

The Boundaries of the Future: Child Protection as a Promise of Peace for the Democratic Republic of the Congo

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Abstract: Child protection is a well-known imperative of multidimensional United Nations (UN) peace operations, especially its stabilization operations. However, as illustrated by the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), protection is guided by a political imaginary that places children affected by conflict in a place and time devoid of political agency: childhood. Resisting the universalizing and seemingly incontestable nature of this space-time, this study is guided by the following question: How do child protection mechanisms in the context of MONUSCO simultaneously reproduce and inform a universalizing conception of childhood and of the child as passive and irrational? Our central argument is that a number of pillars form the basis of the ways child protection mechanisms reflect and inform this conception of childhood: reintegration into the family, promotion of physical health, the assurance of education, and the assurance of leisure. However, this last pillar was found to be absent from MONUSCO documents. Consequently, leisure becomes dependent on the mission fulfilling its security objectives and peace becomes no more than a promise that is repeatedly made and deferred by the UN to Congolese children and to the DRC.

Keywords: peace operations; protection; childhood; MONUSCO; child; stabilization; leisure.

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Introduction

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), a song called *Plus jamais de Kadogo* was released in 2014 as part of the country's efforts to prevent the military recruitment of children. The song was written and performed by Werrason, a Congolese singer and producer with an excellent reputation in the country, and was produced with the support of the DRC government in partnership with the United Nations (UN), through the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO). Throughout the song, Werrason (2014) presents himself as an 'ambassador for peace,' and in the lyrics he appeals not only on his own behalf but also on behalf of Congolese society for an end to *kadogos* – a Swahili word for so-called child soldiers¹. While the lyrics make a plea against the military recruitment of children in the DRC, the video portrays a narrative showing a mother's distress at having her children abducted by an armed group.

In the video, following the death of one of the abducted boys in armed conflict², Werrason (2014) declaims a 20-second speech addressed to the 'warlord,' asking him to stop taking children away from their families and communities, since they are necessary for everyone. This need resides in the joy and innocence of childhood, which in turn serves as a reminder to all Congolese that peace is the only possible solution. At the end of the monologue, therefore, Werrason (2014) stresses that children are essential for building a 'peaceful, strong, energetic, and electric' Congo.

Werrason's voice is accompanied by backing singers, who can be understood as representing the population against child military recruitment. In the first scenes of the video, one of the boys abducted by the paramilitary group appears on an armoured vehicle holding a gun. His expression reveals his sadness, helplessness, and concern – an expression that is mirrored in that of the other boys, who are all sitting in silence. As we watch this scene, the voices of the backing singers, who are wearing brightly coloured clothing and performing high-energy dance moves, echo phrases like 'children should be in school' and 'he could become a deputy, a senator, or even a teacher' (Werrason 2014, our translation). The contrast between the khaki worn by the paramilitaries and the colourful prints of the dancers illustrates ambiguities and tensions over the reality experienced by the *kadogos*, which defies certain expectations about childhood in the DRC and worldwide.

The above-described scenes give an idea of just how many dividing lines there are that at once produce and are produced by a particular set of ideas and values about what constitutes an imagined ideal childhood, forming the kernel of the protest in the form of music. The child, endowed with innocence, immaturity, and joy, is galvanized in the music video as a symbol of peace, representing a future that is an improvement on the present. As Werrason (2014) puts it, Congolese society needs its children to have any hope for a country that is peaceful and strong in the future. When these children are weaponized in a setting of armed conflict, they are removed from the imagined childhood and its spaces, such as the nuclear family and school, and the promise of a better future is put in jeopardy.

Nonetheless, what particularly attracts our attention in this music video is the understanding that childhood is a space-time that must meet certain expectations to achieve the promise of peace. A child who is put in danger and thus distanced from these expectations represents a threat not just to the stability of the DRC, but to the international order (Tabak 2020). From this perspective, as well as being conceived exclusively as a time of potential future transformations, rather than one endowed with desires and demands *in the present time*, childhood is also seen as a space susceptible to intervention.

In this context, this article builds on established criticisms of the universalizing conception of childhood as one that precludes children's agency by positioning them as passive, vulnerable beings whose needs are dictated by third parties (Beier 2020; Berents 2020a; Beier and Tabak 2021; Beier and Berents 2023). From this starting point, we then offer a reflection on the place of children and the role of childhood in the international order by questioning the specific ways in which imagined childhood informs and is reproduced by the MONUSCO child protection mechanisms and by considering the implications of this in a context in which both the DRC and Congolese children are framed as international emergencies. Furthermore, in synergy with this reflection, we investigate the dearth of investments in 'leisure' activities in MONUSCO's child protection efforts, even though this is one of the pillars of the modern imaginary of childhood. This omission suggests that play is something that can only be contemplated in a post-conflict scenario. Specifically, the focus here on this issue stems from our understanding that 'leisure' is related to a conception of peace that is always held out as a promise, with the effective delivery of leisure always being deferred until more urgent objectives are fulfilled, like promoting order and stability.

