

Spotlight on the impacts of explosive weapons with wide area effects on children

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Context

Wars are lasting longer. They are increasingly being fought in towns and cities, often using explosive weapons that have wide area effects with profound humanitarian consequences for children.¹ This is of particular concern with 149 million children globally living in high intensity conflict zones.²

Open source reporting has consistently found that when explosive weapons are used in populated areas, over 90 percent of the casualties are civilian – an estimated half of them children.³ Such destruction also brings critical services like health, education and welfare systems to their knees, as seen in places like Syria and Yemen, with grave impacts on development for years to come.

With children in conflicts more at risk of harm today than at any time in the last 20 years,⁴ the process to create a Political Declaration is a watershed moment to create an international tool that will better protect children from the devastating impacts of explosive weapons.

Particular vulnerabilities of children

As a humanitarian organisation working on the front lines of conflict, we know that children are particularly vulnerable to the effects of explosive weapons.⁵

Direct physical effects

Children's bodies are thrown harder and further by the blasts. Their bones bend more, increasing the chances of long-term deformities with little chance of recovery. Most children affected by blasts experience multiple injuries and are more likely to experience injuries to the head and upper body. Some injuries, such as burns, also affect a much larger proportion of the body than in adults. We know that children have less blood to lose.

Unexploded ordnance from explosive weapons are particularly dangerous for children who are susceptible to picking them up thinking they are toys. The result is commonly loss of the hands, facial injuries, blindness and deafness.⁶

In 2019, the Paediatric Blast Injury Partnership, a coalition of doctors and experts founded by Save the Children and Imperial College London, launched the world's first guide for treating children severely injured by explosive weapons.⁷ This manual, and the specialist guidance it provides, is testament to the unique considerations that have to be taken account of when mitigating the impacts of explosive weapons on children.

Impacts on mental health and psychosocial wellbeing

Explosive weapons also have an impact on children's mental health and psychosocial wellbeing. Children may feel grief because of physical changes resulting from the blast, anger, self-blame, shame, disbelief or anxiety. Common stress reactions that children display depend on the age of the child, but may include separation anxiety; having difficulties

¹ Save the Children, *Stop the War on Children* (2019)

https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/14409/pdf/report_stop_the_war_on_children.pdf

² Save the Children, *Stop the War on Children: Gender Matters* (2020)

<https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/16784/pdf/ch1413553.pdf>

³ Action on Armed Violence <https://aoav.org.uk/2020/explosive-violence-in-2019/>

⁴ Save the Children, *Stop the War on Children: Gender Matters* (2020)

<https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/16784/pdf/ch1413553.pdf>

⁵ Save the Children, *Blast Injuries* (2019) https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/15209/pdf/ch1325872_2_0.pdf

⁶ Watts, HG *The consequences for children of explosive remnants of war: Land mines, unexploded ordnance, improvised explosive devices, and cluster bombs* (2009) <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/21791815>

⁷ <https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/news/media-centre/press-releases/save-the-children-announces-new-paediatric-blast-injury-field-manual>

with sleep and eating; becoming withdrawn, unable to concentrate; having intrusive thoughts and nightmares; struggling to form social connections; and becoming irritable and aggressive.

We know just how resilient children can be, but we cannot expect them to recover without sustained and specialist support. Left untreated, we know that the long-term effects of blast injuries – both physical and psychological – will leave children facing a lifetime of suffering, and a whole generation lost and at risk of exclusion.

Indirect effects

The use of explosive weapons with wide area effects can also block life-saving humanitarian aid, cause mass displacement and increase barriers for accessing education, housing, healthcare and livelihoods due to such displacement as well as through the damage of vital infrastructure. These barriers create significant protection risks for children, leaving them vulnerable to harm, including exploitation and abuse. Being out of school, for example, increases risks for children generally, as well as gendered impacts, with girls particularly at risk of child marriage and boys more likely to be recruited and used by armed forces and armed groups.⁸

What is crucial for an effective text?

In order to truly protect children in conflict from the impacts of explosive weapons we need to see the adoption of a final text which calls for:

- A commitment from governments and armed actors to **avoid the use of explosive weapons in populated areas** due to the indiscriminate effects they create.
- **Clear descriptions** of the human suffering and humanitarian impacts from the use of explosive weapons, **including a recognition of the specific vulnerabilities of children.**
- Strong commitments for the **provision of victim assistance, collection of age, sex and disability disaggregated data, the facilitation of rapid and unimpeded passage for principled humanitarian action**, as well as the **strengthening of cooperation** with local stakeholders, civil society experts and humanitarian organisations.

How will it make a difference for children?

Save the Children are committed to working for a world where all children are given safety, justice and the practical help they need to stay safe or recover. This includes from the impacts of explosive weapons.

The development of an international political declaration is a critical tool for setting stronger international norms and standards in protecting children in conflict, serving as a tool to drive forward policies and practice at a national level and building a community of positive practice.

We have seen how the Safe Schools Declaration has provided such a mandate for militaries to make sure schools are safe during conflict. Now endorsed by over 100 states, it provides a framework for action all over the world with states taking concrete steps to better protect teachers, students and school buildings from the impacts of fighting.

In a time where the destruction of critical infrastructure – hospitals, clinics, homes and schools is making children and their families even more vulnerable, this process to create a declaration is a unique and urgent opportunity to further develop and share positive practices that seek to provide greater protections for children impacted by conflict.

⁸ Save the Children, *Stop the War on Children: Gender Matters* (2020)
<https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/16784/pdf/ch1413553.pdf>