

**PLIGHT OF CHILDREN IN CONFLICT AND POST – CONFLICT  
SOCIETIES: THE CASE OF AFRICA**

**BY**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Wars, conflicts and violence are increasingly becoming part of the norm of the socio-political life in many African countries. The post-independence period in Africa saw the escalation of war and violence in many countries, both in terms of magnitude and intensity. Those conflicts are not only inter and intra-state, but have recently assumed a multilateral dimension. In which a multitude of countries are engaged in conflict within a country as it is currently in the Ivory Coast.

Over the past few decades Africa has probably suffered more from armed conflicts than any other continent. It saw 32 wars between 1960 and 1998. Seven million lives were lost and over nine million people became refugees, returnees or displaced. In 1996 alone, 14 out of the 53 countries of Africa were afflicted by armed conflicts, accounting for more than half of all war related deaths world-wide.

The consequences of these conflicts have seriously undermined Africa's efforts to ensure long-term stability, prosperity, human rights and gender equality for its peoples. Conflicts have changed in nature as interstate conflicts have given way to internal civil wars whose main victims are civilian populations, mostly women and children. Women become specific targets. Rape, forced pregnancies, sexual slavery and assault have also become deliberate instruments of war. Such instruments destroy the bonds which hold together communities together.

Understanding the causes of conflicts is critical to stopping and preventing war. The causes may be complex and country specific, and many involve long-term and short-term issues.

The paper is divided into V broad parts, with a general introduction:

**Part I** deals with the causes, characteristics and impacts of conflicts in Africa. It does not try to provide a detailed conflict analysis or summarize the already abundant literature on conflicts. Instead, it provides a general background to the reader by addressing key elements on which there is broad consensus.

**Part II** deals with the Impact of Armed Conflicts on children. It specifically address the question of child soldiers who are usually addressed in terms of children killing and being killed or injured in combat. There are clearly crucial factors, but they also underestimate the problem significantly because the ramifications are much broader.

**Part III** examines the "Post conflict situation." This part makes an observation that sustained peace and stability are not given in post-conflict situations. In many cases the political and social conditions remain fragile. Political dispute are not fully addressed, while warring factions are not always demilitarized.

**Part IV** looks at the process of “Reintegration”: the child soldier’s development will have been affected in many ways by his or her experience in armed conflict. This section acknowledges that the process is complex and should include a multitude of inter-related issues like – health and basic needs, psychological support, a family context, establishing positive relationships and opportunities for education and income generation.

**Part V** gives an overall summary of what happens to children and women in a conflict situation.

## **PART I**

### **HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF CONFLICTS IN AFRICA**

Understanding the causes, characteristics, and impact of conflicts in Africa is fundamental to resolving them. This section does not try to provide a detailed conflict analysis or summarize the already abundant literature of this topic. Instead, it provides a general background to the reader by addressing key elements on which there is broad consensus.

#### **Historical perspective**

Violent conflict is a worldwide and ancient phenomenon – and Africa is no exception. Over the past forty years, the continent has suffered a variety of conflicts:

- Wars of independence, particularly in lusophone countries, Namibia, and former Rhodesia; some of these wars have left deep scars on the social fabric, e.g., in Angola;
- Rebellions, which often start as local guerilla movements against central, often despotic, governments; in some cases the rebellions, succeed in overthrowing the governments.
- Interstate disputes, in spite of the efforts deployed by the Organization of African Unity following its 1964 resolution on the inviolability of existing borders.

During the Cold War, foreign intervention often fueled these conflicts. East and West competed for spheres of influence, waged war by proxy, and supported client states through financial, political, and military assistance, and sometimes with mercenary forces. These conflicts reflected global strategic concerns by non – African powers (particularly the control of the Horn of Africa and Cape maritime routes) much more than ideological considerations. At times regional powers played a destabilizing role, as South Africa did in the “frontline states” and in Angola (where it tried to prevent a takeover by the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola in 1975). Foreign interventions brought a new level of sophistication in weaponry (including tanks and aircraft): in the late 1980s arms transfers to Africa had reached about \$4 billion a year.

The end of the Cold War brought a general military disengagements of non-African powers in the early 1990s and, according to many observers, a considerable reduction (by a factor of 10 to 1) in arms transfers. Russia and Cuba could no longer afford African interventions. Western public opinion became reluctant to accept casualties in what were seen as postcolonial expeditions. Foreign military establishments recognized that guerilla warfare in a jungle, desert, or even an urban environment raised problems for modern forces, particularly within the context of instant media reporting.

