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ISSUE PAPER #2

***Role of Education and the Demobilization of Child Soldiers -
Aspects of an Appropriate Education Program for Child Soldiers***



Produced by:

**American Institutes for Research
under the EQUIP1 LWA**

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March 2007

**U.S. Agency for International Development
Cooperative Agreement No. GDG-A-00-03-00006-00**

ISSUE PAPER: ROLE OF EDUCATION AND THE DEMOBILIZATION OF CHILD SOLDIERS - ASPECTS OF AN APPROPRIATE EDUCATION PROGRAM FOR CHILD SOLDIERS

INTRODUCTION

The situation of the Child soldiers is extremely complicated. Complexity is found at all levels – at the level of the child, the educational system, the family and the community. In most cases, prolonged conflicts and instability pushes all systems to the brink. Families are in the process of reconciling with enormous personal loss, low or negligible incomes, and even displacement. Poverty, poor governance, inadequate and ineffective systems of basic services, and traumatized and mistrusting communities compound the multitude of challenges faced by individual children who struggle to reintegrate into society. The psycho-social condition of the child soldier is in a most difficult state. Violated, traumatized and accustomed to a different identity and different way of life the needs of the child soldier are defined differently and need all the sensitivity.

Educating the returning child soldier is undoubtedly an enormous challenge. Education programs for child soldiers are invariably part of larger integrated programs that comprehensively address diverse needs and issues of demobilization, disarmament, reintegration and reconstruction. Successful education programs are part of an overarching effort towards conflict resolution and reconstruction, integrating health, shelter, livelihood and education concerns. These programs work with different stakeholders –UN Agencies, other INGOs, Local NGOs, different militia groups, Governments and local communities and community leaders. Most programs have worked intensely at the level of policy, families, community and the child.

BACKGROUND

Although diverse in nature, these overarching programs have in common some general principles for success. These are reflected in the strategies described below.

1. Policies and treaties are needed to get ownership and compliance from all stakeholders for disarmament and demobilization.

Most successful programs have extensively used international conventions, protocols and policies to demobilize child soldiers. Globally ratified conventions and legal frameworks such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990), the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1999), and the International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention 182 on the worst Forms of Child Labor (1998) have served as bases for lobbying and advocacy. These conventions prohibit the use of children in armed conflict and support the role of education in children's lives.

In contexts of conflict, diverse groups recruit children as soldiers. In DRC, for example, child soldiers were recruited by the Congolese Government, Congolese rebels and militias, and rebel groups backed by other countries. In some contexts, conflict spills to neighboring countries and the recruitment or conscripting of children continues abroad. These scenarios require advocacy efforts at many levels. In all programs, non-governmental organizations lobbied intensely to make warring stakeholders aware of and willing to comply with global conventions. These warring stakeholders include both rebel militia and official military organizations, which are often equally

guilty of recruiting child soldiers. Successful programs must incorporate all these diverse stakeholders in an agreement that explicitly addresses the issue of child soldiers. Achieving this goal entails creating awareness on the frameworks, gaining compliance from all those included in peace agreements and holding the government and other players expressly accountable to these agreements.

Two Perspectives on the Use of Policies and Treaties to Assist with Child Soldier Demobilization	
<p><i>The Case of Democratic Republic of the Congo</i></p> <p>The demobilization of children in DRC was made possible by the signing of the Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement between key stakeholders in the conflict in the summer of 1999 and the UN Security Council Resolution 1279, which authorized the UN mission for the Congo (MONUC). MONUC was responsible for demobilization. This process involved identifying, screening, assembling, disarming, demobilizing and repatriating ex-combatants.</p> <p>Save the Children UK (SCUK) played a major role in lobbying for the opening of a rehabilitation center specifically for demobilized children. Before the opening of this center, demobilized children were taken to the same centers as demobilized adults.</p> <p>Save the Children (UK) Program: The Rwanda Demobilization and Reintegration Program (RDRP)</p>	<p><i>The Case of El Salvador</i></p> <p>The biggest drawback of the efforts in El Salvador was the marginalization or exclusion of children from the reintegration process. Since the treaty did not specifically mention the issue of underage child soldiers, they were significantly excluded from key reintegration process. For example, children who had fought shoulder to shoulder with adults were not included in the land allotment agreements which had been central to the peace agreement.</p> <p>“We young people were not recognized in any way. This was the worst thing that happened to me and my comrades” said one former child soldier. Children were left out of many of the benefits of the reintegration process, and they suffered through the resulting feelings of bitterness and exclusion.</p> <p>The Demobilization and Reintegration of Child Soldiers : El Salvador Case Study By : Beth Verhey</p>

