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Role of Education and the Demobilization of Child Soldiers



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ISSUE PAPER: ROLE OF EDUCATION AND THE DEMOBILIZATION OF CHILD SOLDIERS

INTRODUCTION

This issue paper is based on a review of literature available about the demobilization and reintegration of child soldiers. The review included both internet and print media. Although there is a sizeable amount of literature available about the profile and conditions of child soldiers, there is considerably less documentation and analysis about education strategies to meet their unique needs. Evidence of the impact of these interventions was also difficult to discern. Therefore, this study includes practices in education that have been successful in conflict situations, but its limitations require field-based research to draw more in-depth conclusions.

The Study consists of Two Issue Papers:

1. The Importance of Education for Child Soldiers.
2. Aspects of an Appropriate Education Program for Child Soldiers

Who is a Child Soldier?

The Cape Town Principles define a child soldier as any person under 18 years who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force in any capacity. This encompasses but is not limited to cooks, porters, messengers and anyone accompanying such groups other than family members. The definition also includes girls recruited for sexual purposes and for forced marriage. It does not, therefore, only refer to a child who is carrying or has carried arms. Application of this broad definition is important: possession of a weapon is not a prerequisite for a child soldier to benefit from the demobilization and reintegration process.

Cape Town Principles and Best Practices on the Recruitment of Children into the Armed Forces and on Demobilization and social Reintegration of Child Soldiers in Africa (Cape Town, 27-30 April 1997)

BACKGROUND

According to UNICEF, prolonged conflict over the last decade has killed more than 2 million children. It has also left four million children disabled, 12 million homeless, and over ten million traumatized. Every day, conflict kills, maims or disables approximately 2000 children.¹ According to Jesuit Refugee Services, more than 300,000 child soldiers are currently fighting in more than 30 countries around the world. Many of these children are recruited before they reach the age of ten. In some places, almost one third of these child soldiers are young girls.²

Graça Machel, the Former U.N. Secretary-General's Expert on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children, aptly observes that, while wars have always victimized children, "modern wars are exploiting, maiming and killing children more callously and more systematically than ever."³ Her seminal report

¹ <http://www.caat.org.uk/campaigns/paying-the-price/briefing.php>

² Schares, Roxanne SSND for Jesuit Refugee Services. "Education: A Tool for Protection, an Instrument for Transformation" in *Servir: Child Soldiers – Educating to Protect Children* No. 33, December 2004, pg.

³ Graça Machel, *The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children, A Critical Review of the Progress made and obstacles encountered in increasing protection for war-affected Children*, September 2000, p4

for the UN brought before the world the chilling and horrific effects of prolonged conflicts and wars on children. Youth are killed, tortured, raped and forced to participate in unimaginable acts of violence against other human beings, and many times against their own families. The bankruptcy of human and moral values evident in this situation needs no further explanation.

The past several decades have seen prolonged wars and conflicts in many different parts of the world. Conflicts in Afghanistan, Angola, Cambodia, Colombia, DRC, El Salvador, Sierra Leone and a host of other countries testify to the prevalence of this phenomenon. Many of these conflicts have their antecedents in historical inequities and social strife, accentuated by exploitative colonial and post colonial regimes that failed to effectively govern or resurrect local economies. The prolonged exclusion and marginalization of groups, combined with the resource-rich geographies and the easy availability of small arms gave rise to conflicts which were able to sustain themselves for many years. Many unfortunate children are caught in these complex scenarios and many are conscripted as soldiers.

In addition to working as combatants, conscripted children work as cooks, messengers, porters, scouts, sentries, servants, sex slaves and spies. They are used to lay and clear landmines, and occasionally they are used as human mine detectors or human shields. Child combatants are made to take part in various acts including unlawful killing, torture, rape, pillaging and looting.⁴ Militia and government armies see children as easy targets; they are easy to maintain, easy to manage, quick to obey and unlikely to rebel against commanders. When childhood innocence and naiveté is corrupted by drugs, fear and the sense of power derived from holding an AK47 or an M16, these children become willing to perpetrate horrific acts.

Recruitment of Child Soldiers

Children are primarily recruited to supplement forces during shortages of adult soldiers. For this reason, longer conflicts are more likely to recruit children in increasing numbers. New research indicates that commanders see additional benefits to recruiting children; they find children easy to use in battles, easy to manipulate, adventurous, anxious to impress, quick to learn fighting skills, and less costly to maintain. Commanders view children as disposable and convenient fighters who pose no threat to those in power. They also hope that the presence of children will present a moral challenge for enemies.

Recruitment can be either compulsory or voluntary, but a fine line exists between the two types. Forced recruitment occurs in a variety of situations. Children may be abducted and taken captive, threatened into joining the ranks by armed soldiers, driven to volunteer as a result of social exclusion, or compelled to enlist by other such extreme methods.

