

Research Article

Growing Up in the Crossfire: Children, Youth and the Human Cost of Armed Conflict in Africa — Lessons from Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis

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Abstract

Armed conflicts across Africa have consequences for children and young people that extend far beyond immediate death, injury and displacement. They disrupt education, fracture family and community structures, expose children to recruitment, abduction, sexual and gender-based violence, economic exploitation and psychological trauma, and diminish their prospects for social and economic development. This article examines these consequences through the lens of Cameroon's protracted Anglophone crisis, which evolved from peaceful protests in 2016 into an armed confrontation between state security forces and armed separatist groups in the North-West and South-West regions. Adopting a doctrinal legal methodology complemented by socio-legal and contextual analysis, the article evaluates the protection afforded to conflict-affected children under international humanitarian law, international human rights law, international criminal law and the African regional human rights system. Attention is given to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, its Optional Protocol on children in armed conflict, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, the Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocol II, and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. The article argues that the Anglophone crisis exposes a significant protection gap between the extensive normative architecture governing children in armed conflict and its implementation in protracted, fragmented non-international armed conflicts. It introduces the concept of cumulative conflict harm to explain how mutually reinforcing violations progressively erode childhood, agency and future opportunity. It concludes that protecting children requires moving beyond emergency humanitarianism towards accountability, continuity of education, psychosocial recovery, child-sensitive peacebuilding and long-term institutional reconstruction.

Keywords

African Human Rights, Anglophone Crisis, Armed Conflict, Cameroon, Child Protection, Children and Youth, Education, International Humanitarian Law, International Human Rights Law, Youth Peacebuilding

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1. Introduction

1.1. Children at the Centre of Contemporary Armed Conflict

Armed conflict is often framed in terms of territory, sovereignty, military strategy, political power and competing claims to statehood. Yet individuals and communities ultimately bear the consequences. Among those most profoundly affected are children and young people, whose vulnerability stems not only from physical immaturity but also from dependence on functioning families, schools, health systems, communities and public institutions. When conflict destroys or weakens these structures, it undermines the social, developmental and protective ecosystem in which childhood is possible [8]. The effects are particularly severe where violence is prolonged, governance institutions are fragile, humanitarian access is restricted, and displacement is protracted. The contemporary African experience underscores the scale and persistence of this problem. Conflicts in Sudan, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, the Sahel, the Central African Republic, northern Mozambique and Cameroon have exposed children to killing, injury, recruitment, abduction, forced displacement, sexual and gender-based violence, family separation and prolonged disruption of education [32]. These harms are rarely isolated. Instead, they intersect and compound, creating patterns of vulnerability that may persist long after hostilities subside. At the global level, the United Nations verified 38,558 grave violations against children in 2025, affecting 24,174 children. These violations included killing and maiming, recruitment and use, abduction, rape and other forms of sexual violence, attacks on schools and hospitals, and denial of humanitarian access [47].

Yet these figures reveal only part of the human cost. The legal and policy architecture on children and armed conflict understandably prioritises identifiable grave violations because they provide concrete categories for monitoring, reporting and accountability. However, conflict also produces less immediately visible forms of harm. A child who survives an attack but loses five years of education; a displaced adolescent separated from family and community; a girl forced into exploitative work because household income has collapsed; or a young person entering adulthood without qualifications, employment prospects or psychological support may all experience consequences that persist across the life course. This article conceptualises these interconnected consequences as cumulative conflict harm: the progressive and mutually reinforcing erosion of a child's rights, capabilities, developmental opportunities and future life chances through the multiple direct and indirect effects of armed conflict. This framework moves analysis beyond isolated violations towards a more integrated understanding of how conflict reshapes childhood over time. Cameroon's Anglophone crisis provides a particularly compelling case for examining this phenomenon.

1.2. Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis

Cameroon's Anglophone crisis stemmed from longstanding political, constitutional, linguistic and institutional tensions over the position of the country's English-speaking minority within a predominantly Francophone state. These tensions are rooted in Cameroon's colonial history and in the post-independence constitutional arrangements that brought together the former British Southern Cameroons and the former French-administered territory. Over time, sections of the Anglophone population expressed growing concerns about political marginalisation, the centralisation of state power and the gradual erosion of legal and educational institutions associated with the country's bilingual and bijural character. These grievances intensified in 2016, when lawyers and teachers in the North-West and South-West regions organised demonstrations over, among other matters, the perceived encroachment of Francophone legal and educational practices into the common-law judicial system and Anglophone educational structure [1]. The protests were initially peaceful and centred on professional and institutional concerns. However, the state's response, including arrests, restrictions and the use of force against demonstrators, contributed to a deterioration in relations between the central government and sections of the Anglophone population. Human Rights Watch records that government forces cracked down on lawyers, teachers and other protesters during this period, further deepening political tensions. By 2017, sections of the Anglophone movement had become increasingly radicalised, with some groups abandoning calls for greater autonomy or federalism in favour of outright independence for the North-West and South-West regions as a separate state commonly referred to as "Ambazonia" [22]. Armed separatist organisations subsequently emerged, while government forces intensified counter-insurgency operations. The crisis consequently evolved into a protracted non-international armed confrontation marked by allegations of serious human rights violations and abuses by both state security forces and non-state armed groups. Children and young people increasingly found themselves caught between these competing centres of political and military power [28].

