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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Even though Nepal has made considerable progress in its peace process since the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in November 2006 the security situation in the *terai* has been of increasing concern. The activities of the armed groups in the *terai* affect children's lives in several ways. This report is based on a comprehensive assessment of the situation and attempts to capture the current situation for children as it is perceived by the people who live there.

The report draws from interviews with key informants as well as focus group discussions with different segments of the population. It makes use of a qualitative research methodology which aims at capturing how people perceive protection concerns relating to children. The information received has not been investigated or verified in any other way than through cross checks with other respondents or by other information that UNICEF has at hand from other sources.

Protection concerns for children in the *terai* emanate from the general backdrop of poverty and discrimination, in particular gender discrimination, in addition to those that are generated by the current lack of security and the presence of armed groups. The situation for girls and women stands out as particularly grave and respondents mentioned early marriage, domestic violence, 'silencing' of girls, lack of access to education and sexual abuse as being widespread. Other concerns include child labour, disruptions in education and the presence of small arms and light weapons in the community. Protection concerns that are directly linked to the presence of armed groups include a constant fear of abductions, explosions of IEDs and similar threats. There is generally a feeling of insecurity among children and it was reported that children are displaying signs of psychological stress such as depression and a rise in random violent behaviour.

The overall lack of services and access to state institutions in the *terai*, in particular outside of the urban centres, has created a vacuum, leaving fertile ground for armed criminal gangs to operate. In the absence of elected local bodies, people lack a channel to put forward their needs/demands and seek solutions, hence they resort to *bandhs*<sup>1</sup> as the only way to air their grievances. Of particular importance for children is provision of quality education and schools that are accessible but regrettably schools in the *terai* are frequently closed due to *bandhs*, have been the sites of IED explosions plus children have been abducted on the way to their local schools.

This report paints a grim and alarming picture of the current situation in the *terai* where the on-going violence and lawlessness creates a climate of fear which affects children's lives in a number of negative ways. At the same time the report offers some recommendations for changing this negative spiral to a positive one. Ensuring that schools stay open during *bandhs* would be one important step. Children who are attending school are much less likely to join an armed group. Teacher support was also identified as one of the most important sources of support for vulnerable children. It was also pointed out that children who are aware about the risks of getting involved with armed groups are much less likely to join one of these groups. These and other recommendations are included at the end of the report.

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<sup>1</sup> *Bandhs* is a form of protest used by political activists or a large chunk of a community who declares a general strike, usually lasting one day but sometimes longer.

## INTRODUCTION

The aim of the report is to identify current protection concerns for children in the *terai* and in particular factors that increase children's vulnerability as identified by the population themselves. It draws from interviews with hundreds of informants as well as 52 focus group discussions with different segments of the population covering nine districts from four development regions in the *terai* area. It uses a qualitative research methodology which aims at capturing how people perceive protection concerns relating to children. The information received has not been investigated or verified in any other way than through cross checks with other respondents or by other information that UNICEF has at hand from other sources. Naturally the choice of methodology has an impact on the information collected and it should be emphasized that the information presenting in this report is based on people's subjective experiences and interpretation of events. On some occasions data from other sources have been included to give background and sometimes corroborate the statements of the respondents.

The findings from the interviews starts by describing general protection concerns for children in the *terai* and then narrows the focus to the more specific risks caused by armed groups and political parties. It then looks at the current protection mechanisms in place and how they are perceived by the local population. It ends with a set of recommendations to different actors.

## BACKGROUND

Nepal has made considerable progress in bringing the decade-long conflict to an end. After the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement between the Government of Nepal and the Communist Party of Nepal–Maoist on 21 November 2006, the election for the Constituent Assembly was successfully held on 10 April 2008, and was described by international observers as predominantly peaceful, free and fair. The Constituent Assembly is charged with developing a new Constitution and ensuring that Nepal consolidates peace and stability. On 28 May 2008, the country was declared a republic and the monarchy was formally abolished.