Some children join voluntarily or are encouraged to enlist because of their circumstances. Several factors contribute to this “voluntary” recruitment:

- *Economic and Social Reasons:* Volunteering may be seen as a means of survival, particularly when the alternative to enlistment is unemployment. Children may volunteer because they or their families need the income. For many the army represents one of the

⁴ Schares, Roxanne SSND for Jesuit Refugee Services. “Education: A Tool for Protection, an Instrument for Transformation” in *Servir: Child Soldiers – Educating to Protect Children* No. 33, December 2004, pg. 3.

- only paths to influence and upward social mobility. Girls often volunteer to escape early or imminent marriage or because their marriage prospects are poor.
- *Cultural Reasons:* Participation in military or warlike activities may be glorified within a particular culture, and bearing arms may serve as a mark of masculinity. Some children join as a result of peer pressure or because they perceive enlisting as an adventure.
 - *Protection and/or Revenge:* Prior experiences, especially during conflict, can create a sense of vulnerability among children. Enrollment may be seen as a way to protect themselves and their families from harassment. In addition, children who have witnessed violence, especially to their family members or acquaintances, may be motivated to enlist and take revenge.
 - *Ideological Reasons:* Some children genuinely believe in the cause for which they fight. These convictions may result from years of indoctrination and may be reinforced by the idealization of a culture of violence.

The majority of child soldiers are drawn from the poorest, least educated and most marginalized sectors of society. The most vulnerable children are typically those separated from their families or those with disrupted family backgrounds. These groups include:⁵

- *Children living in the conflict zones:* Conflict undermines the traditional child protection roles within family and community, so children are more vulnerable to recruiters. Children in these contexts are usually among the poorest and most disadvantaged, and death or disability of family members frequently forces them to become primary earners. These economic strains increase the likelihood of enrollment.
- *Children from unstable or disrupted backgrounds:* Refugees and the displaced are particularly vulnerable.
- *Children separated from their families:* Families provide both physical and ideological protection from recruitment. Adults are physically more capable of resisting recruiters, and family guidance can keep children from falling prey to militarist cultures and peer pressure. Some unaccompanied children originally associate with an armed group for protective reasons or to attach to an elder and eventually become combatants.
- *Disadvantaged or marginalized children:* Recruiting raids often target gatherings of the poor and disadvantaged. In addition, campaigns of repression and intimidation try to break down the resistance of ethnic, racial, indigenous or religious groups. Children from these marginalized groups are most vulnerable.
- *Former child soldiers.*

Key Characteristics of the Child Soldiers

Children suffer disproportionately from the hazards of military life because of their young age and vulnerability. Physically, they suffer higher casualties and more injuries than do adults. Many child soldiers have significant health problems resulting from poor diet, unsanitary living conditions, untended injuries, physical abuse, sexually transmitted diseases, and early pregnancy and associated complications.⁶ HIV is especially prevalent among child soldiers.

⁵ From UNCHR's "Critical Issues: Child Soldiers" in *Action for the Rights of Children*, September 2002, pg. 9-11.

⁶ See UNESCO's Report on the Project in Sierra Leone and UNCHR's "Critical Issues: Child Soldiers" in *Action for the Rights of Children*, September 2002, pg. 37.

Child soldiers can also suffer immense psychological damage. Their experiences can leave them “traumatized, stigmatized, lacking self-esteem, uncertain of the community’s reaction toward them and unable to return home.”⁷ Child soldiers are made to suffer physical and psychological abuses and harsh punishments, and they are often exposed to drug and alcohol consumption. The war lords, with their highly unscrupulous and manipulative tactics, wreak havoc on the sense of identity, the well being and the values of these children. The implications of these psychological tactics make the reintegration process exceedingly challenging.

Children’s Transformation During Conflict

“I have come to tell you not to call me CO Dirty Ways call me by my real name Junior Sawyer. During the seven year civil war Dorwee proudly moved around the village with the name ‘General Crazy’ one year after the civil war he takes out a gun to kill if somebody calls him by that name”

“I can do anything to anyone, all the big, big people were scared of me; I was the commander in my village.”

‘Former Child Soldiers in Liberia, by Sam Gabaydee Doe.’

In order to mold children into violent monsters, war lords devise strategies to destroy the child’s original identity. They gain the allegiance and loyalty of these children by cleverly portraying themselves as a savior and by creating enemies out of other tribes. In the Liberian, context the single most important ceremony reinforces a person’s individuality, which is reflected in the name he is given. The war lords exploit this ceremony by giving children new names that reflect negative characteristics. They then take each child to his or her own community to perpetrate violence, thereby destroying the child’s earlier relationships and erasing the possibility of return. To facilitate their deception, war lords use drugs to help children overcome fear and to give them a false sense of power.’

