

CHILDREN IN ARMED CONFLICT: PHILIPPINES

Processes and Lessons Learned | 2009-2017

**Action Plan on the Recruitment and
Use of Children in Armed Conflict**

United Nations and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front

FOREWORD

The successful implementation of the UN-MILF Action Plan was a significant milestone in the international community's global commitment to fulfil the rights of children in situations of armed conflict. The eight-year implementation started in 2009 and ended in July 2017 with the disengagement of nearly 2000 children and the delisting of the MILF-BIAF from the annexes of the UN Secretary General's Report.

Reaching its completion was challenging and required tremendous effort by all involved.

I am pleased to acknowledge the commitment of the Government of the Philippines and the MILF leadership toward ensuring compliance with the provisions of the Action Plan. Particular appreciation is also owed to the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict for its oversight and guidance, and to the United Nations in the Philippines. We also recognize the large number of our civil society partners in Mindanao who worked tirelessly on the ground to achieve the results highlighted here. This report acknowledges their special contributions.

This report is a valuable resource, locally and internationally, for understanding how to effectively implement a plan that has successfully stopped and now prevents recruitment and use of children by armed groups.

However, while we celebrate this success, we must not forget that armed groups in Mindanao and many other locations around the world are still recruiting and using children in their struggles. I hope this report helps to inspire the leadership of such groups to take action, cooperate on a common plight, and ensure that all children are able to realize their rights to live, develop and prosper, free from the violence, distress and trauma of armed conflict.

Lotta Sylwander

Representative

UNICEF Philippines

Statement by the UN Resident Coordinator

It is with great pride today that we acknowledge the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) for discontinuing the recruitment and use of children as soldiers in the armed conflict in Mindanao. This is the result of many years of efforts and leadership by the MILF and support from the United Nations in the Philippines and its Country Task-Force on Monitoring and Reporting.

The MILF was listed in the Annual Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict in 2003 for reported and verified cases of recruitment and use of children. Such activities are recognized as constituting one of the six grave violations against children as identified and condemned by the UN Security Council. However, throughout subsequent years, significant steps were taken by the MILF leadership to end these practices. These efforts and steps included an Action Plan in 2009 renouncing the recruitment and use of children and a road map to completion in 2014. This resulted in raised awareness and knowledge, established a system of buy-in and accountability, and ultimately led to the disassociation of 1,869 children previously associated with the MILF.

To honour and celebrate the efforts leading to the removal of the MILF from the Annual Report of the Secretary-General in 2017, this report documents the many crucial steps, efforts and lessons learned. We hope this report will encourage other armed groups, both here and in other countries, to consider the consequences of child recruitment and recognize the possibilities and opportunities for ending the practice.

I wish to once again congratulate the MILF for completing the Action Plan and for successfully removing itself from being listed as a party in the Secretary-General's annual report. With support from the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Children and Armed Conflict, the United Nations team in the Philippines will continue to support efforts to protect children from such grave violations and stands ready to assist in the reintegration of children into their communities. This pledge reaffirms the UN in the Philippines's commitment to protecting and prioritizing the wellbeing of children nationwide.

Ola Almgren

UN Resident Coordinator

Philippines

Statement by the Chairman of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front

Assalamu alaykum wa rahmatullahi wa barakatuh!

The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) is committed to ensuring that no children are associated with its armed forces. The final dissociation of 1,869 of our children demonstrated our commitment to that international norm. Our children are our future and we must invest in their education and upbringing and protect them from the effects of conflict.

I would like to thank the UN-MILF Action Plan members, the field commanders and their elements, parents and everyone in the community for all their efforts to identify, register and support the dissociation of those children and for contributing to the MILF recognition and de-listing as a party associating children with its armed forces. I would like to thank the local and international organizations for their support. I would especially like to thank UNICEF.

If this document can contribute to protecting children in the world then I am thankful. I pray that peace, progress, and justice will reign in our homeland.

Thank you and wassalam.

Al Haj Murad Ebrahim

MILF Chairman

Statement by the Presidential Adviser on Peace, Reconciliation and Unity

I would like to congratulate the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) for this comprehensive documentation and report on the implementation of the United Nations-Moro Islamic Liberation Front (UN-MILF) Action Plan on the Recruitment of and Use of Children in Armed Conflict.

I also give my utmost gratitude to all the people involved in working together on the creation and implementation of this Action Plan and transforming the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region into a community in which children can grow and live in accordance with the deepest values of peace. This achievement is possible because you chose the path of peace and you chose to continue the journey, no matter the difficulties or setbacks.

We are one with you as we continue toward a brighter and peaceful Bangsamoro where parents no longer fear for the safety of their children and where children live freely and develop their full potentials – so they are not just free to dream but also possess the opportunities to fulfil their dreams.

The Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process (OPAPP) is committed to upholding human rights and International Humanitarian Law, particularly the protection of rights and promotion of interests of vulnerable groups such as children in situations of armed conflict. As part of the Inter-Agency Committee on Children in Armed Conflict (IAC-CIAC), OPAPP shall continue to advocate for the prevention of the involvement of children in armed conflict.

To this end, the Philippines has established the Monitoring, Reporting and Response System for Grave Child Rights Violations in Situations of Armed Conflict (MRRS-GCRVSAC) in compliance with UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution Nos. 1539 (s. 2004) and 1612 (s. 2005). This system was created as the monitoring arm within the CAAC Programme Framework and the primary objective of protecting children in situations of armed conflict, preventing related child rights violations and ensuring the provision of appropriate and timely responses to such violations.

Moving forward in the Normalization process, this report serves as an important contribution to the design of future interventions for vulnerable groups, including disengaged children who have a right to sustained disengagement and the prevention of recruitment of other children by other armed groups.

The knowledge gained, and lessons learned from this process will serve as an inspiration, not only to the Bangsamoro but also to other communities and countries experiencing conflict. We have indeed demonstrated that transformation and peace is possible through collective efforts.

Secretary Carlito G. Galvez, Jr.

Presidential Adviser on Peace, Reconciliation and Unity

Philippines



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This document would not have been possible without the vital contributions from the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, the Chairman and members of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front Action Plan Panels, the Office of the Presidential Adviser of the Peace Process, the Bangsamoro Development Agency, Members of the Country Task Force on Monitoring and Reporting in the Philippines, Office of the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, United Nations and NGO partners. A sincere thank you to current and past UNICEF Philippines' Child Protection staff, Natalie McCauley Lamin, Leon Dominador Fajardo, Patrick Halton and Rodeliza Barrientos-Casado for their valuable insights and inputs. Finally, a special thank you to the boys and girls who have been disengaged for their courage and inspiration.

For further information on the UN-MILF Action Plan Documentation and the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism in the Philippines, please contact:

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Cover photo credit: © UNICEF Philippines/2017/Maitem

Cover photo: A child attends a disengagement ceremony held in one of the base camps of the BIAF in Maguindanao. © UNICEF Philippines/2017/Maitem

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AFP	Armed Forces of the Philippines
AOR	Area of Responsibility
ARMM	Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao
BBL	Bangsamoro Basic Law
BOL	Bangsamoro Organic Law
BDA	Bangsamoro Development Agency
BIAF	Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces
BIFF	Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters
BIWAB	Bangsamoro Islamic Women Auxiliary Brigade
CAAC	Children and Armed Conflict
CAB	Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro
CTFMR	Country Task Force on Monitoring and Reporting
C4D	Communication for Development
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration
FAB	Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro
GPH	Government of the Philippines
IEC	Information, Education and Communication
KAP	Knowledge, Attitudes and Practice
MILF	Moro Islamic Liberation Front
MNLF	Moro National Liberation Front
MOA-AD	Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain
MRM	Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OPAPP	Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process
SGO	Supplemental General Order
SRSG	Special Representative of the Secretary-General
UN	United Nations
UNSG	UN Secretary-General

CHRONOLOGY OF SIGNIFICANT EVENTS RELATED TO THE UN-MORO ISLAMIC LIBERATION FRONT ACTION PLAN

November 2003	MILF-BIAF listed in annexes of UNSG's report for recruiting and using children
December 2005	BIAF Code of Conduct, General Order No.1 issued
14 June 2006	BIAF General Order No.2 issued
March 2007	MRM established, CTFMR convened, ¹ engagement with the MILF initiated
14 April 2007	Joint Communiqué between UNICEF and MILF signed
December 2008	Visit of the SRSG-CAAC
1 August 2009	UN-MILF Action Plan signed
20 January 2010	BIAF Supplemental General Order issued
1 August 2010	Action Plan extended
March - December 2010	Registration of children associated with the BIAF/BIWAB
August 2011	Escalation of hostilities; Chairman of the MILF Action Plan Panel replaced
April 2011	Visit of the SRSG-CAAC
15 July 2011	New Chairman of MILF Action Plan Panel appointed
31 July 2011	Action Plan expires
15 October 2012	Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro signed
29 April 2013	Action Plan extended
May 2013	Joint Office of the SRSG-CAAC and UNICEF HQ mission to the Philippines; Operational Plan developed
September 2013	Zamboanga crisis ²
October 2013	Bohol earthquake
8 November 2013	Typhoon Haiyan Level 3 emergency
January 2014	Chairman of MILF Action Plan Panel resigns
27 March 2014	Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro signed
May 2014	UNICEF HQ mission to the Philippines; Action Plan Roadmap developed
July 2014	New Chairman of MILF Action Plan Panel and members appointed
6 August 2014	Action Plan focal points appointed in 7 front and 31 base commands in fulfilment of benchmark 1.1 of the roadmap
14 August 2014	Action Plan Roadmap endorsed by MILF leadership

¹Efforts by the UN to establish a global monitoring and reporting mechanism (MRM) to gather and document information on grave violations against children by parties to conflict culminated in the adoption of UN Security Council resolution 1612 in 2005. In 2007, the Philippines was among five additional country situations requested to implement the MRM. The UN Country Task Force on Monitoring and Reporting (CTFMR), co-led by the Resident Coordinator and UNICEF, was set up in the same year.

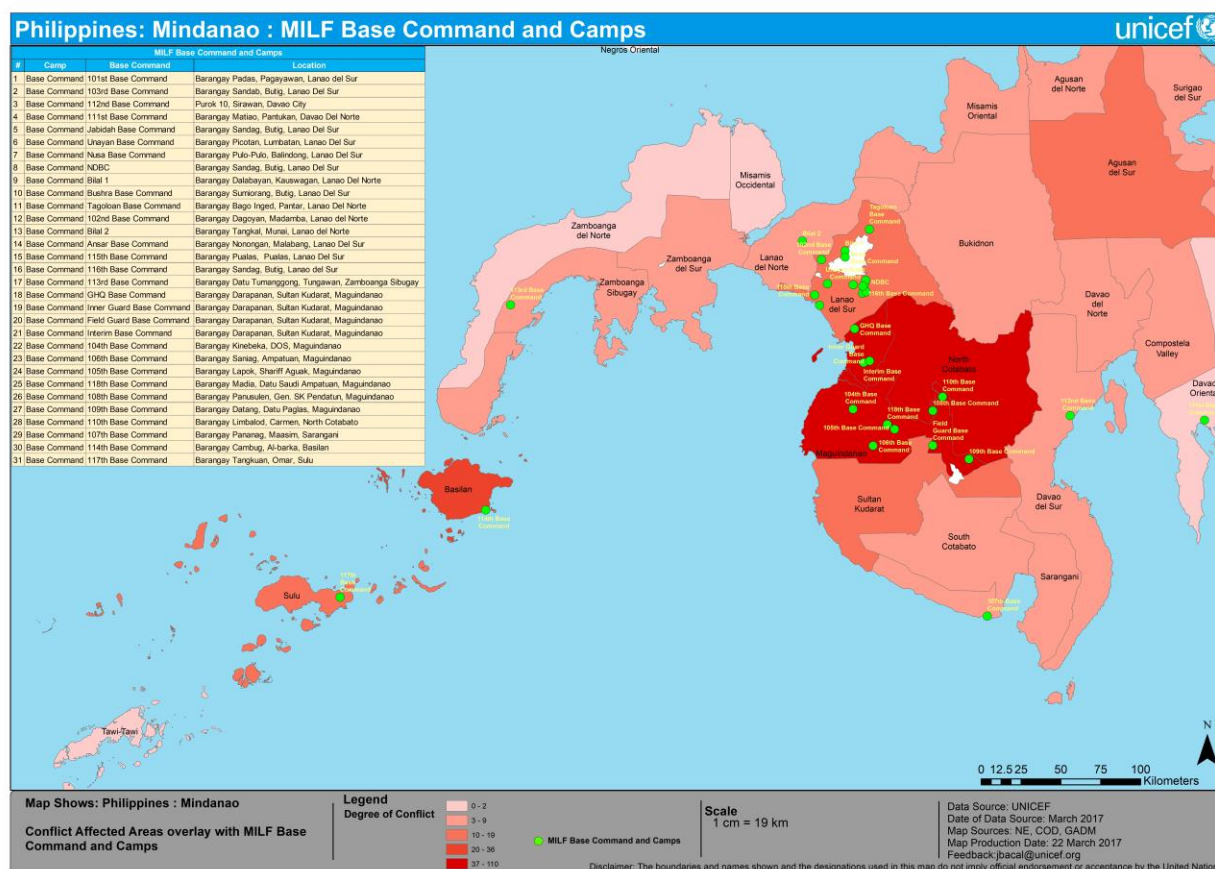
² The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) signed a peace agreement with the Government in 1996 after more than 20 years of fighting for Bangsamoro independence. In early 2000, however, tensions with the Government resurged as some members of the group began to view the implementation of the peace agreement as flawed. That resulted in the fractionalization of the group as well as sporadic clashes with the Government. In September 2013, the Misuari faction of the group launched an attack in Zamboanga city. The armed engagement with government security forces lasted 20 days, killing 7 civilians, wounding 48 others and forcibly displacing more than 118,000; United Nations. Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in the Philippines (S/2017/294), issued 5 April 2017.

