exposure to extreme violence and significant loss, “trapped within their trauma and grief, surrounded by reminders of what happened, ... their minds … a landscape of mental craters and destruction” (Dyregrov & Raundalen, 1996).

Early, sustained care and psychological support for such children are essential, to enable them to express their feelings, understand and process the traumatic events that they have undergone, and begin to have hope in the future – and in adults – again. Yet behind the urgent need for trauma recovery, for support and counseling, for reunification with beloved family members, there are some fundamental questions that require some kind of response. What is the nature of such conflict that leads to such suffering among children, that thrives on rape as a weapon of war? Why are children deliberately targeted, exploited and abused? Why do they

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become fighters, wielding weapons of war? What is going on when children themselves are imprisoned for war-crimes and acts of genocide?

Behind all of this tragedy lie adults, leaders of political factions and fighting groups, leaders accountable to nobody for their actions, who escape, with complete impunity, the consequences of their actions. Too often, in fact, they are rewarded for their inhumanity – with economic or political power - while the children and women whom they have violated continue to live with the intrusive, nightmarish images of their traumatic experiences.

This article examines the nature and roots of intra-state conflict that has such traumatic consequences for children. It examines the characteristics of leaders who encourage and perpetrate such violence, and the impunity with which they do so. It then suggests that this total lack of accountability has its roots in the general climate of impunity that pervades political and social life in many societies even in times of so-called “peace”, where gender-based violence and exploitation of children are not brought to account, or where the lack of democratic systems of governance inhibit the management of conflict (which is inherent between individuals and groups in every society) by any other than violent means.

Finally, some measures for managing conflict, for countering impunity and for fostering a climate of accountability are suggested. It is only through the systematic implementation of such measures that the cycle of armed violence against women and children can be broken, and that the repeated traumatization of children, trapped in the midst of armed conflict, can be stopped.

The Nature of Intra-State Armed Conflict

In the post-Cold War period, intra-state, rather than inter-state armed conflict, predominates. Repeatedly, tensions between groups within states have erupted into chronic civil conflict, marked by extreme brutality and violence. Often, such conflicts revolve around two powerful forces: the assertion or protection of identity, and the struggle over the distribution of scarce resources. “Identity-based” conflict erupts around mutually-exclusive claims of antagonistic groups – whether defined by religion, nationality or ethnicity, caste or culture – and where that sense of identity is considered to be under threat (Médecins Sans Frontières, 1997). Such conflicts are intense, bitter and intractable. Frequently interwoven with conflict over identity is conflict over resource scarcity and maldistribution – over land, economic or political power, budgets, access to education and other social services, over jobs. This lethal combination renders such conflicts emotionally charged, intense, bitter and intractable, exacerbated by manipulation and exploitation by unscrupulous leaders (Harris & Reilly, 1998).

When conflict is about the sense of identity, when opponents demonize members of the opposing group as sub-human, there is no hiding-place for civilians. Distinctions between combatants and non-combatants disappear. Fighting takes place in the home, the school, the farm, and the community. The entire social fabric is destroyed – civil society institutions collapse, households and communities are torn apart, neighbor is pitted against neighbor, populations terrorized and intentionally displaced, collective punishment and mass murder countenanced, rape used as a weapon of war to destroy the fabric, character and identity of the opposing group. Children, as the “future” of the other side, are dehumanized and deliberately
targeted. In Rwanda in early 1994, the extremist Hutu Radio Mille Collines exhorted listeners to eliminate Tutsi children: “To kill the big rats, you have to kill the little rats too”. Hutu genocidaires derided the Tutsi “inyenzi” (the Kinyarwanda word for cockroaches) as pests, to be eradicated.