Education took on particular political significance because the original grievances included concerns about protecting the Anglophone educational system. From 2017, separatist groups imposed school boycotts as part of their resistance to the central government and, in many areas, enforced them through intimidation and violence. Students and teachers were threatened, beaten, abducted or killed; school buildings were burned, damaged or looted; and families were forced to assess whether sending children to school exposed them to unacceptable physical danger [9]. Human Rights Watch documented more than 70 attacks on schools from 2017 and reported that approximately 700,000 students were denied access to education, while at least 268 students and education

professionals were abducted between January 2017 and August 2021. The persistence of these disruptions shows that the conflict's educational consequences are no longer temporary [20]. In May 2025, UNICEF reported that more than 80 per cent of schools in Bafut were closed and that 41 per cent of schools across the North-West and South-West regions were non-operational in 2024. It also recorded 43 attacks on education in 2024 alone. These developments illustrate how a conflict approaching a decade in duration can transform educational interruption into structural deprivation [46]. The Anglophone crisis therefore provides an important case study of how political grievances, militarisation and prolonged insecurity can progressively erode children's rights to education, protection, development and a secure transition into adulthood.

1.3. Research Questions

Against this background, the article addresses four interconnected questions.

First, how has the Anglophone crisis affected children and young people physically, educationally, psychologically, socially and economically?

Second, to what extent do international humanitarian law, international human rights law, international criminal law and African regional human rights law provide an adequate normative framework for protecting children affected by such conflicts?

Third, why does a substantial implementation gap persist despite the density of applicable legal norms?

Fourth, what lessons can Cameroon offer for the protection of children and young people in protracted conflicts elsewhere in Africa?

The central contention is that the Anglophone crisis shows that the human cost of conflict cannot be adequately measured by casualty statistics or isolated violations alone. Conflict produces interconnected harms that accumulate throughout childhood and may persist into adulthood. Effective protection therefore requires a legal and policy framework that addresses both immediate violations and their cumulative developmental consequences.

2. Methodology and Analytical Framework

2.1. Doctrinal Legal Methodology

This study primarily employs a doctrinal legal methodology. It identifies, interprets and evaluates the international and regional legal rules governing the protection of children affected by armed conflict, and considers their application to the circumstances arising from Cameroon's Anglophone crisis [29]. The primary legal materials examined include the four Geneva Conventions of 1949, Additional Protocol II of 1977, the Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 (CRC), the Optional

Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict 2000 (OPAC), the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court 1998, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights 1981, and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child 1990 (ACRWC). These instruments are analysed using the principles of treaty interpretation and by examining the interaction among international humanitarian law (IHL), international human rights law (IHRL), international criminal law and African regional human rights law. The article pays particular attention to the relationship between general protections afforded to civilians and the special protections afforded to children.

2.2. Socio-Legal and Contextual Analysis

Doctrinal analysis alone cannot explain how legal norms operate in conflict environments. The article therefore supplements doctrinal analysis with a contextual socio-legal approach, drawing on reports and documentation from United Nations bodies, humanitarian organisations, international human rights organisations, and other credible institutional sources [7]. This method enables an assessment of the relationship between law "on the books" and protection "on the ground". It is particularly appropriate when the central research problem concerns the apparent contradiction between extensive normative protection and persistent violations. The approach does not independently determine individual criminal responsibility for specific incidents. Attribution in fragmented conflicts is often contested, and allegations of specific violations require evidential standards that differ from this article's broader analytical purposes. Where responsibility remains contested, the analysis avoids treating allegations as established judicial facts.

2.3. A Child-Rights-Based Approach

The methodology also employs a child-rights-based framework derived from the four foundational principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC): non-discrimination; the best interests of the child; the rights to life, survival and development; and respect for the views of the child. These principles provide an interpretative framework for assessing the direct and indirect consequences of armed conflict beyond immediate questions of physical protection. This approach rejects the characterisation of children as merely passive victims or beneficiaries of humanitarian assistance. Children are autonomous rights-holders whose legal entitlements remain applicable during armed conflict. States consequently remain the primary duty-bearers under international human rights law and applicable international humanitarian law (IHL). Non-state armed groups are likewise bound by the relevant rules of IHL and may incur responsibility under domestic and international criminal law for conduct amounting to serious violations [44].

