

### **Third Voksenåsen Statement (2009) on the Rights of the Child:**

#### **Never to become a child soldier or other victim of war**

*'... recognition of the inherent dignity and of equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in this world.'*

(Preamble to the Convention on the Rights of the Child)

On 6 November 2009 we gathered for the third annual event on forms of genocide and mass violence at the Voksenåsen Centre, arranged by the Dag Hammarskjöld Programme of the NetworkersSouthNorth and the Voksenåsen Centre in cooperation with The Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation. Forty-nine participants discussed the plight of children in particular during wartime, when victims of war include the perpetrators.

A year earlier, the second Voksenåsen Statement stressed that our solidarity should be first and foremost with the most vulnerable and abused. They deserve and require our special care and concern at times where their own capacities and voices need strengthening. Our point of departure and expression of solidarity should provide space for initiatives by children and women, who are always the most affected by war and mass violence.

The few formal conventions that have – reluctantly – allowed women to participate in matters of direct concern to them have not given them an obvious space in the follow-up to those agreements. Children still have no representation in negotiations concerning security and peace-building, although they constitute almost half of those directly suffering from war, whether as soldiers or refugees, or through other forms of mass violence and related abuses.

Twenty years ago the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted. Since then it has been signed and ratified by the governments of all but two countries in the world. But many have not turned it into domestic law. Neither is the Optional Protocol a sufficient response to human rights abuses suffered by thousands of child soldiers daily. Prevention, disarmament and demobilisation remain largely ignored issues. The horrific reality of heinous crimes continues unabated. In response to the world leaders' failure to do what they can, naming and shaming as a means of further enforcement of normative frameworks is not enough. Democratically elected governments should show more responsibility by finding political solutions to military conflicts and protecting the children in all countries of this world.

Introducing a notion that military strategies preparing for war should include measures to protect children from the effects of war is a perversion of the idea of protecting civilian populations, especially children. All people are best protected by the absence of war and violence. Children will prosper and mature best under conditions free of any threats to their

life. Protecting children from the effects of war would mean abolishing war and other forms of violent action.

War-affected children often suffer from a total cognitive collapse, and a complete loss of confidence and trust in the adult world – composed of parents and other close relatives, but also the wider local community and the representatives and institutions of state. They are betrayed by the adult world. Demonisation of the enemy is for the child soldier the result of fear and disorientation and the ultimate pseudo-solution to come to terms with the realities. As research shows, experience builds brains. War and fear poisons mindsets. But peace work needs peace of mind. A quarter of a million child soldiers need help to rebuild their peace of mind, and hundreds of thousands of children at risk of being recruited need support in building it.

Mobilising moral awareness and consciousness, developing and disseminating and strengthening knowledge on existing agreements, new ideas and means of preventing recruitment and dealing with trauma must accelerate among those who are willing to take sides with the oppressed to influence the powerful of the world (still almost exclusively men). The future of humankind rests with the children of today. Bringing them up in a peaceful and caring environment is not a 'soft' issue but an investment in the core of security, the future of our species and the planet. At a time when the human species, through the irresponsible lifestyle of a minority, is threatening human survival, bringing up new generations to practise empathy and concern for all forms of life is an urgent necessity.

Processes leading towards the elimination of all forms of war-related abuse of and violence against children must accelerate. The direct, respectful involvement of children in such processes must be an integral part of the work. Not only are children, young people and women entitled to meaningful space and influence in processes affecting them; the negotiations for peace, reconciliation and reconstruction cannot be left to the remaining male 20 per cent of humankind. The child's right to be heard is an imperative. The adult world must take on the responsibility of ensuring that the concrete implementation of this right is done with empathy and care.

As the second Voksenåsen Statement maintained: 'As human beings, our loyalty and solidarity should always remain with other human beings'. Children are the biggest group among the human beings in our world. Without them there is no future.