September 2014	List of MILF front and base commands shared with UNICEF and facilitation of unhindered access guaranteed in fulfilment of benchmark 2.1 of the roadmap
September – October 2014	Code of Conduct/SGO displayed in fronts, bases, military camps and MILF communities in fulfilment roadmap benchmark 1.2
23 September – December 2014	Front and base commanders, ground commanders and officers of BIAF/BIWAB oriented to fulfil benchmark 3.1 of the roadmap
January – December 2015	“Children, Not Soldiers” campaign designed, launched and rolled-out in fulfilment of benchmark 5 of the roadmap
8 January 2015	Directive issued by BIAF Chief of General Staff reminding forces’ compliance with Code of Conduct and SGO
January 2015	Mamasapano encounter ³
May 2015 – February 2016	Series of public events led by base commanders and signing of public declarations on non-recruitment and use of children
October 2015	Four-step process for the identification and disengagement of children proposed by base commanders and BIWAB battalion commanders and endorsed by BIAF Chief of General Staff
November 2015	Joint Office of the SRSR-CAAC and UNICEF HQ mission to the Philippines
12 December 2015	Command Order issued to all fronts and bases to comply with guidelines on the identification and disengagement of children
December 2015 – May 2016	Action Plan messages systematically reinforced and re-echoed down the command structure and to the communities by the BIAF in fulfilment of benchmark 4 of the roadmap
March - May 2016	MILF Action Plan Task Forces for identification of children appointed and trained
April – July 2016	Four-step process tested in two base commands culminating in the disengagement of 178 children
May 2016	CTFMR Working Group on Identification and Disengagement of Children established
June- December 2016	“Children, Not Soldiers” campaign phase 2 rolled out
August 2016-March 2017	Identification, validation, orientation and disengagement of children in all front and base commands conducted and completed in fulfilment of benchmark 2 of the roadmap
August 2016	Assessment and design of a community-based normalisation programme of support for children disengaged from the BIAF/BIWAB and at-risk(re) children associated with armed groups
19 December 2014 – 27 March 2017	Base command quarterly progress reports submitted by all bases in fulfilment of benchmark 3.2 of the roadmap
28 March 2017	New Command Order issued directing all commanders and officers of the BIAF/BIWAB to prevent the association and re-association of children disengaged and children at-risk by instituting regular monitoring and screening of troops and elements, and ensuring accountability in cases of non-compliance
July 2017	MILF-BIAF delisted from annexes of UN SG’s report

³ On 25 January 2015, a special action force of the National Police conducted a law enforcement operation in the Mamasapano municipality of Maguindanao Province to arrest two high-profile militants who had been under the protection of the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF). The MILF was not informed that the operation would take place and engaged the special action force in a firefight, which resulted in the death of 6 civilians, 44 members of the special action force and 18 MILF fighters. Following the Mamasapano incident, which led to a large military offensive in February 2015, clashes between the Armed Forces and the BIFF increased significantly in the first half of 2015, with military operations subsequently conducted by the Armed Forces throughout 2016; United Nations. Report of the Secretary-General (S/2017/294), issued 5 April 2017.

MAP OF THE MORO ISLAMIC LIBERATION FRONT BASE COMMANDS AREA OF RESPONSIBILITY

The UN-MILF Action Plan was implemented across seven front commands and 31 base commands of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front-Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces. The points on the following map are markers for each of the 31 base commands; it does not represent the exact location of the base command. Each base command Area of Responsibility (AOR) may spread across several barangays (smallest unit of administration of Philippine Government) or even straddle two provinces. The AOR corresponds to the location of the main base camp and the satellite camps of its sub-units.



PREFACE

‘Long ago, we were victimized by the Government through oppression. Parents defended their rights and their land. The children also helped their parents in defending their rights. The children also experienced harassment from the military. Because of this, the practice until now has been for children to be brought along by their parents inside the camp for protection, and children are therefore exposed to camp life on a daily basis. Their eventual joining is a necessity. The children are considered the next generation of the MILF. They will replace the current generation when they grow up. And it is an obligation to fight against oppression and to defend our faith and our people.’ (Parents, explaining motivation and reasons for children’s association)⁴

Samira was in her third year of high school in 1973 when war broke out in Mindanao at the height of martial law. To escape atrocities, her family left their home in Sultan Kudarat and fled to the mountains, where she and her father eventually joined and trained with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). At the MILF camp, Samira was sent to work in the kitchen where she prepared food and concocted herbal medicines used to treat the injured soldiers. While she was never involved in actual combat, she was not spared from the harsh life at the camp.⁵

Almost four decades later, in 2014, Mohammad, now 17 years old, recounted that he was 10 years old when he started to visit the MILF camp together with his father who is a member of the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF). He enjoyed going to the camp and eventually decided to join the MILF because of his father. Mohammad wanted to help the group in any way he could. While in the camp he helped fetch firewood and sometimes performed guard duty. When not working he attended school and socialized with his friends in the community.

The MILF was listed in the annexes of the UN Secretary-General’s (UNSG) report on children and armed conflict (CAAC) in 2003 following reports of recruitment and use of children by the military arm of the MILF, which included the BIAF and Bangsamoro Islamic Women Auxiliary Brigade (BIWAB). On 1 August 2009, the UN and the MILF signed the Action Plan to end the recruitment and use of children that committed the MILF to concrete, time-bound actions over an initial period of 12 months. The Action Plan established benchmarks the MILF was required to meet in order to be delisted from the UNSG report annexes and ensure a BIAF/BIWAB free of all boys and girls under the age of 18.

As the principal UN agency for children’s rights and child protection, UNICEF took the lead in negotiation with the MILF and implementation of the Action Plan. In 2010, UNICEF and its partners made an initial attempt to identify and register children associated with the BIAF/BIWAB. However, it discontinued efforts when straightforward release and the reintegration process that had proven successful in other country contexts could not be applied in Mindanao due to the community-driven dynamic of children’s association with the MILF. Without a more nuanced approach, the registration of children in Mindanao would have potentially become a census-like exercise of all children in the communities affected by the conflict. The notion of reintegration – in as much as it implies reintegration back to the family, community, and civilian life – was also called into question by both

⁴ UNICEF and Transition International, ‘Assessment of the drivers of children’s association with armed groups and entry points to prevent association in Mindanao’, January 2017.

⁵ UNICEF Philippines, Real lives - Bangsamoro women unite in ending child recruitment: https://www.unicef.org/philippines/reallives_24666.html [June 2018].

signatories to the Action Plan. The views held by the MILF on the definition of age of maturity in contravention of Philippines national legislation and international norms, as well as its lack of awareness on the scope of who a child soldier or a child associated is, were additional inhibiting factors.

The MILF context differs from many other child soldier experiences around the world. The factors driving recruitment and the melange of socio-religious factors that influence children's association with the separatist movement in Mindanao are many and complex. There are few parallels with the other situations of forced recruitment and the related academic discourse.

At the turn of the millennium, civil conflict in West Africa exposed grave violations against children where large numbers of children were often forcibly recruited by armed groups, separated from their families and mobilized to live on the move. Crucially, such contexts assert a clear military identity on children that exacerbates their vulnerability to harm. When identified for release, children were handed over to child protection actors and placed in cantonment sites for demobilization and/or accommodated in interim centres to receive medical care, psychosocial support and other services. This often took place in locations away from the children's homes and communities, and while children were subsequently reunified with their families and benefitted from reintegration support, significant numbers were rejected, discriminated against and kept on the margins of society.

In contrast, the MILF did not forcibly recruit and use children. Children's association with the armed group is generally accepted as a consequence of their social milieu, where children are born into an armed struggle in which their parents and neighbours are already involved. Family ties, interpretations of religious duty and political allegiance all conspire to mould Bangsamoro children around the separatist agenda. The fluid passage of children into BIAF/BIWAB and the facilitative role of the community in influencing children's 'voluntary' enlistment in the group posed unique challenges to the Action Plan implementation. There are also no firm civil-military boundaries in the communities, and the community and combatant relationship are mutually supportive.

In 2011, the MILF did not sign the extension of the Action Plan following its expiration, which necessitated a temporary cessation of Action Plan activities. The focus on the Action Plan shifted away from registering children already associated with the armed group to raising awareness on preventing recruitment and establishing a workable complaints mechanism in case recruitment was to occur. At the community level, a partnership between UNICEF and the Bangsamoro Development Agency saw the establishment of Community-based Child Protection Networks in conflict-affected areas. It was envisaged that supporting communities to conceptualise and 'own' the protective environment in MILF-controlled areas would be invaluable to the goal of longer-term social and attitudinal behaviour change.

However, between 2012 and 2013, progress on the Action Plan implementation again stalled due to the political and conflict situation, with a general slowdown in the engagement between UNICEF and MILF likely owing to the complexities of the overarching peace process with the Government.

The signing of the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) in March 2014 generated renewed opportunity with the MILF, and the group restated its commitment in July to implement the Action Plan fully. A Road Map, delineating specific activities against six core benchmarks were agreed upon and endorsed by the MILF. From that point onwards, the MILF demonstrated remarkable focus and commitment and concluded the Action Plan within three years, with the identification and disengagement of more than 1,800 children who were associated with the BIAF and BIWAB in support or combat roles. This time, UNICEF, together with the MILF, jointly determined the framework on identifying children for release and their disengagement, bearing in mind the lessons learned from the earlier efforts in 2010. The formal disengagement of these children marked the completion of the UN-MILF Action Plan. In July 2017, the UNSG delisted the MILF from the annexes of its annual report.

While the conclusion of peace negotiations and a resulting decline in hostilities may have been a catalyst for the MILF to revisit the Action Plan, a range of other important factors propelled the Action Plan toward completion. The process included challenges and setbacks, but trust between the MILF and UNICEF, bolstered by the MILF's willingness to engage and communicate, allowed for mutual solutions without compromising the process. The Government of the Philippines' (GPH) support and amenability to such engagement between the UN and the MILF further contributed to its success.

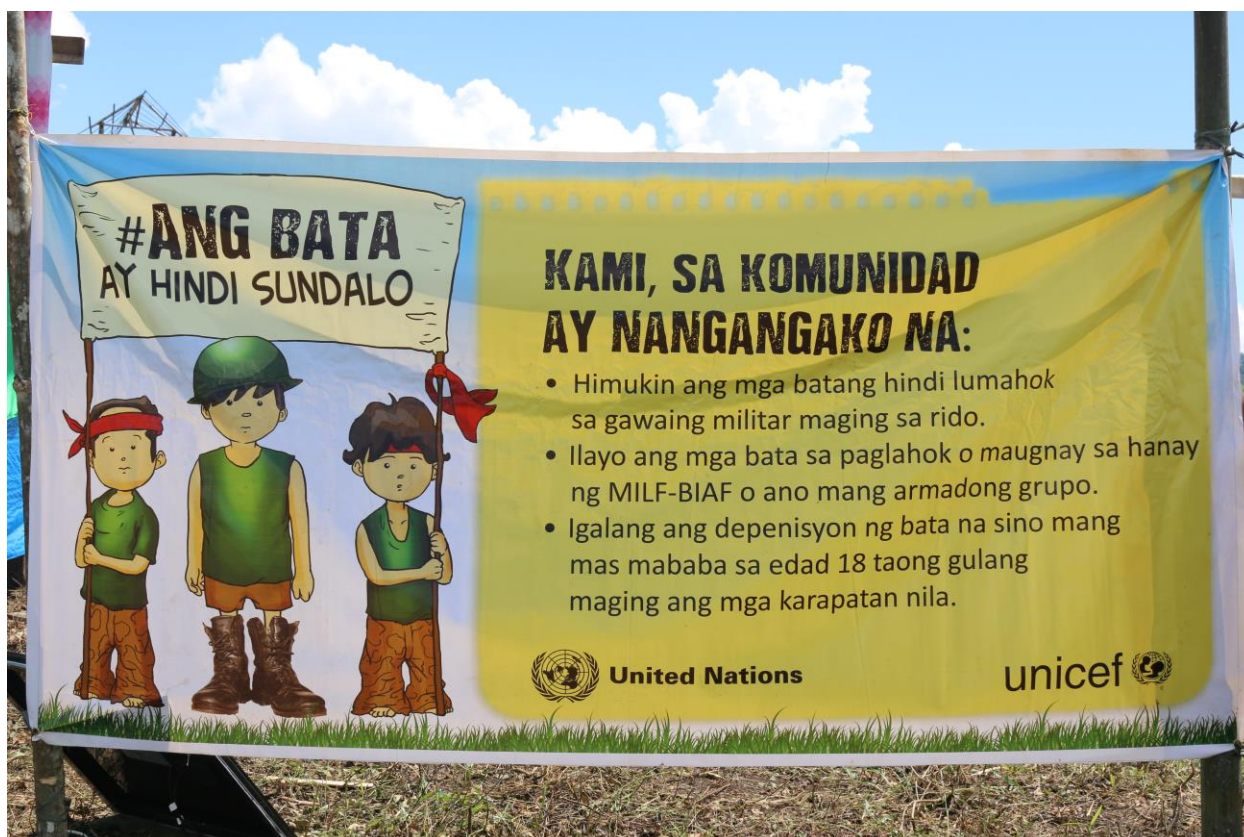
The implementation of the UN-MILF Action Plan is an example of successfully identifying and disengaging children associated with a community-based armed group for which there was no known precedent globally. The documentation of the process, from its inception to conclusion, offers an opportunity to reflect on the enabling factors for success, challenges, opportunities, good practices and lessons learned. The Philippines' experience can inform future interventions and processes in similar contexts globally.

The documentation presented here is a result of numerous conversations with the MILF leadership and commanders, the MILF religious leaders, members of the BIWAB, disengaged children and their parents, as well as UNICEF, UN, Non-Government partners and Government officials – all of whom have been directly involved in the Action Plan implementation or are still involved in programmes for disengaged children and their communities.