The analysis further distinguishes "children", defined under

the CRC and African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child as persons below eighteen years, from the broader and more context-dependent category of “youth”. This distinction matters in protracted conflicts. Children who entered Cameroon’s Anglophone crisis during primary education have subsequently progressed into adolescence or adulthood while continuing to experience displacement, educational deprivation, trauma and socioeconomic insecurity [37]. A child-rights-based methodology therefore facilitates analysis of both immediate violations and the cumulative, life-course consequences through which armed conflict can reshape the transition from childhood to adulthood.

2.4. Limitations

Conflict research faces unavoidable methodological limitations. Reliable, disaggregated data are difficult to obtain; humanitarian access may be restricted; displacement complicates population estimates; violations may be underreported; sexual violence is particularly prone to underreporting; and competing actors may instrumentalise information. Accordingly, quantitative figures are treated as indicators of scale rather than as complete representations of harm [13]. The article’s principal purpose is normative and analytical: to evaluate patterns of harm against applicable legal obligations and to draw wider lessons for child protection in African conflicts.

3. Conceptualising the Human Cost: From Individual Violations to Cumulative Conflict Harm

3.1. Beyond Casualty-Based Understandings of Harm

The most visible human consequences of armed conflict are deaths and physical injuries. Their gravity is indisputable. Yet a child-centred assessment requires a broader conception. For children, an attack on a village may cause physical injury, displacement, family separation, interruption of education, loss of household income, food insecurity and psychological trauma. These consequences are not independent. Each can intensify the others. A child displaced from a rural community may lose access to school. Educational exclusion may increase exposure to exploitative labour, early marriage, criminality or recruitment by armed groups. Poverty may limit access to healthcare. Trauma may undermine educational attainment. Continued insecurity may prevent return. By adulthood, what began as displacement has become a restructuring of the individual’s entire life trajectory [49].

3.2. Cumulative Conflict Harm

This article therefore proposes cumulative conflict harm as an analytical concept. Cumulative conflict harm occurs where

direct and indirect conflict-related deprivations interact over time so that their combined effect upon a child is substantially greater than each violation viewed separately [42]. The concept contains four dimensions.

The first is multiplicity: conflict ordinarily affects several rights simultaneously.

The second is interaction: deprivation of one right increases vulnerability to deprivation of another.

The third is temporality: harm compounds as conflict continues.

The fourth is intergenerational transmission: the consequences may extend into adulthood and affect subsequent families and communities.

This approach complements rather than replaces the UN framework of six grave violations against children. Those violations remain indispensable monitoring categories. The argument advanced here is that legal and policy analysis must also recognise the developmental architecture surrounding those violations.

3.3. Childhood as a Time-Sensitive Legal Interest

Time is particularly significant for children’s rights because childhood is a finite and non-renewable stage of human development. An adult may theoretically resume education, employment or economic activity after temporary displacement, but a child cannot recover childhood itself. Five years of lost primary education cannot simply be restored by reopening a school several years later. Similarly, prolonged malnutrition during critical developmental stages may produce enduring physical and cognitive consequences, while separation from parents or caregivers during the formative years can disrupt emotional security, social development and family relationships even after reunification.

Children’s rights in armed conflict therefore possess a distinctive temporal dimension. Rights to education, health, family life, survival and development are not adequately protected merely because services are eventually restored. Their effective enjoyment frequently depends on protection being provided at the developmental stage when it is required. This temporal dimension reinforces the article’s concept of cumulative conflict harm: prolonged deprivation can progressively transform an initially temporary disruption into enduring disadvantage. In this sense, delayed protection may ultimately amount to denial of protection.

4. The Legal Architecture Protecting Children in Armed Conflict

4.1. International Humanitarian Law

When violence reaches the legal threshold of a non-interna-

tional armed conflict, Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions sets out minimum humanitarian guarantees for persons not taking part in hostilities. Additional Protocol II extends these protections to qualifying non-international armed conflicts. Article 4 requires humane treatment and prohibits murder, cruel treatment, torture, hostage-taking, acts of terrorism, outrages upon personal dignity, rape, slavery and related abuses [35].

Crucially, Article 4(3) provides specific protections for children. Children must receive the care and assistance they require, including education. Family reunification must be facilitated. Children under fifteen must neither be recruited into armed forces or groups nor be allowed to participate in hostilities. Where necessary, measures may be taken to move children from areas of hostilities to safer areas. The principle of distinction provides another fundamental layer of protection. Parties must distinguish between civilians and combatants, and between civilian objects and military objectives. Children who are civilians benefit from these protections. Schools are ordinarily civilian objects and therefore protected from attack unless and for as long as they become military objectives. The principles of proportionality and precautions in attack further constrain military operations where civilians, including children, may be affected [40].

4.2. Convention on the Rights of the Child

International human rights law continues to provide a vital framework during armed conflict. The CRC recognises an integrated framework of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. Particularly relevant to conflict-affected children are the rights to life, survival and development; protection from violence; health; education; protection from economic exploitation; protection from sexual exploitation; protection from abduction and trafficking; and recovery and social reintegration. Article 38 specifically addresses armed conflict and requires States Parties to respect applicable IHL as it relates to children. The CRC is important because it prevents child protection from being confined to the battlefield. A child may survive hostilities while experiencing serious violations of rights to education, health, development and family life. The CRC makes those consequences legally relevant [14].