However, following the endorsement of the Interim Constitution in January 2007, the country has witnessed violent political upheaval that has fanned out across most of the *terai*<sup>2</sup>. The *terai* movement, led by the Madhesi Janadhikar Forum (MJF) and later joined by other mainstream *terai*-based parties such as the Terai Madhes Loktantrik Party (TMLP) and Nepal Sadbhavana Party (NSP), has reiterated its demand for 'one Madhesh, one Pradesh', stipulating that an autonomous Madhesi region be included in the new Constitution. Many other armed groups have emerged in the *terai* since then and, as a consequence, the *terai* has been periodically subjected to strikes (*bandha*) and other forms of violence affecting normal life. Moreover, it has been alleged that some *terai*-based armed groups are misusing children for various purposes, thus putting children at grave risk.

In October 2008, members of the CAAFAG Working Group, the 1612 Task Force and the Joint Mine Action Working Group (now referred to as the Children Affected by Conflict Working Group (CAC WG)) organized a one-day workshop in order to identify the main issues/concerns affecting children in the *terai* region. During the meeting, members of the CAC WG took the decision to conduct a rapid assessment in selected districts to obtain a better understanding of the issues affecting children and the factors contributing to their vulnerability. The assessment was also expected to identify key actors for the promotion of

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<sup>2</sup> The southern plains of Nepal, bordering India.

child rights in the *terai*, and make suggestions on preventing the misuse of children, protecting their rights, and providing them with responsive services.

### **Rationale**

There are no comprehensive and verified data regarding the misuse of children by armed groups in the *terai*. However, the media, human rights organizations, and community rights activists have reported numerous incidents that expose the misuse of children by various armed groups and gross violations of children's rights, including abduction, killing, sexual violence and recruitment or misuse of children.

At a time when the nation is looking forward to sustained peace and a new Constitution that ensures and protects the rights of all its citizens, children in the *terai* are again vulnerable to violence and exploitation. In preparation for programmatic responses, the CAC WG decided to conduct this assessment as a first step towards understanding the protection risks children in the *terai* are exposed to, and as a basis for strategizing appropriate interventions to protect and safeguard children's rights to survival and development.

### **Objective**

The rapid assessment is intended to provide an analysis of the situation of children in the *terai*. The findings are expected to inform both policy and programming interventions for the government, the CAC WG, and other related stakeholders.

The assessment aimed to:

- Identify the difficulties children are facing from politicized armed groups and violence.
- Identify the risks (short-term and long-term) for children arising from the changed political context in *terai* districts.
- Identify factors contributing to protection risks faced by children.
- Identify the structures currently supporting child protection in the community (health, education, vocational, psychosocial, etc.).
- Identify the factors hindering children's access to their rights.
- Identify key stakeholders and assess the role that they could/should play in the prevention of abuse/misuse of children and the protection of children's rights.
- Map out existing projects for economic and social reintegration of children.
- Identify the demographic factors of children who are particularly at risk and those who are more protected from politicized armed groups and violence.

### **Assessment Methodology**

This qualitative assessment was designed to understand the perception of communities regarding protection concerns of children in the situation prevailing in the *terai* districts. The key phases of the assessment included:

- A thorough desk review of available documentation, including existing analysis/reports from the CAC WG, UN reports, universities, etc.
- Design of the assessment methodology, survey techniques/tools, selection and sampling of interviewees, coverage, etc.
- Identification of key sites for field visits.

- Translation of key assessment documents (questionnaires).
- Identification and orientation of field assessors/persons.
- Conducting key informant interviews, using semi-structured questionnaires, and focus group discussions.
- Data consolidation and analysis.
- Conducting a final report dissemination workshop for CAC WG members.

### **Target Groups**

The target groups identified for interviews and focus group discussions were categorized as children and youth, the community, governmental authorities, members of mainstream political parties and youth wings, civil society, and the security forces.

- Children: Students; child clubs, youth groups; adolescents/youths
- Community people: Parents, guardians, other community members
- Government officials: Chief District Officer (CDO), Women’s Development Officer (WDO), District Education Officer (DEO), Local Development Officer (LDO), members of District Child Welfare Board (DCWB), teachers, health workers, etc.)
- Representatives of political parties and youth wings
- Representatives of armed groups
- Representatives of civil society organizations and journalists (human rights organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), etc.)
- Government security forces

The following target groups were interviewed— a total of 265 persons.

- 15 members of child clubs/youth groups
- 35 students/children
- 8 adolescents/youths
- 33 parents/guardians, other community members
- 22 government officials
- 33 representative of political parties
- 4 representative of youth wings
- 32 representative of civil society organizations
- 38 school teachers
- 17 members of government security forces
- 12 health post workers
- 16 journalists

In addition, 52 focus group discussions were organized in the nine selected districts. Participants in focus group discussions were children, representatives of child clubs, youths, parents, members of the community, representatives of development agencies (NGOs), journalists, and teachers.