In some cases, this disengagement helped to settle conflicts, as in Mozambique and Namibia. But the Cold War also left a bitter legacy that added to existing tensions and sources of conflict: deep internal divisions and sustained fighting (e.g., Angola); Cold War leaders with appalling governance and human rights records (e.g., Mobutu in Zaire, Mengistu in Ethiopia).

The 1990s saw the emergence and proliferation of new type of war. Most African conflicts in the 1990s continued (Angola, Sudan) or started (Sierra Leon, Congo-Brazzaville) as civil conflicts, which increased in intensity, progressively involved neighbouring countries and regional powers, and generally wrought havoc on the people. The recent war between Ethiopia and Eritrea, an interstate war waged by conventional forces along established frontlines, was an exception.

### **Causes of African internal conflicts**

Understanding the causes of conflicts is critical to stopping and preventing war. The causes may be complex and country specific, including long-term and short-term issues. And new factors tend to emerge during conflict (for example, grievances of those who have lost the most), adding to the initial causes. Each situation demands a detailed and specific conflict analysis. The following paragraphs outline some to the common risks across the continent.

#### ***Long-term causes***

These factors usually cannot be substantially modified in the short to medium term, but they can be managed to transform risks into opportunities. Typically these factors include:

- *History.* A rich history dating back to pre-colonial times, or to the anticolonial struggle and the formation of states, sometimes underlies local antagonisms and many explain the lack of the state's legitimacy in several countries. There are also a number of deep fault lines (religious, cultural, or economic) that run across the continent, such as those between Muslim and Christian and animist societies and between coastal and hinterland populations. Still, it is often the interpretations of history rather than history itself which is at the base of the conflict (e.g., in Rwanda).
- *Poverty, illiteracy, and unemployment.* Widespread poverty and inequality fuel a broad range of social tensions. Large-scale unemployment, combined with rapid

demographic growth, creates a large pool of idle young men with few prospects and little to lose. Illiterate, poor groups are easy targets for war recruiters and political extremists.

### *Short-term causes*

- *Exclusionary policies and discrimination.* In many African countries, large groups are excluded from political and economic life on regional, ethnic, or social grounds. Within the context of high ethnic and linguistic fragmentation, such policies kindle deep frustrations, particularly when combined with inequalities. In countries where one group is dominant, there may be attempts to oppress minorities, or even to commit genocide. Contrary to common belief, formal democratic processes, including free and fair elections, may not be enough to address these issues. Deliberately inclusive policies (and in some cases shrewd maneuvering) have proved themselves key to successful management of these kinds of tensions.
- *Mismanagement of economic rents.* In some countries, a small minority that controls the state (so called “patrimonial states”) appropriates economic rents linked to specific exports (such as oil, cocoa, timber, diamonds, gold). Combined with poor governance, corruption, and widespread poverty, this results in profound inequalities that trigger resentment and political instability. And economic failure usually leads to a “shrinking pie” effect. In this process, foreign investment may have an ambiguous impact when it aggravated the unequal distribution of economic resources across groups. Gaining and maintaining control over economic rents is often at the heart of conflicts.
- *Erosion of the state.* Poor governance, endemic corruption, and economic failure can weaken the state to the point that it gradually loses control over large stretches of territory. The absence of public authority and the widespread insecurity in these areas can easily degenerate into conflict. Typical steps in the erosion process include fiscal collapse, degradation of basic fiscal services, paralysis of the transport system, greater insecurity caused by the collapse of criminalization of the security forces, and market and state fragmentation. In some cases, however, the presence of a strong and centralized security apparatus may prevent or delay the collapse of a state.

In addition to governance issues, other factors may increase the risk of conflict:

- *Subregional instability.* Recent research shows that on average there is a 0.55 probability that a country neighbouring a conflict will also slide into war. Often, a large number of refugees in an area puts pressure on local natural resources, heightens social tensions, and creates instability in host communities. In addition, refugee camps may become havens for rebel movements, from where they launch attacks against government forces in their own country. This in turn may bring incursions of foreign troops into the host country, initiating a cycle of border incidents and fighting.