4.3. Optional Protocol on Children in Armed Conflict

The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict (OPAC) strengthens international protection against the recruitment of children and their participation in hostilities. Particularly significant in fragmented non-international armed conflicts, Article 4 provides that armed groups distinct from state armed forces should not, under any circumstances, recruit or use persons under eighteen in hostilities. States Parties

must take all feasible measures to prevent such recruitment and use, including adopting the legal measures necessary to prohibit and criminalise these practices. This higher protective standard is particularly relevant where non-state armed organisations operate through decentralised, fluid or shifting command structures [48]. In the context of Cameroon's Anglophone crisis, OPAC therefore provides an important normative framework for assessing the recruitment or use of children by separatist armed groups and the state's corresponding preventive obligations [33].

4.4. African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child

The ACRWC is one of the strongest regional legal instruments addressing children affected by conflict. Article 22 requires States Parties to respect and ensure respect for IHL applicable in conflicts affecting children. More significantly, it requires States to take necessary measures to ensure that *no child* takes direct part in hostilities and to refrain from recruiting any child. Because Article 2 defines a child as every human being below eighteen, the African Charter establishes a stronger regional standard than the fifteen-year threshold found in certain IHL and international criminal law provisions [18]. Article 22(3) also requires protection and care for children affected by armed conflict and expressly extends these protections to situations of internal armed conflict, tension and strife. This breadth is particularly important in Africa, where legal debates concerning whether violence has crossed the technical threshold of armed conflict should not be allowed to create child-protection vacuums. The Charter also protects education, health, family life and children affected by displacement. Article 23 extends protection to refugee children and, *mutatis mutandis*, internally displaced children [27].

4.5. International Criminal Law

International criminal law provides an accountability framework for the most serious violations. Under the Rome Statute, intentionally directing attacks against civilians may constitute a war crime in non-international armed conflict. Intentionally attacking buildings dedicated to education may likewise constitute a war crime if those buildings are not military objectives. The Statute also criminalises conscripting or enlisting children under fifteen into armed forces or groups or using them to participate actively in hostilities. Rape, sexual slavery and other qualifying forms of sexual violence may also constitute war crimes and, depending on the context, crimes against humanity [16]. The criminal-law framework is important not merely for punishment. Credible accountability signals that children and schools are not legitimate instruments for pursuing political or military objectives.

5. Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis and the Transformation of Childhood

5.1. From Political Grievance to Armed Conflict

The Anglophone crisis illustrates how unresolved constitutional, linguistic and political grievances can progressively transform the social environment in which children grow, learn and develop. The protests that emerged in 2016 centred largely on concerns raised by lawyers and teachers about preserving Cameroon's common-law tradition and Anglophone educational system [2]. As peaceful protest evolved into armed confrontation, however, institutions originally associated with those grievances became increasingly entangled in the conflict. Schools, teachers and students consequently acquired symbolic and strategic significance within a wider struggle over identity, governance and political authority. This development has produced a profound contradiction. A political struggle partly justified by demands to protect Anglophone legal, cultural and educational identity has simultaneously contributed to the destruction of educational opportunities available to the generation expected to inherit that identity [3]. Prolonged school closures, attacks on educational institutions, displacement and insecurity have therefore transformed a political crisis into a child-rights and developmental crisis. The experience demonstrates how unresolved political grievances can generate cumulative conflict harm that extends considerably beyond the immediate battlefield [26].

5.2. Children Between Competing Centres of Power

Children in conflict environments rarely have meaningful control over the political identities imposed on them. In the Anglophone regions, children may face demands from the state, separatist actors, families, schools and communities. Even ordinary actions, such as attending school, travelling between towns, speaking certain languages or living in certain locations, can acquire political significance. This is the coercive politicisation of childhood [11]. Children become associated with political positions they did not choose. A child attending a government-recognised school should not thereby become a legitimate target of separatist punishment. Equally, residence in a separatist-controlled or contested community cannot justify treating a child as associated with an armed group [41]. The principle of distinction exists precisely to resist such logic.

6. Education Under Attack

6.1. Schools as Battlegrounds

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the Anglophone cri-

sis's impact on children has been the weaponisation of education. Human Rights Watch documented systematic attacks by armed separatists on students, teachers and schools, and reported killings, beatings, abductions, threats, and the destruction and looting of educational infrastructure. Its investigation documented the kidnapping of at least 268 students and education professionals between January 2017 and August 2021 [19]. The October 2020 attack on the Mother Francisca International Bilingual Academy in Kumba demonstrated the extreme consequences. Seven children were killed, and at least thirteen others were injured when gunmen attacked the school. Responsibility for the attack was disputed, underscoring the need for an independent investigation rather than politically predetermined attribution. The importance of such incidents extends beyond their immediate victims [21]. Violence against one school signals danger to thousands of families.

