

## **Side Event on the Internally Displaced Children – at the 15<sup>th</sup> Human Rights Council, Geneva**

A side event was organised on 13 September on “The Rights and Guarantees of Internally Displaced Children in Armed Conflict” to discuss the *Working Paper N° 2 on Children in Armed Conflict*, released by the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG). The panel consisted of five members including Ms. Erin Mooney, co-author of the Working Paper; Ms. Alice Farmer (Internally Displaced Monitoring Centre); Ms. Kristin Barstad (ICRC); Christine Knudsen (UNICEF); and Mr. Volker Türk (UNHCR); and was chaired by Ms. Radhika Coomaraswamy, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) for Children in Armed Conflict.

The *Working Paper* was inspired by SRSG’s visits to conflict areas where she met with children in IDP camps and realized that principles needed to be formulated to ensure that children’s rights were protected. In 2009 the Office of the SRSG first put forward the Rights and Guarantees of internally Displaced Children before the HRC after which Ms. Coomaraswamy included them in her report to the General Assembly. The General Assembly endorsed these principles in the resolution on Protection of and Assistance to Internally Displaced Populations, (A/Res/64/162.) The *Working Paper* that the panelists came together to discuss “*outlines these rights and guarantees, placing them in a real life context while explaining the legal basis for their formulation.*”<sup>9</sup>

The panelists wished to convey that the Paper should serve as an advocacy tool to raise awareness and help to create a common approach and standard in IDP camps to ensure that children are protected. It was clear that of IDPs children are the most vulnerable and face the greatest risks, Erin Mooney began the discussion by stating that there were a 1.5 million children who had been displaced. With so many conflict areas around the world it is common that in the chaos of flight parents will lose their children, sometimes these children are too young to know their names or where they are from. Once separated from parents they are subject to attack and abuse, are at risk of being trafficked, sexually exploited, illegally adopted, subject to forced labour, and recruited.

The recruitment of children to become soldiers was one of the gravest concerns during the discussion; Ms. Farmer explained that there was a clear nexus between the displacement and recruitment of children. She said that often people would be displaced because of the threat of recruitment, but once they were displaced they only became more vulnerable to it. She attributed this to the fact that IDP camps often remain close to conflict areas, and in the camps conditions are very poor with no or limited access to basic needs, no protection, and no access to schools or activities to keep children occupied. Ms. Barstad described the camps as a perfect recruiting ground because children are often “hungry, angry, and unaccompanied.” All of these factors coupled with the boredom that Ms. Coomaraswamy had heard children complaining of at camps increased their vulnerability exponentially.

Access to education was a prominent aspect of the discussion in reducing IDP children’s

vulnerability. Ms. Knudsen believed that access to education would not only reduce vulnerability, but provide for a better future and serve as a way to enforce peace. She was, however, concerned that several countries did not provide IDP children with any access to education and those that did often provided access to education was often inadequate. She described the increasing trend of targeting schools and learning spaces, resulting in the frequent attacks of teachers and students.

There is also a problem of a lack of infrastructure in many places and where it does exist may force teachers and students to face unsafe routes, minefields or sexual violence, causing them to be too afraid to attend. Ms. Knudsen stressed the need for schools to be treated as “zones of peace and safe spaces,” and regretted that education was not a priority under International Humanitarian Law, but that these structures were still protected under it and said there was momentum in the Security Council to reduce such attacks. She called for education to be seen as a priority for stopping conflict in the eyes of donors, who currently view it as a secondary need. She said that small progress had been made in this regard, but that donors did not quite incorporate this as a primary need, and she therefore wished to establish clear principles on need based donor practices.

9 Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children in Armed Conflict, *Working Paper No. 2: The Rights and Guarantees of Internally Displaced Children in Armed Conflict*, Working Paper, United Nations (New York: United Nations, 2010).

Mr. Türk raised the issue of the loss of documentation, which he attributed to being a key issue in protection, and said that other risks often arose from children having no identification. He stressed that documentation needed to be secured so that children did not end up stateless. This concern was also relevant to the discussion on education, where Ms. Farmer and Ms. Knudsen described how displaced children were often removed from their schools and then had no documents, like proof of completion or birth certificates to enroll elsewhere. Mr. Türk continued with his concern of displaced children becoming “invisible” and highlighted the connection between the IDP situation and the refugee context. He described the “treacherous journeys,” children are forced to take and felt that they were being persecuted, but despite their persecution were not being given attention in the asylum process. Mr. Türk emphasized that if the issue of displacement was not addressed it would be a seed for future conflict because displacement leads to stigmatization and frustrations that get passed to from generation to generation.

Displacement is often seen as a temporary interruption but the truth, as stated by several panelists, is that people are being displaced for periods of 20 years. This can lead to parents passing on their hostilities and frustrations to their children and these children, according to Mr. Türk becoming “the fighters of the future.”

In conclusion each panelist was asked to convey a final message. Mr Türk began by saying that in child protection partnership is a crucial aspect and that it is key to continue and reinforce to see how connections and inter-linkages can be made. Ms. Knudsen focused on the Millennium Development Goals asserting that without talking about children in conflict they could not be achieved and that it was everyone's responsibility to advocate for these children. Ms. Barstad addressed labeling in her closing statement, saying that it was sometimes helpful to label groups but could also be counter-productive, so wanted to remind people that when addressing children, she used the example of child soldiers, it was important to keep other children in mind as well, so as not to overlook them because they were not included in the labeled group. Ms. Farmer kept her message short by simply saying that all children have rights, but being displaced effects how they are realized. Ms. Mooney concluded the meeting by asserting that if the differential context of children is not examined then they are not being protected. She further said "we are not protecting IDPs, if we are not looking at the children in this situation." Ms. Mooney ended by reminding everyone present that children and youth needed to be reached out to more to remedy the situation because they had coping mechanisms and strategies, and highlighted their right to participate stressing that they are not just passive actors.