- *Easy access to small arms.* Since the end of the Cold War, small arms have become easily available at low cost from both regular army stocks and from the international market. This has dramatically increased the lethality of conflicts. Addressing this issue would require that the international community act forcefully in three main areas: First, access to armaments by non-conventional forces and oppressive or expansionist states should be restricted. Suppliers can often be identified, and the feasibility of applying diplomatic and economic sanctions should be explored. Second, the donor community should monitor the military expenditures of African states and interrupt subregional arms races through diplomatic and economic pressure. Third, the self-financing capacity of warring factions should be checked by controlling their trade of key commodities (e.g., oil, diamonds), (Michailof, Koster and Devietor 2002:2-4; Kinnock 2001:38-40)

## **PART II**

### **THE IMPACT OF ARMED CONFLICTS ON CHILDREN**

When armed conflicts occur, children and women are the principal victims. Children are killed, maimed, orphaned or separated from their families; boys are forced to bear arms and commit violent acts themselves. Girls and women are, exploited and sexually abused. It is children and women who suffer the most when schools are closed, clinics destroyed, fields sown with landmines and markets virtually bereft of goods. Those who survive the killing fields may die later for lack of food, water or experience lengthy separations from their families may be traumatized for years to come.

To many of Africa's children and women have experienced the horrors of total war, where combatants use weapons indiscriminately to terrorize civilians, impose their will and achieve their selfish ends, where accidental discriminations of race, class or ethnicity are cynically manipulated to determine who will live and who will die. In some of these wars, neutrality is not an option. Every man, woman and child is forced to take a side; and every man, woman and child is assigned to a particular group to be protected or to be destroyed. Youth, age and disability are no defense (UN Document A/51/306/Add.1:2)

#### **CHILD SOLDIERS**

The question of child soldiers is usually discussed in terms of children killing and being killed or injured in combat. These are clearly crucial factors, but they also understate the problem significantly because the ramifications are much broader. The use of child soldiers has many direct and incidental effects upon the children who are so used. But it also has impact on other children, on the families and communities from which they are recruited, and also on the post conflict society

Among the key issues which arise when children are recruited and used in hostilities are:

- Direct and indirect violations of the rights of the individual child soldier;
- Violations of the rights of other children;
- Implications for the ways in which conflicts are fought; and,
- Problems in ending the conflict and building a post-conflict society, including the demobilization and reintegration of child soldiers and soldiers recruited as children (Bennet, Gamba and van der Merwe 2000:7).

The deliberate use of very young people as soldiers is widespread. One component is the recruitment of under age boys to armies that are desperately short of manpower. Armies simply take young and younger conscripts because the supply of able-bodied young men of the right age is drying up, and young recruits are better than old ones. This is a common strategy in prolonged wars and is not the main phenomenon under consideration.

A second component is the deliberate recruitment of children, usually between the ages of about twelve and fifteen, but often younger, to serve as frontline soldiers. This phenomenon has received some attention from human rights organizations and psychologists; its wider social and military significance is out concern here. The best known child armies were in Mozambique and Liberia, but 3 000 children under sixteen (including 500 girls) also fought with the NRA in Uganda in the mid- 1980s and they are increasingly common throughout the continent, notably in Angola before the end of the Civil War in early 2002.

Child soldiers are preferred by many commanders for several reasons. African children are usually brought up to be obedient, and child soldiers can therefore be highly disciplined. They are also malleable; they lack inhibitions, and a sense of proportion, and so can be persuaded to carry out act of extreme violence. They have no responsibilities at home that may inhibit their commitment to fighting. They are less prone to contemplate dissertation and a return to a civilian life when bored as adult soldiers so often. Child soldiers are particularly terrifying when manning roadblocks because they combine total, arbitrary power with a lack of judgment – they may sort people for trivial reasons, or follow instructions to the letter without readiness to compromise. Children are used by some forces to execute prisoners, a task that adult soldiers do not like.

The issue of children has a major effect on military strategy; Children do not understand conventional military strategy and tend to treat war as a street game. Professional soldiers are frightened of fighting children because the children do not know when to stop, nor when they are in an untenable military position and should withdraw. In any engagement that approaches a conventional battle, child soldiers will simply be massacred, but in an irregular or surprise attack they can be devastating. Hence children are sometimes put in the vanguard.

In Liberia, the NPFL used children in the front line when attacking troops of the West African peacekeeping force, ECOMOG, in the belief that professional soldiers on a peacekeeping mission would not fire on children.

Perhaps the most significant fact about child soldiers is the ease with which they can be recruited especially from communities already disrupted by war. While a substantial minority of child soldiers have been forcibly recruited and brutalized, most are volunteers. They seek out a military life from a sense of adventure, having been socialized into violence from an early age or because they are looking for some stability and a sense of order in a disrupted life.

There can also be intense social pressures for them to participate, both from peers. Many orphans become camp followers to guerrilla forces and militias because they have no home to go to, and because they want to avenge the deaths of their parents; this is how the recruitment of the children to the Ugandan NRA began. It is then very tempting for commanders to assign them checkpoint, guard and finally combat duties. Children can also be recruited from communities where adults are unwilling to join up, perhaps because the adults know the likely consequences of warfare. This fact – the ease of recruiting children – is a genuine and ominous discovery in the development of military doctrine.