Excerpts from RRN Newsletter <http://www.odihpn.org/pdfbin/newsletter012.pdf>

The Situation of the Girl Child Soldier

Recent estimates posit that of the approximately 300,000 children involved in conflicts worldwide, up to 40% (120,000) are girls.⁸ In military camps, young girls perform many of the same tasks as do young boys. Many of these girls, usually the older ones, are involved in active combat. Others are used to cook, clean, tend to the wounded and perform a variety of other menial tasks.⁹ While young male combatants are not exempt from sexual abuse, girls are more likely to be raped and subjected to prolonged sexual abuse.¹⁰ It is not uncommon for girls in military camps to become sex slaves or “wives” to any number of men. These positions relegate them to the status of a material possession; they are “owned” by the military men. This sense of

⁷ From ILO, *Reintegrating Child Soldiers*, pg. 6.

⁸ Save the Children UK, *Forgotten Casualties of War: Girls in Armed Conflict*, 2005, 1.

⁹ See Africa Recovery, *The Road from Soldier Back to Child*, pg. 1 and Asian Human Rights Commission, *Child Soldiers*, 3

¹⁰ See UNCHR’s “Critical Issues: Child Soldiers” in *Action for the Rights of Children*, September 2002, pg. 29

ownership often leads to a refusal on the part of military officials to release girls to demobilization programs. These men claim that since the girls are their “wives,” they do not have to be released as boy soldiers do.¹¹ For this reason – and because girls are more often kept hidden from officials than are boys – many girl soldiers never enter into demobilization processes.

Those girls who are demobilized face unique challenges. During all stages of demobilization, and especially during the reintegration process, the needs of girl soldiers should not be ignored. Special consideration should be given to female child soldiers including: “gender segregated data, gender sensitization and awareness programs, special health and education, and psycho-social programs.”¹² Special attention should also be paid to health problems arising from sexually transmitted diseases, young pregnancies, miscarriages, self-imposed abortions and the needs of young children born during military association.

IMPERATIVE OF EDUCATION FOR CHILD SOLDIERS

The above brings out the critical condition and need of attention for Child Soldiers. Education is key to helping children overcome their difficult pasts.

Education and the Right’s Perspective – Education is seen as one of the basic rights of all, especially children and adolescents. Children who have missed on education by being child soldiers need to the opportunity to fulfill their Right.

Education and Psycho- Social Care – The need for psycho-social care for returning child soldiers is indeed tremendous. Education spaces and teachers are valuable in providing psycho-social care to children. Their role in establishing routine, giving space for children to safely socialize, and promoting self-esteem and resiliency is well recognized.

Education and Special Content – There is an urgent need to giving conflict-affected children life-saving and skill-related information. Such concepts and skill-building activities can be easily integrated into education programs. Some of the critical information needs identified are on issues of HIV and AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections, land mines, conflict resolution and peace, as well as health and nutrition.

Education and Livelihood – Education, especially literacy, is a necessary base for vocational training. For child soldiers, the need to develop livelihood security is very real and the opportunities for more profitable livelihood activities increase with an education.

Education and Legitimate Reintegration - Integration of child soldiers in learning spaces gives social acceptance to their reintegration process in the community. It prepares them for a civilian life, and is a developmentally appropriate way of reintroducing them to the community and peaceful living.

Education, Children’s Identity and Peer Relationships- Education and the associated learning process give children and an alternative life style. It provides a daily routine that prevents them from slipping back into being a child soldier or other socially harmful activity. It also enables

¹¹ Save the Children UK, *Forgotten Casualties of War: Girls in Armed Conflict*, 2005, 12.

¹² “Asia Pacific Conference on the Use of Children as Soldiers: Conference Report,” (Kathmandu, Nepal) 15-18 May, 2000, pg. 2

them to discover their other strengths – redefining themselves and their social relationships. This is a critical contribution toward the reintegration process.

CHALLENGES IN EDUCATING FORMER CHILD SOLDIERS

When children are demobilized, their situations are likely influenced by the same political, social, and cultural considerations that characterized their initial recruitments. The social and economic realities still pose difficulties for the child’s participation in education. Invariably, child soldiers live in areas that have long been plagued by insecurity and conflict.

Like many other systems, the education system in such contexts is often badly damaged. School infrastructure may be destroyed, materials may be in short supply, teachers may be missing and financial flows to the system are likely to have stopped completely or been reduced to a negligible amount. Formal schools at the primary and secondary levels and vocational or technical institutes are often largely unavailable, so educating former child soldiers is exceedingly challenging.

In addition, preparing the former child soldiers, who have been out of the learning space and forced to redefine their psycho-social relationships, is exceedingly difficult. Their transformation to become learners and adapt to the associated cognitive and social requirements of participating in a classroom is an enormous challenge in itself.