Based on the interviews and focus groups discussion a number of District reports were produced which are available upon request.

**Geographical Coverage and Organizational Responsibilities**

Nine districts from four regions were selected for the assessment: Sunsari, Saptari and Siraha



in the Eastern Region; Dhanusa, Mahottari, Sarlahi and Rautahat in the Central Region; Kapilvastu in the Western Region; and Bardiya in the Mid-Western Region.

While selecting districts for the assessment, regional representation was taken into consideration. However, given the limitations of time and access, the presence of the CAC WG in proposed districts was another criterion for district selection.

The assessment covered 31 Village Development Committees (VDCs) and nine municipalities in these nine districts.

**Limitations**

Taking into consideration the security of the field assessors, armed groups were not approached for interview. As the CAC WG had to rely on existing staff to carry out the assessment, there were limited human resources and time available, which caused delay in data entry and analysis.

**FINDINGS**

**General protection risks**

*Gender discrimination*

Gender-based discrimination and violence, including early marriage, domestic violence, ‘silencing’ of girls, lack of access to education, denial of property rights, and sexual abuse, were generally recognized as the most widespread and pressing general protection concerns for children in the *terai*. Girls are expected to obey decisions taken by the family and their elders, and their views are not sought or respected even in important decisions related to their lives.

Gender-based violence is rampant and many cases of rape and other kinds of sexual violence, including marital rape, were mentioned during focus group discussions. The perception that girls are a burden to the family also results in early and forced marriages, with many children married before the age of majority. Early marriage is also connected to dowry issues, which often see girls married early to avoid payment of a larger dowry and abused by their in-laws if the dowry is too small. The need to save for a dowry is cited as one of the reasons for girls not accessing education. Owing to early marriage, girls often bear children at a young age, which has severe effects on their health. Several children have also committed suicide after being forced to marry.

In general, boys are sent to school and girls are kept at home for domestic work; parents that are able to choose often send sons to private school while daughters are sent to public schools. There is a high chance of young girls being trafficked because of low levels of awareness among parents, the long and porous border with India, and high levels of criminal activity. In some cases, gender discrimination and poverty have led some parents and families to sell their

children or traffic them to cross-border towns or higher-caste people who keep *kamalari* (female bonded labourers).

### *Child labour*

Child labour is a major problem in the *terai*. It includes children working as domestic servants or as *kamalari*<sup>3</sup>, as well as children leaving, or being forced to leave school in order to seek employment in India or other countries. Low-caste, illiterate children, orphans and children without parental care are particularly vulnerable. Children work in hotels, restaurants, transportation, brick factories, and collection of raw materials, on farms and as domestic labour; older children often travel to India for work. There are reported cases of abuse occurring in places of employment.

Although child labour was widely acknowledged as a factor that limits the ability of children to enjoy other rights such as education, respondents often saw it as an inherent part of life for many children.

### *Education*

Disruptions to education are another ongoing issue. Poverty and gender, caste and ethnic discrimination are major factors in stopping children from enrolling in school or continuing with their education, and pushing them into work. Schools are frequently closed because of *bandha* called by political parties and their sister organizations or armed groups. In some cases, there is also a lack of understanding among children and their families of the value of education. This is particularly true for girls, as boys are often seen as a more worthwhile investment. It was felt that the increasing politicization of the general environment has resulted in children paying more attention to political affairs than to their education, and that school dropout rates have increased as education has become more disrupted and children more involved in political activities. Some political activities have also taken place in schools.

The current security situation also affects the school situation for children. Extortion and threats to teachers and civil servants, abduction of children, and recruitment of children and their use in armed activities occur regularly. Children feel insecure and are afraid when coming to and from school. Parents are worried about the safety of their children when they are not at home. Even school-going children face various difficulties. Some of these relate to poor infrastructure and lack of materials such as textbooks, and others relate to a lack of teaching in the mother tongue and a lack of child-friendly teaching methods.