Finally, child soldiers are cheap. They do not need to be well paid, and need relatively little training. Many Liberian child soldiers were paid in drugs especially cocaine and marijuana. The social and psychological effects of the militarizations of children and childhood is not something that can be dealt with in a short paper like this one, but suffice to mention that abused and violent children are apt to turn into abusive and violent adults (Kaldor and Vashee 1997:320-2)

### **Violation of the rights of the individual child soldier**

Violations of the rights of the child soldiers take on a variety of forms. There is obviously the likelihood of death or injury as a result of participation in combat. Albeit limited, the evidence suggests that most frequent combat related injuries specific to child soldiers are loss of hearing, loss of sight and loss of limbs, all of which have permanent implications in relation to the future integration and perceived “value to society” of these children.

Non-combat death results in many child soldiers dying without ever seeing military action. Some die resisting recruitment; subsequently others are killed while trying to escape or are summarily executed for having made the attempt. “Toughening up” procedures even in regular government armed forces – and brutal punishment not infrequently prove fatal for children and adolescents. Child soldiers often succumb to the everyday vigours of military life, such as unsanitary conditions, diseases, malnutrition and exposure. Those who fall by the wayside on forced marches are left to die. Others, unable to stand the strain, end up killing themselves or dying from self-inflicted injuries.

Child soldiers are also often subject to non-combat related injuries not only those relating from beatings or other specific instances of ill-treatment or misadventure, but also the



longer term effects of the deprivation of nourishment, or of, for example, carrying heavy loads that can lead to bone deformation.

Child soldiers are in general exposed to health risks, for example, malnutrition, skin and respiratory diseases, malaria and sexual exploitation (of both sexes) that results in the particular hazards of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS. For girls, sexual exploitation is often institutionalized – they are frequently required to provide sexual services, as well as to fight. This carries the risk of pregnancy leading either to abortion or to childbirth; a decision in which the mother frequently has no say.

The mental, emotional and psychological effects of committing atrocities designed to break the will of recruits have profound implications for child soldiers and their rehabilitation and reintegration into society. If captured, child soldiers face likely exposure to torture and other ill-treatment, even to summary execution and, in the long-term liability to criminal prosecution, including for war crimes or treason, and, if found guilty, to severe penalties. Children, even when originally abducted or forcibly recruited into armed opposition groups, have been charged with treason, abducted or forcibly recruited into armed opposition groups, have been charged with treason, an offence for which the death penalty remains the norm rather than the exception. Other violations that child soldiers may have to face, include:

- Induction into drug and /or alcohol abuse;
- Separation from family;
- Arbitrary detention; and
- Deprivation of education (Brett 2000:7-8)

#### The Gracia Machel Report on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children.

As highlighted in the seminal UN Study on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children by Gracia Machel, the involvement of children in conflict has increased in recent decades due to the length of many conflicts, the blurring of civilian and military targets, and the proliferation of small arms (Findings, World Bank 2002:1). Machel's final Report sets out the findings and recommendations and used the Convention on the Rights of the Child throughout her work as a guiding source of operative, principles and standards. The Convention on the Rights of the Child represents a new, multidisciplinary approach to protecting children. It demonstrates the under dependence of all children's rights to the activities of a whole host of actors at all levels. In accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child the report uses the term "child" to include everyone under the age of 18.

In the process of her work, Machel identified a number of particular concerns in addition to those identified in paragraph nine of resolution 48/157 of the U.N, including: the changing patterns of conflict; specific impacts on girls and the children of minority and indigenous groups; economic embargoes; rape and other forms of gender-related violence and sexual exploitation; torture; the inadequate provision of education, health and nutrition and displaced children and other children at particular risk; and the inadequate

implementation of international human rights and humanitarian law. Accordingly, with the co-operation of relevant inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations and individual experts, a programme of research into these issues was undertaken through the preparation of twenty-five thematic papers and field – based case studies.

For the purpose of this brief paper, Machel's report was very revealing: it states that armed conflicts across and between communities result in massive levels of destruction; physical human, moral and cultural. Not only are large numbers of children killed and injured, but also countless others grow up deprived of their material and emotional needs, including the structures that give meaning to social and cultural life. The entire fabric of their societies – their homes, schools, health systems and religious institutions – are torn to pieces.