Children are at the center of such conflicts - targeted, displaced, violated, abducted; girls sexually brutalized and enslaved; countless children traumatized by the violence inflicted upon them or by witnessing the violent torture, wounding or death of parents, siblings, friends; young boys recruited as combatants, learning to wield their machetes or automatic weapons with consummate skill. They are caught in a deadly endgame in societies where norms of behavior that encourage compromise or negotiation have broken down, or where adults – leaders and followers - have concluded that no institutions or systems exist to peacefully manage conflict, ensure equitable resource distribution, ensure power-sharing or group autonomy. They are also caught in situations where impunity reigns, where those in positions of leadership and power are able to violate basic humanitarian norms with little or no fear of adverse consequences to themselves.

Leadership and Impunity: The Absence of Accountability

Kigali, July 1994: A newly-arrived international aid worker drives into the city from the airport in a bullet-ridden jeep. During the twenty-minute ride, he sees a handful of soldiers and only one civilian, an old woman, on the road. Houses, shops and office buildings lie silent, doors ajar, windows broken, walls gaping with shell and mortar-holes. The occasional club or machete lies by the side of the road, or beside a crude barricade that until recently blocked the road, now pushed aside. And everywhere is the constant, overpowering stench of death.

Six weeks later, in Kibumba, Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), he surveys an endless scene of human misery. As far as the eye can see, a vast throng of men, women and children, caught in the grips of a cholera epidemic that will kill tens of thousands within two weeks. Rwandans: refugees, displaced, dispossessed, victims. But there is a huge contradiction, because many of these victims are also killers. Thousands among them – Hutus, adults and children - have killed, again and again, in the previous months, until they in turn have been forced to flee with their families. The great majority of them are poor farmers, with a few years of schooling or no education at all. Yet they killed. Why? Like most people, they probably had simple ambitions – a plot of land, enough money to get by on, good health for their families, a decent education for their children, an occasional drink with their friends. So how did they end up in Kibumba and other camps like it?

The emptiness of Kigali, the throngs in Kibumba: both were symptoms, and outcomes, of destructive and disastrous national and community leadership, that, for decades, chose to divide and blame, manipulate and foster violence, rather than seek constructive and inclusive solutions to Rwanda’s complex problems of over-population, environmental degradation, increasingly untenable agricultural practices, inequitable access to education, social services and economic opportunity. The Hutu faction from the northwest of the country practiced the politics of exclusion ruthlessly. No rule of law brought their leaders to task. The exercise of political power was characterized by exploitation of the ethnic factor to apportion blame, rather than to address
the structural problems in society that caused social division and unrest. Likewise, those who targeted children and women intentionally in the periodic outbursts of communal violence that scarred Rwanda, or who recruited children as fighters, feared no calling to account for their actions.

The outcome in 1994 was the silence of Kigali and the massing of humanity in Kibumba. Death and displacement resulted from the total lack of accountability of manipulative political leaders for their actions and acts of violence – they acted with complete impunity, abetted by an international community unwilling to acknowledge genocide when they saw it. External aid fostered an increasingly dictatorial and exclusive system in the 1980s – donors knew it, but turned a blind eye. Who wanted to shatter Rwanda’s anointed role as a model of development? There were plenty of warning signs of impending disaster in 1993 and 1994, but the world chose to ignore and deny these. So, there was a failure of leadership nationally and internationally, encouraging national leaders to believe that they were accountable to nobody but themselves.

Discussions of impunity tend to arise in relation to excesses exercised during armed conflict, yet in many societies not at war, there exists a healthy climate of impunity. When the poor are disenfranchised or forced to work in sweatshops, when children work in coalmines, carpet or fireworks factories and in other forms of exploitative labor, they do so because those in power choose not to help them, and to abet their exploitation. The powerful that exploit the poor and their children do so with impunity: there is no effective system of labor laws or child protection to bring exploiters to task.

One of the most pervasive indicators of the climate of impunity is gender-based violence and exploitation. In South Asia today, a region of the world once characterized by Mahbub-ul Haq (1997) as the least gender-insensitive region in the world, it is almost a sin to be born poor and female. From womb to old-age, in girlhood and womanhood, she is more vulnerable and of lower status than males and suffers consequent discrimination, exploitation and violence. Authorities disregard widespread domestic violence against women as a “domestic matter” outside their jurisdiction; women undergo the trauma of rape, acid burning and “honor-killing”; dowry-deaths go largely unpunished. Although South Asia contains just 22 per cent of the world’s population, it has more than half of the world’s out-of-school girls, more than half of the world’s maternal mortality.