The following question forms the core of this article: How do child protection mechanisms, in the context of MONUSCO, reproduce and at the same time inform a universalizing conception of childhood and of children as passive and irrational? We argue that protection mechanisms reflect and inform this conception of childhood based on some core pillars – reintegration into the family, the promotion of physical health, and the assurance of education – which jointly delimit the boundaries of this modern space-time. When these elements are in place, safe and peaceful childhood of the kind that symbolizes the promise of peace will set is, as exemplified in the music video *Plus jamais de Kadogo*. Although the assurance of leisure is also part of this universalizing conception and, therefore, of this promise of peace, our analysis of the documents that provide the basis of what has been labelled the international child protection regime (Okyere 2022), as well as the main documents that orient the activities of MONUSCO, indicates that the emergency nature of the peace operation means the space of leisure is always one step behind, dependent on the achievement of the mission's security goals, rather than integral to the envisaged peace. Further, we understand that this deferral of leisure – to be addressed as a post-conflict commitment – constantly remakes and renews the promise of peace, intended both for children and for the DRC. And, in turn, this same deferral becomes a justification for investments in international control (protection) actions in contexts of *emergency*.

This article is divided into three sections, in addition to the Introduction. The first section presents an overview of the main documents constituting the aforementioned international child protection regime, identifying and exploring the pillars upon which the established conception of childhood is built. This involves a brief systematization in the form of a table showing how the pillars are articulated in the different documents. The second section provides a contextualization of MONUSCO, including an appraisal of the documents that specify its remit and rules of engagement to identify how the structuring pillars of childhood are reflected in and guide the mission's child protection efforts. The operation conducted in the DRC is chosen as a case study not only because the UN peacekeeping operation has one of the largest child protection components, but above all because its stabilization mandate and its inherently militarized nature generate peculiarities and contradictions vis-a-vis the ideal of childhood identified here. Finally, the third section analyses the absence of any mention of the assurance of leisure in the MONUSCO documents and relates this omission not only to its dependence on the fulfilment of MONUSCO's security objectives, but to the (re)production of a promise of peace – and of a 'peaceful, strong, energetic and electric' Congo – that is never actually materialized, and which is also voiced as an appeal from civil society, as seen in the song by Werrason.

Innocence, immaturity, and irrationality: The pillars of the childhood protection mechanisms in international politics

The idea that childhood is a unique moment in life that deserves special protection plays a significant role in international documents concerning children. Although there is some degree of consensus among societies around the world on the demands of childhood, we draw on Critical Childhood Studies (Boyden 2003; Hockey and James 1993; Higonet 1998) to show how this period should not be taken as a naturally existing category, but as a social construct based on a particular set of values, ideas, and expectations.

Holzscheiter (2010) sketches an overview of what she classifies as 'images of the child,' which are a set of characteristics attributed to the time of childhood in modernity. The recurring images are those of the irrational child, the immanent child, and the innocent child. In the first image, the child is presented as possessing wild impulses and a lack of rationality, which means they must be restrained and guided by adults. In the second, the child is represented by the idea of the 'blank slate': a human being with no knowledge whatsoever who is in a process of development and has the potential to make full use of their reason. Finally, in the third, the child is portrayed as a being naturally endowed with goodness, and childhood is portrayed as a time of vulnerability and innocence, far removed from the political upheavals, war, and strife of the adult world. The characteristics that stand out in these depictions of childhood as a unique stage in a human life are irrationality, development, guardianship, and protection. It therefore follows that children must be innocent and immature and exist in a state of transition during which time they must be socialized and prepared for life as adults (Holzscheiter 2010).

These characteristics recur, to a greater or lesser extent, in the legislation drafted for the purposes of child welfare in the twentieth century, which underwent stages of institutionalization, politicization, and internationalization (Holzscheiter 2010). In this legislation, on account of their ephemeral condition of irrationality and vulnerability, children are seen as innately in need of special protections to ensure their development and well-being. With the establishment of the first normative frameworks, meeting children's needs began to be envisaged as an international duty and endeavour.

To explore the social and political conditions underpinning the development of this conception of childhood, we consider the main documents that constitute the international child protection regime, understood as a structure that encompasses the actors, knowledge, practices, and discourses present in the debates and measures that orient the formulation of children's rights (Okyere 2022). These documents are: the Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1924), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1959), the International Year of the Child (1979), and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Although the UN system has other documents relating to children's rights and protection mechanisms, these five form the basis of the normative framework, given their international scope and the variety of themes they address, in addition to covering specific topics.

The starting point in the production of documents aimed at children comes in 1924 in the form of the Geneva Declaration, which was produced by the international NGO Save the Children and adopted by the League of Nations. Drafted in the wake of the First World War, the declaration focuses on how to protect children from the harmful effects of armed conflict. In its few paragraphs, it frames children as individuals with rights, stressing that humanity should direct its efforts towards ensuring 'the means requisite for its normal development' (UNICEF 1924: 1st paragraph). These means are translated above all into children's physical integrity, represented in the declaration as the fight against the hunger and diseases that children experienced in the postwar period. In addition, the document emphasizes that children should be a top priority at times of suffering and stress, thereby setting childhood apart as a peaceful space-time. In other words, in this first regulatory framework, we can already see efforts directed towards protecting the physical integrity of children, with an emphasis on combating childhood diseases and hunger.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 – also the outcome of discussions in post-war years – is considered a humanitarian milestone. Yet despite its great prominence, it reserves only peripheral space to childhood, linking the rights of the child to the rights of the family, which it classifies as the fundamental group unit of society, entitled to protection by the state (ONU 1948). Classified thus, the family is also considered the group unit of childhood, insofar as subsequent documents make the family jointly responsible, together with the state, for the protection of children. Nonetheless, in practice, when these protection mechanisms fail and a child exhibits behaviours that deviate from those expected of it, responsibility for these falls squarely on the family dynamics (Boyden 2003). That is, children, understood as beings still in development and thus

irrational, are not capable of taking responsibility for their own protection and development. This is why the family and the state are understood to be responsible for them.