As the saying goes, "It takes a village to raise a child". Ultimately, for individuals like Samira and other parents, their desire is for their children and grandchildren to continue schooling without disruptions from armed conflicts. An active member of the BIWAB, Samira now advocates among other mothers in her community to keep their children from joining the armed group. Mohammad, now disengaged from the BIAF, is happy that he has been relieved from responsibilities and camp duties and is free to focus on schooling and enjoying life as a teenager. He hopes to become a good leader and serve the people of the Bangsamoro community.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND ON THE RECRUITMENT AND USE OF CHILDREN IN ARMED CONFLICT BY THE MORO ISLAMIC LIBERATION FRONT



"Children, Not Soldiers" campaign banner placed in MILF communities after orientations by UNICEF partners declaring community commitment on the non-involvement of children with the BIAF/BIWAB. © UNICEF Philippines/2016/Marcella

THE ARMED CONFLICT AND PEACE PROCESS WITH THE MORO ISLAMIC LIBERATION FRONT

"I am tired of war. No one wins, everyone is a loser at the end. It's time to put an end to it. I want my grandchildren to get an education. How can they stay in school when there's always war?" (Samira Sungod, Bangsamoro Islamic Women Auxiliary Brigade)

Mindanao is the second largest island group in the Philippines. It has around 20 million inhabitants, including the Bangsamoro or ethnic Filipino Muslims who call Mindanao their home. The contemporary armed struggle between the Government of the Philippines (GPH) and several groups seeking self-determination and increased autonomy for the Moro people in Mindanao dates back to 1968. The MILF is the largest of these groups and presently the main standard bearer of Moro aspirations. It was officially founded in 1984 after breaking away from the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) in late 1977. The group initially called itself the New MNLF Leadership, but later renamed itself to the MILF to reflect its separation from the MNLF and its distinct Islamic orientation⁶ that would guide its affairs and activities.

The MILF focused on a negotiated solution, and a cessation of hostilities was agreed with the GPH in 1997 while the start of formal peace negotiations began in 1999. Negotiations were suspended in response to the "all-out-war" by the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) from June 2000 to March 2001, as well as the attacks against the MILF's position at Buliok, North Cotabato, in February 2003. The "all-out-war" had enormous consequences for the MILF where it lost its Headquarters, Camp Abubakre As-Siddique and several other identified camps, including Camp Uthman, Camp Omar, Camp Badre, Camp Bilal and Camp Bushra.⁷ It also caused major humanitarian suffering, human rights abuses and the displacement of civilian populations. However, exploratory talks between the parties continued amid the fighting and resulted in the signing of the Tripoli Agreement of Peace 2001 and a mutual ceasefire agreement in 2003.

Despite several armed clashes in the intervening years⁸, the signing of the 2003 mutual ceasefire agreement eventually paved the way for the 2008 Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD). However, the signing of the MOA-AD was aborted, triggering a major outbreak of armed violence with attacks by some 'rogue' MILF elements against civilian communities and military counter operations by the AFP. The fighting displaced over half a million people in Central Mindanao. The collapse of the agreement

⁶Santos, Jr., Soliman M. and Paz Verdades M. Santos, *Primed and Purposeful: Armed Groups and Human Security Efforts in the Philippines*. Geneva: Small Arms Survey, April 2010.

⁷Taya, Shamsuddin L., *The Political Strategies of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front for Self-Determination in the Philippines*, Intellectual Discourse, 2007, VOL 15, NO 1, 59-84.

⁸United Nations. Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in the Philippines (S/2008/272), issued 24 April 2008. "January 2005: truce broken after MILF forces, led by Abdulrahman Binago, attacked AFP troops, ceasefire was enforced weeks later; 2006: MILF engaged in clashes with government security forces on two occasions in 2006, resulting in the displacement of 72,000 people in Mindanao; and in July 2007: an armed encounter in Basilan Province, left 14 Government soldiers and six MILF fighters dead. Roughly half of the displaced were children, who were subsequently unable to attend school and, in many cases, suffered from conflict-related trauma."

also resulted in disaffected MILF fighters breaking away to form the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF).

Armed clashes continued in 2009 but eventually reduced in number from mid-2009 onwards as both sides reiterated their commitment to the peace process and suspended military actions. Informal talks between the GPH and the MILF panels were revived and plans for formal peace negotiations resumed. In June 2010 a joint declaration of continuity for peace negotiations between the GPH and the MILF was issued, leading to the formal resumption of peace negotiations in 2011; this period saw a significant decrease in armed confrontations between AFP and the MILF, which practically ceased in 2012.⁹

The parties signed the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro (FAB) in October 2012 that set out the principles and mechanisms toward the realization of a new autonomous political entity, called Bangsamoro, to replace the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM).¹⁰ This was followed by the signing of the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) in March 2014, officially concluding 17 years of peace negotiations between the GPH and the MILF.

On 22 July 2018, the Philippine Congress passed the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL), previously known as the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL). The BOL or Republic Act No. 11054¹¹ signed by President Rodrigo Duterte on 27 July, now paves the way for establishment of the new Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao.

The Bangsamoro Development Agency

The agreement signed in Tripoli, Libya, on June 22, 2001, known as the Agreement on Peace and Development between the GPH and the MILF, was novel in that the parties agreed to cooperate and coordinate with the Government to implement development projects in areas affected by the war as a way of helping the MILF communities even before a peace agreement concluded.¹² This led to the creation of the Bangsamoro Development Agency (BDA), the relief, rehabilitation and development arm of the MILF. The BDA is also mandated to be the coordination unit of the MILF during the pre-transition period; and served as the Secretariat for the UN-MILF Action Plan implementation from 2014 to 2017.

The MILF Leadership

The Central Committee is the highest policy-making body of the MILF, currently led by its Chairman, Al Haj Murad Ebrahim and assisted by two Vice Chairmen, Ghazali Jaafar and Alim Ali Sulaiman. The leadership is based on a collective structure, rooted in the Islamic concept of “shura” or consultation.¹³ All major issues are tabled to the Central Committee for decisions. Chairman Murad, who is also Commander in Chief, heads the MILF’s political committee and commands its armed wing, the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF). The BIAF has its own Chief of General Staff, Sammy al-Mansoor. The BIAF also has an all-

⁹ United Nations. Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in the Philippines (S/2013/419), July 2013.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ An Act Providing for the Organic Law for the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao.

¹² Santos, Jr., Soliman M. and Paz Verdades M. Santos, *Primed and Purposeful*, 79.

¹³ Ibid. p. 346.

female supplemental force, the Bangsamoro Islamic Women Auxiliary Brigade (BIWAB), led by Brigade Commander Ling Gumander. The *ulama*, or Islamic scholars, play a significant role in the leadership of the MILF, with the Grand Mufti of Cotabato, Ustadz Abdulrahman “Abu Hurayra” Udasan, heading the Bangsamoro Darul Ifta. The BIAF also has a Department of Islamic Call and Guidance, headed by the Chief Murshid Ustadz Abdulkadir Abdullah, which oversees senior religious leaders from its rank who are given lead roles as *murshideen* and *murshidaat* to provide Islamic guidance to the BIAF and BIWAB in all base commands.

Command, Control and Code of Conduct

The BIAF has a military chain of command much like a regular army. At the time of implementing the Action Plan, the BIAF had 31 base commands, which are the primary military formations of the BIAF, and led by base commanders. These base commands are divided among seven front commands, led by front commanders. The AOR of the BIAF front commands is clustered geographically to include eastern Mindanao, southern Mindanao, north-eastern Mindanao, central Mindanao, western Mindanao, and north-western Mindanao, as well as the National Guard Front, which has no specific AOR but is responsible for safeguarding the MILF Headquarters and leadership.¹⁴ Base commands are assigned areas within the AOR of their respective front command. The AOR of each base command is not contiguous. Its AOR corresponds to the location of the main base camp and the satellite camps of its sub-units (brigade, battalion, company, platoon). Every base command comprises of Expeditionary Forces, Inner Defence Forces, and Guerrilla Units – led by deputy base commanders.

The BIAF’s area of operations span from the central Mindanao provinces of Maguindanao, North Cotabato, South Cotabato, Sultan Kudarat, Lanao del Sur and Lanao del Norte to other parts of Mindanao, such as Zamboanga Sibugay, Basilan, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi to the west and Davao Oriental, Davao city and Davao del Sur to the east.

The MILF issued a Code of Conduct, General Order No. 1 in 2005, to “regulate the affairs of the BIAF prescribing its powers, duties and functions and other related purposes.” General Order No.2 “an order amending Articles 34 and 36 of the Code of Conduct of the BIAF and for other purposes,” was subsequently issued in 2006. Article 36, paragraph 2 in particular sets out to limit the recruitment of members to the BIAF to those above 18 years of age¹⁵; and paragraph 3 stipulates that “no child shall be admitted into the BIAF.” These General Orders underpinned the MILF’s assertion that it does not have an official policy of recruiting and using children.

Bangsamoro Islamic Women’s Auxiliary Brigade

The BIWAB comprises 31 battalions across MILF base commands in Mindanao and the Island Provinces, made up of approximately 17,000 members. The BIWAB conducts military

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 350.

¹⁵Article 36, paragraph number 2, of the Code of Conduct states that *recruitment for regular membership in the BIAF, preference shall be given to those who possess Islamic values, physically and mentally fit, matured and above eighteen (18) years of age at the time of his admission.* The same applies to training for military activities.

training among its members and assists with medical, communication and other auxiliary needs. BIWAB members do not actively participate in armed operations and are not officially recognised as combatants.¹⁶

MILF Communities and Camps

MILF-controlled areas are in themselves, vibrant, and self-sustaining communities where families, women and children live.¹⁷ It includes military camps, and in most instances is indistinguishable from the surrounding community, allowing children to move seamlessly between contexts. Larger camps like the six 'Recognized MILF Camps' can encompass more than one MILF community, and can include a mosque, school, commercial and residential areas, solar energy system, and segments of several different villages.¹⁸

Other camps are situated several kilometres away from MILF communities and are more remote and generally inaccessible to children – usually in upland locations, whereas satellite camps can be within the MILF communities. The camps – front camps, base camps, satellite camps or training facilities of the BIAF – are well guarded and shelter military equipment, weapons, ammunition and BIAF/BIWAB elements. The camps serve as operation centres for MILF-military activities. They vary in size, depending on the military unit, from a small camp for a platoon to a large camp of a front commander.

Most BIAF/BIWAB members are residents of MILF communities. Once they are associated with the BIAF/BIWAB, they are regarded as *mujahideen/mujahidat* (soldiers) and are distinguished from the *ummah* (civilian constituency). All BIAF/BIWAB *mujahideen/mujahidat* are under the direct supervision and command of the BIAF Chief of General Staff. All MILF communities are under the authority of the MILF Central Committee through the provincial chairmen.

¹⁶ Lundström, Stina and Marhaban, Shadia, *Challenges and Opportunities for Female Combatants' Post-war Community Leadership: Lessons Learnt from Aceh and Mindanao*, Workshop Report, April 2016.

¹⁷ Ibon Foundation in cooperation with Children's Rehabilitation Centre and Centre for Women's Resources, *Uncounted lives: children, women and conflict in the Philippines*, a needs assessment of children and women affected by armed conflict for UNICEF, 2006.

¹⁸ Bale, Jeffrey M., *The Abu Sayyaf Group in its Philippine and International Contexts*, Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey, cited in Mapping militant organisations, Moro Islamic Liberation Front, Stanford University, <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/309#cite15> [July 2018].

RECRUITMENT AND USE OF CHILDREN AND LISTING OF THE MILF-BIAF

“For us, the community is where the families of our commanders and men live and where they exercise and practice their own way of life. In some cases, they are the sons and daughters of our commanders on the ground. This is true for almost all MILF camps and communities: our definition of what a camp is all about is totally different from that of the Philippine military. This is, indeed, a unique situation applied only in the case of the Bangsamoro people in Mindanao.”¹⁹

In 2003, the MILF-BIAF was listed in the annexes of the UNSG’s annual Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict,²⁰ pursuant to Security Council resolution 1379 (2001)²¹. Against the backdrop of decades of conflict, children were found to be involved with the armed group. It was estimated that 10 to 30 per cent of the population in the MILF controlled areas in central and western Mindanao were children participating in activities directly related to the armed conflict.²² The children were most commonly used in carrying out patrols, performing sentry duty, and preparing food and providing medical support to the MILF forces. Children were also seen carrying firearms in the MILF camps and communities.

Despite being listed, the MILF has always categorically maintained that it does not have an official policy of recruiting children and has underscored this with the Code of Conduct stipulating no children shall be admitted into the BIAF. However, certain exceptions apply, as expressed in an official statement issued by the office of the late MILF Chairman Salamat Hashim.²³ The MILF claimed that it has the right to assume a custodial role for orphans whose parents are killed in war and to provide them with military training on a voluntary basis.²⁴ It also believed that in situations where the community is under attack, children may be allowed to defend their community.²⁵ But the MILF specified that children were not used for combat purposes and their tasks were auxiliary in nature and limited to such roles as being mail couriers or bringing food, supplies and other provisions to the MILF troops

¹⁹Submission of the MILF to the Geneva Call publication *“In Their Words: Perspectives of Armed non-State Actors on the Protection of Children from the Effects of Armed Conflict,”* 2010.

²⁰ United Nations. Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict (A/58/546-S/2003/1053), November 2003.

²¹ Security Council resolution 1379 (2001), OP16: “Requests the Secretary-General to attach to his report a list of parties to armed conflict that recruit or use children in violation of the international obligations applicable to them, in situations that are on the Security Council’s agenda or that may be brought to the attention of the Security Council by the Secretary-General, in accordance with Article 99 of the Charter of the United Nations, which in his opinion may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security.”

²²Cagoco-Guam, Rufa, *Philippines: Child Soldiers in Central and Western Mindanao: A Rapid Assessment*, Geneva: International Labour Organisation, February 2002.

²³Maradika, Official Publication of the Central Committee of the MILF (1999), Vol.XIX, No.6, June 1999, pp. 1 and 7, cited in Ibon Foundation, *Uncounted lives: a needs assessment of children and women affected by armed conflict for UNICEF*, 2006.