*In 2000, on average 1.66 schools were available for every 1,000 persons in the country however in all Terai districts except Chitwan the ratio of primary schools per 1,000 population was less than 1. The average student-per-teacher ratio was 34.7, but in the terai districts of Bardia, Banke and Bara it was above 50.<sup>4</sup>*

The paramount importance of education was clear from the discussions. Overall, where children lacked access to quality education, problems with substance abuse, gambling, and association with armed groups were higher. Children and young people who are out of school do not have high hopes and show greater despondency about their future.

<sup>3</sup> The *kamlari* system grew out of the practice where girls are sold through middlemen to far-off homes and businesses after an initial payment of Nepali Rs 4,000 - 6,000 (50-75 dollars) is made to the parents at the time of the verbal contract during a winter festival. The girls, taken away with a promise of education, often get nothing except food and clothes, and end up in servitude and exploitation. Although the Supreme Court of Nepal banned the *kamlari* system in September 2006, the practice still prevails, in particular in the Western and Far Western Region.

<sup>4</sup> Analysis for Assessing Humanitarian Needs and Vulnerabilities in Nepal 2008, IASC – Nepal.

### *Child participation*

In general, children are not given the space to speak for themselves or participate in decision-making that affects them. Traditional value systems held by parents and families mean that children are denied their rights and that parents take all major decisions for them. Although respondents recognized that children have the right to education, healthcare, entertainment, and overall mental and physical development, children's voices and views are nevertheless not respected within the family or in society. As feudalism and caste hierarchy is deeply entrenched in the social structure, marginalized and disadvantaged groups, especially in the rural areas, are often pressured to support interests of the dominating group as they are powerless to deny their support. Access to rights is more difficult for children who come from these marginalized and disadvantaged community.

### *Other concerns*

Some children are involved in illegal activities such as theft, substance abuse, and trafficking of illegal weapons. Children are used in the traffic of small arms from across the border, especially from Indian state of Bihar, which was mentioned a safe haven for criminal and armed groups. They are also used for illegal smuggling of various goods, such as tobacco, wood, sugar etc across the India-Nepal border.

Substance abuse (including the use of alcohol, cigarettes, marijuana, and other drugs) is identified as another issue. Drug use is frequently linked to delinquent behaviour and involvement in armed groups.

Trafficking, particularly of girls, and especially to India, is another serious problem, with trafficking often happening with the consent of the child's family.

The proliferation of small arms in the region is of increasing concern. Arms are said to be sold for as little as NRs 1,200 and are readily available in border areas. The presence of weapons in school has been reported. It was estimated that in some places every one in five households owns a gun.

### **Protection risks from political parties**

The distinction between political parties and armed groups has become blurred by some underground groups declaring themselves as political parties. There are also allegations that most armed groups are backed by political parties, and that some sister organizations of political parties are involved in criminal activities. In focus group discussions, some respondents blamed the conflict on rivalry between political parties and armed groups; others spoke of 'political armed groups', or said children were involved in 'hidden' political activities.

Children are asked, and reportedly sometimes hired, to join rallies and demonstrations organized by political parties. It is difficult to say to what degree children participate in these activities voluntarily or whether they are coerced. Some children were of the opinion that it is their right to take part in protest programmes, whereas others said that it was risky for them and was not their 'job'. Many children were unaware of any consequences that might result from their involvement in such activities.

In some cases, political parties offer money and other material incentives, such as sporting goods, to entice children to become involved in their activities. Children are promised the opportunity to acquire power, government jobs, or make money quickly without hard work. Some parties employ children for small jobs such as sending messages, and in political rallies.

Although most parties have, in principle, agreed to consider schools as ‘zones of peace’, school areas are often used to hold political meetings and activities. Political activities are widely seen to be disturbing educational activities in schools. The continual strikes and *bandha* called by political parties and armed groups have also severely affected children’s education. There are also cases where children have been taken to political rallies while on their way to school.

### **Protection risks from armed groups**

After the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2006 and the subsequent Madhesh Andolan [Madhesh Uprising], many new armed groups emerged in the *terai*, and political violence and criminal activities have escalated. In 2007, the government signed an agreement with the United Democratic Madhesi Front, complying with their demands, and in 2008, the government opened talks with other armed groups<sup>5</sup>. There is a perception that, since some of the Madhesh movement leaders were able to join the government after signing the political agreement, this has set a precedent that other armed groups aim to follow as a route to obtaining similar access to political power, further fuelling the proliferation of new smaller armed groups. Reference is also made to the legacy of the Maoist conflict, as it is seen to have motivated other groups to adopt the same strategies such as abductions, extortions, and the use of children. It was pointed out that, as the Maoists were successful in taking power by armed struggle combined with widespread impunity, other armed groups are now attracted to the same tactics.

