

Interview with General Roméo A Dallaire

What is your role at CIDA?

I have been invited by the Minister for International Cooperation to be Special Advisor on War-affected Children to the Canadian International Development Agency. My role is to provide insight to CIDA on specific areas where children are being used in conflict. I attend conferences, present papers, review documents where required and go to the field to analyse the situation and provide insights on possible areas of work. I also look at what and how Canada is doing with regard to this issue.

What is CIDA's position regarding war-affected children?

Within CIDA's Child Protection Action Plan, war-affected children are an area of strategic focus. Priorities for CIDA programming in support of these children include providing basic education for refugee and internally displaced children, supporting reintegration of child soldiers into their families and communities, training to prevent and resolve conflicts, and providing basic health and psychosocial services.

CIDA is focusing on efforts to involve war-affected girls and boys directly in designing and implementing interventions for them. CIDA also seeks to make the impact of war on girls and boys visible and to promote ways to prevent the violation of their rights during and after conflicts.

What should donor governments do to look after the needs of displaced and war-affected children?

The question of children as instruments of war is misunderstood. There is little acknowledgement that this new phenomenon has emerged during the conflicts of the 90s.

Because there is no grand strategic grasp of this phenomenon, you don't

have an outcry by the international community about the abhorrence of the use of children in war. You don't have an outcry like you have with regard to the use of biological or nuclear weapons. These instruments are rightly feared and actions have been taken to ratify conventions to prevent their use. The use of children in war to me is morally impossible to neglect or to put aside. I don't see how we can make treaties on weapons and on prevention of war and we can create an international court yet not move in a cultural sense to develop repugnance about children as combatants.

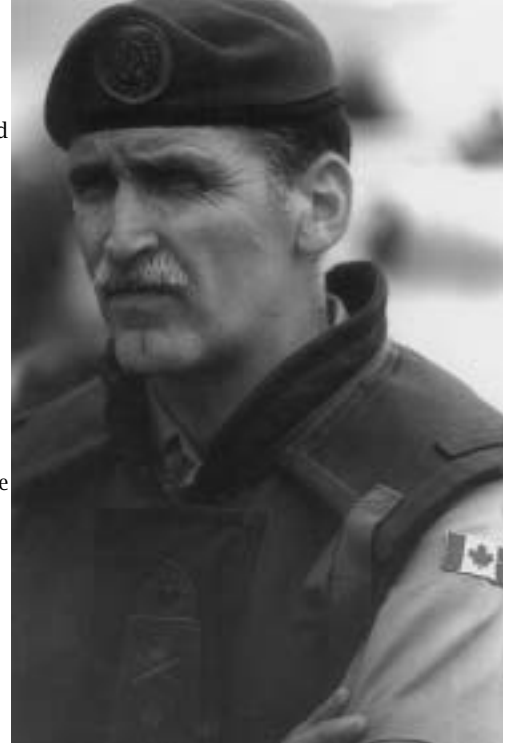
How would you describe the response by the humanitarian community so far?

What are the opportunities and challenges?

There are enormous efforts being done by a whole host of organisations. Some are working on prevention. Others are trying to pick up the pieces after conflicts. There is some effort done through education to encourage peaceful resolutions of conflict. The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child is also moving forward.¹

But what I don't see from that international effort is the ability to advance more innovative efforts in the field. I'll give you an example. UNICEF in Sierra Leone has done a magnificent job with its partners to rebuild educational systems in displaced camps and villages. Through reintegration programmes, they teach basic skills and attempt to reintegrate back into society the children who have been active participants in these conflicts.

However, the depth of the problem is not touched upon. Longer-term programmes are not being pursued. The work is one of crisis resolution and



setting up a base where the nation can pick up and sustain itself. The argument is that NGOs don't want to create a dependent state and so they want to hand over fairly rapidly. However, the responsibility cannot simply be handed over.

I once spoke to a young leader and he told me how he was going to this rehabilitation programme to be a cobbler or carpenter. This was not particularly over-exciting but it gave him a basic skill. He said "I'm going to be going to school here for the next while." He then asked "what happens after?" These children are very conscious of the longer term which sometimes I don't think that we appreciate enough. What happens after the three months of this programme? Is there an education system for him? Is there going to be support to help him into these transitions? What happens after this life of traumas and easily available power? The facile response is that the communities and families are able to absorb these children and to reintegrate them into mainstream society.