²⁴ United Nations. Report of the Secretary-General (S/2008/272), April 2008.

²⁵ Ibid.

in times of fighting.²⁶ To the MILF, entire families and communities are involved with the politico-military agenda of the movement, and children inherit that association seamlessly and informally; their participation with or provision of support to the armed group is considered a natural extension of their responsibilities to their families and communities.

The MILF leadership also defines the age of maturity at puberty in accordance with Islam as being 13 or 14 years old for boys, and 11 or 12 years old for girls. This position was borne out in their stand on the issue of children associated within their ranks.²⁷

Context of children's association with the MILF as part of a community-based armed group

The MILF is a community-based movement in which the family unit plays a central role in the inter-generational transmission of political objectives and ideologies.²⁸ Children's patterns of engagement with the armed group are accordingly influenced. The concept of childhood for the MILF as noted above, is culture-specific and rooted in Islamic beliefs. Children's identities are closely interlinked with religion and the political cause of the Bangsamoro. In many cases, children in these communities acquire and develop an intrinsic readiness to defend their families, community and homeland, as well as fulfil their religious duty, with parents encouraging or allowing their engagement with the BIAF/BIWAB. It is also the children's way of showing solidarity with their family, relatives and friends who are part of the MILF, not only the living but also with those who died in conflict.²⁹

Almost all children who are associated have parents who are part of the MILF as BIAF/BIWAB³⁰, or are sympathisers of the group. Their association happens gradually and is considered a normal process of socialisation. There is, in fact, an almost general expectation, or "tradition" amongst family members that supports children's involvement with the group.³¹ From an early age, the children accompany their parents to the military camps. As they get older their presence in the camps is related to carrying out tasks and responsibilities assigned to them by the commander. The children's workload in the camps, as well as attendance varies depending on BIAF/BIWAB activities and operations – and once completed, they would return home.³²

The community and combatant relationship is also a supportive one, mainly due to ties of kinship that reinforces loyalty amongst them. Parents and community members consider the MILF as a "protector" or "refuge" and therefore send their children to the camps as a means to teach their children good moral values and discipline. While in the camps,

²⁶ Statement by Mohagher Iqbal of the MILF Central Committee, cited in Ibon Foundation, *Uncounted lives and Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in the Philippines* (S/2008/272).

²⁷ United Nations. Report of the Secretary-General (S/2008/272), April 2008.

²⁸ UNICEF and Transition International, *Assessment of the drivers of children's association with armed groups*, January 2017.

²⁹ Batistiana, Brenda S., Aquino-Elogada, Rachel, Golosino, Edwin, *Social Representations of the Recruitment and Use of Children in the Moro Islamic Liberation Front*, Mediators Network for Sustainable Peace (MedNet), Inc., 2014.

³⁰ UNICEF and Transition International, *Assessment of the drivers of children's association with armed groups*, January 2017.

³¹ Batistiana, et.al., *Social Representations of the Recruitment and Use of Children in the MILF*, 2014.

³² UNICEF and Transition International, *Assessment of the drivers of children's association with armed groups* (January 2017).

children receive instruction in Arabic and in the Quran, taught the basic precepts of Islam and in reciting prayers properly³³, aside from basic military training. Parents see the potential preventive (i.e., so children will not stray away from the right path) and curative (i.e. discipline or transform them) effect of training for their children.³⁴ The children, however, continue to keep in 'persistent contact with their family members during their stay in the camps, which is unique'.³⁵ In any case, there is a fine line between the life of a child with the MILF and their home/community life as there is an evident overlap.³⁶

In the MILF context, the term "associated" does not always adequately reflect the degree of actual involvement of children with the MILF, as there is a strong degree of fluidness and flexibility in their association.³⁷ There is also no pattern of forced or formal recruitment, encampment and separation from parents and caregivers. The element of coercion seen in other well-documented child soldier experiences is missing, where children are abducted from their families and communities and geographically separated.

Further, in this setting, reintegration of children was arguably a misnomer as it did not reconcile with the reality and would have required an adaptation of the traditional disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes for children, strategies, and associated terminologies that apply in other country situations.³⁸

Similarly, the separation of children from the BIAF/BIWAB implies a disassociation of children from the roles they perform for the armed group and the beginning of the transition from military to civilian life. It does not refer to taking the children away from their homes and communities in base command areas. Disengagement of children associated with the BIAF/BIWAB also does not mean separation from their parents and caregivers.

³³ Cagoco-Guiam, Rufa, *Philippines: Child Soldiers in Central and Western Mindanao*, International Labour Organisation, (February 2002).

³⁴ Batistiana, et.al. *Social Representations of the Recruitment and Use of Children in the MILF*, p. 33, 2014.

³⁵ Ozerdem, A., & Podder, S. How Voluntary? The Role of Community in Youth Participation in Muslim Mindanao. p. 131, In *Child Soldiers: From Recruitment to Reintegration*. Palgrave Macmillan (August 2011).

³⁶ Ibid. p.132.

³⁷ UNICEF and Transition International, Assessment of the drivers of children's association with armed groups (January 2017).

³⁸ ILO – UNICEF, Concept note on Joint United Nations programming for children affected by armed conflict in Mindanao, in support of the UN-MILF Action Plan on the issue of the recruitment and use of minors (March 2012).

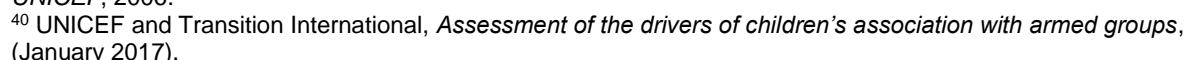
CHAPTER 2

PROFILE OF THE CHILD ASSOCIATED WITH THE MORO ISLAMIC LIBERATION FRONT



Boys being disengaged from 101 Base Command of the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces, Pagayawan, Lanao del Sur © UNICEF Philippines/2017/Maitem

Although actual figures of children who have been associated with the MILF have never been available, estimates suggest thousands of children were involved with the armed group throughout the duration of the contemporary conflict in Mindanao. In 2016, the MILF began a process to separate and disengage children from the BIAF and BIWAB. A total of 1,869 boys and girls were identified. An analysis of the data on this cohort of children, in addition to the findings from an assessment of drivers for association of children with armed actors in this region,⁴⁰ conducted in parallel to the UN-MILF Action Plan, provides a more layered understanding of the profile of the child associated with the BIAF/BIWAB and reasons for their association, as presented in this chapter.



Pathways to becoming a child associated with the BIAF or BIWAB

The children in conflict-affected areas in Muslim Mindanao have grown up against a backdrop of insecurity and violence throughout their young lives. Exposed to poverty and social vulnerabilities, children in the geographically remote MILF communities are less likely to have access to government services and support. Their families experience difficulties maintaining a stable means of livelihood, which further impacts their ability to support their children's access to formal education. Many of the disengaged children were expected to contribute to income-generating activities at an early age to augment the family income, such as farming, selling fish and other products in the market or driving the 'habal-habal'. The combination of these conditions aggravated the sense of deprivation and marginalization, and together with the influencing role that identity, ideology and community played, paved the way for them to join the BIAF/BIWAB.

The majority of children formerly associated with the BIAF/BIWAB live with their parents, who are themselves members of the movement. In fact, many from this cohort are children of MILF commanders. When asked, children shared that the family unit is a strong source of emotional support and guidance for them, with mothers being the first source of confidence and fathers having the greater influence over their decision to join the MILF. From a very young age, the children accompanied their parents to the camps, and over a period of time, they gradually became members of the MILF. This extended to the wider relationships in the local communities beyond the camp setting, with relatives or even peers having an influence in their decision to support the MILF. There was no evidence of forced recruitment of the children by the MILF, whether by coercion, compulsion or abduction.

There was also no formal recruitment process. Parental 'consent' was sometimes sought before accepting a child into the group, but parents in most instances willingly consented to their children's involvement. Commanders would assign children simple tasks in the camps, which were support functions in nature. As the children grew older and became adept at handling a weapon, there was a sense of having become a full-fledged member of the MILF forces and their roles evolved to more military-type functions.

While the BIAF has a well-defined command structure, many BIAF members are part-timers. They report for duty at the camp on a rotation basis, and their daily routine involves physical exercise, military training and prayer sessions.⁴¹ When not in training or on duty, they return to their homes and families, as well as to farm or carry out other work.⁴² The situation of children who were associated with the BIAF/BIWAB is akin to this. They were not included in the regular rotation of duty at the military camps – they reported that their attendance in the camps was usually for a few hours per week or a few hours per day, unless there were operations or activities where their attendance may have been required for longer periods. The children rarely stayed overnight in the camps. After completing their required tasks, they would return home to their families. Children and their families considered such involvement to be a normal aspect of daily life.

⁴¹Santos, Jr., Soliman M. and Paz Verdades M. Santos, *Primed and Purposeful*, 385.

⁴² Ibid.

The children who were associated with the BIAF/BIWAB had also come to understand that the Bangsamoro struggle is not one of retribution and justice but includes the political and religious aspiration of attaining a Bangsamoro homeland⁴³, ingrained and experienced through decades-old narrative of oppression of the Bangsamoro. The concept of jihad (*Jihadul Asghar*) had thus become about fighting to protect a peaceful way of life. By engaging in this kind of jihad, the children believed that they would be rewarded through instant acceptance to heaven, either as a *shahid* (martyr) or dying of old age but having lived the life of a *mujahid*.

Further, the linkages between personal losses these children have suffered and the political motivation of joining the MILF was evident. Children whose parents, family members or relatives had died in past military encounters felt they understood the struggle of the MILF and saw the importance of their contribution to the fight for self-determination as the next generation of the movement.



Boys and girls associated with the BIAF or BIWAB from Interim Base Command, Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao waiting for the disengagement ceremony to begin. © UNICEF Philippines/2017/Maitem

Profile of children associated with the BIAF or BIWAB

The identification of children for separation and disengagement, and the validation exercise in all the base and front commands of the MILF took several months. The majority

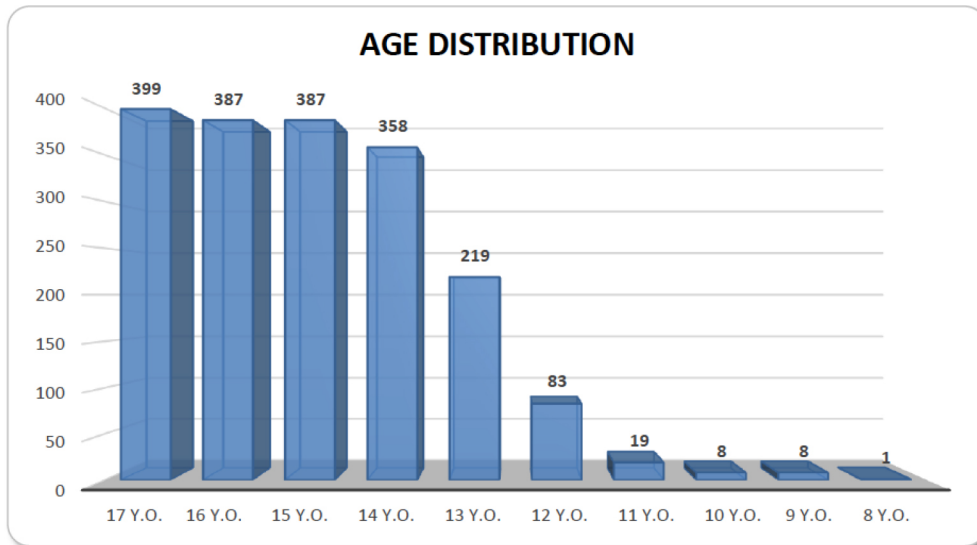
⁴³Ibon Foundation, *Uncounted lives: a needs assessment of children and women affected by armed conflict for UNICEF*, 2006; and feedback from a sample of children during the orientations with children identified to be disengaged.

of children who were disengaged were boys, all associated with the BIAF. The rest were girls, mainly associated with the BIWAB, although several girls were also attached to the expeditionary and inner defence forces of the BIAF.

	Boys	Girls	Total
Total number of children identified and disengaged as of 19 March 2017 in 100% compliance with the final benchmark	1,249	620	1,869

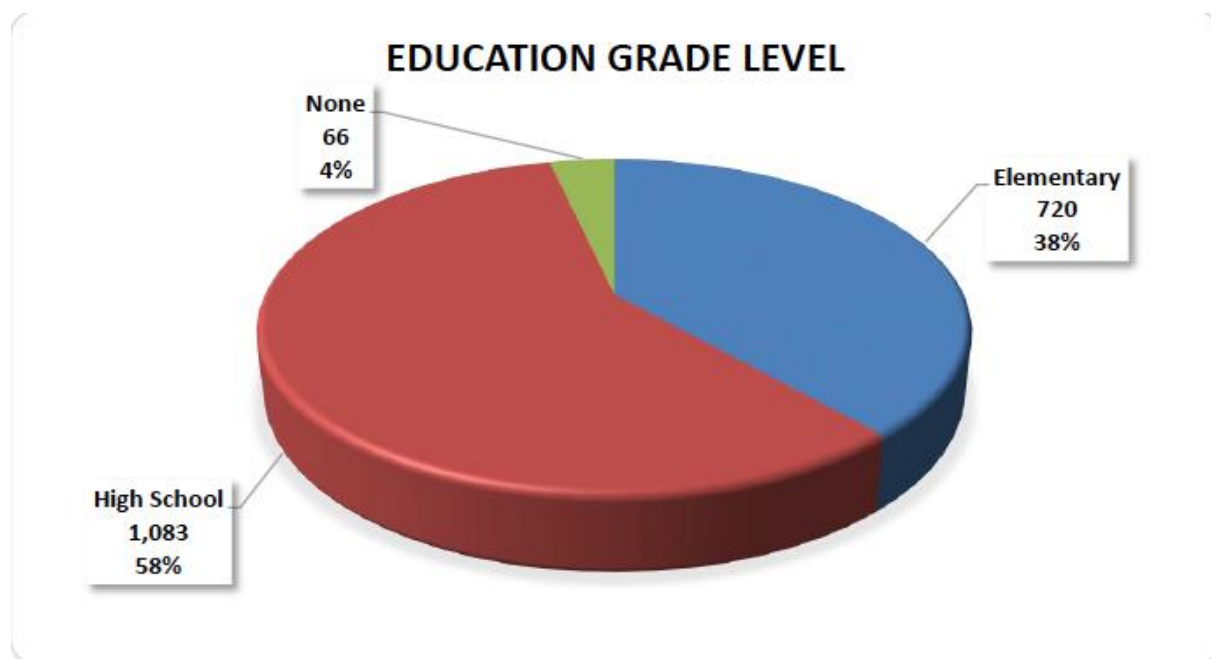
Most of the children were between the ages of 14 and 17 years, with the youngest identified being only 9 years old. Several boys who had just turned 18 were also included in this count. While a few of the older children had been associated with the MILF forces before the Action Plan was signed, overall a large number of children became involved more recently, with the number reaching a peak in 2014. This trend coincided with the signing of the FAB and CAB in 2012 and 2014, respectively. Insights offered by the MILF suggest that during this period of prevailing peace, parents were allowing their children to regularly accompany them to the camps as it was considered safe.