In a bid to reaffirm its commitments more directly towards the issue of childhood, the UN produced the Declaration on the Rights of the Child in 1959 in order to raise and consolidate the importance of the dignity of children at an international level. In addition to reinforcing the idea of children as having special protection, the declaration introduces innovations in children's right. As mentioned above, the family is now understood to be fundamental for the development of children. For instance, principle 6 of the Declaration on the Rights of the Child highlights the need for love to develop the child's personality, with the nuclear family being depicted as an environment of affection and security, both materially and morally (UNICEF 1959). Thus, in addition to the normative frameworks categorizing the family as a fundamental component, love now becomes a right reserved for this stage of life.

Another important pillar introduced in the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child concerns education. Although this topic is addressed briefly in the Geneva Declaration, only in 1959 is it classified as an entitlement of children and an integral part of their development, guiding them to become useful members of society, as stated in principle 7, and therefore symbolizing childhood as a preparatory phase for adult life. From this point on, education appears in other documents, such as the International Labour Organization's Convention Concerning Minimum Age for Admission to Employment (1973) and Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention (1999), to curb and prohibit child labour. School is now a priority for childhood and consequently work should be shunned. In addition to the mandatory provision of time for education, the Declaration on the Rights of the Child also identifies as fundamental for childhood the opportunity to enjoy leisure activities: play and recreation should therefore equally contribute to their development (UNICEF 1959: principle 7).

As children's rights continued to gain prominence in the twentieth century, the International Year of the Child was established, in 1979. This was designed to encourage governments to rethink their public policies in order to ensure healthy childhoods for their young citizens, according to the values outlined in the previous documents. In the declaration that established this special year, children are framed as part of countries' social and economic development insofar as they are their future citizens (UNICEF 1979). Thus, assuring children's rights becomes a prerequisite for guaranteeing the development of countries themselves. Accordingly, the way children are treated thereafter serves as an indicator of a country's level of 'civilization,' as highlighted by Holzscheiter (2010).

Finally, the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child can be considered a symbol of the intended universalization of children's rights, as it is the most ratified treaty in the history of the UN. Despite introducing some innovations in terms of the agenda, such as cultural and religious considerations, in addition to setting the age limit for childhood (up to eighteen years old), the document largely continues in the same vein as all the documents since the Geneva Declaration (UNICEF 1989). Once again, the child is framed as an individual whose immaturity makes them vulnerable and therefore in need of protection to ensure their well-being and development.

In addition to the five documents discussed above, a qualitative analysis of seventeen other documents devoted to the field of childhood collected from the UN system revealed a number of categories or fundamental pillars attributed to the child development process. The protection of the space-time of childhood involves: ensuring the *health* of the child, which is equated with the absence of threats to their physical integrity (UNICEF 1989: Art. 24; UNGA 2002: Art. 7, paragraph 4); ensuring the child receives an *education* based on learning content of a utilitarian nature for their future and a developmental nature for their personality (UNICEF 1989: Art. 29; UNESCO 1990: Art. 6); *promoting leisure* and recreation (UNICEF 1989: Art. 31); and; the existence of a *nuclear family* that provides affection and security for the child (UNICEF 1989: Preamble; ONU 1948: Art. 16). As these elements are framed as structuring pillars of childhood, it follows that the full exercise of a child's rights is intrinsically linked to their complete fulfilment.

The results of this analysis are presented in Table 1, which maps the documents consulted against the categories described above, indicating which categories appear in which texts. The documents are listed in the left-hand column of the grid, and the categories of childhood are listed along the top row, so that when a category is present in a declaration, it is ticked in the square where the row and column intersect. Table 1, therefore, provides a visual representation of how childhood is articulated in these normative frameworks, showing which elements are highlighted and which are not in each text. Equally importantly, the analysis of the documents revealed that 'peace' is always mentioned, not as a structuring pillar but as an ideal. Thus, Table 1 also shows how 'peace' is integrated into the child protection regime within the scope of the UN as a common objective to all the declarations relating to childhood.

Beyond this analysis, it is also worth pointing out that the establishment of these rights not only constitutes but also reproduces a universal notion of children (Tabak 2020, 2024), projecting childhood as a journey isolated from cultural and social dynamics. Thus, the documents draw on certain elements considered fundamental for a universalizing form of development and protection, which may or may not match the expectations and needs of children living in different societies (Boyden 2003). Furthermore, the framing of all children as vulnerable makes them appear passive and incapable of agency. This, then, allows little room for listening, which means demands that fall outside the protection mechanisms in question are essentially silenced (Beier 2018; Beier 2020; Berents 2020a; Tabak and Carvalho 2018).

However, as pointed out by Lee-Koo (2018), at the same time as some children are not given an equal voice, there is a standard depiction of childhood that circulates internationally, especially in international politics and, more specifically, in humanitarian campaigns. Images of children in contexts of suffering are often chosen to portray and denounce specific conflicts, emphasizing how the putatively peaceful space-time of childhood is at risk. These representations of deviations from the norm are then used as indicators of the gravity of the situation in question. They may even prompt specific processes, such as sanctions and interventions, against states that have failed to protect the citizens considered to be the most vulnerable (Berents 2020b).