2. Families and Communities Must Be Central for Reintegration of Child Soldiers.

Recognizing families as key to the reintegration process, successful programs work closely with parents so that they are better able to support both themselves and the child who is coming home. Frequently, families are unaware of the rights of children, and as such some see no wrong in sending older children or adolescents to work in potentially harmful situations. For this reason and others, awareness-raising for family members about the rights of children is an integral part of successful programming. Invariably, the family of the child soldier is very poor and has difficulty in meeting daily needs. During and immediately after conflict, economies suffer greatly and jobs and livelihoods are hard to find. Inflation is high, and families may find the income of their child soldiers is a significant contribution to their tenuous existence. Many programs attempt to address this issue by helping the returnee children learn a vocation. In some programs, such as one run by Save the Children, the focus was on increasing family income by increasing livelihood capacities among families.¹

¹ See Save the Children’s *Going Home: Demobilizing and Reintegrating Child Soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo* by Beth Verhey, 2003.

Awareness-raising programs also work to prepare parents to receive the returning child. Families in these situations often face the dilemma of wanting their child back but fearing repercussion from the community, militia or government armies. In some cases the families themselves harbor fear or hatred for the child because he or she may have been instrumental in bringing violence and trauma to the family. Programs that recognize this dilemma work closely with families to mentally and emotionally prepare them to accept and help their children. Preparation strategies include dialogue, counseling and awareness generation. Successful strategies to help children and families cope may be a combination of: identifying/mapping families of child soldiers; contacting and counseling these families; coordinating for the child's return; and creating livelihood options for both the family and the child soldier.

It is not uncommon for a community to manifest considerable hostility and mistrust toward returning child soldiers. This phenomenon occurs most frequently with returning girls, who have often served as sex slaves or wives during their time with armed groups. If the community as a whole is unready to accept the returned child soldiers and if appropriate power structures of community leaders are not in place to sanction this acceptance, reintegration is practically impossible. Returning children who fail to reintegrate often return to their commanders or re-enlist elsewhere.

Community participation also plays a critical role in implementing and sustaining local activities, particularly as governments may be consumed by processes of reconstruction or may be, in many cases, ineffective or absent.

Some programs demonstrate how existing community institutions and traditional community leaders can be enlisted to give social legitimacy to the return of the child soldiers to civilian life. Local rituals and traditions may prove especially effective in gaining acceptance and forgiveness for the child soldier. Successful examples of using community networks to facilitate reintegration include:

- The Christian's Children Fund implemented program in Angola, which worked with the community to legitimize the return of the former child soldiers. The program worked through church-based motivators and welcomed returning children in a traditional ceremony involving cleansing rituals.²
- The Save the Children-run program in DRC layered demobilization activities with their strong Community Child Protection Networks (CCPN), which focused on preventing and protecting children from all kinds of abuse, advocating for children's protection and development, and disseminating and promoting the rights of children and legal protection instruments. Because they were already actively engaged in child rights issues, the CCPN played critical roles in demobilization and reintegration activities.³

² See Christian Children's Fund, *Final Report: Project of Reintegration of Child Soldiers in Angola*, September 1998.

³ See Save the Children, *Going Home: Demobilizing and Reintegrating Child Soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo* by Beth Verhey, 2003.