6.2. The Right to Education During Conflict

In humanitarian emergencies, education is sometimes treated as secondary to immediate physical survival. Legally and developmentally, this is inadequate. Education is both a protected right and a protective mechanism. Schools provide knowledge, socialisation, routine, nutrition in some contexts, contact with safeguarding professionals, and an environment in which children can maintain expectations of a future beyond conflict. Additional Protocol II expressly recognises education as part of the special care and aid owed to children during non-international armed conflicts [24]. The ACRWC likewise requires states to progressively realise accessible education, while Article 22 imposes specific conflict-related protections [6].

6.3. Educational Deprivation as Long-Term Harm

The damage caused by school closures is cumulative. A child who misses several weeks may recover. A child who misses several academic years faces a fundamentally different problem. Prolonged exclusion can lead to illiteracy, reduced employment prospects, increased poverty, early entry into insecure labour, exposure to exploitation and diminished political participation. When entire communities experience such exclusion, conflict produces regional inequalities that may become future sources of instability. This creates a vicious cycle: *conflict* → *educational exclusion* → *reduced opportunity* → *socioeconomic marginalisation* → *increased vulnerability* → *renewed instability*. Breaking that cycle must therefore be regarded as part of conflict prevention rather than merely post-conflict social policy [45].

7. Killing, Maiming and the Right to Life

The most irreversible cost of conflict is death. International

humanitarian law prohibits direct attacks on civilians, and international human rights law protects the right to life. Children's particular vulnerability heightens parties' obligations to take feasible precautions to protect them [31]. Yet children in Cameroon have been killed in attacks on schools, during security operations, at checkpoints, and amid wider violence affecting civilian communities. The death of a child has consequences that extend beyond the individual victim. Families experience bereavement; surviving siblings may develop trauma; communities lose confidence in institutions; and repeated incidents normalise violence. The right to life must therefore be understood not merely as a prohibition on arbitrary killing but as part of a broader protective architecture that requires prevention, investigation and accountability [4]. Where credible allegations of unlawful killings arise, effective, independent investigation is essential. Impunity compounds the original violation by signalling that children's lives carry insufficient institutional value.

8. Child Recruitment, Association with Armed Groups and Lost Agency

Children in prolonged conflicts face heightened vulnerability to recruitment and association with armed actors. Recruitment need not always involve dramatic abduction. Poverty, community pressure, ideological persuasion, desire for protection, revenge following the death of relatives, absence of educational opportunities and lack of employment may all influence involvement [10]. This complicates simplistic distinctions between “voluntary” and “forced” recruitment. A fifteen-year-old whose school has closed, whose family has been displaced and whose community is dominated by armed actors cannot meaningfully be analysed through an adult conception of autonomous consent.

The ACRWC is particularly important here because its prohibition extends to the recruitment of any child under eighteen. Children associated with armed groups must be understood within a reintegration framework, rather than a purely punitive one. Even where they have participated in violence, their age, circumstances of recruitment, coercion and developmental status remain legally significant. Successful demobilisation requires education, vocational training, family reunification, psychosocial assistance and community reconciliation [30]. Otherwise, formal separation from an armed group may leave intact the conditions that produced recruitment.

9. Displacement, Family Separation and Economic Vulnerability

9.1. Displacement as a Child-Protection Crisis

Displacement is a principal mechanism by which conflict restructures childhood. Families fleeing violence may move

from rural communities to regional cities, other parts of Cameroon, or neighbouring countries. Human Rights Watch reported more than 638,000 internally displaced people across the Anglophone regions by mid-2023, as part of a broader humanitarian crisis affecting approximately 1.7 million people. For children, displacement may entail the simultaneous loss of home, school, friendships, community protection networks, and economic security [17].

9.2. Family Separation

Armed conflict can separate children from parents and caregivers through death, detention, forced displacement, recruitment, abduction or migration, significantly increasing their vulnerability to exploitation, trafficking, abuse and psychological trauma. The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) recognises the particular vulnerability of displaced children and sets out key obligations for their protection and family reunification. Similarly, Additional Protocol II requires appropriate measures to facilitate the reunion of families temporarily separated by armed conflict. Family unity should therefore be understood as an essential component of child protection, not merely a humanitarian preference. Effective responses require systematic family tracing, safe reunification procedures, appropriate interim care and safeguards to ensure that reunification serves the child's best interests. In protracted conflicts such as Cameroon's Anglophone crisis, prolonged family separation may also intensify cumulative conflict-related harm by undermining emotional security, social development and children's access to education and essential services [39].

9.3. Poverty and Exploitation

Displacement frequently destroys household livelihoods. Children may consequently enter informal employment, domestic work, street trading or other exploitative work environments. Girls may face heightened exposure to sexual exploitation, transactional relationships and early marriage. Conflict therefore transforms security vulnerability into economic vulnerability. This again demonstrates why rights cannot be compartmentalised. The right to education cannot be effectively protected without addressing household poverty; protection against exploitation cannot be realised where displaced families lack viable income; and physical security cannot be separated from socioeconomic survival [38].