The limited understanding among the MILF field commanders and elements on the definition of a child associated with an armed group contributed to this problem. Children were still observed, sometimes in military uniforms and with arms, manning checkpoints or providing security during activities in the camp. The trend reversed itself gradually in 2015 once the orientations for the BIAF were rolled-out and the “Children, Not Soldiers” campaign was launched in accordance with the Action Plan. Base commanders began to instruct their field commanders to discourage parents from bringing their children to the camps and eventually stopped and prevented children from coming as the Action Plan implementation progressed. Commanders also admitted that children were not vital to camp operations and that adults could in fact easily undertake the tasks executed by them.



The majority of children remained in school even while serving the BIAF/BIWAB. The high literacy levels among the disengaged children confirms the MILF's desire for children to continue their education, whether in public schools, or madaris that have been established within the camp communities. However, commanders had acknowledged that children's attendance in school was affected by their engagement in camp duties, which resulted in frequent absences and poor performance. Some children expressed frustration with school, not being able to keep up with their studies and having a hard time mixing with other children. According to the older children, during times of conflict, those who were called for duty would be absent from classes for the duration required, with some dropping out of school indefinitely if the conflict was protracted.

Interestingly, school principals and teachers generally found children who were associated with the MILF to be well behaved and disciplined, and possessed leadership skills.



Roles of children associated with the BIAF or BIWAB

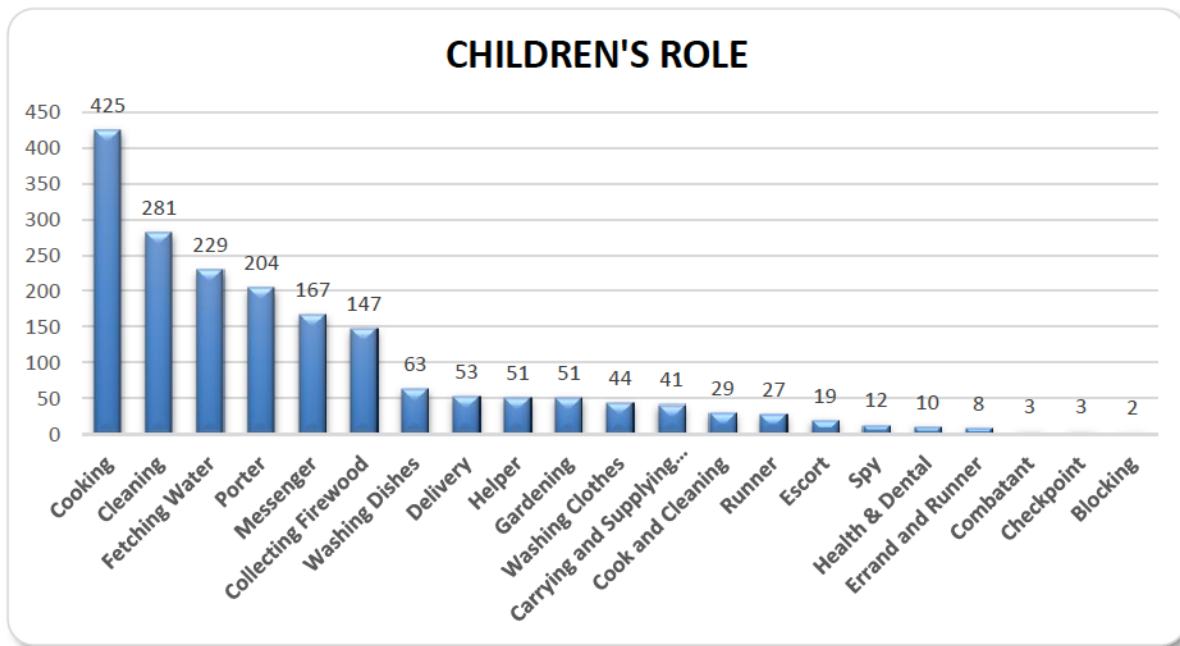
The majority of children disengaged from the BIAF/BIWAB were carrying out support roles, such as cooking, cleaning the camp, washing uniforms, fetching firewood or water, and running errands for the combatants. Prior to the Action Plan orientations, BIAF commanders and troops viewed the assignment of these tasks to children as a way for them to be responsible members of their family and communities, such that when they go home, they are of help to their parents and that the children would be considered good leaders and models of a genuine Muslim.⁴⁴ The commanders did not consider this as exploitation or a violation, and failed to see the obvious risks this placed on the children in times of conflict.

Some children also performed military functions, including acting as defensive blocking forces at the periphery of camps and manning guard posts. They were also used as messengers and spies. Several of the older boys had been combatants. Interactions with the children during the validation process indicated that the older boys and girls possess the knowledge of using a firearm and have had the experience of using one in the past. They received weapons training from their fathers, and in some cases, their commanders.

Tasks assigned to children were generally disaggregated by gender. The girls associated with the BIWAB mostly did the cooking, cleaning and laundry and received training to be medical support personnel. Girls were not deployed as combatants. The boys were assigned a wider range of tasks, including being responsible for gathering firewood and fetching water, guard duties, storing of weapons and purchasing supplies for the camps. Some commanders mentioned that boys were used as couriers to carry ammunition to

⁴⁴ Batistiana, et.al., *Social Representations of the Recruitment and Use of Children in the MILF*, 2014.

check points, or to buy and deliver medicines to combatants in the frontlines.



Given the 'voluntary' nature of their association based on the concept of *jihad fiysabilillah*, the children did not receive financial remuneration for their services, although they received food and other non-material benefits. The boys shared that they gained combat and other skills, as well as religious knowledge and emotional well-being while with the BIAF. The older boys in particular liked being amongst their friends and relatives in the camps, enjoying the comradeship around telling jokes and sharing stories. The children were also not punished or sanctioned beyond receiving a minor reprimand if they failed to perform tasks assigned to them. Those who performed their tasks well would receive positive citations from the commanders.⁴⁵

It is evident that most disengaged children and their parents considered the MILF a protective shield from actual and potential external conflicts and the unknown outcome of the peace process. Thus they often considered children's involvement with the movement as being indispensable.⁴⁶ While some parents and children were not without worries and fears of the risks involved with being associated, these were overridden by feelings of insecurity about the possibility of conflict resurging, and so families continued to encourage their children to join the BIAF/BIWAB. The commanders, parents and many children had thus initially viewed their separation and disengagement from the BIAF/BIWAB with some obvious reticence and concern.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

CHAPTER 3

UN-MILF ACTION PLAN IMPLEMENTATION



ROADMAP

Base Commander from 106 base command conducting a re-echo session on the Action Plan and MILF Code of Conduct for troops from 104 and 106 base commands, Datu Odin Sinsuat, Maguindanao. © UNICEF Philippines/2015/Marcella

“Over years of hard work, having to address many challenges and crisscrossing several times over all the different MILF Base Commands, numbering 31 Base Commands situated in different locations in Mindanao as far as Jolo, Sulu...eventually we have reached this stage of the Roadmap because of the strong commitment of the MILF leadership to the Action Plan, the excellent cooperation of the Base Commanders, the very active participation of BIWAB, and the guidance and strong support of UNICEF.” (Eduard Guerra, Chairman, UN-MILF Action Plan, 5-Person Panel, 2014-2017)⁴⁷

It took the MILF, with the support of the UN, almost eight years to fully comply with the Action Plan from the time of its signature in 2009. Despite two distinct processes over this period, the progress and setbacks in the peace process between the GPH and the MILF are acknowledged as key influencing factors on the trajectory of the Action Plan. The initial signing in 2009 was due in no small part to the recommencement of peace negotiations between the GPH and the MILF in 2007, and the spirit of accord and optimism that was emerging at the time. The signing of the CAB in 2014 was another catalyst for the resumption of Action Plan implementation after periods of inactivity from 2011 until 2013 and is recognized for accelerating implementation up to the final disengagement of children associated with the BIAF/BIWAB in 2017.

However, the suspension of peace talks, and breakout of armed clashes between the AFP, BIAF, and the BIFF, not only prevented an extension of the Action Plan in 2011, it also slowed overall implementation. This was especially apparent when UNICEF access to conflict-affected MILF base commands and communities was temporarily ceased or delayed due to insecurity. Law enforcement operations in Mamasapano in 2015 and the subsequent non-passage of the BBL was probably the most significant incident that could have reversed all efforts made on the Action Plan or derailed it altogether. Sustained peace efforts and continued commitment to the peace process were therefore essential conditions for the successful implementation of the Action Plan.

2007-2009: Building trust and progressive engagement (pre-Action Plan)

Two years prior to the signing of the Action Plan in 2009, UNICEF, representing the then newly-established Country Task Force on Monitoring and Reporting (CTFMR), began a series of discussions with the MILF on the “Days of Peace” campaign to promote a climate of peace in Mindanao through a programme providing basic health services and a long-term commitment focused on early childhood education for children most affected by conflict.⁴⁸ This was aimed at building trust and confidence between the parties and demonstrating UNICEF’s commitment and willingness to support the MILF communities. Through the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process (OPAPP) and NGO partners, communication lines were opened with the MILF and engagement was facilitated through the BDA. The openness of the GPH to UNICEF’s engagement with the MILF also accelerated the process. This led to the issuance of a Joint Communiqué between UNICEF

⁴⁷ Remarks made at Camp Darapanan during the culmination of the cultural competition “Pakaradian Sa Darapanan” as part of the “Children, Not Soldiers” campaign, 19 September 2016.

⁴⁸ The Philippines was prioritised in 2007 for implementation of the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism, in response to the recruitment and use of minors by the New People’s Army, MILF and the Abu Sayyaf Group, as well as concerns of other violations committed by the AFP, its paramilitary groups and force multipliers.

and the MILF in 2007 upholding children's rights and protection in armed conflict. The communiqué was the first agreement between the MILF and a UN agency to be signed during the MILF's diplomatic outreach with the international community as part of the peace process to gain credibility and legitimacy as a liberation movement.

This country level engagement, supported by the visit of the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (SRSG-CAAC) to the Philippines in 2008, resulted in the MILF agreeing to comply with the recommendations of the Security Council and forming a MILF Action Plan Panel to engage with UNICEF and the CTFMR. During the SRSG's visit, the MILF was informed about their listing in the SG's annual report annexes for recruiting and using children in armed conflict. The MILF considered its listing a grave accusation by the UN and expressed the opinion that the number of child rights violations attributed to the group was insignificant in comparison to the AFP and other armed non-State actors. However, its willingness to cooperate displayed commitment to abide by international law and work within the standards set by the UN to take the required steps toward removing the group from the UN list of parties recruiting and using children.



UNICEF Philippines former Representative, Vanessa Tobin, MILF former Chairman of the Action Plan Panel Eid Kabalu and MILF BIAF Chief of Staff, Sammy Al-Mansoor, present the signed action plan ensuring the protection of children affected by armed conflict. © UNICEF Philippines/2009/Alquinto

2009-2011: Signing the Action Plan and initiating implementation

UNICEF began earnest negotiations on the Action Plan with the MILF Action Plan Panel in 2009. This culminated in its finalisation and formal signing on 1 August 2009. A general assumption ensued that implementation of the Action Plan would follow a disarmament,

demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) template, and a target group of children would be identified and established for release and reintegration support.

However, the process leading to the adoption of the Action Plan was more challenging than expected. The MILF's concern lay with the difference between the age of maturity in the perspective of Islam and the definition of a child under international law. To ensure the Action Plan received full acceptance by its forces from a religious point of view, the MILF first consulted its Darul Ifta (Religious Council), which deliberated and confirmed that the Action Plan did not contravene Islamic teachings and principles, and endorsed the agreement for signing by the MILF leadership.⁴⁹ This mitigating step by the MILF leadership minimised possible resistance to the legitimacy of the Action Plan among the commanders and elements, greatly facilitating its implementation in later years.

Another hurdle in the negotiations was the MILF's desire to keep the Action Plan confidential and addressed bilaterally only with UNICEF. According to the MILF, this request was related to the provision in the Action Plan that required the registration of children associated with the BIAF/BIWAB. The MILF expressed concern about this requirement and some of its members speculated that this was part of a so-called anti-insurgency campaign.⁵⁰ It feared the personal details of these children may get into the hands of the AFP who during that period had been accused of abducting civilians, including children, and forcing them to reveal identities and whereabouts of MILF fighters.⁵¹ The MILF was still at the revolutionary stage and secrecy of its personnel was critical to its survival. This cautious approach also resulted in the MILF placing a limitation clause on the involvement of UNICEF partners in the Action Plan process, requiring all implementing partners to be "mutually agreed" by the MILF Central Committee.⁵²

The Action Plan adoption was followed soon thereafter by the issuance of the Supplemental General Order to General Orders 1 and 2 (Code of Conduct) in 2010, reiterating the non-recruitment and use of children under-18 years into the BIAF/BIWAB, and outlining punitive sanctions for non-compliance. The Code of Conduct and SGO were critical to holding commanders accountable to the Straight-18 rule.