Table 1

Documents/Categories	Physical Health	Family	Education	Leisure	Peace
Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1924)	✓		✓		✓
Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)	✓	✓	✓		✓
Declaration on the Rights of the Child (1959)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Convention on Consent to Marriage (1963)		✓			✓
ILO Convention No. 138 on the Minimum Age for Admission to Employment (1973)	✓		✓		✓
Declaration on the Protection of Women and Children in Emergency and Armed Conflict (1974)	✓	✓	✓		✓
International Year of the Child (1979)	✓	✓	✓		✓
United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice (1985)	✓	✓	✓		✓
United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
UNESCO World Declaration on Education for All (1990)		✓	✓	✓	✓
ILO Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour (1999)	✓	✓	✓		✓
United Nations Millennium Declaration (2000)	✓	✓	✓		✓
A World fit for Children (2002)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Optional Protocol to the CRC on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (2002)	✓	✓	✓		✓
Declaration of the Commemorative High-level Plenary Meeting (2007)	✓	✓	✓		✓
Millennium Development Goals 2015	✓		✓		✓
Sustainable Development Goals 2030	✓		✓		✓
MONUSCO*	✓	✓	✓		✓

Table caption:

Physical Health: The child's right manifested by the absence of threats to their physical integrity, such as infectious diseases, malnutrition, and mortality, thereby ensuring their development. It is intrinsic to early childhood through the guarantee of basic care (CRC 1989, Art. 24; A World Fit for Children 2002, Art. 7, para. 4).

Education: A process involving the acquisition of knowledge of utilitarian value for the child's future and developmental value regarding personality, national and cultural identity. It takes place in schools, which are regarded as spaces for integrating differences and fostering respect. Education is also a mechanism of personal transformation and of promoting world peace (CRC 1989, Art. 29; World Declaration on Education for All, UNESCO, 1990, Art. 6).

Family: The fundamental unit of society, which in the international regime is recognized as an object of protection. It is the child's first contact with the world, and therefore should be an environment of care, love, and protection, where the child feels safe to develop their personality and sense of responsibility (CRC 1989, Preamble; Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948, Art. 16).

Leisure: An element intrinsic to the child's nature, reserved for recreational, enjoyable, cultural, and artistic activities. It also functions as a space of happiness, personal development, and social interaction (CRC 1989, Art. 31).

Peace: Elimination of direct violence, such as armed conflict, and indirect violence, such as the lasting effects of these events in society (Galtung, 1969). A time when the other categories addressed can be assured, and the ultimate goal of the documents that articulate the promotion of a safe childhood as the promotion of a safe world. (International Year of the Child, 1979, Preamble – paragraph 7) (A World Fit for Children, 2002, Art 9).

***MONUSCO:** United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. For this classification, 18 United Nations security Council resolutions were considered that established and renewed the operation's mandate (2010–2022) along with five specific reports of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Based on these categories that structure the international child protection regime (Okyere 2022), the next section presents an analysis of the (re)production of this universalizing conception of childhood in the efforts carried out by UN peace operations, especially MONUSCO.

MONUSCO and childhood: The place of children in stabilization frameworks

MONUSCO is one of the most multifaceted peace operations in contemporary times regarding its capabilities, functions, and goals. It is a new iteration of the former United Nations Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC), introduced to the country in 1999. According to the most recent data from the UN Peacekeeping³ portal, MONUSCO is the third largest peace operation in terms of personnel, counting on 17 753 civilian workers, police, military, and support officers (UN 2023).

As one of the latest reports by the Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network points out, the population of the DRC has over the past few decades experienced repeated insecurity associated with competition over its vast resource-rich territory, crises in governance structures, corruption, humanitarian crises, and, above all, the continued influence of state and non-state Congolese and regional armed groups (Vermeij et al. 2022). This means that since 2010, when Resolution 1925 was passed (UN 2010a), marking the inception of MONUSCO, one of its primary tasks has been to ensure the protection of civilians, including women and children. However, this goal falls within a framework of action whose primary objective is ‘stabilization’ – a term that lacks an explicit definition by the UN, but which, practically speaking, incorporates a central meaning, namely, a ‘comprehensive approach’ to restoring the central authority of a state. This involves coordinating tasks traditionally carried out in times of ‘peace,’ such as humanitarian action, socioeconomic aid, and infrastructure reconstruction, with tasks associated with times of ‘war,’ such as the robust use of force to neutralize non-state groups hostile to the achievement of the mandate (Oliveira 2020; Curran and Hunt 2020).

Specifically, MONUSCO represents an inflexion point in the debate on stabilization precisely because of the establishment of the MONUSCO Intervention Brigade (FIB), by Resolution 2098 (UN 2013), which continues to this day with an explicit remit to neutralize non-state actors, especially the M23 group (Tull 2017). As Carvalho and Duarte (2022: 122) point out, ‘although MONUSCO’s mandate provides for the consolidation of peace, in practice what is observed is that support for government forces and the actions of the FIB foster military victory for the DRC government.’ The continuum that stabilization sets up between strictly peacebuilding actions and actions that increasingly border on peace enforcement directly contributes to the consolidation of what Russo (2021) has called the stabilization–protection nexus. In this sense, given that the actions of armed groups represent a threat to both objectives, combating these actors with military force becomes an imperative both for the restoration of a government and for the protection of civilians, women and children included (Russo 2021).

This backdrop has caused some normative and practical ambiguities to arise for MONUSCO's child protection sector, especially concerning the activities of child protection advisors: consultants specialized in implementing child protection mandates. Essentially, as Tabak and Araujo (2022) point out, in any peace operation, child protection (much as the universalizing conception of childhood and the child) is articulated precisely at the interface of the human rights and security agendas, where actions such as training mission members on the civil rights of women and children and tasks linked to the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of child soldiers come together. Yet the dilemmas of the militarization of protection are exemplified in the confluence, on the one hand, of the mission's partnership with the established government in combating non-state actors and, on the other hand, of its commitment to protecting children and advocating for the release of child soldiers and the end of their recruitment by the country's own armed forces (UN 2022a; Vermeij et al. 2022).

