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Psychological Pathways to Minimizing Human Rights Violations Against Children

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Abstract. This article identifies several psychological pathways that governments and human rights organizations can employ to minimize human rights violations against children.

According to The New York Times, the United Nations (UN) is beginning to assign full-time advocates of children to UN operations centers (peacekeeping and the like) throughout the world. One has been assigned to Sierra Leone and one or two others are to be assigned to Congo. The population from which advocates are to be drawn include individuals from within the UN and outside it—e.g., private relief organizations. The goal of this initiative is to minimize human rights violations against children—viz., children as slaves, soldiers, targets of political and military violence, and as individuals bereft of basic assets such as food, shelter, clothing, education, and at least rudimentary physical and mental health support.

Although the intent of the initiative is admirable, one must ponder how effective the initiative might be and the psychological routes through which it can be effective. Advocates can attempt to influence the cognitions, emotions, motives, and behaviors of many political groupings. Many of these groupings have at least one direct route to impeding human rights violations of children—e.g., engaging in a behavior (providing personnel, money, materiel, and/or information) with a direct impact on impeding violations. And all of these groupings have at least one indirect route to impeding these violations—e.g., influencing attitudes about violations leading to behaviors that impede violations. The most significant political groupings include authorities of (1) local, regional, and national governments; (2) bilateral and multilateral governmental organizations comprising representatives from the governments in (1); (3) nongovernmental humanitarian organizations; (4) other nonstate actors including military, paramilitary, and civilian organizations that actually perpetrate or can impede human rights violations of children.