Like the unimpeded victimization of children in times of armed conflict, such widespread gender discrimination is also a function of impunity – of a patriarchal system and culture in which the unequal status of women in society, gender-based abuse and violence, are condoned. Acceptance of such extreme gender-based inequities dulls the senses, dilutes ethical norms and standards of behavior. It encourages abusive men to believe that there are no negative consequences for their treatment of women – impunity and immunity from censure or prosecution are the norm.

Gender-based violence is a global phenomenon, as is exploitation and sexual abuse of children. While there is growing focus on these scourges, the silent complicity of leaders from community to national level, and of institutions and society at large, is still a common phenomenon that protects the perpetrator from sanction, which fosters the climate of impunity.
Thus if one looks beyond the immediate tragedy of the war-traumatized child, indeed, of whole societies of traumatized children, to some of the underlying causes of extreme violence against civilians, whether in peace-time or in times of armed conflict, one confronts consistent themes: the failure of social institutions and systems to manage conflicts constructively and peacefully; the failure of leaders to use power or distribute resources equitably; the lack of an effective rule of law to bring perpetrators of exploitation or abuse to account; and ultimately, in times of open armed conflict, the impunity of those who recruit and exploit children, who use mass displacement, rape or killing as instruments of war.

What can be done to address these underlying factors, the symptoms of which emerge in the mass traumatization of children when armed conflict erupts within societies?

**Tackling the Climate of Impunity**

While there are many ways of addressing the underlying global climate of impunity that prevails, four overall areas of action are suggested below:

1. Guarantee children as “zones of peace”.
2. “Name names” of those who target and exploit women and children, whether directly or indirectly, in situations of armed conflict.
3. The international community and international norms: create a climate of compliance and accountability.
4. Encourage the strengthening of democratic institutions for equitable development and peaceful conflict management.

**Children as “Zones of Peace”**

2001, in the Tamil north-east of Sri Lanka UNICEF is negotiating with the Tamil Tigers to stop using schools as centers for recruitment of child combatants. At the same time, the U.N. agency is requesting government forces to move out of schools occupied as military camps, and to move military guard-posts to at least 500 meters’ distance from school compounds. In Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of Congo, “corridors of peace” or “days of tranquility” are negotiated to allow child vaccinations to take place, or to ensure the transshipment of humanitarian supplies to children and families in need. In 1991, UNICEF and WHO successfully negotiated between Iran, Iraq and the anti-Iraq Coalition to allow convoys of pediatric drugs and medical equipment to move from the Iran border to Baghdad, at the height of the Gulf War.

In the 1980s, negotiated cease-fires for child vaccination in El Salvador saw both sides in the civil war transporting vaccines and cold chain equipment, even vaccinating children. In Sudan, the Lifeline Sudan initiative was built on the concept of safe corridors for the delivery of food and humanitarian supplies to children and other desperate civilians. In Lebanon, hundreds of thousands of children from different factions – Druze, Shiite, Christian, Palestinian, and others - attended summer camps over a period of several years, coming into contact with each other and
learning that, wherever they came from, in the end, they were all just children, with a common yearning for peace and friendship.

Behind all these initiatives is a 20-year-old concept, that of “children as a zone of peace”. In the early 1980s, Nils Thedin, then a delegate of Sweden to the Executive Board of UNICEF, called upon the children’s organization to turn into reality the ideal of “children as a conflict-free zone in human relations” (Vittachi, 1993). Shortly thereafter, the then-Executive Director of UNICEF, James P. Grant, started to work with Archbishop Arturo Rivero Damas of El Salvador to broker days of tranquility between the government and rebel forces, to allow vaccination of children throughout the country. In this particular situation, the agreement on cease-fire days to allow child vaccination was the first step in a dialogue that eventually led to a more generalized peace negotiation process. The concept of children as zones of peace was subsequently followed up in a number of countries, some of which are cited above.