As recognized in Resolution 2666 (the most recent to date), there continue to be high rates of attacks on schools and hospitals, constant violations of human rights, and frequent occurrences of children joining armed groups (UN 2022a). Based on these points, it can be observed that the violence associated with MONUSCO's activities reveals a contradiction both with the promotion of universalizing values linked to childhood and mainly with the notion of the safe, stable environment envisaged in the normative frameworks as the ideal space for childhood.

According to Rasmussen (2004), there are dichotomies between 'places for children' and 'children's places.' The former are the places adults conceive for children based on their own perceptions of childhood, which they then attribute to children, while the latter are the environments children themselves associate with leisure and play. Rasmussen shows how 'places for children' fall within the 'institutionalized triangle' formed between recreational institutions, the home, and the school, all three of which are strongly reinforced in the legal elements of the international child protection regime (Okyere 2022) as fundamental pillars of childhood. Yet in scenarios of armed conflict, as observed in the DRC, these spaces are damaged and marginalized, prompting the notion that war challenges the existence of a healthy and safe childhood and that child protection efforts are required to restore and rebuild these lost spaces. This, then, suggests that reflections are needed on the extent to which such measures, specifically those that come under the remit of MONUSCO, are guided by and, at the same time, reinforce the four categories that sustain the principal normative frameworks of child protection efforts and their notion of peace as a goal (Table 1).

Throughout this analysis, we considered twenty-three documents, including eighteen Security Council resolutions that extended MONUSCO's mandates over time, and five specific reports of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Of the eighteen resolutions, we prioritized the ones we felt focused more on child protection efforts. All five reports were published by the Secretary-General between 2010 and 2022. The choice of these documents is justified by the fact that they take a comprehensive approach to the issue of childhood in the context of the DRC, allowing a broad understanding of how child protection efforts play out there.

It is worth noting that in 2005 the United Nations Security Council had already defined six serious violations against children in armed conflicts: the murder and mutilation of children; the recruitment and use of children by armed groups; attacks on schools and hospitals; rape and other forms of sexual violence; kidnapping of children; and denial of humanitarian aid (UN 2005; Chikhuwa 2010). Based on our analysis of the structuring elements in Table 1 – physical health, education, family, leisure, and peace as a desired objective – we understand that such violations correspond to an absolute negation of these pre-established categories, clashing directly with the imagined model of universal childhood that the resolutions aim to reinstate. There is, for example, a special note of emergency apparent in the assurance of the ‘physical health’ of children, this being one of the pillars of the international child protection regime (Okyere 2022).

In its preamble, Resolution 1925 (2010) notes concern regarding the humanitarian situation in the DRC, marked by multiple violations of fundamental human rights, including high rates of sexual violence and the recruitment and use of child soldiers. In article 12, it stresses that one of the mission’s initial priorities is to ‘work closely with the Government to ensure the implementation of its commitments to address serious violations against children (...)’, reinforcing its commitment to releasing children present in the armed forces of the DCR and preventing future recruitment (UN 2010). Furthermore, Resolution 2053 (2012), Resolution 2211 (2015), and others can be interpreted as framing the issue of children in the DRC as a security problem at the international level and armed groups as the main propagators of this cycle of violence (UN 2012, 2015). Thus, accompanied by the terms ‘without further delay’ and ‘necessity,’ most of the measures proposed by MONUSCO are based on the understanding that assuring the physical health of children (who are understood as an inherently vulnerable) is urgent and a top priority, which justifies its focus on mitigating violence against children.

From 2019 onwards, new threats to both the physical integrity of children and the effectiveness of protection efforts can be identified: firstly, the Ebola virus and then, from 2020 onwards, COVID-19. Although Ebola is a longstanding problem in the DRC, Resolution 2502 (UN 2019) in particular expresses concern about the outbreak in the region. The mission therefore also undertakes to fight the virus and prevent its proliferation; after all, the 2018 outbreak was the second largest in the country, and 30 percent of the people infected at the time were children (UN 2019; ONU 2019). Likewise, subsequent resolutions take account of the COVID-19 pandemic and focus attention on containing the virus and promoting humanitarian aid (UN 2020a, 2021). Curiously, this pandemic also impacts the progress of MONUSCO’s activities, since it delays trials of leaders of armed groups that recruit minors, as well as the repatriation of foreign children associated with paramilitary contingents (UN 2022a).

Other issues with which the mission concerns itself also reflect idealizations arising from the category ‘family,’ which is articulated as a fundamental building block of society filled with love, affection, and protection, and developing children’s personalities and sense of responsibility. Report 453 (2014) explains that some children voluntarily join armed groups after they ‘lost their families’ (UN 2014), for example which conveys the idea that the absence of this core unit destabilizes them. Thus, the reports of the

Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo report that as children go through the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration process, their families are mapped out so they can return to this once damaged group (UN 2010, 2014, 2018, 2020b, 2022b). In this sense, the reinsertion of the former child soldier into the family environment – a space conceived as loving and protecting – is designed to cast off any remnants of war still present in the child's imaginary so they can once again be associated with the aspirations of 'symbol of peace' and hope for a 'better tomorrow than today,' as (re)produced by the normative documents of the international child protection regime (Burman 1994; Holzscheiter 2010; Okyere 2022).