At the same time, the MILF Panel, with UNICEF support, was orienting BIAF commanders on the Action Plan. These were conducted over a limited period and ultimately deemed not comprehensive or effective in providing commanders with sufficient knowledge on the Action Plan process.⁵³ This lack of social preparation, as well as the slow dissemination of orders down the chain of command, resulted in failure to obtain buy-in and cooperation by commanders and had negative implications for the Rapid Registration Process of children that followed.

⁴⁹ Interview with the MILF, July 2018.

⁵⁰ Submission of the MILF to the Geneva Call publication "*In Their Words: Perspectives of Armed non-State Actors on the Protection of Children from the Effects of Armed Conflict*," 2010.

⁵¹ Interview with the MILF, July 2018.

⁵² Interview with the MILF, July 2018.

⁵³ Interview with the MILF, July 2018.

Rapid Registration of Children identified within the BIAF/BIWAB for DDR support

The Rapid Registration Process (RRP) began in 2010 and focused on core MILF-command areas. UNICEF engaged the Institute of Bangsamoro Studies and Plan International to conduct the registration, undertake the verification of registered children, and develop a database to store the information. These partners were selected and mutually agreed with the MILF. Between March and December 2010, 180 community enumerators received basic training on the process. The enumerators registered approximately 550 supposed children associated with the BIAF/BIWAB. While the intent of registering child soldiers in line with the Action Plan was a good one, it became evident from the initiation of the RRP that the context upon which the Action Plan was anchored was based on the UN's African experience of child soldiers and thus its applicability to the MILF community-based context was problematic. The intensity and complexity of the registration process was also underestimated noting the AOR of the MILF base commands. The enumerators were not equipped to identify and access the details of children associated within the MILF context, and there was also strong pushback from commanders wary of the approach of registering children. This realisation resulted in cancellation of the RRP and resulted in an alternative approach to identifying and separating children associated with the MILF.

2011-2013: Expiry of the Action Plan and implementation hiatus

Following two years of implementation, the MILF did not sign an addendum on extension of the Action Plan after its expiry in July 2011, and the agreement went into hiatus. This coincided with the MILF's withdrawal from peace talks and an escalation in armed skirmishes between the MILF, AFP and the BIFF. The period also saw changes in MILF personnel responsible for Action Plan implementation. Despite this, UNICEF continued with many of its other child protection programming objectives in Mindanao. This included working with the Government on improvements to the functionality of its local government units and further engagement with Bangsamoro communities on preventing and responding to all kinds of abuse, exploitation and violence towards children. Ironically, this work overlapped significantly with the geographic parameters of the Action Plan. In particular, UNICEF partnered with BDA on initiatives that would complement the Action Plan process such as the establishment of community-based Child Protection Networks in MILF areas with the intention of linking them to the Child Protection Units/focal points of the BIAF. Communication and awareness-raising activities on basic rights for children were conducted within the MILF and at the community level. These were aimed at mitigating some of the drivers of children's involvement in armed conflict within a broader framework of strengthening the child protection system. The benchmarks on establishing and training Child Protection Units and a complaints mechanism for reporting alleged violations against children were however not fulfilled.

In April 2013, the MILF leadership agreed to an open-ended extension of the Action Plan. A joint delegation from the Office of the SRSG-CAAC and UNICEF Headquarters visited the

Philippines and worked on developing an operational plan in an effort to make the steps more practical and achievable given lessons learned since 2009. The operational plan identified key non-negotiable benchmarks that the MILF must meet, and proposed activities towards these benchmarks with a one-year target for completion. The Office of the SRSG-CAAC also provided practical guidelines for determining the association of children with armed forces or armed groups, and what constitutes a support function, based on the definition of the Paris Principles⁵⁴ and jurisprudence arising from the Lubanga judgement.⁵⁵ The operational plan and guidelines were presented to the MILF Action Plan Panel and received in a collaborative spirit. But no further steps were taken by the MILF regardless of continuous efforts by UNICEF and the CTFMR to re-engage. The Action Plan went dormant for almost a year.



UNICEF Philippines Representative, Lotta Sylwander, meeting with Chairman of the MILF Action Plan Panel, Eduard Guerra, BIAF Chief of General Staff, Sammy al-Mansoor and other members of the MILF Central Committee in Camp Darapanan, Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao. © UNICEF Philippines/2014

2014-2017: Revitalisation of the Action Plan and path to finalisation

The signing of the CAB in March 2014 was the most significant step towards lasting peace in Mindanao in a generation. Political commentators reported widespread optimism in the peace process with both sides renewing pledges and restating commitments to democracy and human rights. This rapidly evolving landscape presented exciting opportunities for

⁵⁴ The Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups, 2007.

⁵⁵ Thomas Lubanga, a Congolese militia leader, was found guilty by the International Criminal Court of war crimes of enlisting and conscripting children under the age of 15 years and using them to participate actively in hostilities.

children's rights and the Action Plan. The continued scrutiny of the Security Council and persistent efforts of UNICEF paid off when, in July 2014, the MILF revitalized its engagement on the Action Plan. This time, the MILF restated their commitment to fully implement the Action Plan and honour the agreement signed with the UN. As a display of this commitment, the MILF reconstituted the Action Plan Panel to include both military and civilian representatives of the organisation. The Chair of the Panel was a senior member of the Central Committee and had the trust and confidence of the MILF Chairman. The female representative, a first for the MILF in its engagement with the international community, was a member of the BIWAB and created inroads for the major involvement of women in the Action Plan implementation. The MILF also appointed the Head of the Administrative Office of the General Staff to support the mobilization of front and base commanders for activities under the Action Plan. The Action Plan Secretariat, based in BDA, coordinated between the UN and MILF on logistics and administrative arrangements. These separate set-ups were instrumental in the smooth implementation of the Action Plan and eased the communication challenges faced by UNICEF in the earlier phases.

Building on the operational plan, an Action Plan Roadmap was then developed and endorsed by the MILF leadership.

Action Plan Roadmap Benchmarks
1.1 MILF leadership disseminates and displays at all Base Commands and military camps the Supplemental General Order for General Orders Nos. 1 & 2; and 1.2 Appoints child protection focal points within each MILF Base Command to regularly liaise with the UN.
2.1 MILF facilitates access to the UN to Base Commands, military camps, training centres and operational commands; and 2.2 MILF to identify any children who are recruited or associated with the BIAF in any role and ensure their separation from chain of command.
3.1 MILF Base Commanders meet with UN team for briefing on the Action Plan and Supplemental General Order; and 3.2 Submit Base Command progress reports every two months.
4. MILF Base Commanders facilitate orientation and re-echoing sessions for all troops within AOR on the Action Plan and the Supplemental General Order
5.1 MILF leadership develops and launches, with UN support, a communication campaign for MILF troops and for the community through appropriate media; and 5.2 Organises a public event to signal the adherence of the Base Command and communities to prevent and respond to child recruitment and use
6. MILF leadership takes action on non-compliance in Base Commands including through disciplinary measures where appropriate as stipulated in Article 64-A of the Supplemental General Order

The MILF shared the list of front and base commands with UNICEF, identifying the seven fronts and 31 bases across Mindanao that would fall within the purview of the Action Plan. The MILF also offered guaranteed and unhindered access to territory under its control for Action Plan-related activities by UNICEF and partners. Although these visits required prior

coordination for security reasons, the MILF ensured access to commanders and camps upon request. No attempts to conceal children associated with the BIAF/BIWAB were observed during these visits.

Defining the strategy and approach for engagement and implementation

Based on experiences and lessons learned from the previous phases and information shared by the MILF at the inception meeting with UNICEF in July 2014, the following served as a guiding framework:

- It was key to properly sequence the activities in the Action Plan so that each activity served as a building block for the next to prepare the MILF to take ownership of the process for the eventual identification and separation of children associated with the BIAF/BIWAB;
- It was necessary to prioritise orientations for the BIAF/BIWAB at the outset to disseminate basic child rights and protection concepts and definitions. It also helped to ensure the MILF's Code of Conduct and SGO were understood and shared as widely as possible within the military;
- In parallel to the orientations, it was important to plan for a sustained and longer-term communication and awareness-raising programme for the community in MILF areas in order to influence change in norms and practices ascribed to the recruitment and use of children;
- In order to equip commanders to lead specific Action Plan activities and to make child protection a primary obligation and responsibility, it was necessary to train and mentor base commanders and Action Plan focal points;
- Recognizing BIWAB members as an influential bridge to military and civilians, it was essential to mobilise their support for the involvement of women and children;
- UNICEF gained the trust of front and base commanders by displaying a clear commitment to supporting the MILF achieve compliance with the Action Plan and create a protective environment for their children;
- It was imperative that the benchmark on identifying children associated with the BIAF/BIWAB for separation be approached cautiously and only after obtaining the trust and buy-in of commanders; the process also had to be owned and led by the MILF, not UNICEF;
- It was crucial to involve MILF religious leaders in the process to reinforce messages from an Islamic perspective given their influential role among the military and communities;
- It was necessary to leverage political capital and influence of key Member States and other international actors present in the country to encourage the MILF to stay the course of the Action Plan until completion.



BIAF combatant reading the Code of Conduct pocket card distributed during one of the base command orientations held in Maguindanao. © UNICEF Philippines/2014/Cabrera

THE ACTION PLAN ROADMAP – STEP-BY-STEP APPROACH

Step 1: Appointing focal points and disseminating orders

The MILF appointed Action Plan focal points in 31 base commands and seven front commands comprised of the Administrative Officer. This is a key position within the command structure as the Administrative Officers manage the master list of BIAF membership in their respective bases. These focal points were instrumental to ensuring activities were carried out properly in support of base commanders and played a critical role in identification of children at later stages. Importantly, except for two base commands, the same focal points were retained until the end of the Action Plan process, allowing for gradual capacity-building by UNICEF and the Action Plan Secretariat that eventually led to greater ownership and pride in meeting the Action Plan benchmarks. The MILF also strategically displayed the Code of Conduct and SGO in their main military camps, satellite camps and base command communities. Interestingly, many children who were associated became aware through these displays that their association with the BIAF/BIWAB was a violation and that the commanders could be held accountable.



Banner on the BIAF Code of Conduct and Supplemental General Order displayed at the entrance of the MILF Headquarters, Camp Darapanan. © UNICEF Philippines/2015/Maitem

Step 2: Orienting Front and Base Commanders, field commanders, officers and elements; and re-echoing messages for all troops

UNICEF developed special training modules⁵⁶ for the orientations and translated them into Tagalog and the three regional languages of Maguindanaon, Maranao and Kagaan. Together with BDA and Plan International, the orientations were conducted for all front and base commands, reaching more than 9,000 BIAF/BIWAB. The officers were also given pocket cards on the Code of Conduct and a Supplemental General Order produced by the International Committee of the Red Cross. These orientations were then followed by sessions led by the base commanders or Action Plan focal points to systematically reinforce key messages to the rank and file within their respective AORs. Over 100 sessions reached 9,644 individuals. Sessions were also held with parents and children, reaching at least 4,600 individuals. The purpose of repeating the sessions over a sustained period was to ensure the messages first reached and were then retained by as many MILF members as possible.



Orientation on the UN-MILF Action Plan and protection of children in armed conflict for BIAF commanders and troops in 118 base commands of the BIAF, Datu Saudi Ampatuan, Maguindanao. © UNICEF Philippines/2016/Marcella

Step 3: A communication campaign targeting MILF military and civilians

The local version of the global “Children, Not Soldiers” campaign proved effective in communicating messages with the BIAF/BIWAB among the military, communities and

⁵⁶ There were a total of four modules that included an introduction to child protection and children and armed conflict, including the definition of a child under International Law; legal and other frameworks on child protection, including the BIAF Code of Conduct and Orders; the MRM, grave violations against children and background to the BIAF listing; and the Action Plan benchmarks, as well as the roles and responsibilities of commanders and Action Plan focal points in implementing each benchmark.

children themselves. It was launched in 2015 and ran in two phases until the end of 2016. The MILF, with UN support, jointly designed a Communication for Development (C4D) strategy⁵⁷ around the core themes of the definition of the age of childhood; non-engagement of children in military-related activities; and non-involvement or association of children with the MILF military structure in combatant or support roles. Key messages were infused with selected Islamic verses culled from the Children in Islam Manual produced by Al-Azhar University and UNICEF.⁵⁸ The second phase of this campaign amplified messages on the need to prevent association or re-association of children with BIAF/BIWAB or other armed groups. It also sought to influence internal processes that serve to counter norms and practices in a non-threatening way, as well as generate alternative perspectives to dissuade children, parents and communities from associating with the BIAF/BIWAB. Information, Education and Communication materials were produced, including community banners, printed t-shirts, educational flipcharts, wristbands, stickers and other visual materials promoting the campaign – all in consultation with the MILF.



Launching of the “Children, Not Soldiers” Campaign in Cotabato City. © UNICEF Philippines/2016/Cabrera

⁵⁷ Key messages for the campaign were informed by findings of a UNICEF commissioned knowledge, attitudes and practices (KAP) study that sought to look at how social actors, particularly children, their parents, MILF Base Commanders and community leaders make sense of children’s involvement with the MILF; and identify the social structures and community systems that support, promote and perpetuate these KAPs.

⁵⁸ Al-Azhar University and UNICEF, *Children in Islam: Their Care, Protection and Development*, 2005. The Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt is a respected institution by the MILF; the research was well regarded and supported the customisation of key #CNS messages.