The absence of State institutions in the *terai*, especially outside urban centres, is a major obstacle to preventing the activities of armed groups. So is the lack of coordination between political parties, communities, civil society organizations, security forces, and government officials, which results in a mutual blame game and an erosion of trust, as well as the lack of an effective security system. There is a widespread lack of trust in the security forces, and the perception is that criminals enjoy impunity. Owing to the absence of elected local bodies, people lack a channel for putting forward their needs/demands and seeking solutions. In many places, the government service centres in villages were removed during the conflict and have yet to be re-established. The lack of services and access to government institutions has created a vacuum, leaving fertile ground for armed criminal gangs to operate.

There is a perception among the population that children are becoming increasingly involved in political, conflict-related, and criminal activities. Children are misused by both political parties and armed groups. Although political parties are usually considered to belong in a different league from armed groups, the distinction is not always clear. Most armed groups appear to conduct both political and criminal activities; however, it was acknowledged that the ‘criminalization’ of the conflict does not preclude the fact that there are important social causes behind it. It was emphasized that many members of armed groups are from a poor background and/or a lower caste. Some respondents claimed that activities by the armed groups target both the Madhesi and Pahadi, and do not appear to be ethnically motivated.

It is impossible to say exactly how many children are involved with armed groups, but it appears that the number is substantial; many respondents cited that between 10–20 children per VDC were involved with armed groups, which would add up to thousands of children. It was reported that the living conditions of these children are often very bad. They can be cut off from their families, live in constant insecurity, suffer from physical and psychosocial

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<sup>5</sup> The term ‘armed group’ is used to denote all groups that are involved in violent activities, which includes both acts of political violence as well as criminal activities.

health issues, and do not receive adequate nutrition. It was recognized that these children do not have control over their own lives, as they live under the control of their leaders.

*Between January and June 2009 the 1612 Task Force documented 14 cases ( 2 girls, 12 boys) of recruitment of children by various armed groups in seven terai districts (Banke, Bardiya, Dang, Jhapa, Morang, Rupandehi, Sunsari).*

The main activity carried out by armed groups appears to be abductions or kidnappings, and there seems to be an evolution towards an ‘abduction economy’, producing ‘criminal entrepreneurs’. Even teachers have sometimes been accused of involvement in abduction cases. It is also common for armed groups to contact a third party, such as a journalist to handle negotiations and collection of the ransom. Most abductions are never reported to the police and it is, therefore, difficult to estimate how common they are. Other activities include extortion, looting, and forced closure of schools. This has resulted in a climate of fear, which affects people’s lives in several ways. For example, as a result of the increased feeling of insecurity among the general population, people do not move around as freely as in the past.

*Of the total 254 casualties caused by explosives (intentional and non-intentional) in 2008, casualties in terai districts was 88%, with the remainder occurring in Kathmandu (5%) and other districts (7%). Between January-May 2009, the Mine Action Working Group has recorded 67 casualties resulting from intentional and non-intentional casualties, of which terai districts suffered 78% casualties and Kathmandu 22%. In 2008, 8% of the casualties were children while in 2009 (Jan-May) children accounted for 12% of the casualties.<sup>6</sup>*

#### *Role of children in armed groups*

It appears that children mainly have two roles in armed groups, as messengers for extortion notes and ransom collection, as cross-border smugglers particularly of small arms and drugs and enforcing *bandhs* called by the armed groups. There were fewer reports of children taking part in direct fighting, although some mentioned that children were involved in making bombs. Girls’ involvement in armed groups seems quite limited.

#### *Reasons for joining*

It was reported that representatives of armed groups frequently meet with communities, including children, and try to recruit individuals with promises of a better future, improvement in conditions for deprived communities, good jobs, and more power to dominant ethnic groups.

Poverty is the main reason for children’s engagement with armed groups. Armed groups are perceived to offer economic security and material incentives such as money, mobile phones, and motorbikes (commonly referred to as the ‘3Ms’). Sometimes, parents encourage their children to join up in return for food or money. Children who do not have access to education are more likely to join armed groups compared with children going to school.