Further, war violates every right of a child – the right to life, the right to be with family and community, the right to health, the right to the development of the personality and the right to be nurtured and protected. Many of today's conflicts last the length of a "childhood", meaning that from birth to early childhood, children will experience multiple and accumulative assaults. Disrupting the social networks and primary relationships that support children's physical, emotional, moral, cognitive and social development in this way, and for this duration can have profound physical and psychological implications.

In countless cases, the impact of armed conflict on children's lives remains invincible. The origin of the problems of many children who have been affected by conflicts is obscured. The children themselves may be removed from the public, living in institutions or, as is true of thousands of unaccompanied and orphaned children, exist as street children or become victims of prostitution. Children who have lost parents often experience humiliation, rejection and discrimination. For years, they may suffer in silence as their self-esteem crumbles away. Their insecurity and fear cannot be measured (UN Document A/51/306 and Add 1 op cit).

### **The Impact on Post-conflict situation**

If large numbers of children have been involved in hostilities over a prolonged period, their involvement in the conflict becomes a normal way of life and it may be hard for them to envisage an end to the conflict, let alone a role for themselves in the post conflict society, since their identities are completely bound up with the conflict and with being fighters. Particular issues include:

- The problem of disarming, and of reintegration into society and adhering to civilian, peacetime values remain serious concerns. It is often extremely difficult, to reunite children who have committed atrocities with their families and to reintegrate them into the community. It is even more complex to reintegrate girls with children or those known to have been involved in sexual relationships;

- Separating the “child” from the “soldier” is not only a problem for children themselves, but also for others who have to deal with them, including regional or international peacekeepers;
- Children have to deal with the loss of status, and of physical, economic and other power without a gun, especially where the economy is in poor shape because of prolonged conflict;
- The lack of education and vocational training (even perhaps a lack of knowledge about the family’s traditional means of livelihood) hampers efforts to reconstruct post-conflict, societies;
- The long-term health implications of the injuries, diseases substance abuse to which child soldiers are typically exposed, especially HIV/AIDS, loss of limb, and hearing and eyesight impairment are, at the very least, a daunting task (Brett 200:9).

### **Traditional African Society**

One of the most characteristic facet of contemporary wars in Africa is that many of them are fought by young people, and children are increasingly becoming frontline fighters. This is a wholly new phenomenon which promises to change the nature of warfare, with profound consequences for the ability to resolve conflicts and demilitarize the continent.

Few African societies have any tradition of child soldiers. Fighting was the task chiefly or exclusively for young adult males. In many societies, notably pastoralists in East and North-East Africa, age-grade systems existed under which boys graduated to a “waviour” age grade, usually in their late teens. Under certain circumstances, initiation into this age grade might occur young, so that boys in tier early or mid-teens would become waviours. However, this was a departure from the norm, and more importantly, those young males were expected to fights as adults, even though under Western conceptions of adulthood they would still qualify as children. The notion of a “child waviour” in an African age-grade society would be a contradiction.

Children participated in pre-colonial armies as scouts and camp-followers, sometimes with specific duties assigned such as carrying weapons and ammunition for their elders. Children were not removed from war, but neither were they fighters. Moreover, the military technology of the period required physical strength to be used effectively. Firearms, whose effectiveness is not related to the strength of the gunman, were too expensive to be entrusted to children. It is the availability of light, easy to use automatic weapons that has made child combat a possibility (Kaldor and Vashee 1997:318-9, op. cit). The proliferation of and illicit trafficking in small arms are widely recognized as two of the biggest challenges faced by Africa. The spread of small arms is directly linked to high levels of crime, conflict, instability and underdevelopment (Chimanikire 2001:6)

## **PART III**

### **POST CONFLICT SITUATION**

Civil wars always end, but they usually restart. Globally, with the first ten years of the end of a conflict, 31% of them have resumed. African conflicts are even more prone to restart than the global average: half of African peace restoration last less than a decade. Thus, while for those African countries currently at the task of reaching peace may seem enormous; the harder task is probably not to reach peace but to sustain it (Bigombe, Collier and Sambanis, 2000:353).

An analysis of African conflicts should ideally entail an understanding of the post conflict structures resulting from the responses to the conflicts. This is a very important issue especially in Africa. The post-conflict structures that result are inspired and influenced by the type of response to the conflict. At the same time, certain responses such as peace agreements might generate a particular kind of post conflict structure. The relationship between these two can lead to useful insights; These include how the conflict is related to post conflict structures such as the restructuring of the state and its institutions, among them constitution building. It might point to issues on governance and causes of conflict (Mwaigiru, 2001:5)

It should be understood that post conflict situations are complex, and intervention cannot take place using standard approaches and instruments. Stakes, as well as risks, are high, needs are immense, and capacities are limited. And speed is key, since peace dividends are essential for conflict-affected groups to regain hope and work toward consolidating stability. International intervention in these situations is challenging and must be based on a broadly shared strategic framework. This section proposes a number of elements for such a framework.