At the heart of the campaign was a series of public events organized and led by the commanders in their respective bases. Activities were conducted during a community thanksgiving (Kanduli). This was an important component of the Action Plan as it was an opportunity for BIAF/BIWAB and community members to hear directly from the commanders pledging to zero-child association or involvement in any armed or support activities. Every commander signed a declaration at the end of the ceremony signaling his commitment. Over 10,000 people living in MILF communities were present at these ceremonies across all base commands.



Base commander from 117 base command, Panamao, Sulu publicly declaring his commitment to non-involvement of children with his forces in combatant or support roles. © UNICEF Philippines/2015/Nando

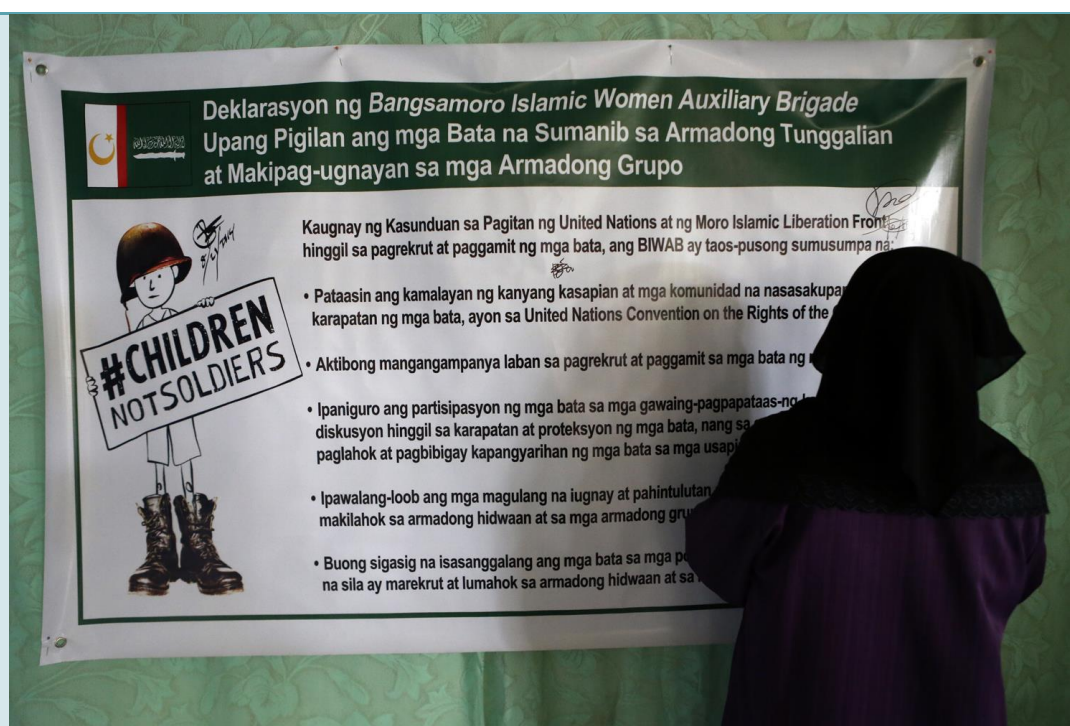
UNICEF partners played a significant role in the campaign's success.⁵⁹ They conducted a range of activities in core MILF communities across Mindanao delivering key messages through discussion groups with children and youth, community assemblies, kids' camps and other youth recreational programmes. Messages were also disseminated through *Tahderriyah* (Islamic daycare centres) teachers, administrators, as well as parents. Radio

⁵⁹Main partners in this campaign were BDA, Plan International, Balay Rehabilitation, Nonviolent Peaceforce, Kalimudan Culture and Arts Centre, UNYPHIL Women, Mindanao Tulong Bakwet, Inc., Suara Mindanao, and the Bureau of Public Information-ARMM.

programmes were used to disseminate the campaign messages particularly to MILF communities in the most remote areas. The campaign was further supported by a former child soldier selected by the MILF to act as an advocate for children affected by conflict.

The campaign culminated with *Pakaradian sa Kalilintad* (a celebration of peace), a cultural competition of traditional performances involving children from all the base commands to celebrate the Bangsamoro way of life and to preserve and promote the importance of culture among the younger generation. The children reinforced the “Children, Not Soldiers” messages through dance, song, and music – highlighting that Action Plan benchmarks can be achieved through creative means steered by children and communities. In total, the campaign reached more than 20,000 people, including 3,201 BIAF, 3,256 BIWAB and 11,884 children, adolescents, community and religious members in 61 municipalities and eight provinces across Mindanao.

Vitalising gatekeepers, empowering women – the BIWAB



Bangsamoro Islamic Women Auxiliary Brigade leading community orientations. © UNICEF Philippines/2015/Maitem

From the outset, BIWAB was recognized as a potent force for ensuring successful implementation of the Action Plan. As members of the military, and as mothers, grandmothers, wives and sisters, they had a pivotal role in influencing the changes and cultural norms driving the involvement of children with armed groups amongst their peers and other female community members. UNICEF worked closely with the BIWAB leadership and members while they took on significant responsibilities in the planning and execution of the “Children, Not Soldiers” campaign.

This was the first known time globally where female members of a non-State armed group committed to campaigning against the recruitment and use of children in armed groups and proactively sought to secure their protection against related possible threats and vulnerabilities.

Step 4: Identifying children vulnerable to continued involvement and securing sustained disengagement

Building on the previous achievements and allaying fears that children might be separated from their families and communities, the base commanders undertook the task of identifying children associated with forces under their command. With UNICEF guiding the discussions, they provided inputs into the design of a four-step process, endorsed by the BIAF Chief of General Staff. This included: 1) identifying children associated with the BIAF/BIWAB; 2) confirmation and validation of the initial lists submitted by the base command; 3) orientation with children identified and their parents; and finally, 4) officially releasing engaged children.

A command order was then issued requiring the compliance of all commanders to identify children who were associated with the BIAF/BIWAB for the purpose of being disengaged.

This was the most difficult benchmark to address with regards to its practical implementation given the scope and scale. It required base commanders to appoint a Task Force comprising the Action Plan focal point, a representative from the BIWAB and another from the Medical section in every base command to facilitate and support the identification and disengagement process. The deputy base commanders were responsible for overseeing the identification exercise and mobilising their respective brigade, battalion and company commanders, and platoon leaders. UNICEF developed the implementing guidelines and tools for conducting the exercise and trained members of the Task Force. Separately, a CTFMR-Working Group on the Identification and Disengagement of Children was formed to monitor compliance of this final benchmark. Members of the CTFMR-Working Group were comprised of the Commission on Human Rights of the Philippines, the Regional Human Rights Commission-ARMM, Nonviolent Peaceforce and UNICEF. The MILF welcomed the involvement of the national and regional human rights commissions as part of the validation team, noting the influence these institutions brought to bear on the final benchmark.

The thorough process of identifying children was conducted by the BIAF in a total of 199 Inner Defence brigades, 220 Expeditionary Mission brigades, 227 Guerrilla Operations units and 31 BIWAB battalions, with a final total of 1,869 children associated with the BIAF/BIWAB. The CTFMR-Working Group carried out the validation of these lists, one base command at a time, and where inaccuracies or inconsistencies were found, bases were requested to repeat the process. Children whose names were found on the BIAF/BIWAB official “master lists” were removed. The children and parents were then oriented on the reasons behind their disengagement. The commanders specifically requested this step to ensure the children and their parents fully understood the importance and implications of being disengaged. These sessions were led by the MILF and included a representative from

the Department of Islamic Call and Guidance of the BIAF. Disengagement ceremonies for the children were subsequently conducted and witnessed by officials from the UN, OPAPP, ARMM, GPH-MILF Ceasefire Mechanisms and other members of the CTFMR. Certificates of disengagement were issued to each child, signifying their official separation from the BIAF/BIWAB and reinstatement to civilian status.⁶⁰



Parents and children arriving for the disengagement ceremony at 101 base command of the BIAF, Pagayawan, Lanao del Sur. © UNICEF Philippines/2017/Maitem

Step 5: Systematic monitoring and investigation by MILF of allegations of recruitment and use of children, signalling no tolerance for non-compliance

Base Commanders submitted quarterly progress reports to the UN and MILF Action Plan Panel throughout the Action Plan process, which served as a tool to monitor compliance and assess progress on implementation. When gaps in implementation were discovered, or if allegations of recruitment and use of children were received through the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM), these were presented to the MILF Action Plan Panel. Investigations were initiated by instructions from the Chief of General Staff and appropriate action taken. These were, but not limited to, verbal warnings to individual commanders to

⁶⁰ The certificate proved to be important documentary evidence to identify disengaged children for provision of support following their displacement/evacuation during the Marawi siege. According to the caseworkers tracing the whereabouts of these children, the children left many of their belongings behind but took along their certificates.

stop the use of children in any form, and the issuance of directives as reminders to strictly comply with the Code of Conduct and SGO.



Members of the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces from 104 base command attending the orientation, Datu Odin Sinsuat, Maguindanao. © UNICEF Philippines/2014/Nando

Step 6: Instituting safeguards to monitor and screen troops, including age assessment measures

As a final step, following the disengagement of all children, the MILF promulgated a directive⁶¹ requiring regular self-monitoring and screening of armed elements, as well as age-assessment guidelines⁶² to establish safeguards for the prevention of association and re-association of children.

⁶¹ MILF Directive on Instituting Safeguards to Prevent the Association and Re-association of Children with the MILF-BIAF, issued on 25 March 2017.

⁶² Age assessment guidelines to prevent and respond to child recruitment and use in the BIAF/BIWAB, issued in 2017, are intended to be used by all concerned commanders and officers in cases when valid identity documents are lacking or there is a reason to doubt the accuracy of the information based on initial physical appearance, observation or other factors. The guidelines are also used for screening and identification and removal of active members of the BIAF/BIWAB deemed to be underage.

POST-DELISTING

“Being disengaged was an advantage for us. We want to fight for our rights and the rights of the Bangsamoro, not using guns but through non-violent means, through knowledge and education.” (Disengaged children from General Headquarters Base Command sharing their views, July 2018)

The UN continues to monitor and report on grave violations against children by all parties to the conflict in Mindanao, including the MILF. In line with its March 2017 directive, the MILF has also instituted regular monitoring of its commanders and elements through the Office of the General Staff, thus ensuring no child associates or re-associates with the BIAF/BIWAB. Commanders have been ordered not to allow children to enter the camps or perform any roles for the forces. The BIWAB also distributed instructions to all battalion commanders and developed an internal monitoring system. At the base command level, meetings are now held with disengaged children and their parents periodically as part of the MILF’s continued advocacy efforts post-Action Plan. Parents are also guided to support their children to participate in alternative activities and to prioritise school attendance over visits to the camps. The directive was also shared with all BIAF *murshideen* through the Department of Islamic Call and Guidance to reduce the risk of BIAF continuing to use children.

Other preventive and response programmes continue for disengaged children, children at risk of (re) association with other armed groups, and families. UNICEF, in collaboration with the MILF, ARMM and partners, is providing support to family-based case management, psychosocial interventions, good parenting and referrals to existing government services. UNICEF’s support to the work with MILF Muslim religious leaders also continues through the production and delivery of a series of *Khutbah* (Friday Sermons) on child protection based on Islamic teachings that will be used by the *Duat* (Islamic preacher), *Aimmah* (leader of prayer congregations), and *murshideen* and *murshidaat* to convey child protection messages to combatants and communities.



Disengaged child from Ansar base command, Malabang, Lanao del Sur reading the words on the t-shirt he received. © UNICEF Philippines/2017/ Marcella

CHAPTER 4

GOOD PRACTICES AND LESSONS LEARNED



'Pakaradian sa Darapanan', culmination of the "Children, Not Soldiers" campaign in MILF Headquarters, Camp Darapanan, Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao. © UNICEF Philippines/2016/Marcella

“For the past eight years, UNICEF has been assisting the MILF in an Action Plan to prevent and address the recruitment and use of children and to disengage children found in their ranks. Today we reach the final benchmark of the Action Plan and commend the MILF for seeing the Action Plan to its completion. The long process of changing beliefs and behaviours required the openness of the MILF communities to listen and unite for the sake of their children. But this is only the beginning of all our work. Bangsamoro children will only be able to chart their own destinies if we provide them with proper health and education so that they can dream big dreams and be future leaders, doctors, and teachers.” (Lotta Sylwander, Representative of UNICEF Philippines,⁶³

Through the Action Plan’s eight-year implementation, numerous good practices can be highlighted for directly assisting the MILF to meet commitments under the agreement. Likewise, challenges and obstacles also served as a valuable learning process, useful in guiding others working on behalf of children and engaging with parties to conflict on similar Action Plans around the world.

Commitment by the MILF at the highest levels

The MILF Central Committee, led by its Chairman and other key senior leaders of the organisation, including the First Vice Chairman and Chief of General Staff, were committed to and updated periodically on each step of the Action Plan implementation. Although there were notable periods of inactivity at the height of the peace negotiations, and delays in signing the Action Plan extensions, the MILF maintained its commitment to the key principles. The MILF appeared to view the Action Plan and the ultimate goal of being delisted as important within the context of the peace process and for building international credibility in efforts to transition into the political sphere. The MILF’s commitment was demonstrated by the leadership’s non-interference in the implementation process, facilitation of access to base commands and camps by UNICEF, UN and partners, rapid investigations into concerns expressed by UNICEF, and attendance at important Action Plan activities. The MILF’s commitments were further evidenced during the 2015 Mamasapano armed conflict incident after which the MILF proceeded with the Action Plan implementation despite facing a political onslaught, calls for all-out-war, pushback on the BBL and negative publicity.