- The USAID-sponsored Community Focused Reintegration (CFR) programs in Burundi, DRC, Liberia, and Sierra Leone made community central to the reintegration and education processes. In Burundi, for example, the program consisted of three components: 1) leadership training for esteemed community members, including training on understanding perceptions, communicating effectively, and resolving conflicts; 2) combined vocational skills and literacy training for ex-combatants and other community members; and 3) small grants for small community infrastructure projects. Together these activities helped to reweave the social networks of the community while reintegrating the returning child soldiers.⁴

3. Post-Conflict Education Efforts Must Be Targeted to Reach Child Soldiers.

Most children who participate in conflicts as soldiers either have never been to school or dropped out in early grades. By the time they are ready for reintegration, these children have spent a number of years outside any sort of formal learning space. She or he is likely to be deeply scarred and highly traumatized and is likely to have been a witness or even a perpetrator of violence of the worst kind. The rigor of soldier life has likely left him or her undernourished and suffering from disease, injury and/or disability. Unfortunately, sexually transmitted diseases are far too common among these children, especially among female ex-combatants. In addition, child soldiers become accustomed to the military way of life. Many ex-combatants miss the money, power and action associated with their lives as soldiers.

Years spent associated with armed groups have deprived these children of an education, leaving them far behind their peers in education. Most often government educational systems in these contexts have been destroyed by conflict, leaving few options for child soldiers. Experience shows that in order to reach child soldiers with educational interventions, they must be specifically targeted.

The programs reviewed for this analysis consistently demonstrated that inter-related activities are key to enabling the child soldier to become a learner who is integrated into civilian life. These activities include the provision of temporary shelter and a kit for immediate personal needs, health screening and medical care, psycho-social care, foster care, education, and economic support. Alternative education programs are most often preferred for returning child soldiers. The programs reviewed also demonstrated that planned properly, child soldiers can also benefit from the other post-conflict initiatives implemented for the general population of children. However, key to making this happen is planning for the special needs of former child soldiers at the outset. Some of the approaches and activities in education that have worked for child soldiers include:

- ***Transit Camps and Bridge Courses:*** Transit camps are considered essential as an intermediary step for child soldiers. These camps offer a number of services, such as psycho-social care, medical attention, literacy development and skill courses. The former child soldiers stay in these transit camps for 6 to 8 weeks or more until they are reintegrated with their families. Educational bridge programs work well in these settings, as they enable returning children to achieve some basic literacy and primary level competencies in a relatively short time. Bridge programs effectively create a base from which the child can move to other learning options. In most cases, children proceed to vocational education.

⁴ See USAID, *Community-Focused Reintegration*, 2005.

- **Vocational Education:** Most former child soldiers undergoing the process of reintegration are eleven years of age or older and belong to extremely poor families. Invariably, these children feel compelled to supplement the family income (or are without families and must earn a living for themselves). For this reason many demobilization programs include vocational education programs to build skills in a specific trade. Vocational training exists to help children gain skills in agriculture, animal husbandry, baking, carpentry, crafting, masonry, mechanics, tailoring and a variety of other trades. The vocational skills training component of the USAID-sponsored project in Burundi also included classes on small-business management. Over 4,000 participants have graduated from that program.⁵
- However, some programs have found it challenging to choose appropriate vocations in which to train children. In El Salvador, for example, the experience with vocational training was not very encouraging; only about 25% of children became involved in the trade for which they were trained.⁶ To make the most of these programs, a complex labor market analysis should determine which vocations will be offered.
- **Special Content:** Modules or lessons on specific themes thought to be useful to child soldiers are often integrated into education programs. Some examples include peace education, education on landmine and HIV awareness, and civic education. In its civic education program, UNCHR included lessons intended to sensitize children to the underlying causes of child recruitment and to the issues of human and child rights.⁷
- **Creating Awareness of Children's Rights:** Many children are unaware of their rights and simply do not know that it is unlawful for them to become or remain child soldiers. Save the Children has disseminated rights-based information by launching extensive awareness building campaigns. In these instances, this strategy can be successful in moving children to demobilize themselves and reach out to the community-based networks and transit centers.⁸
- **RapidEd:** Developed by PLAN and UNESCO, RapidEd is an accelerated remedial program for war affected children. It includes basic courses in literacy and numeracy, as well as in therapeutic and healing forms of self expression. The intent is to establish schools as quickly as possible to give a sense of normalcy and to create opportunities for children to voice their deep-seated emotions and traumas. In order to ensure the latter goal, facilitators are trained in undertaking dialogue with the children in the most sensitive manner. The approach also encourages singing, playing, discussing, participating in role playing or dramas and drawing. A school kit comprised of pens,