However, it is interesting to note that the family model presented above, and its aims, are at odds with reality, since the Secretary-General's own reports reveal that the presence of a nuclear family does not prevent children from joining armed groups (UN 2022b). In other words, while the report would have the stakeholders involved in child protection continue to train their efforts on promoting family reunification – the rationale for which is associated with some ideas that are held to be inherent to this process, such as 'affection,' 'safety,' and 'dignity' (UN 2022b) – it also acknowledges that of the 1702 children who voluntarily joined armed groups or the DRC Armed Forces, 587 (34%) were influenced in this decision by their families. Indeed, 105 children were living with their families when they joined the warring groups.

The category of 'education' and its implications also resonate in the scope of MONUSCO's protection efforts, since it is seen as a mechanism for personal transformation and the promotion of world peace. As mentioned above, there have been several attacks on schools and hospitals since the mission began its work, and these institutions were also used for military purposes during the armed conflict, generating concerns in the UN Security Council about how to ensure access to education, recognized as a right for minors, as well as the 'civilian role' of educational entities (UN 2014, 2018). In view of this, the reports indicate that measures were implemented by both MONUSCO and UNICEF to ensure that schools and temporary spaces of learning were rebuilt and renovated so that children could have access to 'quality education' and educational kits. Likewise, they highlight actions designed to give some former child soldiers the opportunity not only to return to school, but also to gain access to vocational training and income-generating activities (UN 2014, 2018, 2020b).

It has been observed that the legal documents from the international child protection regime frame education as a mechanism that enhances children's personal and interpersonal skills, making them 'useful members of society' capable of contributing to the construction of a peaceful future (UNICEF 1979; Holzscheiter 2010; Okyere 2022). Thus, boosting the educational remit of MONUSCO is designed to ensure that children who once perpetrated 'destabilizing' acts turn into stable, resilient citizens who do not incite or inflame war. This is confirmed in Report 745 (2022), which highlights the importance of investing in socioeconomic reintegration programs to prevent child recruitment, which is articulated as an impediment to the construction of 'sustainable development,' itself framed in the report as a long-term solution for peace and stability in the DRC (UN 2022b).

From the foregoing analysis, it is clear that child protection is seen as a central element of MONUSCO's work and can therefore also be analysed as a measure of its success (UN 2019). Despite this, the documents analysed here do not draw an explicit link between children and peacebuilding. Furthermore, the analysis of the MONUSCO reports reveals a glaring omission of the category 'leisure,' even though it is identified in Table 1 as one of the structuring pillars of the international child protection regime (Okyere 2022). A search for words commonly used in UN documents in relation to childhood, such as 'leisure,' 'fun,' and 'play,' did not return any mentions of these or any associated activities. We argue below that as war (and the associated time of emergency) is not regarded as a 'place for children' (Rasmussen 2004), this smothers and/or defers the potential for leisure, even though this is understood as being intrinsic to the promise of peace to be achieved in post-conflict scenarios.

Children and the (a)political: Peace as a promise

The investigation of child protection mechanisms in the documents that guide MONUSCO's mandate revealed that these protection efforts are guided by the endeavour to reinstate the constituent elements of childhood: physical health, education, and family. As discussed above, restoring these elements involves combating the six serious violations of children in armed conflicts, which are understood as an absolute negation of the constituent elements. However, despite the importance attributed to 'leisure' in UN documents, it is absent from the MONUSCO documents, and reinstating it is not framed as a matter of urgency.

According to our analysis of the international child protection regime, the category 'leisure' is a space-time for children to play, where they can enjoy fun and recreational activities (UNICEF 1959: art. 7) and also develop their personality and social skills by interacting with other children. Leisure can therefore be seen as a more autonomous zone for children, given that it allows them the freedom to choose their own games, using their imagination and creativity as a form of expression. It is, therefore, a space where children have greater agency than in the other standard normative frameworks. Yet the omission of leisure indicates that ensuring a space for fun and play is not a top priority for MONUSCO. Although the importance of leisure is highlighted in international documents as an intrinsic pillar of the nature of childhood that combines recreation, development, happiness, and interaction among children (UN 1989: art 31), the potential for agency represented by this category is overlooked in MONUSCO's protection efforts. The absence of 'leisure' in these documents should not be downplayed, since its nonexistence informs the conception of children that is deserving of protection. As mentioned before, the ideal perpetuated in the protection mechanisms frames the child as vulnerable and passive, which, as postulated by Beier (2018), ends up marginalizing their potential for 'being' and 'acting' in the situations they face in their lives. The silencing, in the MONUSCO documents, of the very element that allows children greater expression is therefore one more case of the reproduction of this limited conception of childhood.

Therefore, the lack of security and stability experienced in the DRC are interpreted as factors that prevent leisure from being a priority. In contrast, other categories, such as education, family, and above all physical health, are repeatedly mentioned in the resolutions, making their restoration a matter of urgency. Yet although MONUSCO does not invest in leisure spaces and times for children, as children navigate the tensions and limits of war, they still play. Their play spaces extrapolate those created by adults, with leisure taking place wherever and with whatever the children find pleasure in spending their time and expending their energy on (Rasmussen 2004). Thus, when international protection efforts define which of children's needs and desires should be prioritized, based on their putative vulnerability and passivity, they also neglect certain equally important spaces of listening.