10. Sexual and Gender-Based Violence and Psychological Trauma

Sexual violence is among the most serious and frequently underreported harms of armed conflict. Girls face risks, although boys may also experience sexual violence and encounter substantial barriers to disclosure. The prohibition of rape

and other forms of sexual violence is firmly established in international humanitarian law [50]. Additional Protocol II expressly prohibits rape, enforced prostitution and indecent assault. The Rome Statute further recognises qualifying sexual violence as war crimes and, where the contextual elements are established, as potentially crimes against humanity. The consequences for children may include physical injury, sexually transmitted infections, pregnancy, stigma, exclusion from education, family rejection and severe psychological trauma [15]. Effective responses must therefore be survivor-centred and confidential. Accountability is necessary, but access to healthcare, reproductive services, psychosocial support, education and community reintegration is equally important. Gender-sensitive protection also requires recognising that conflict redistributes household responsibilities. Girls may leave school to care for siblings or relatives, while boys may face heightened expectations to provide economically or to participate in armed activities. Not all conflict injuries are visible. Children who witness killings, experience attacks, lose relatives, flee their homes, or live in persistent fear may develop anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, grief, difficulty concentrating, and other signs of psychological distress. Human Rights Watch's research on attacks on education in Cameroon documented trauma among students and teachers and highlighted limited psychosocial support. The psychological consequences of conflict are legally relevant to children's rights to health, development, and recovery. Yet humanitarian responses frequently prioritise measurable material needs: shelter, food, medicine, and physical reconstruction. These are indispensable, but rebuilding a school without addressing the trauma of children afraid to enter it does not meaningfully restore education. Mental health and psychosocial support should therefore be integrated into education, healthcare, humanitarian relief, and post-conflict reconstruction [43].

11. Accountability and the Protection Gap

11.1. Strong Norms, Weak Implementation

Cameroon's central child-protection paradox is straightforward: children benefit from extensive safeguards under international humanitarian law, international human rights law and African regional human rights law, yet serious violations and abuses persist. The principal problem is therefore not a lack of legal norms but an implementation deficit between formal obligations and protection in practice. This gap is sustained by weak accountability mechanisms, restricted humanitarian access, fragmented and decentralised armed groups, inadequate domestic enforcement, limited monitoring and investigative capacity, and insufficient political commitment to accounta-

bility. Protracted asymmetric conflict further complicates civilian protection and responsibility attribution. Consequently, even a comparatively comprehensive normative framework may have limited protective effect where violations are insufficiently investigated, perpetrators are not held accountable, and affected children lack effective remedies. The Cameroon experience therefore demonstrates that legal protection ultimately depends on credible implementation, enforcement and institutional accountability [12].

11.2. Responsibility of the State

States bear the primary responsibility for protecting persons within their jurisdiction, including children affected by armed conflict. The presence of an insurgency or counter-insurgency operation does not suspend applicable obligations under international humanitarian law and international human rights law. State security forces must comply with the principles of distinction, proportionality and precautions in attack, and ensure lawful detention, humane treatment and special protection for children. The state also bears positive obligations to take reasonable measures to prevent foreseeable violations and to protect access to essential services, including education and healthcare. Credible allegations of unlawful killings, torture, arbitrary detention, sexual violence or other abuses by state agents require prompt, independent, impartial and effective investigation. Failure to investigate, and where appropriate, to prosecute perpetrators not only denies victims access to justice and effective remedies but may also reinforce perceptions of impunity, undermine institutional legitimacy and public confidence, deepen community grievances and contribute to further radicalisation and cycles of violence [23].

11.3. Responsibility of Non-State Armed Groups

Non-state armed groups are also bound by applicable rules of international humanitarian law, particularly in non-international armed conflicts. Political grievances, claims to self-determination, or opposition to actual or perceived state misconduct cannot legally justify violence against civilians or other persons protected by IHL. This principle is especially significant in attacks on education. Claims that schools are instruments of political assimilation cannot transform children, teachers, or civilian educational institutions into legitimate military targets. Accordingly, deliberate attacks on civilians, kidnapping, hostage-taking, cruel treatment, and the recruitment or use of children remain prohibited irrespective of the political or ideological objectives asserted by perpetrators [36]. Armed groups must also respect the civilian character of schools and facilitate humanitarian protection. Violations by one party cannot legally excuse reciprocal violations by another, since IHL obligations apply independently of the perceived legitimacy of the underlying cause.