Detractors might argue that negotiating a day here and there to allow child immunization, or of safe passage for humanitarian supplies, is not addressing fundamental root causes of conflict, or of human rights violations in times of armed conflict. Yet, when humanitarian actors operate in such environments, they would argue that such mediation for children conveys a message far wider than the limited goal of ensuring delivery of vaccination or of humanitarian supplies. That message is simple but powerful: in times of armed conflict, in fact in any situation, the right of all children to protection is absolute, and any involvement of children in armed conflict is abhorrent. As Graça Machel stated in her landmark report to the United Nations in 1996: “… children simply have no part in warfare. The international community must denounce this attack on children for what it is – intolerable and unacceptable” (United Nations General Assembly, 1996, p. 9).

The manner in which groups opposing each other treat children needs to be developed as an important indicator of their credibility. Surely no group that targets or recruits children, which attacks schools, which denies humanitarian access to children, can claim any moral authority, or aspire to legitimate political leadership? Thus protection of children, their delineation as “zones of peace”, is an important element of humanitarian advocacy, just as the needs and rights of children can form a common basis for understanding and agreement between opposing parties seeking to negotiate demobilization or peace accords. These are not new ideas, but they are ideas that need to be constantly reaffirmed. And again, when warring parties fail to respect children in this way, let actions to demand their accountability to children, and to counter impunity, come into force.

**Naming Names**

One of the most significant limitations to ensuring accountability and countering impunity is silence: inadequate public, private, national or international objection to the abuse of children during conflict, and inadequate efforts to implement constructive ways by which children can be protected and assisted when abused. Silence and invisibility breed impunity, so the idea of “naming names” is very powerful.

To take a recent example: in April 2000, the UN Security Council investigative panel on Angola, examining violations of the international embargo against UNITA, made its findings
known. Chaired by Canada, the report named names – diamond merchants in Belgium, arms brokers in South Africa, weapons suppliers in Bulgaria, African leaders who, in exchange for diamonds, allow their countries to be trans-shipment points or UNITA refuges. The accusations led to a storm of outrage, but also to immediate actions. Belgium and the diamond industry sought to absolve themselves of blame. Countries sought to defend their records, but also immediately acted to curtail illegal shipment activities. Corporations sought to defend their investment decisions – they become nervous when bad publicity threatens investments. And we find that increasingly, around the world, human rights are finding their way onto corporate agendas as private sector leaders debate the concept of corporate social responsibility and of business codes of conduct.

Amnesty International frequently names individuals, governments and organizations which abuse human rights. Already, researchers covering the civil conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone, and the links between the conflicts, the diamond trade, natural resource exploitation and arms flows, have identified and named the corporations and countries – both near and distant neighbors – which have benefited from or contributed to these extended conflicts. Such knowledge needs to be shared much more widely, and used strategically to put pressure on those who exploit armed conflict – and the suffering of conflict-affected children – for their own economic and political gain. This can be best done by the kind of coalition of civil society organizations, governments, international agencies – and enlightened corporate leaders - that successfully advocated for the Ottawa Convention to ban the manufacture, sale and use of anti-personnel landmines, or which successfully pressured for the creation of the International Criminal Court.

There is no “internal conflict” which is exclusively internal – parties always have external political supporters and/or economic, or external sources of arms. External governments and private companies help to support and underwrite conflicts. They should not be rewarded with silence. The challenge is to take this analysis into the wider public domain – to the media, to the business pages, to the meetings of corporate shareholders, to embarrass corporate exploiters of conflict into acting differently.

The International Community and International Norms: Creating a Climate of Compliance and Accountability

As international humanitarian law and human rights law have evolved, they have sought to provide a framework for placing limits on the conduct of warfare, particularly where the protection of civilian populations and property are concerned. But in today’s intra-state civil conflicts, of which the terrorization of civilians is an intrinsic element, such limits are ignored with impunity. Any vestige of respect for international norms is rapidly eroded, and the norms and values that exist in every society and culture regarding the care and protection of children are routinely ignored.