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<sup>6</sup> INSEC/UNICEF

*Two 15-year-old boys were approached by an adult to kidnap a 12-year-old from their boarding school. Lured by the promise of receiving NRs 50,000 each, they tricked the boy into a bus and handed him over to the abductors in Lahan. However, when the boys saw the parents of the kidnapped boy at their school, crying and pleading for help, they came forward and confessed the whole story. In retaliation, the parents abducted the father of one of the two boys and demanded the release of their son. The boy was eventually released, but both boys were still in custody at the time of the assessment. Furthermore, their testimony might become a threat to their lives.*

It was pointed out that for some children joining an armed group is a way to increase their sense of power and purpose where they would otherwise feel powerless and marginalized. Hence, association with an armed group makes the child feel more powerful (being a ‘*thulo manche*’ [big man]), and can also work as a protective measure against becoming a victim of abduction or looting.

Other reasons for joining armed groups include threats made against children and their families, the desire for revenge, particularly for children who have lost relatives or friends, or peer pressure from friends or relatives who are involved in armed groups. In a few cases, political motivation such as an end to discrimination and the elimination of poverty were mentioned. Some respondents claimed that children who were previously involved in the Maoist movement are now joining armed groups to earn money.

Children who understand the dangers of associating with armed groups and their movements are far more likely to refuse to become involved with them. However, where children have little or no awareness of the risks posed by such involvement, they do not refuse recruitment/involvement.

#### *Effects on children*

Generally, the tense situation and the ongoing insecurity is said to have contributed to growing psychosocial problems among children as well as disruption of education and lack of freedom of movement, especially for girls, who fear rape and abduction. Ongoing violence and lawlessness, including the sound of explosions and gunshots, witnessing of violence and fear of abduction, have had grave psychological impacts on children, and have resulted in a negative attitude towards education (because of its lack of quality and many disruptions), feelings of revenge, sadness, suspicion of strangers, and acceptance of the culture of violence. The physiological effects on children have manifested themselves through a rise in random violent behaviour among children, directed against each other and against adults such as shopkeepers and teachers. Some respondents also claimed that due to demonstrations and strikes by political parties and armed groups children have become more wary and are afraid to speak openly.

*In a focus group discussion, students described the killing of the principal of their school, where two students had seen the badly mutilated and bleeding body. One of the students said that he cannot bear to be alone or study on his own, as the image of the mutilated body keeps flashing back into his mind. All students expressed difficulties in concentrating on their studies since the incident, as there is a constant sense of fear among teachers and students at the school.*

The fear of abduction also affects school attendance. Many children have been taken to political rallies while on their way to school. Although it appears that girls are less targeted for abductions, owing to the dowry system, there are many reports of the rape of girls by

members of armed groups and also cases where girls have been forced into prostitution. Several respondents stated that the psychosocial impact of the current situation is particularly devastating for women and girls.

There is also a fear of explosions, as armed groups have planted bombs in schools as well as other public places. Furthermore, the continual strikes and *bandha* called by political parties, armed groups and other agitating groups also severely affect children's education.

### **Protection mechanisms**

The community and family are generally seen as the primary sources of protection for children, although it was recognized that the capacity of some families to provide support differs significantly from others. In focus group discussions, parents expressed feelings of insecurity; this affects their ability to support their children. Some parents and members of the community are worried about the worsening child rights situation. Other respondents had little or no knowledge of child rights and child protection. Many did not consider it necessary to consult with their children on issues that affected their children's lives, and those with school-going children did not think it necessary to follow up with the school on their children's progress. Many parents remain unaware about the activities their children might be involved in, including those linked to armed groups. In the case of children formerly associated with armed groups, parents often try to help them reintegrate but community attitudes towards these children can be an obstacle that prevents them from readjusting into society. It was recognized that children mostly share their concerns with their friends, when they are having educational, emotional or family problems.

Another obstacle was the lack of security. Respondents put their views strongly that security is very poor: the government is unable to provide adequate security for the people, and criminal groups operate freely. In addition, armed groups interfere with activities conducted by NGOs.

Poverty was also mentioned as a major obstacle for parents in providing support to their children. Many families lack the economic means to support children and cannot afford adequate food, shelter, clothing, education, and healthcare. Moreover, poor families often have less time to take care of their children—small children are watched over by their siblings, increasing their vulnerability. Traditional value systems and illiteracy are also seen as obstacles that prevent families from offering their children the help and support they need.