11.4. Accountability Beyond Criminal Prosecution

Accountability should not be confined to criminal investigation and prosecution, important though these mechanisms remain. A comprehensive approach should also encompass truth-seeking, acknowledgement of victims, reparations, rehabilitation, institutional reform and guarantees of non-repetition. For conflict-affected children, effective remedies must reflect the distinctive developmental and long-term consequences of violations. Reparative measures may therefore include accelerated education programmes, scholarships, psychosocial and mental health support, family tracing and reunification, vocational training and the reconstruction of damaged schools. Such measures can constitute forms of transformative reparation by addressing not only the original violation but also the structural disadvantages it produces. Child-sensitive accountability should consequently seek to restore dignity, rebuild opportunities and prevent conflict-related harm from determining a child's future life trajectory [25].

12. Youth: From Victims of Conflict to Agents of Peace

A child-centred analysis should avoid portraying young people solely as victims. Young people possess agency and can contribute meaningfully to peacebuilding, community resilience and reconstruction. This is particularly important in prolonged conflicts. A generation raised during conflict may have unique knowledge of its consequences. Excluding that generation from peace processes risks producing settlements negotiated about young people rather than with them. Youth participation should therefore occur at local, regional and national levels. Peace processes should incorporate youth representatives, including young women, displaced youth, conflict-affected students and young people with disabilities. Participation must, however, be meaningful, not ceremonial. Youth representatives need genuine opportunities to influence policy priorities, particularly in education, employment, justice, reconciliation and reconstruction [34].

13. Cameroon as a Lesson for Africa

13.1. Early Political Failure Becomes a Child-Protection Crisis

The first lesson is preventive. The Anglophone crisis shows how unresolved grievances can escalate into violence, with consequences that extend far beyond the original political dispute. Preventing armed conflict is therefore one of the most effective forms of child protection. Governments should treat persistent claims of linguistic, constitutional, regional or political exclusion as potential human-security issues, not

merely security threats.

The second lesson concerns education. When parties turn schools into political instruments, children pay the price. African states should strengthen the implementation of the Safe Schools Declaration and protect the civilian character of educational institutions. Cameroon endorsed the Declaration in 2018, yet attacks on education continued. Commitment must therefore move from endorsement to implementation.

Third, child protection should not depend excessively upon debates over the formal classification of violence. The ACRWC offers an especially useful African model because Article 22 expressly extends protection to internal armed conflicts, tension and strife. This creates a normative bridge across situations where technical IHL thresholds might otherwise create uncertainty.

Fourth, conflicts involving multiple decentralised armed groups cannot be addressed exclusively through national-level agreements. Local commanders, traditional authorities, religious leaders, women's organisations, youth groups and community protection structures may all be necessary to negotiate school access, humanitarian corridors, releases of abducted persons and local ceasefires.

13.2. Peace Without Children Is Incomplete Peace

Peace agreements that end hostilities but fail to restore the rights, opportunities and developmental prospects of conflict-affected children remain fundamentally incomplete. Sustainable peace must therefore extend beyond ceasefires and political settlements to address the cumulative consequences of conflict for children. Post-conflict reconstruction should prioritise safe, accessible education, healthcare, civil documentation, family reunification, psychosocial and mental health support, youth employment, rehabilitation and access to justice. Children and young people should also participate meaningfully in peacebuilding and reconstruction processes that directly affect their futures. Without such measures, formal peace may coexist with educational exclusion, trauma, poverty and social marginalisation [5]. A generation carrying the unresolved consequences of war may consequently inherit peace institutionally while continuing to experience conflict developmentally, undermining reconciliation and increasing the risk of future instability.

14. Rethinking Protection: A Child-Centred Framework for Protracted African Conflicts

The evidence considered in this article supports a five-pillar framework.

First, prevention. States and regional organisations should integrate child-impact assessments into conflict early-warning

mechanisms. Risks to schools, displacement patterns, recruitment and attacks on civilian communities should serve as indicators that require preventive intervention.

Second, continuity. Uphold children's core rights during conflict. Alternative education, mobile schools, community learning spaces, remote learning where technologically feasible, and accelerated learning programmes should prevent temporary disruption from becoming permanent exclusion.

Third, protection. Parties must comply with IHL and human rights obligations. Schools should remain civilian spaces. Child recruitment, sexual violence, abduction and attacks on civilians require systematic monitoring.

Fourth, accountability. Domestic institutions, regional mechanisms, and international partners should strengthen evidence preservation, investigation, and prosecution. Accountability processes must be independent and consistent, regardless of the identity of alleged perpetrators.

Fifth, recovery and participation. Post-conflict policies should recognise children and young people as participants in reconstruction. Psychosocial recovery, education, vocational training, reparations, and meaningful youth participation must be integral to sustainable peacebuilding.

These pillars reflect a broader proposition: child protection is not a peripheral humanitarian activity. It is integral to the legal and institutional architecture of sustainable peace.

15. Key Contribution to Knowledge

This article makes four principal contributions to the literature on children, armed conflict and African human rights law.