Let me explain. You've got boys, you've got girls and you've got leaders. The boys are the active participants and their reintegration requires taking their energy, and giving them active things to do in order to sustain that impulse that they have been living with for years. The question of girls is far more complex because even if we have innovative ideas to help rehabilitate them, like teaching them non-traditional skills, these often go nowhere. Girls return to their home village and can't use those skills because of traditional village culture. It creates another pressure on the girls which they have to face while also tackling the psychological trauma.

These two groups in themselves can partially be handled through reasonably short-term programmes. However, none of the programmes for boys or girls deal with the true post-traumatic stress they face. They'll fake it, they'll live with it for months, maybe years, but at one time or another, without any follow-up or professional help, they will explode. They can become enormous problems for communities and can become potential recruits to return into the bush.

The third group, the leadership gang, as far as I have been able to discern, has not been specifically touched upon by the humanitarian community. The youth who have developed leadership skills during these conflicts are in the norm highly skilled, highly intelligent, very savvy of human nature, very proud and capable of swaying the opinions of others. Now these boy and girl leaders are being handled in the same pot as the boys and girls I have just described. However, they are the seeds for the next round, they are the leaders of the next revolution unless they are nurtured through a separate programme. The objective is to take those magnificent skills and encourage them to become leaders in an effective rebuilding of the nation.

Sierra Leone is an example where 14 year olds are actually in command of camps of displaced or demobilised children. They retain those same powers because they're natural leaders and the others are swayed by them. Even NGOs use them. The lack of coordinated work with these leaders

is to me the most evident deficiency in the whole programme because no matter how much we're going to do, if those leaders are not handled well, they will bring back into conflict and banditry all the ones that we've helped.

With regard to your recent trip to Sierra Leone as Special Advisor to CIDA, what risk and opportunities did you see for the children?

Sierra Leone is, I think, a very good example to use when we want to study the problematic issue of youth in conflict. It is also a very good example to use to dissect the efforts that have been done by the humanitarian community.

One area, particularly difficult to handle, which is prevalent in Sierra Leone is the whole area of child dependency on drugs and alcohol. How do you bring those children back down to normalcy? I've discovered that detoxification programmes are virtually unavailable because they are very costly and risky in terms of getting positive results. But as long as they still have a hankering for drugs, any bandit or any adult can recruit them instantaneously. So by not solving this dependency, or re-educating and reorienting the leaders you keep them as potential recruits for the next round.

Throughout the conversations you have had with boys and girls, what have they told you about their needs during and after a conflict?

Interestingly, the most vociferous are the young leaders. The girls, however, are very difficult to reach. It takes time for them to come out of the closet, to both speak about what they've lived and what they want to do. But the theme that keeps coming from all of them is education.

They want to be able to know what's going on and to be able to make more conscious decisions. A lot of these kids have aged extensively through surviving the traumas of these conflicts. They are not necessarily a 12 year old like in North American standards. Therefore we need to orient our programmes towards appropriately targeted education. It's interesting

to see that education in displaced and refugee camps can provide much that the community needs. Teachers who are culturally sensitive and who are working patiently to provide education and permit the children to make decisions are needed. The difficulty lies in deciding on the type of education programme. Will it be in line with the national system, or shall it be more independent? Much research needs to be done on this issue. Where you see an organised programme, there is far more serenity in the camp, the kids are structured, the adults have more time to reflect and can tackle problems.

What do you hope to accomplish by the end of your term as Special Advisor?

I hope to do two things. One, is making Canadian youth far more aware of what's going on out there. Showing them what's happening to those of their age. So, provide an awareness that will remain with them, because it's so strong and powerful a picture that if they're aware of it, they'll grasp it. My preliminary work has proven that not only are they affected by this information but they're quite keen in pursuing it.

And the other one is a strong desire to get youth to do something concrete, which is not just bottle drives and picking up a few dollars to donate, which is essential, but in fact getting involved with programmes that are both at the strategic level of 'Canadian youth support the Optional Protocol', 'Canadian youth have launched a campaign specifically against child soldiers being used' and, at the more tactical scale, children who might be able to bring about change through influencing local business and community leaders.

*For further information see www.acdi-cida.gc.ca/childprotection or contact Caroline Fahmy, Research Consultant to General Dallaire. Email: caroline_fahmy@acdi-cida.gc.ca
This interview was given on 4 September 2002.*

1. The Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict was adopted by the UN General Assembly in May 2000. It entered into force on 12 February 2002, having been signed to date by 110 states. The text of the protocol is at: www.unicef.org/crc/annex1.htm