Under the universalizing conception of childhood present in the MONUSCO mission in the DRC, the prioritization of education, family, and physical health, to the detriment of leisure, fosters the idea that the primary objective is to consolidate stability and guarantee order. In other words, instead of efforts being channelled into building a comprehensive, self-sustaining peace – a process in which children could play a prominent part – short-term approaches are prioritized to contain dissension and instability by enforcing public order, which often involves resorting to military force (Curran and Hunt 2020). We therefore believe childhood serves as an analytical prism that reveals how the silencing of leisure within the MONUSCO framework impacts on the reality in the country: in addition to reinforcing the type of childhood to be protected (i.e. children that are inherently passive and victims), it also articulates the type of peace envisaged by the mission and the international community for the DRC.

As is well known, MONUSCO is part of a scenario in which 'peacebuilding operations cease to be articulated around a central defining core – the idea of peace – and are instead shaped by concerns closer to strategic-military calculations, related to the goals of stabilization' (Oliveira 2020: 210). In this sense, within the mission's framework, peace is equated with the restoration of government authority, the neutralization of non-state armed groups, and the protection of civilians, including children. This focus mobilizes the stabilization–protection nexus mentioned above (Russo 2021), galvanizing child protection within a militarized framework of action that reduces children's needs and (re)produces a reality in which children are mere recipients of intervention (Beier 2018; Tabak 2020; Beier and Berents 2023). Just as a form of peace that makes space and time for leisure is deferred to some unknown future, so the DRC is articulated as an object of protection by the international community whose borders are (re)drawn as a developing state that cannot be responsible for itself, that therefore needs intervention from the international community.

The analysis thus far demonstrates that the peace desired and articulated by the UN for the DRC consists of regional and sustainable development, stabilization, and the absence of conflict. Although the MONUSCO documents do not assign active roles to children in achieving this peace, the protection efforts designed for the country reflect some ideas that frame children as symbols of a future hope for humanity, which, in the context of the peace operation, represents the achievement of the aforementioned elements. It is

therefore important to reflect on the relationship between the investments in child protection and the construction of a stable order for the future of the DRC, showing how the MONUSCO protection mechanisms intervene in this process.

Pupavac (2001) draws attention to the fact that most nongovernmental and intergovernmental agencies have adopted a discourse shaped by psychoanalytical conceptions, whereby children who live in environments marked by domestic and/or social violence, including war, are more likely to grow up to become perpetrators of that very same form of violence. The child protection efforts present for the DRC, guided by the categories of physical health, education, and family, aim to save children, especially those actively involved in the armed conflict, from this violent space. In other words, they aim to rebuild in their identity the notions of vulnerability and innocence, which are often stripped from them in contexts of military recruitment, so they can also once again be 'symbols of peace' and 'hope for a better tomorrow than today' (Malkki 2010; Holzscheiter 2010). Efforts to neutralize the cruelty of war in children's imagination can be understood as bringing them towards the model of peace intended for this stage of life and, consequently, for the country; and, by extension, for the international community.

It is clear that the omission of the category 'leisure' from the MONUSCO documents compromises the achievement of the kind of peace promised in the normative frameworks in relation to childhood, since this peace involves achieving all four cornerstones of childhood, one of which is 'leisure.' Given the emergency nature of the mission and the high rates of serious violations of children, 'leisure' is not seen as a priority and is deferred to a post-conflict moment. The absence of war that would reign in this future space-time would provide room for 'play' in children's daily lives. Yet the documents that constitute the international child protection regime do not frame 'play' as a post-peace element but as a component that enables the achievement of peace. The omission of 'leisure' compromises the potential for achieving a comprehensive peace and its associated outcomes, namely, the transformation of the child into a 'useful member of society' and the presence of a peaceful order both domestically and internationally. Thus, by not promoting one of the pillars that underpin the universalizing path for childhood, peace, as conceived in the UN documents analysed in the context of MONUSCO, is nothing more than a promise that is constantly remade by the UN to children and the DRC but whose realization is constantly deferred. In other words, for this state, where children's experiences diverge from the peace project paved and enabled by the four pillars of imagined childhood, all that remains is a constant renewal of UN mission mandates and a desire that one day the stable future and its promises, such as those reproduced by MONUSCO, will be accomplished.

One final point about leisure: its silence shines a light on how decisions are made about what is urgent and what is not. Teju Cole (2012) has identified an unequal and hierarchical relationship in the attempt to determine what the other's needs are and the path they should follow. Conceived as non-urgent, play is seen as something that can wait, even though it is listed as an essential ingredient of childhood. Thus, as seen at the beginning of this section, the silencing of the category that represents the space where children could

have a bigger role in peacebuilding reinforces their conception as objects of protection provided by adults, which not only compromises their individual needs but also mutes their voices in the broader peace process in the DRC. Specifically, in MONUSCO's child protection efforts, this silencing makes way for a future-looking discourse of children as 'hope' to the detriment of their current demands and needs, leading us to question whether the 'right' time for 'leisure' will ever come or will remain an ever-renewed promise, together with the possibility of peace in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Conclusion

This article investigated the child protection efforts undertaken by MONUSCO to analyse how they reflect and, at the same time, inform a universalizing conception of childhood in which children are seen as passive and irrational. To this end, we analysed twenty-three documents that shed light on MONUSCO's actions vis-a-vis child protection, including Security Council resolutions that have extended the mission's mandate and specific reports of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Having identified the absence of any mention in the MONUSCO documents of the promotion of leisure as part of the child protection efforts, we proceeded to reflect on what this absence means and what outcomes it yields, insofar as this omission informs the deferral of play to a peaceful, post-conflict scenario for the child and for the DRC: a scenario that is always an unfulfilled promise in view of the state of emergency in the country and the need for urgent solutions to other issues.