A look at some key challenges:

Economic Considerations

Many child soldiers come from impoverished communities, and prolonged conflicts may have worsened already dire economic conditions. Often the former child soldier’s family cannot support the child upon his/her return. As a result, many former child soldiers cannot attend school during formal hours because they must work to contribute to the family income. School fees and the expenses of uniforms and supplies may not be feasible.¹³

Stigmatization

It is not unusual for the community to stigmatize former child soldiers. This stigmatization, which often takes the form of fear or resentment, makes it difficult for the former combatants to achieve successful reintegration. Some community members feel resentment for the special support these children receive, and some fear they will fall into violent patterns. Many communities and authorities are unwilling to forget the crimes the children have committed.¹⁴ Girls in particular are often stigmatized as having had inappropriate sexual involvement. This perception limits girls’ options for employment and for marriage, and it often pushes them into prostitution.¹⁵ Fear of stigmatization is one of the strongest barriers to reintegrating and educating children.

Adjustment Issues

Physical and psychological trauma makes the transition from the world of a soldier to the world of a student difficult for many former combatants. It is not unusual to find that former child

¹³ Ibid, 18-19.

¹⁴ See UNESCO’s Report on the Project in Sierra Leone.

¹⁵ See ILO’s *Reintegrating Child Soldiers*, pg. 2.

soldiers have problems concentrating on learning tasks, following norms, building relationships or keeping up their interest and motivation. Some suffer from an acute sense of guilt as they realize the nature of the atrocities they have committed.¹⁶

Moreover, it is difficult for former child soldiers to break with the norms of their former hierarchical, military communities and re-learn the codes of civilian behavior. Those who have spent most of their childhood fighting another group of people know no other way of life. They have no other point of reference to determine their identities. This leaves them feeling abandoned or estranged upon demobilization. Many children miss the camaraderie and lifestyle of the fighting corps. This feeling is especially common among those who believed in the ideology of their group and found that membership gave them a sense of purpose.

Many children, especially those who held responsibility in the group, may have difficulty adjusting to a civilian life in which their status is no longer recognized. This may result in difficulty conforming to the rules of school.¹⁷ Returning to or beginning school can be difficult and potentially embarrassing. Some former child soldiers feel humiliated to be taking classes with younger children or find that teachers and students are afraid of them.¹⁸

Availability of Relevant and Appropriate Learning Options

As stated earlier, in most cases the education system in contexts of conflict is badly affected, and quality education may be unavailable. There may be a dearth of appropriate and relevant alternatives for child soldiers that would ensure development of literacy and vocational competencies. Alternative vocational programs, accelerated learning opportunities, and bridge activities are often under funded or completely unavailable. Such programs must also be structured to adequately challenge these learners and maintain their interest without overwhelming them and therefore setting them up for failure.

Practical Considerations

Former child soldiers may have difficulty getting documentation for enrollment, and school authorities may not allow them to join the same level as younger children.¹⁹ In addition, many schools are too far away from villages or transit centers to allow for sustained enrollment.

The situation of the teacher should also be considered as he/she will have personal concerns regarding the conflict. Teachers may have been deliberately or accidentally victimized and may have trouble adjusting to the presence of former child soldiers in their classes. There may be limits to the demands that can be asked of them.²⁰

¹⁶ See UNCHR's "Critical Issues: Child Soldiers" in *Action for the Rights of Children*, September 2002, pg. 29

¹⁷ See UNCHR's "Critical Issues: Child Soldiers" in *Action for the Rights of Children*, September 2002, pg. 29 and Africa Recovery, *The Road from Soldier Back to Child*, pg. 2.

¹⁸ See World Bank's *Child Soldiers: Preventing, Demobilizing and Reintegrating*, pg. 18-19.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ See UNCHR's "Critical Issues: Child Soldiers" in *Action for the Rights of Children*, September 2002, pg. 37.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The more successful efforts at demobilization of child soldiers have adopted comprehensive approaches to demobilization and formulated long-term plans. Almost all demobilization programs were integrated programs that concurrently undertook a number of advocacy, shelter, health, education and economic activities. Successful strategies begin with national support in the form of policies and treaties. These programs then proceed to address demobilization and reintegration issues at various levels of importance for the child and especially at the levels of family, community, and self. Successful efforts must focus on redefining identities and self concepts, gaining acceptance within families and communities, gaining skills and competencies, and becoming a legitimate civilians with policy support. The literature also points to the fact that successful demobilization and reintegration programs began in stable and conducive contexts.

The challenges for former child soldiers are numerous and multi-facted. However, education can be a first important key, not only to restoring normalcy for children and their communities, but also to helping children to regain their footing on a path to future success.