⁵ See USAID's *Community Focused Reintegration*.

⁶ See World Bank, *Child Soldiers: Prevention, Demobilization and Reintegration*, [http://lnweb18.worldbank.org/ESSD/sdvext.nsf/67ByDocName/ChildSoldiersPreventionDemobilizationandReintegration/\\$FILE/ChildsoldiersNote3.pdf](http://lnweb18.worldbank.org/ESSD/sdvext.nsf/67ByDocName/ChildSoldiersPreventionDemobilizationandReintegration/$FILE/ChildsoldiersNote3.pdf)

⁷ See <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/template?page=home&src=static/teaching-tools/tchcived/12-14up.htm>

⁸ See Save the Children, *Going Home: Demobilizing and Reintegrating Child Soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo* by Beth Verhey, 2003.

chart paper, select locally appropriate sports equipment and musical instruments is given to the community.⁹

- ***Creating Healing Classrooms***: The International Rescue Committee (IRC) has advanced the concept of schools as places for psycho-social support and recovery after times of conflict or upheaval. Through the initiative, IRC trains teachers to adopt practices that `restore and nurture developmental opportunities`. Teachers are trained to create a nurturing environment where the child's need for protection, security, psycho social-care, development and learning are addressed. The training enables teachers to create classrooms that promote a sense of belonging in all children, build routines and relationships with peers, promote personal attachments, provide intellectual stimulation and develop a sense of control among children. The training also works to ensure the quality of education and addresses teachers' needs to reflect and address their own personal traumas and problems. The healing classrooms module has been successfully piloted in Aceh, Iraq, Liberia, and Northern Ethiopia.¹⁰
- ***Peace Education***: Participation in war and indoctrination into the ideologies of hatred and violence leaves children's moral sensibilities deformed. Children may hand over their guns, but they cannot so easily abandon the violent ways of thinking in which they have been trained. Part of demobilization is enabling the child move away from violence and into a more inclusive and constructive way of life. The inclusion of peace education in curricula facilitates this process. For example, the Peace Education Module for Youth and Young Adults in Solomon Islands, developed by UNICEF, promotes deep and reflective thinking on issues of peace, diversity, conflict. It includes practical activities and lessons on practicing inter-personal and inter-group peace and on good governance and peace. The module contains set lessons to be implemented in secondary schools over a period of time through a range of activities like role play, discussion, small group work, opinion polls and negotiation exercises.
- ***Accelerated Learning Programs***: In South Sudan, an Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) designed under the Sudan Basic Education Program (SBEP) provides alternative and faster basic education for older children and youth ages 12 – 18. The program allows these children to catch up with their peers already enrolled in the formal primary education program. The ALP adopts the eight-year primary school curriculum but restructures its contents, such that those enrolled will take a period of four years to cover the material. The ALP program provides the opportunity for members of its target group to acquire knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and life skills which will enable them to express themselves and become self-disciplined and self-reliant. It also provides them with an education designed to promote their desire to continue learning through formal or other alternative forms of education.
- ***The Teacher Emergency Package (TEP) Program***: The Teacher Education Emergency Package was a co-venture of UNICEF-UNESCO and UNHCR. The TEP contains a basic

⁹ Hannu Pesonen, `Sierra Leone: Where Children Draw end to their Waterloo from ..Helping Children out grow War, by Vachel W. Miller and Friedrich Affolter, USAID, 2002