It is not easy to assure the application of international standards and indigenous cultural norms for the protection of children. Neither is their incorporation into national laws and legislation guaranteed to stop violation of children’s rights, either during armed conflict or in peacetime. But such action is an essential part of the process of building up a framework for
bringing violators to account, a framework standards and norms for accountability, mechanisms for monitoring compliance with such standards, and for bringing recalcitrants to account.

In addition to long-established humanitarian law – the Geneva Conventions and Protocols and human rights laws and conventions such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, recent years have seen a flurry of new standards requiring universal ratification and implementation: the Rome Statutes for the International Criminal Court; the Anti-Personnel Landmine Treaty; the new Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child which bans the recruitment of children into armed forces, and their deployment below the age of 18 years. Regionally, there now exist such instruments as the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, which has recently come into force. Sub-regional organizations are also attempting to address the accountability of member states, and actors within them, for the rights, protection and well-being of their populations. Members of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have sought to define such codes of conduct, for example as cited in their recent Bamako and Lomé declarations, while the ECOWAS Moratorium on small arms and light weapons seeks to limit the flow of such weaponry into and between member states.

Human rights activists around the world, nationally and through international networking, are actively advocating for a clear and concrete timetable for applying at national level the solid body of international norms and standards that now exist, and for training and informing legislators, law-makers or security forces in application of, and compliance with, the provisions of such standards.

Ratify, legislate, train, inform. There is nothing – unless it is a lack of political will - stopping any country today from ensuring that the full range of norms and standards is in place nationally. Do these standards apply to non-state parties? Yes. There is a growing international acceptance that non-state entities, rebel groups, are equally bound by human rights standards. A body of precedent is developing, for example, as with the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement’s Agreement on Ground Rules in 1995, whereby the SPLM bound itself to international norms and commitments to children and civilians in the midst of conflict (Levine, 1997). The same process is being applied in Sri Lanka to persuade the LTTE to comply with norms governing the age of recruitment of young people as fighters.

Are these standards the product of alien, externally-imposed values? No. Positive norms and values exist in every culture regarding care and protection of children in times of war and conflict. These can be rediscovered, re-instated, accepted at all levels of society, to re-establish an understanding that surely must be universally applied – that there are no circumstances under which the targeting and exploitation of children is justifiable, ever.

In a sense, this is the easy part – to ratify, legislate, inform, commit. But how to ensure that these norms and standards are actually applied? Clearly, each country has it within its power to establish independent bodies to monitor, document and report on human rights and their abuse. In recent years, Truth Commissions have been created in the aftermath of civil conflict in several countries – in Chile, El Salvador or South Africa, for example – to aid in the transition from conflict and oppression to democracy, to address the demand for justice by
victims of violence and their families, and to establish a true and accurate record of rights violations and of those responsible, as a necessary step in the process of national reconciliation.

Likewise the International Criminal Tribunals for the Former Yugoslavia (created in 1993) and for Rwanda (created 1994), were both established by the United Nations Security Council with the mandate to prosecute individuals responsible for crimes against humanity and genocide committed in those two zones of conflict. The work of the tribunals has illustrated the tremendous difficulty of bringing war criminals to account and of prosecuting rape under international humanitarian and human rights laws. Yet individuals are being brought to account – albeit to slowly and too few - but the tribunals are helping to erode the climate of impunity within which perpetrators feel free to commit horrendous violations. The story of the struggle to indict former General Augusto Pinochet, for human rights violations and disappearances committed under his regime in Chile, is also a warning to current leaders that increasingly, they will have no place to hide – within their own countries or overseas – from the consequences of their actions if they violate human rights or perpetrate crimes against humanity.