Government support is generally seen as weak and lacks a systematized approach for interventions aimed at the protection of child rights. WDOs and DCWBs were the most generally recognized support structures from the State. It is widely perceived that while there is, in principle, agreement on the need for special support to be provided by the State or other groups for children from Dalit, ethnic minorities, internally displaced households, and economically disadvantaged groups, in reality they are not given this support. Apart from some education scholarships, which are available for Dalit children, other forms of social protection are not available to vulnerable children. Some relief packages have been provided to internally displaced households and the families of martyrs; however, the process of identification of eligible claimants was not transparent.

The importance of schools was often emphasized. Educational support is important for children associated with armed groups, especially for girls, and also reduces vulnerability to initial recruitment. Teacher support was identified as one of the most important sources of support, for example, through providing and encouraging child-friendly quality education. Some teachers and community members said that they sometimes ask children if they were

facing any problems and provide informal counselling, if required.

NGOs were often mentioned as an important support structure, although some organizations working at the grassroots lack adequate knowledge and skills to address the issues. However, these local NGOs have the potential to provide useful support services, if they are provided with resources and training. The need for educational support was emphasized. Some organizations support children by providing them with educational materials, and sometimes scholarships are provided to children, although this support is usually on a short-term basis.

Formation of child clubs was identified as a strong mechanism for child participation. Various child clubs have been formed in communities by a number of organizations. These child clubs are actively engaged in conducting a range of activities in the community, such as sensitization programmes on health, education, water and sanitation, organized sport events, after school tuition, etc. They also collect money to help affected children, and conduct programmes to create public awareness, including about the dangers of joining armed groups, through street drama and other methods. While conducting such programme, they receive support from the community and help with organizing the events. These child clubs have a positive effect on the community. In some cases, child clubs and youth clubs have put forward demands at all-party meetings, but it was felt that generally children are not able to raise their voice to protect their rights because they are powerless and lack a platform to do so, despite the existence of child clubs. There is also problem of coordination among existing child clubs.

## CONCLUSION

This report paints a grim and alarming picture of the current situation in the *terai* where the on-going violence and lawlessness creates a climate of fear which affects children's lives in a number of negative ways. The overall lack of services and access to state institutions in the *terai*, in particular outside of the urban centres, has created a vacuum, leaving fertile ground for armed criminal gangs to operate. At the same time, there is a widespread lack of trust in the security forces with a perception that criminals enjoy impunity. All of these factors contribute to creating a climate of fear in the *terai* which manifests itself through the deteriorating physical and psychological well being of many children.

Moreover, in the absence of elected local bodies where people can put forward their needs/demands they increasingly resort to *bandhs* as the only way to air their grievances. These *bandhs* affect society in different negative ways, but of particular importance for children is that schools frequently get closed. Because of the lack of quality and the many disruptions in their schooling, some children have developed negative attitude towards education, in the current situation in the *terai* this is particularly alarming as children who do not attend school are much more likely to join an armed group. Ensuring quality education and keeping schools open are crucial preventive measures against children's involvements with the *terai* groups.

It is clear from this report, as well as from reports from other organisations, that the situation in the *terai* is becoming increasingly volatile. A comprehensive strategy which addresses concerns from different angles is needed and is hoped that this report can feed into the development of such a strategy.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Recommendations for the Government of Nepal

- Establish communication channels and coordination links with other stakeholders working in the field.
- Enhance existing security measures in order to deter criminal activities and build trust within the community.
- Ensure transparency and visibility of existing support structures and programmes (e.g. health and education) as well as among the various security organizations.
- Provide children and youth with skills-based training and quality education.
- Adopt and implement the draft National Plan of Action for the Integration of Children Affected by Armed Conflict.
- Develop and adopt child- and youth-friendly policies at the district level.
- Ensure that government bodies, such as DCWBs, coordinate the support to children formerly associated with armed groups, including educational scholarships and extra health services as well as vocational training, further education, shelter, psycho-social support and employment opportunities.
- Ensure that children and youth who are detained on security related charges are treated in accordance to international juvenile justice standards and other international human rights standards.
- Develop targeted support for children directly affected by the conflict such as orphans, victims of abduction, and witnesses of violent acts, etc., including psychosocial support.
- Create special programmes for vulnerable children and young people to discourage them from associating with armed groups.
- Provide support for improvement in the quality of public schools to reduce repetition and dropout rates.
- Enhance law enforcement, particularly in remote areas, and work toward ending the culture of impunity, particularly for people who have committed serious crimes including sexual violence.
- Enforce laws against child labour and gender based and sexual violence against children and women.
- Enhance existing security measures in order to deter criminal activities and restore trust within the community.
- Ensure that school are kept open during *bandhs* and not affected by political unrest.
- Reinforce the implementation of a referral mechanism with the objective of informing child protection organizations/agencies, at regional and district level, about the availability of services provided by different agencies in their respective geographical areas and ensure that those children have access to services provided by members' agencies through the referral mechanism.
- Support strengthening of child protection (including social protection) system at district and community level