¹⁰ *Creating Healing Classrooms: Guide for Teachers and Teacher Educators*. International Resuce Committee. 2006.

lesson plans in literacy and numeracy, basic learning material like chalk, pencil and exercise books. It enables teachers to start education process when the system has been badly affected and made dysfunctional. The TEP has been used at a large scale in Rwanda, Somalia and other contexts of conflict.¹¹

- ***Psycho-Social Care***: Almost every demobilization program incorporates psycho-social care through a range of different activities (see Healing Classrooms listed above). Some such activities focus on helping children construct life narratives for when they were with their families and for when they were child soldiers. The effects of these narratives differ from individual to individual, but they are largely effective in enabling children to express and address their deeper emotions and concerns. Other activities undertaken as psycho-social care include individual counseling, therapeutic workshops, peer relation and communication sessions and productive work for children.
- The experience in Colombia brought out the significance of social relationships for the child.¹² During their time with the militia or the military, children develop friendships with fellow soldiers. In many cases, young soldiers perceive their commanders as mentors and idolize them. Former child soldiers must abandon the patterns of military relationships and adapt to the patterns of civilian life instead. The experience in Columbia emphasizes the need to ‘recreate the social fabric’ by enabling the child to rebuild new relationships that validate him or her.
- The Colombian experience also emphasizes the need to build on the child soldiers’ internal capacities and resources and to keep a perspective on the negative previous negative conditioning of the child. Engaging the returnee children in sports has proven an effective rebuilding strategy. Save the Children in Liberia integrated sports with life skill education, and they found that sports gave the child soldiers an opportunity for physical expression, for developing social groups and above all for gaining social recognition and re-establishing self identity.¹³

CONCLUSION

Demobilization of Child Soldiers is not possible if insecurity and conflict persist in the region. The success of the demobilization efforts depend a great deal on certain conditions.

Markers of such contexts include:

- *The assurance of peace and conflict cessation in the region.* An overall environment of security gives the demobilization process a better chance at success. Reintegration of child soldiers is difficult of impossible without this precondition.
- *Peace agreements that specifically call for the demobilization of child soldiers.*

¹¹ The International Response to Conflict and Genocide:Lessons from the Rwanda Experience. http://www.um.dk/Publikationer/Danida/English/Evaluations/1997_rwanda/b4/c6.asp

¹² See *The Psycho-Social Care of Demobilized Child soldiers in Colombia: Conceptual and Methodological Aspects.* By Fernando Jiovani Arias Morales. http://www.childsoldiers.org/document_get.php?id=1117

¹³ See Save the Children, *When Children Affected by War Go Home: Lessons Learned from Liberia.*

- *The development and implementation of reconstruction and development plans by the country that specifically take children's needs into account.* Without active change in the fundamental context of conflict, children will remain at high risk for re-recruitment.
- *A carefully planned disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process.* This includes a sophisticated understanding of the logistics and operational details of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration and a carefully planned process that includes preparations for mapping child soldiers, giving them identity cards, coordinating with their families, attaining and running suitable transit camp facilities, and providing appropriate educational opportunities.
- *The complete cessation of small arms supply to the region.*

In the context of education the scan of literature has not given a forceful evidence of the success of the education strategies. However, the data in most documents highlight number of child soldiers demobilized, reintegrated with family, or educated, indicating the high priority often placed on education by families and children themselves. Other impact level details are hard to find. The literature on the details of content and pedagogic approach was not immediately present, although – as listed above – numerous examples of types of programming in education exist.

There probably is a need to conduct an in-depth field study in documenting the details of the education approaches adopted with child soldiers and their impact. However, there also appears to be a strong need to redefine educational options for this group of learners, both in terms of content and teaching methods. These alternatives need to be both challenging to the psyche of the demobilized child soldier and be appropriate to the types of learning and skills these children need to survive and thrive post-conflict. There also is a need to re-position the role of formal systems and of vocational courses in this context. Both have to evolve, so that they offer learning options that are not merely performing a transition function but build competencies and a knowledge base that will help the child in life.