The United Nations Security Council, which has long defined threats to international security in terms of aggressive relations between states, has had to come to terms with the predominant reality and consequences of armed conflict within state boundaries, which threaten “human security”. Today, it is increasingly accepted that threats to international peace and security can derive from economic, environmental and social crises, which threaten the security of individuals and civilian populations within states, and that human rights are inseparable from questions of international peace and security. The collapse of institutions of governance within states, internal oppression and conflict, which precipitate flows of refugees or the spillover of fighting across borders, are recognized as posing “fundamental security threats” (Taylor, Daws, & Adamczick-Gerteis, 1997). Thus during the year 2000, the Security Council debated and passed resolutions on, amongst others, the protection of children and civilians in armed conflict, on refugees, on women, peace and security, on HIV/AIDS and peacekeeping, and on the role of the Security Council in prevention of armed conflict – none of which would have been considered as Security Council issues even five years ago.

To focus on human security is to argue that the safety and well being of individuals are integral to achieving global peace and security. Thus civilian suffering, especially during periods of civil strife, should trigger action by the international community in the same way that aggression between states has traditionally done. However, it must be said that the concept of human security and of international humanitarian intervention in the affairs of a country in which human security is threatened, is far from universally accepted, especially by countries who still insist on the sovereign right of states to preclude external interference in their internal affairs. But world opinion is shifting. Little by little, it is becoming accepted that state leaders cannot abuse their populations with impunity, and that the international community has a right to demand their accountability. As stated previously, the possibility of “naming names” of the hidden external actors who stimulate, or benefit from, armed conflict, be they governments or corporate entities, is also a part of the international process of limiting the extent to which a climate of impunity can continue to protect those who divide and abuse their populations for their own ends.
Democratic Development and Conflict Management

The above sections have highlighted ways of responding to the abuse and traumatization of children and other civilians in situations of armed civil conflict, and of creating a normative environment of increasing accountability. But civil conflicts have their roots in structural social, political and economic conditions, which generate exclusion, inequity, discrimination, vulnerability, marginalization and poverty. Thus no discussion on countering the climate of impunity can be complete without examining some of the peaceful methods by which conflict can be managed. As stated at the outset of this chapter, many of today’s civil conflicts revolve around the concept of identity, and perceived or actual threats to the identity of groups in society, interwoven with the struggle over scarce or inequitably distributed resources. Thus whether in pre- or post-conflict environments, the development of reliable institutions, processes and legal frameworks for conflict management, for power-sharing and for inclusion of different identity groups within society, as well as for resource allocation, are critical steps towards peaceful management of conflict, towards the development of accountable systems of governance – and towards discouraging the development of a climate of impunity.

The word “democracy” is much abused and misused. Powerful international actors frequently try to impose a particular – and often inappropriate - definition of democracy on weaker states. Democracy is not a panacea, and the existence of democracy is no guarantee of a society free of violence; yet “democratic societies tend to develop the institutions, resources and flexibility, in the long term, to peacefully manage (deep-rooted, identity driven) conflicts” (Harris & Reilly, 1998, p. 13). The key is not for external actors to advocate or impose their preferred model of democracy, but to support the development of appropriate political structures, legislative bodies, judicial structures and forms of decentralization or devolution, which allow groups to exercise their civil liberties and be afforded protection under the law, to share power and resources, to negotiate on the basis of commonly-accepted norms of behavior, and to feel that their identity, rights and needs are recognized and respected. This applies whatever identity binds the group, whether it is gender, religion, ethnicity, language or geographic location, for example. This usually means “majoritarian” political institutions and election systems (in which the winners of a first-past-the-post system take over all instruments of political power) are not appropriate for societies deeply divided between groups which conflict on fundamental matters of identity. Such systems can in fact make matters worse and institutionalize the sense that political leaders are immune from sanction or accountability to society at large.

Conflict occurs wherever individuals have different perspectives or goals. Thus constructive conflict management is a necessary part of democratic debate and dialogue. In deeply divided societies, “basic democratic values such as pluralism, tolerance, inclusiveness, negotiation and compromise are keys to building long-lasting settlements to conflicts” (Harris & Reilly, 1998, p. 17).