As seen throughout the first section and in Table 1, the normative frameworks of the international child protection regime (Okyere 2022) (re)produce a universalizing notion of childhood based on four pillars that are understood as fundamental to this space-time and which would enable the achievement of a particular model of peace. The documents that form these frameworks associate the full assurance of rights derived from 'physical health,' 'education,' 'family,' and 'leisure' with a peace for children that includes promises of their development into 'useful members of society' for their country, contributing to its order and stability. These normative frameworks dictate and perpetuate certain images of childhood that portray children as victims, symbols of human goodness, neutral, truth-producing blank slates, ambassadors of peace, and promises of a good future (Malkki 2010). In this sense, not only is war not deemed by adults as an appropriate 'place for children' (Rasmussen 2004), but it represents a threat to the ideal of childhood because it has the capacity to impose on children images that run counter to those highlighted by Malkki (2010), most eloquently expressed in the image of the child soldier, who therefore needs salvation and intervention.

As mentioned in the introduction, the video *Plus jamais de Kadogo* tells the story of two Congolese children who are co-opted by a paramilitary group to become *kadogos*. In the scene in which these boys are separated from their family, we can see an explicit clash between two types of childhood: the universalizing conception, promoted by the UN, in which children have happy faces and live in a stable nuclear family that provides them with physical health, education, and leisure, and the deviant childhood, in which

children are heavily armed, have facial expressions associated with anger and helplessness, and represent a threat not only to the DRC, but also to the stability of the international order (Tabak 2020). Within the scope of MONUSCO, child protection efforts focus on rescuing these minors from the corrupting and threatening effects of war, setting them on the universalizing path of childhood so they can enjoy a 'peaceful, strong, energetic' Congo, as the song says. However, despite this conception of childhood and, consequently, this conception of peace, which is to be sustained through the four pillars of childhood, it is clear that the mandates of the peace mission assign leisure the category of non-emergency, deferring it to a post-conflict moment when peace will allow it to flourish after having been suffocated by war.

By neglecting one of the pillars of the universal conception of childhood, MONUSCO jeopardizes the potential accomplishment of peace. Leisure is a space-time where children have greater agency, using their imagination to choose how to play and express themselves. Even in war, they find places and situations where they can play: 'children's places' (Rasmussen 2004). By making the end of conflict a precondition for leisure, MONUSCO's child protection efforts end up dictating, from the top down, which needs should be prioritized, consistently attributing children passive and non-rational roles in the peace process and consequently compromising the potential for an important space of listening where children might express their particular demands and needs. Instead, with each renewal of the mission's mandate, its emergency status is reaffirmed and leisure is again overlooked, putting off the arrival of a future where children might be 'useful members of society,' maybe even deputies, senators, or teachers (as suggested in the music video), who will pave the way to peace and stability in the country. Therefore, while the promises made by the UN to the children and the population of the DRC are renewed with each mandate of the mission, the music video *Plus jamais de Kadogo* shows that war holds out only one alternative for child soldiers: death, as symbolized by the killing in combat of one of the children abducted by the armed group.

Ultimately, the idea of a peaceful DRC articulates a future that is held out continually as a promise by the mission. In the last scene of the music video *Plus jamais de Kadogo*, despite all the factors that threaten the DRC and the Congolese people, the mother of the children taken by the paramilitary group allows a smile to cross her face. This smile can be seen as representing the hope, renewed every day, for a 'better tomorrow than today' and as justifying operations in the name of a promise of peace. A peace that is based – and fragmented – on political boundaries that repeatedly (re)draw the borders of the conceptions of child, adult, state, and world.

Notes

- 1 More commonly referred to, according to the Paris Principles (2007), as 'a child associated with an armed force or armed group,' a child soldier is defined as 'any person below 18 years of age who is or has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity. (...) It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities' (UNICEF 2007). In this sense, there is no need for explicit participation in a conflict, since recruitment is enough for a child to be legally classified as a child soldier. Similarly, the classification covers both state and non-state armed groups.

- 2 Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Llnr1qXHB70> [3:38–3:58]. Accessed on Nov. 30, 2023.
- 3 Available at: <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/mission/monusco>. Accessed on Nov. 30, 2023.

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Data Availability

All data generated or analysed during this study are included in this published article.

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Fronteiras do futuro: A proteção das crianças como promessa de paz para a República Democrática do Congo

Resumo: A proteção de crianças é um imperativo conhecido de operações de paz multidimensionais da ONU, sobretudo as operações de estabilização. Contudo, como ilustrado pela Missão de Estabilização das Nações Unidas na República Democrática do Congo (MONUSCO), a proteção é guiada por um imaginário político que posiciona as crianças afetadas por conflitos em um lugar e em um tempo desprovidos de agência política, a infância. Resistindo ao caráter universalizante e aparentemente inquestionável desse espaço-tempo, nos guiamos pela seguinte pergunta: Como os mecanismos de proteção da criança, no contexto da MONUSCO, reproduzem e ao mesmo tempo, informam uma concepção universalizante de infância e da criança como um ser passivo e irracional? Nosso argumento é que os mecanismos de proteção refletem e informam essa concepção de infância a partir de alguns pilares, sendo estes a reintegração na família, a promoção da saúde física, a garantia da educação e a garantia do lazer. Verificamos que a ausência desse último pilar dos documentos da MONUSCO, por um lado, torna o lazer algo dependente da conclusão dos objetivos securitários da missão e, por outro lado, faz com que a paz seja apenas uma promessa adiada e refeita pelas Nações Unidas tanto às crianças quanto à RDC.

Palavras-chave: operações de paz; proteção; infância; MONUSCO; criança; estabilização; lazer.

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