#### **Peace and Stability as the main objectives**

Sustained peace and social stability are not given in post-conflict situations. In many cases the political and social conditions remain fragile. Political disputes are not fully addressed, while warring factions are not always demilitarized. Authorities often lack the capacity, and sometimes the legitimacy, to revive the economy and address the most urgent needs. External intervention may be critical in preventing conflicts from re-igniting.

External intervention must be aimed primarily at consolidating peace and stability. While the ultimate objective is poverty reduction and sustained economic development, peace and stability are prerequisites for any other goals – and in the aftermath of a conflict their consolidation must be an objective in itself, rather than a positive by-product of other initiatives. This requires intervening across a broad range of activities – political, military, economic, humanitarian. For the development community, the focus should be twofold:

- *Address short-term issues.* That may cause instability, often by strengthening governance mechanisms (both by increasing capacity and ensuring inclusiveness) and revitalizing the economy.
- *Work on the causes.* Of the conflict, and in particular help improve living standards, with special attention to the specific political economy.

In some cases this objective may be at odds with traditional poverty alleviation approaches; but, without peace and stability, there can be no effective poverty reduction. For instance, reforms that are usually critical for reducing poverty (such as reducing the size of an overstaffed civil service) may jeopardize peace prospects, and hence may be inadvisable. Conditionality should be adjusted to the political economy of the post-conflict country.

Stability should be understood within its regional context. Civil conflicts tend to spill across borders, endangering growth prospects in neighbouring countries. Addressing the regional dimension of conflict is therefore critical. When a conflict is at risk of spreading, a determined containment strategy may be called for, if feasible. Economic intervention alone, however, is not enough and must be part of a broader effort, including a strong political and possibly military commitment. In this regard, regional organizations (OAU, ECOWAS, SADC) can play a crucial role.

Expectations should be managed. Although economic assistance can contribute significantly to peace and stability, it cannot ensure it. Other factors will be critical, many of which are beyond the scope of aid agencies. Specific outcomes can be achieved, but reconciliation and the overall restoration of a solid social fabric will require time and number of inputs that economic assistance alone cannot provide. Aid can only be one element of a broader strategy (Michailof, Kostner and Devictor, op.cit. 11)

## **DEMOBILIZATION**

Demobilization may refer to a formal exercise or a variety of informal occasions. Formal demobilization, including for child soldiers, usually follows a peace agreement but may also occur as part of a military restructuring. Informal occasions include instances where child soldiers escape from or are released by their armed group, whether spontaneously or because of advocacy or other circumstances. For example, child soldiers found as prisoners of war have been demobilized. Informal occasions also include gaining the agreement of a particular armed group to release child soldiers during an ongoing conflict. Such opportunities can be developed but require advance program planning.

Demobilization may be involuntary for child soldiers, and they may fear the transition from military to civilian life and an unknown future. During this kind of transition, it is important to gain the support and encouragement of military and civilian officials, as well as families and communities. Former child soldiers themselves can play a valuable role in counseling their peers.

**Including all child soldiers in peace accords and demobilization processes.**

Early advocacy is essential to generate political attention and commitment to child soldiers. Silence on the issue and a lack of political will may obliterate the issue of child soldiers and their exclusion from peace processes. In addition, political and military authorities often limit programs to “official, adult combatants.” In El Salvador the government insisted that support to ex-combatants was intended for “citizens,” meaning those eighteen years or older. A late negotiation resulted in some of those sixteen years and older being included in a land credit program, and proposals were advanced for education or training for some of those fifteen or sixteen years old. No provisions were made for those under fifteen. Likewise, the UN peacekeeping mission in Angola, following the example of Mozambique, tried to limit its mandate and budget to the demobilization of soldiers fifteen years and older. This criterion ultimately was not enforced, but other debates followed.

Determining a child soldier as under eighteen years was finally accepted as national law; but there was intense debate concerning from which date to count someone as being under eighteen years. Most demobilization programs take the date of a peace accord as a practical point from which to determine an under age soldier. But arguments by military officials in Angola resulted in a compromise: “the calendar year of demobilization,” more than a year after the peace agreement, was adopted as the baseline for determining who was underage. This resulted in thousands of child soldiers “ageing out” of support programs.

Child soldiers have also been excluded from peace accords and demobilization programs because their status often hides them. If the term soldier is only understood to mean combatant, or if a peace agreement only refers to the demobilization of combatants, many children and youths, especially girls, serving in so-called support functions will be excluded.