- Conduct peace activities involving children and young people

**Recommendations for local stakeholders (community leaders, youth clubs, teachers, parents, etc.)**

- Actively engage children (especially girls) in participating in activities within the community.
- Promote inter-generational dialogue to enhance understanding of community issues and conflict-related problems, e.g., the return of children formerly associated with armed groups, the push and pull factors related to joining armed groups, etc.
- Encourage joint efforts to address the conflict across dividing lines in society, instead of solving problems in isolation.
- Contact and work together with government bodies, the media, and civil society organizations.
- Organize regular recreational activities for children and youths.
- Establish child/youth groups to sensitize children and the community on child rights and promote child participation.
- Conduct community sensitization on issues faced by children formerly associated with armed groups to promote and encourage their reintegration.
- Conduct awareness-raising activities for children and parents about the risks of joining armed groups.
- Create an overall protective environment for children conducive to exercising their rights, including better treatment by their families and the community at large.
- Declare children and schools as zones of peace, and strengthen such initiatives.
- Promote inter-generational dialogue to enhance understanding of child protection issues.

**Recommendations for local NGOs and civil society organizations (including child rights advocacy groups)**

- Build the meditation and peace-building capacity of local communities so that they have the tools, confidence and inter-communal trust to prevent and address local-level conflict.
- Assist in improving coordination between support structures, especially in forming and strengthening communication links.
- Hold sensitization programmes on parenting for parents and caregivers, and conduct general awareness-raising programmes on child rights for all relevant community stakeholders to increase awareness and accountability.
- Support safe spaces for children and youths to voice their concerns and issues.
- Create awareness of the special needs of girls associated with armed groups, and provide all necessary support, if they have been abused or are pregnant.
- Work for all conflict-affected children, not just some of them.
- Make use of local capacity during programme implementation, and ensure inclusiveness.

- Support local-level efforts aimed at preventing conflict (child and youth clubs, micro-credit organizations, vocational training, etc.).
- Ensure that programmes target vulnerable VDCs and communities, such as VDCs in the southern border area where children are more vulnerable to recruitment and face other child protection risks.
- Encourage community acceptance of peace-building programmes (resulting in their greater effectiveness) by ensuring that peace promoters belong to the local community.
- Hire local human rights monitors with good access to their community and surrounding villages, as a strategy to increase access to all areas of a district.
- Establish a field presence in affected districts in the *terai* to enable local actors to contact advocacy groups easily and exchange essential information with them.
- Bring community voices together as a way to build trust within the community, and develop a strong, comprehensive, and locally owned advocacy network.
- Support the implementation of referral mechanism and ensure that those children have access to services provided by members' agencies through the referral mechanism.
- Ensure that referral mechanisms also include capacity to support victims of sexual violence.
- Increase coordination with local political parties and bring them together to obtain their commitment to protect children from misuse for political purposes.
- Develop the capacity and strategies of child rights organizations to deal with armed groups, and focus on persuading armed groups not to use children in their activities.
- Work closely with local media to raise awareness within the community on child rights and the adverse effects of conflict on children, especially those actors working in child protection, education, etc.

## **5. Recommendations for CAC WG members**

- Engage with other local stakeholders to enhance local advocacy skills, especially through working with local government and the media.
- Establish conflict-specific programmes for prevention of the use of children in conflict.
- Establish national injury surveillance systems on incidents involving explosions and small arms
- Develop and/or strengthen monitoring and evaluation of children affected by conflict, systematically documenting and reporting child rights violations, and declaring and supporting children as zones of peace.