First, it introduces the concept of *cumulative conflict harm*. Existing legal frameworks often categorise harm: killing, recruitment, abduction, sexual violence, attacks on schools and denial of humanitarian assistance. These categories are indispensable for monitoring and accountability, but they can obscure how violations interact over time. The cumulative-conflict-harm framework shows that educational exclusion, displacement, poverty, trauma, family separation and exposure to violence operate relationally rather than independently.

Second, the article identifies the temporal dimension of children's rights in conflict. Childhood is non-renewable. Legal remedies that arrive years after a child has lost critical developmental opportunities cannot fully restore the status quo ante. This creates a heightened obligation to adopt preventive and prompt protective measures.

Third, the article demonstrates the distinctive normative value of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child in conflict settings. Applying Article 22 to internal armed conflict, tension and strife, together with the Charter's definition of childhood and its prohibition on child participation and recruitment, provides an African normative framework that can exceed minimum international standards in significant respects.

Fourth, the Cameroon case demonstrates the need to recon-

ceptualise educational continuity as a peace-and-security obligation rather than merely a social policy objective. Prolonged educational exclusion can reproduce marginalisation, poverty and vulnerability to recruitment, thereby contributing to the conditions that make conflict self-perpetuating.

Taken together, these contributions shift analysis from a model focused primarily on protecting children from individual violations to one concerned with protecting the continuity of childhood itself.

16. Recommendations

The Government of Cameroon should strengthen independent investigations into alleged violations against children by all actors; ensure that security operations comply with IHL and human rights law; prioritise safe access to education; strengthen birth registration and documentation for displaced children; expand psychosocial services; support family tracing and reunification; and ensure that conflict-affected children have access to remedies and appropriate forms of reparation.

Armed separatist groups should immediately cease attacks and threats against students, teachers and schools; end kidnappings and hostage-taking; prohibit the recruitment and use of children; end any military use of educational facilities; facilitate humanitarian access; and issue enforceable instructions to members requiring compliance with IHL.

The African Union and African human rights institutions should strengthen monitoring of Article 22 of the ACRWC, treat attacks on education as an early warning indicator, support accountability mechanisms, and promote child-sensitive mediation.

International partners should ensure that humanitarian funding includes multi-year support for education in emergencies and for mental health services, rather than concentrating exclusively on short-term relief.

Finally, peace initiatives concerning Cameroon should institutionalise young people's participation. The generation most profoundly affected by the conflict should have a meaningful role in shaping the peace that follows.

17. Conclusion

Children do not start wars, but they often inherit their deepest consequences. Cameroon's Anglophone crisis illustrates this reality with disturbing clarity. What began as a political and institutional dispute over law, education, language and governance evolved into an armed conflict in which children have been killed, injured, displaced, abducted, traumatised and deprived of education. Schools that should represent possibility became sites of fear. Families were displaced. Communities fractured. Children who entered the crisis at primary-school age have grown towards adulthood in its shadow. International law is not silent. International humanitarian law protects civilians and provides special guarantees for children.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child protects life, development, health, education and recovery. OPAC strengthens the prohibition on child recruitment. The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child provides particularly robust protection in armed conflict, including internal conflict, tension and strife. International criminal law establishes individual responsibility for some of the gravest violations. The fundamental difficulty is therefore less a normative vacuum than a failure to translate law into lived protection.

The concept of cumulative conflict harm, developed in this article, helps illuminate what conventional measures can overlook. A child may survive a bullet yet lose an education. A child may escape recruitment yet spend years displaced. A school may eventually reopen, while traumatised students remain afraid to attend. A ceasefire may silence weapons, yet an entire generation continues to experience the developmental consequences of conflict. For this reason, the human cost of armed conflict must be measured not only by lives lost but also by interrupted childhoods and diminished futures. Cameroon also offers a wider warning to Africa. Political grievances left unaddressed through credible institutions can mutate into conflicts whose greatest burden falls on those who played no role in creating them. Protecting children therefore requires more than humanitarian assistance after violence begins. It requires responsive governance, prevention, accountability, functioning institutions and political systems capable of resolving grievances without turning communities into battlefields. Equally, children and youth must not be imagined solely through vulnerability. Young people can shape reconciliation, rebuild communities, and challenge the political cultures that produced violence. Their participation is indispensable to sustainable peace. The ultimate measure of a society emerging from conflict is consequently not simply whether armed actors stop fighting. It is whether children can return to school without fear; whether displaced families can rebuild their lives; whether survivors can obtain justice and psychological support; whether young people can imagine meaningful futures; and whether institutions can guarantee that another generation will not endure the same experience. Protecting children in armed conflict is not an act of charity. It is a legal obligation. Restoring their futures is not merely post-conflict reconstruction. It is peacebuilding. Ensuring that Africa's children no longer grow up in the crossfire must be understood as one of the continent's most urgent human rights, governance, and development imperatives.

Abbreviations

CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989
OPAC	Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989
ACHPR	African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights 1981
ACRWC	African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child 1990

IHL	International Humanitarian Law
IHRL	International Human Rights Law
UN	United Nations

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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