While international law now establishes eighteen years as the minimum age for involvement in conflict, age criteria are artificial to the actual experience of children as soldiers. For socio-cultural reasons, many child soldiers may not know their age, and physical judgments are often inaccurate. Child soldier programs must be sensitive to local social and cultural conceptions of children and youths, their role in society, and stages of development and responsibility. For example, program practitioners in Angola and El Salvador usefully adopted the terms “underage soldier” and “youth combatant” to avoid emotional debates over the term “child” and to clarify understandings about child soldiers.

In view of the duration of many conflicts, those who may be a few years more than eighteen at the time of a peace accord or demobilization exercise will have spent their developing years as a soldier. Like their younger peers, they will have been deprived of the normal skill development and moral socialization gained from families and communities.

On the other hand, many child soldiers see their participation as equal to that of the adults and want similar recognition in a demobilization exercise. While attention to the special needs of child soldiers in demobilization programs is vital, questions of age underline the need to see reintegration holistically for a range of war affected youth.

*Advocacy – the need for specific and persistent actions on child soldiers.*

The exclusion of some child soldiers from demobilization programs because of age, gender, or function can in part be addressed by assuring inclusive, community-based reintegration strategies. But the risk of child soldiers being excluded by demobilization plans raises again the importance of advocacy.

Child soldiers want to be recognized and included in normal demobilization programs. When child soldiers are excluded, resentment and a sense of abandonment lead some to return to violence as a way of improving their lives. Former child soldiers in El Salvador, for example, feel betrayed by the demobilization program and by their former commanders.

For others, recognition plays an important protection role. In Uganda, the security clearance and document that former child soldier receive gives them the confidence to return to their communities without suspicion. In an informal demobilization in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, former child soldiers asked for demobilization documentation in order to protect themselves from re-recruitment or from being charged as deserters.

*Appropriate demobilization benefits packages for child soldiers.*

Looking to the Mozambique experience, where child soldiers expressed resentment about being excluded from demobilization exercises, program partners in Angola insisted that all child soldiers access demobilization benefits. Planning thus included that benefits could be claimed and processed at the local level as well as through the formal demobilization process.

While ensuring benefits equity between child and adult demobilizing soldiers, there should be recognition too of the special needs of child soldiers and supports appropriate to their community situation. In some cases, benefits packages for child soldiers have been seen as way of honoring their participation, while ignoring justice for the victims. In another turn, benefits (such as food supplements and indemnity payments) may not play the reintegration role that humanitarian programs hoped for: in a number of cases, families and foster caregivers rejected child soldiers once their benefits package ran out.

Although most child soldiers want to be treated in the same way as adult soldiers, they often lack civilian life experience in gaining the social, cultural and livelihood skills necessary to tier future. In most demobilization exercises, child soldiers should receive a benefits package equitable to that of demobilizing adults – but program planning must harmonize benefits packages with reintegration strategies.

**Planning, resources, and coordination**

Advance planning is vital to demobilization and reintegration. In many instances, peace negotiations and demobilization planning proceed outside the humanitarian programs had to rush to meet demobilization plans and agreements.

The demobilization of child soldiers must correspond with adult demobilization processes and emphasize community rebuilding. Program planning should reflect analysis of local circumstances of child recruitment and the experiences and roles of child soldiers in a country experience. For example, as part of growing up, have children participated within an armed movement? were they forcibly recruited? Are they forcibly recruited? Are they known to have committed atrocities?

***Coordination and Institutional issues***

Unfortunately, leadership and coordination roles in child demobilization often suffer because of confusion and disagreement among agencies. Given the complexity of military, humanitarian, and child-specific aspects to demobilization, it is usual that a variety of agencies with some degree of overlapping mandates be present. Despite this, the locus of coordination and policy leadership has been well served by UN agencies, especially in regard to the persistent advocacy necessary at multiple political levels. Thus, effective coordination between UN offices with overall political, military, and humanitarian roles and those with child specific roles and expertise is essential.

In Angola, program partners created a technical coordination committee to focus on issues for the child soldiers program distinct from, but related to, the more politicized full demobilization exercise and peace process. An important characteristic of the coordination committee was its inclusiveness. Under joint coordination office, membership included the government social affairs ministry, representatives of both parties to the conflict, international non-governmental organizations, and local associations.