Hence the current priority that many international development actors give to the promotion of “good governance” is an essential part of the struggle to ensure peaceful management of conflict, to prevent resort to armed conflict and to prevent what often drives groups to armed conflict – the existence of a climate of impunity. Pursuit of policies and programs for more equitable development, disparity reduction, gender equity and effective social
integration of all groups in society, is an effective way of reducing the potential for violent social conflict. Easily said, but demanding a quality of leadership, functioning legal, political and social institutions – including universal education of good quality – which are elusive in many societies today.

A final word about the democratic values mentioned previously, such as: tolerance, inclusiveness, compromise, participation, and respect for difference. How are these learned? Why, in April and May of 1994, in southern Rwanda, did one Hutu municipal official instigate the systematic annihilation of his Tutsi constituents, while another, not far away, sought to hide and protect Tutsis – at considerable risk to himself? There may be several interrelated explanations – family upbringing and background, economic status, negative or positive experience of interactions between Hutu and Tutsi. But the difference in educational background does seem to have been a significant factor also. The first was exposed to a traditional, authoritarian school environment, based on rote learning and unquestioning memorization, where any sign of initiative was rewarded with corporal punishment, where teachers ruled by fear and taught hate. The second was educated in a school where teachers encouraged interaction with and between children, where curiosity was welcomed and stimulated, where tolerance and respect for others were core values.

Educators believe that the assurance of an open, value-based education which enables children to think critically, build self-esteem, learn to be empathetic, tolerant and to appreciate differences in others, solve problems co-operatively and in a non-violent way, can be a major contributor to a democratic, participatory society, composed of thinking citizens who lean towards peaceful, rather than violent, resolution of conflict. “The greatest chance we have to prevent violence in society is to raise children who reject violence as a method of problem-solving, who believe in the right of the individual to grow in a safe environment” (UNICEF International Child Development Centre, 1998, p. 3).

Conclusion

This article has attempted to address some fundamental questions regarding the nature of identity-based armed conflict within states, conflict which mercilessly uses and abuses children and women, which consciously targets them and which leaves them physically scarred and psychologically traumatized. It has argued that the poor quality of leadership and the lack of accountability of those wielding military, economic or political power, are significant root causes of the abuse and traumatization of children, most egregiously illustrated in times of armed conflict within states. Exploitative leaders benefit from a sense of invulnerability, of safety from any kind of accountability for their actions – in other words, from a pervasive climate of impunity.

The article has suggested that, while there are many possible courses of actions to be taken if impunity is to be countered, four in particular are worthy of attention: the designation of children as zones of peace; the identification and public naming of those who target and exploit women and children for their own financial or political gain; the development of a more rigorous normative framework, and international vigilance to ensure increased compliance with human rights and humanitarian norms; and finally, the strengthening of democratic institutions which
allow for peaceful management of conflict and for equitable development. In addition, an effective investment in the future is in an education system, which actively encourages the child to think critically, solve problems co-operatively, value and tolerate differences in others.

None of these areas of action provide an absolute guarantee of peace, neither can they ensure that armed conflict between groups within a society will never erupt. But taken together, they offer a number of opportunities to mould positive environments in which leaders are encouraged to exercise their power and authority for the betterment of all their citizens, for the equitable development of their societies, and in the development of channels and institutions which allow differences and conflicts to be settled by peaceful means.

Perhaps in this way, the world will gradually do away with the currently-pervasive climates of impunity which lead inexorably to violence and armed conflict, which lead to the victimization and traumatization of innocent children and which require caring individuals – whether they be psychologists or counselors, health workers or teachers, community workers or parents – to help traumatized children piece together their shattered lives, to regain hope in themselves, in their future, and in adults.

References


**Notes**

1. Dyregrov and Raundalen, p.47.
3. Harris and Reilly, pp.9-11.
8. Taylor, Daws and Adamczick (pp.41-43); Dewitt, Haglund and Kirton (pp.1-10).
11. UNICEF ICDC, p.3.