



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NEXT STEPS ON CANADA'S GLOBAL ENGAGEMENT
June 17th, 2021

Reimagining a better world for children living in conflict and crisis: Children's rights at the core of Canada's global engagement

Children affected by natural disasters, conflict and crisis – including crises like COVID-19 – are among the most marginalized in the world. Particularly in the early years, children and their caregivers need targeted and urgent support to address the overlapping health, education and protection challenges they face to survive and thrive. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated global inequities worldwide, leading to dangerous regressions in the most basic children's rights. This reversal of decades of hard-fought progress carries significant risks that connect us all, not only in the short-term but for the next generation. Healthy, safe, educated children are essential to any recovery plan for Canada and for the world.

On the global stage, Canada has long been a champion for the rights of the most marginalized. The rights of children – particularly those facing discrimination and living in conflict and crisis - must be at the core of the next signature phase of Canada's global engagement. A better world for us all depends on our ability to reimagine a better world for children, including those living in crisis and conflict. Canada can catalyze this movement.

As Canada's leading child-focused international development and humanitarian organizations, with millions of supporters across Canada, we are alarmed at the state of child rights today. We remain steadfast in our commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the principles of Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP). Bold political leadership and new investment are needed to champion the rights of the most marginalized children, in all their diversity, to be healthy, educated, protected and empowered. To that end, **Canada should spearhead a new global initiative for children living in conflict and crisis** with the following components.

A Canadian Special Envoy for Children Living in Conflict and Crisis

Children living in conflict and crisis face additional and persistent barriers to health care, education and protection services. It is estimated that over 13 million child refugees and 17 million internally displaced children are currently living in overcrowded, unsanitary conditions such as camps or temporary settlements, which often lack adequate health infrastructure. Where services are available, many face discrimination based on legal status, thereby limiting

access to life-saving health care, including sexual and reproductive health and rights.

In times of crisis, schools are often the first public service suspended and last to be resumed. School closures due to COVID-19 is a persistent and acute example of this. However, it is important to remember that even before the pandemic over a quarter of a billion children – including 75 million children and youth living in conflict affected areas – were already out of school due to multiple and intersecting barriers, such as gender, refugee status or lack of access to a safe school facility. Children who are out of school are at risk not only being denied hope and opportunity, they are also subject to increased levels of sexual and gender-based violence. This is particularly true for girls and LGBTQI children, who generally fare worse due to harmful gender-related norms and practices.

Canada has a strong track record in advancing the rights of children and youth. At this unprecedented moment of overlapping crises, **we are calling on all parties to carry forward that leadership and to commit to appointing a high-profile Canadian Special Envoy for Children Living in Conflict and Crisis.**

The Special Envoy would act as a focal point within government to ensure Canada uses its positive diplomatic relationships to advance the rights of the world's most marginalized and forgotten children. This position should be grounded in a commitment to gender-transformative development, anti-racism, anti-discrimination and justice for children living in conflict and crisis, especially as it relates to children's civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights. The Special Envoy would mobilize support for a global movement, including additional financial resources from likeminded partners.

A Global Children and Youth Advisory Council

The world now has the largest generation of young people in history. While children and youth face unique barriers and challenges, they are also inherently powerful and capable of participating in decision-making and offering innovative solutions. The children and youth of today are already becoming the leaders of tomorrow – and with the right support, can ensure an inclusive, just world where no child is left behind.

Engaging children and youth means creating democratic and respectful spaces that amplify their voices and prioritize the inclusion of those who are disproportionately denied opportunities to speak. This includes girls, children with disabilities, LGBTQI and BIPOC children, as well as children without adequate parental care (such as orphaned, abandoned, unaccompanied and separated children). Developing children's and youth leadership skills to further good governance, problem solving and youth-led action is clearly recognized as a global best practice, but remains severely underfunded.

Following the feminist principle of “nothing about us without us” and in the interest of fostering the agency of children and youth, **we call on all parties to commit to consulting children and youth in partner countries on Canada's international development priorities, through the creation of a new Global Children and Youth Advisory Council.**

This Global Children and Youth Advisory Council should work in partnership with the Special Envoy for Children Living in Crisis and Conflict to ensure that the most marginalized young people, including girls, refugees and displaced children, are part of the solutions and are supported with the knowledge and skills they need to be active leaders and decision makers in their communities.

New Targeted Funding for Early Childhood Development in Emergencies (ECDiE)

Early childhood – from birth to age 8 – is the most important phase of development in a person’s life. This is when early experiences shape the architecture of the developing brain and lay the foundation for future learning, health, and economic productivity. During these critical early years, a child’s brain develops faster than at any other time, and the brain is most sensitive to environmental factors. Children born into conflict and crisis are exposed to a wide range of compounding risks and toxic stress that can inhibit brain development, threatening both their individual prospects as well as the larger community goals of cohesion, resilience and gender equality.

Early childhood development (ECD) programs are a proven buffer against these risks, enabling children to build resilience, overcome adversity, and reach their full potential. Comprehensive ECD supports both young children and their caregivers, and includes a holistic set of services including health, nutrition, responsive caregiving (e.g., gentle vs. punitive discipline) and play-based learning.

Despite evidence that investing in early childhood development is essential and has a high return on investment, resources dedicated to children’s early years account for a very small fraction of development assistance going to crisis-affected countries, with only a sliver of that specifically allocated for nurturing care and pre-primary education.

To respond to this challenge, **we are calling on all parties to commit to new and additional financial resources for children, with an expanded focus on early childhood development in emergencies (ECDiE).**

Children’s Rights: Core to a Global Recovery, Core to Canada’s Global Engagement

Multiplying global crises means that sustainable, targeted funding is all the more urgent to respond, build resilience and avert more crises. As such, investments in children’s rights will only adequately respond to the urgent and unmet needs of children living in conflict and crisis if they are situated within broader increases to international assistance. **Therefore, a final call to action is for all parties to commit to long-term, predictable and sustainable increases to Canada’s international development and humanitarian assistance.**

Canada has committed to building a stronger and more inclusive country as we move past the current pandemic. Canadians are keen to see this commitment extend through Canada’s foreign policy and international assistance. There is no better way to make this a reality than to listen to and invest in children and youth – they are our present and our future.