Coordination is also essential for the extensive logistics aspects of family tracing, reunification, and follow-up support to child soldiers. Representatives of each partner in the Angola technical coordination committee met weekly as a provincial – level committee. These weekly meetings helped coordinate family reunification details, developing solutions for child soldiers whose families could not be traced, and creating individually appropriate education or income generating opportunities of the child soldiers.



## PART IV

### REINTEGRATION

The child soldier's development will have been affected in many ways by his or her experience in armed conflict. The context of their family and community life will likely have changed because of increased poverty, the death of family members and friends, displacement, and perhaps resettlement. This raises the question of what is meant by the terms reintegration, reinsertion, recovery, and rehabilitation. Reintegration to what? The reality is a matter of adjusting to new circumstances. The process is complex and should include a multitude of inter-related issues: health and basic needs, psychosocial support, a family context, establishing positive relationships, and opportunities for education and income generation. The combination of these elements – balancing social and economic factors – is essential. Experience shows three things fundamental to successful reintegration:

- 1) Family reunification and inclusive community environment
- 2) Psychosocial support
- 3) Opportunities for education and livelihood.

#### **Family reunification and community-based networks**

The demobilization chapter has shown that family reunification or alternative family-based living arrangements, rather than centers, are the most effective reintegration strategy. Experience consistently demonstrates that family and community relationships are the most important factors in the reintegration of child soldiers.

The prospect of former child soldiers living independently or having children, with or without a partner, must be addressed proactively in reintegration programs. Of the Angolan former child soldiers living “alone”, many have new families because they married and/or had children during the conflict. Among child soldiers in the El Salvador follow-up survey, 56 percent reported that their family situation changed after the war because of new ties. Almost half of the former child soldiers, 47.9 percent, were married or with a partner, and 58.7 percent had children.

One of the most important support projects in Angola was a “self-building project,” in which former child soldiers and their new families were supported in home construction. An essential project component of community integration was that either family or community leaders gave the land or the new homes.

This is not to say that family reunifications always go smoothly. Staff working with child soldiers needs to develop family mediation and community mobilization skills. A demobilized child soldier is no longer the child he or she was before recruitment, and both the child family has adjusted to new roles, expectations, and hardships. In Angola, 16 percent of the cases followed up had left their care situation after reunification. Some moved to an urban area as a means of self-protection from re-recruitment or to access vocational training, but others moved due to family relationship problems.

There may also be concerns about whether a family or community will accept a former child soldier, especially if child soldiers have been involved in killings or rape. In Northern Uganda, families feared that reunited child soldiers would attract the attention of rebels in future attacks. Children themselves in Uganda note the importance of cleansing ceremonies so that their communities do not view them as *cen* or “contaminated.” Supporting these socio-cultural processes is especially important for girls who have been forced to serve as “wives” to rebels. These girls and their children may face the long-term concern of being considered a poor marriage prospect.

On the other hand, the concern that former child soldiers will be refused by their families or communities can be overstated. In Angola, practitioners quickly learned that families recognized that acts committed by child soldiers were the responsibility of the adults who recruited them. Among former child soldiers followed up in El Salvador, 98.5 percent reported that their family relations were good or very good, and only 6.6 percent reported that they had difficulties being accepted by the community upon demobilization.

Indeed, the reintegration of child soldiers faces a challenging process of reconciliation and mediation. Family and community reintegration takes time and must allow for an appropriate process of acceptance and new roles. The role of traditional ceremonies and special attention for girls is discussed further below.

Community mobilization is as important as the more technical tracing and logistics of family reunification. Lessons learned emphasize that post-conflict recovery must emphasize psychological support activities as well as physical needs.

Former child soldiers cite many obstacles to reinsertion of formal schooling, including:

- They cannot attend school during formal school hours because they must earn their own income or contribute to the family livelihood.
- They or their families cannot afford the school fees or expenses of uniforms and supplies.
- Education facilities were destroyed during the conflict, or there is a lack of teachers in their community.
- They have difficulty getting documentation for enrollment, or school authorities would not allow older former child soldiers to join the same level as younger children.
- They feel shame or resentment about going to school with much younger children. (cf. Verhey. 2001:7-19) (see Addison 2001:1-18)

## **PART V**

### **CONCLUSION**

When armed conflicts occur, children and women are the principal victims. Children are killed, maimed, orphaned or separated from their families; boys are forced to bear arms and commit violent acts themselves. Girls and women are exploited and sexually abused. It is children and women who suffer the most when schools are closed, clinics destroyed, fields sown with landmines, and markets virtually bereft of goods. Those who survive the killing fields may die later for lack of food, water or basic medicines. Those who survive even that but witness killing, maiming, burning and looting or experience lengthy separations from their families – may be traumatized for years to come.

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