Strong command and control

The command and control by the MILF Chairman, also the Commander in Chief of the BIAF, and subordinate commanders cannot be underestimated. While rogue and breakaway commanders did challenge the MILF leadership during the peace process, most bases and lower-level commanders followed the supervision and control expressed by the central military command. This facilitated the quick dissemination and enforcement of the General Orders and directives pertaining to the Action Plan. Front and base commanders also described their loyalty, trust and discipline in following the leader’s orders as proscribed by their Islamic faith. There had been no instance of any commander refusing to partake or

⁶³ Remarks made at the Disengagement Ceremony of children associated with the Interim Base Command and Central Mindanao Front, 18 February 2017

cooperate with the Action Plan during the last three years of implementation – despite some commanders who were initially hesitant to disengage children under their command. One effective strategy included approaching each benchmark with commanders who were in full agreement with the Action Plan before proceeding to other commanders. Base commanders kept each other accountable, and those who already complied advocated for others to follow suit. As a last resort, it was sometimes necessary for the BIAF Chief of General Staff to intervene or even discipline commanders for non-compliance.

Appointment of a senior member of the MILF Central Committee as Chairman of the MILF Action Plan Panel

The appointment of a senior and well-respected member of the MILF as Chairman of the Action Plan Panel was an indication of the MILF's commitment to fulfil their responsibilities following the signing of the CAB in 2014. The appointment allowed smooth and systematic implementation as any necessary decisions or corrective actions could be taken swiftly. The composition of the new panel of both civilian and military representatives also proved useful for communicating with different MILF agencies – such as the Da'awah Information committee (religious committee) and Foreign Affairs committee – both key contributors to the Action Plan process. Of particular note was the appointment of a female military representative to the panel who was instrumental in ensuring the active involvement of the BIWAB in implementing the Action Plan.

Endorsement of the Action Plan by the Darul Ifta (MILF Religious Council) and role of MILF religious leaders

The endorsement of the Action Plan by the Darul Ifta prior to its signing minimised any possible resistance and doubts to the legitimacy of the Action Plan from an Islamic perspective, particularly regarding the age of maturity of a child. Having the BIAF *murshideen* and *murshidaat* play a role in the Action Plan implementation from the outset such as the “Children, Not Soldiers” campaign and leading the orientations with children identified as disengaged and their parents, was crucial given their moral authority to foster dialogue and influence thinking and behavioural change among combatants and communities.

Obtaining buy-in and building ownership by front and base commanders through regular engagement and consultation

At the start of each new benchmark, UNICEF consulted with front and base commanders and the Action Plan focal points, either through the Office of General Staff or by bringing them together in one location. This was important for building a sense of ownership among the commanders and encouraging them to find solutions that worked in their context. Throughout this process UNICEF sought to empower focal points to further communicate through their ranks. For instance, identifying children associated with the BIAF and BIWAB was achieved by securing the commanders and focal points' involvement in the design process, enabling their comfort and readiness. Given the community-based nature of the MILF context, any methodology to identify children associated through externally imposed means clearly would not have achieved the same results.

During these engagements, UNICEF set out to reassure commanders and BIAF/BIWAB forces of UN/UNICEF's values and guiding principles, and to reiterate its objectivity and impartiality in monitoring and reporting on all parties to the conflict in the Philippines. This was done by raising awareness on the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism and sharing with them excerpts from the SG's annual report and annexes. It highly motivated many of the commanders to see the progress made on the Action Plan reflected in these reports. The need for information verified through the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism was critical for engaging in dialogue with parties to conflict.

Involvement of the BIWAB

The role of the BIWAB was instrumental in the successful implementation of the Action Plan. Initially, the role of women, particularly the BIWAB, in implementing the Action Plan was negligible. The participation of the BIWAB in the broader peace process also initially appeared limited. The BIWAB and women-focused NGOs shared with UNICEF the steps taken to involve the BIWAB through the roundtable discussion in 2015. With support from UNICEF and the Government of Canada, created space for the group to be more prominent players in the normalisation and action plan processes. The involvement of BIWAB as active contributors to the Action Plan provided the opportunity to shape solutions and make decisions. And as members of their own communities, they not only obtained the cooperation of other mothers to advocate against the involvement of children with armed groups, but also facilitated the participation of children in the process.



Members of the Bangsamoro Islamic Women Auxiliary Brigade from 107 base command in Maasim, Sarangani participating in the orientation. © UNICEF Philippines/2014/Lemiah Nando

Working with strategic local and international partners

The contribution of UNICEF's partners, both local and international, to the Action Plan process was indispensable from 2009 forward. Local partners in particular contributed to the success of the "Children, Not Soldiers" campaign by ensuring sustained efforts in core MILF communities across Mindanao. These partners had the advantage of working in these conflict-affected communities and had already gained their trust and acceptance. UNICEF also partnered with the *Suara Mindanao* (Voice of Mindanao) radio programme which reaches some of the most remote communities in the region. The Bureau of Public Information of the ARMM Government also ensured that MILF communities and general public in the Island provinces of Tawi-Tawi, Sulu, and Basilan heard the messages. International partners, such as Plan International and Nonviolent Peaceforce, also brought several years of experience working with the MILF and their communities, including on the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism.

UNICEF introduced its implementing partners to the MILF Action Plan Panel with a clear delineation of roles and AOR for endorsement during the planning stages of the respective programmes. While the communication did not always reach the base commands quickly, this was good practice in accordance with the 'mutually agreed' partners clause in the Action Plan.

Working as 'One UN' - role of the UN Country Task Force on Monitoring and Reporting

The CTFMR at the national level, co-chaired by the UN Resident Coordinator and the UNICEF Representative, was instrumental to the negotiation phase of the Action Plan in 2009. The CTFMR served to collectively, and Heads of Agencies were also able to emphasise the importance of the Action Plan in bilateral discussions with the MILF leadership during visits to Mindanao over the years. While agencies displayed a willingness and desire to be more involved in the implementation of the Action Plan, three large-scale emergencies affecting the Philippines beginning in 2013 with diverted attention and resources. However, active CTFMR members at the Mindanao level, specifically the Commission on Human Rights of the Philippines, the Regional Commission on Human Rights and Nonviolent Peaceforce, monitored compliance of the Action Plan across base commands jointly with UNICEF. This included monitoring BIAF base command areas in the Island provinces where UNICEF had travel restrictions for security reasons. Such mutually supportive undertakings by CTFMR members backed by resources from their respective organisations were exceptional in this case.

Leveraging political capital and influence of diplomatic/donor community and other international actors

The role of bilateral diplomacy, particularly by the Group of Friends on children and armed conflict, was a contributing factor to the MILF's maintained momentum on the Action Plan. The Group of Friends forum in the Philippines, convened by the Government of Canada, was established in 2014, mirroring a similar group of UN Member States in New York, that advocates on behalf of the global Children and Armed Conflict Agenda. The MILF was encouraged by the interest shown by members of the Group of Friends on its Action Plan during meetings with its Central Committee. This added to its credibility and legitimacy

among the international community. The Group of Friends also served as a platform to advocate for funding for child protection programmes in Mindanao.

Trust building and sustained engagement with the MILF by the UN and UNICEF in the Philippines

UNICEF's resolve to engage the MILF in peace building was constant despite ongoing political and physical conflicts. The signing of the Joint Communiqué by UNICEF and MILF in 2007, which called for deliberate and extraordinary efforts to provide services for children in conflict-affected communities in Mindanao, was the start of this constructive engagement and helped build the trust and confidence necessary for continued dialogue on the Action Plan. UNICEF's Representative was also the first UN official to make a visit to the MILF in 2007. Since then, successive UNICEF Representatives have strengthened engagement with the MILF and defined cooperation on broader programming for the protection of children in armed conflict in Mindanao. This approach could be used in initiating similar agreements with other armed groups in the Philippines.

High-level advocacy by the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict

High-profile visits to the Philippines by the UN Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict and sustained advocacy with the MILF and the Security Council were influential in securing commitments, including the MILF's agreement to sign the Action Plan. Further visits by technical teams in support of the UN Country Team also assisted in navigating challenges and advancing implementation.

Government of the Philippines cooperation

The openness of the Government of the Philippines to UNICEF's engagement approach with the MILF allowed for early and meaningful collaboration. The Government, through the Office of the Presidential Adviser to the Peace Process, also sent representatives to observe the disengagement ceremonies of children associated with the BIAF/BIWAB, including a high-level delegation led by the Presidential Adviser to the Peace Process, Secretary Jesus Dureza. The Government was kept apprised of the progress made and had an optimistic view that the Action Plan could serve as a springboard for similar negotiations with other non-State actors to halt the recruitment and use of children.

Publicising progress made on the Action Plan

Media briefings at strategic milestones of the Action Plan implementation provided encouragement to the MILF, particularly the commanders on the ground, to see their work being acknowledged and recognised. During initial stages of the process, although it was unlikely that the MILF would rescind on its agreement, the popularisation of the Action Plan was helpful for ensuring awareness of the standards to which Action Plan compliance was being measured and to increase public scrutiny of the process. Publicity was also helpful in supporting local civil society organisations and NGOs working on child protection in MILF communities who were not previously aware of the efforts. This motivated some organisations to recalibrate their programmes to support the Action Plan goals. Furthermore, within the context of the peace process, the MILF's efforts to address

recruitment and use of children was highlighted and legitimized by visibility at the national level.

Communication for Development: “Children, Not Soldiers” campaign

The Communication for Development (C4D), “Children, Not Soldiers” campaign made a positive impact at the community level, according to stakeholders interviewed at the conclusion of the Action Plan. This was due to the fact that the campaign was designed together with the MILF and incorporated inputs from a range of MILF stakeholders and child protection partners whose interventions reached affected communities. Messages and IEC materials were tailored to local contexts and informed by the findings of a UNICEF-commissioned knowledge, attitudes and practices (KAP) study. The campaign was sustained for two years and involved the active participation of children, their families and the wider MILF communities.



Commission on Human Rights of the Philippines, a member of the CTFMR supporting the validation process in 109 base command of the BIAF, Datu Paglas, Maguindanao. © UNICEF Philippines/2016/Marcella

LESSONS LEARNED

Understanding the MILF context

In 2008/09 there was limited global knowledge, experience or guidance for Action Plans. The general assumption in the Philippines was that children would follow a traditional template of disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) requiring registration of children for release and reintegration support. However, given the MILF community context, the process became a census-like exercise of all children in communities affected by conflict. This served of little use and was discontinued. Moreover, the term 'reintegration'⁶⁴ had proven contentious in past dialogue with the MILF. Similarly, other components of the Action Plan such as a complaints mechanism proved short-sighted by assuming the armed group was working in opposition to the community and/or required emboldening members to report on cases of child recruitment and use.

As these assumptions were disproven, an alternative operational plan was devised with measurable benchmarks adapted to the local context and based on the provisions of the existing Action Plan. In order to accelerate the process, it would have been more effective, both for negotiation and implementation, to have proceeded with more contextual knowledge before developing the initial Action Plan.

Other challenges included the rapid registration process which failed to gain the buy-in of base commanders. The commanders were not sufficiently oriented on the Action Plan and not consulted in the planning and execution of the registration. This resulted in reluctance to contribute during the preparation phase. An additional challenge involved the use of external enumerators to identify and register children. The sequencing of activities should be carefully considered depending on the context and understanding of the armed group. In the MILF context, it was clear that time invested orienting combatants and community members prior to the identification process was key to gaining needed acceptance.

Identifying thresholds for engagement

The complexity of the MILF context made identifying children's association challenging. The relationship between the MILF and the communities meant many children lived in MILF camps and, by nature of their Bangsamoro ethnicity, closely linked to the MILF agenda. This presented the CTFMR with a dilemma for determining the degree of children's involvement under the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism framework without the unnecessary inclusion of all children in these communities. Guidance provided by the Office of the SRSG-CAAC and UNICEF (based on the definition of the Paris Principles and jurisprudence arising from the Lubanga judgement) established that a child was associated

⁶⁴ The term 'reintegration' was deemed sensitive to the MILF, with one reason cited that it "sounds too close to the 'national integration' policy which is viewed as seeking to subsume the struggling Moro identity into the dominant Filipino identity." It is also "associated with a drive for pacification wherein the government would concede just enough in negotiations to achieve the cessation of hostilities or demobilization of rebel combatants, without really addressing the substantive issues raised by the conflict." (Santos, Jr., Soliman M. and Paz Verdades M. Santos, *Primed and Purposeful*).

if they were exposed to a real risk of being a potential target as a consequence of involvement in the armed agenda, including support roles.

In 2014, when the new MILF Action Plan Panel was established, members acknowledged the organisation did not fully understand the scope of what defined a “child soldier” or a “child associated” and had assumed that only a child recruited and used as a combatant in military operations constituted a violation. However, once the definition was understood, the information was repeated through orientations, messaging campaigns and workshops resulting in broader clarity. As a result, commanders were able to draw distinction between a child associated with the BIAF/BIWAB and those who were not, based on the roles children performed and the risks involved with providing support in the base camps. The commanders were consequently able to lead the process of identifying children from the rank and file.

Managing expectations

The MILF perception that the Action Plan was a sole UNICEF undertaking created expectations that UNICEF should dedicate resources for the Action Plan implementation and provide support and services for the disengaged children. In a few base commands, this could have become a security risk for UNICEF staff. In one instance, misinformation provided by field commanders on the objectives of the identification exercise, linking registration to the provision of benefits for children by UNICEF (such as scholarships and money), led to inflated numbers of children added to the list. In another instance, parents reacted negatively to having their children’s names removed from the list. Having ownership of the Action Plan implementation, the MILF leadership intervened to reinforce the guidelines and reminded commanders to conduct the exercise in good faith and transparently. This helped to manage the expectations of combatants, parents and children and ensured better communication for those eligible for disengagement.



The certificate of disengagement signifying her official separation from the BIWAB. © UNICEF Philippines/2016/Maitem

CONCLUSION

“I feel like the child in me is free now because I am no longer required to undertake tasks in the military. I enjoy just being a child.” (Interview with disengaged BIWAB member, July 2018)

The delisting of the MILF, with the sustained support of UNICEF and the CTFMR, was an important milestone demonstrating true commitment to the protection and welfare of children. The MILF leadership affirmed the focus on raising awareness among combatants and communities and gaining their acceptance of the messages were key to the success of the Action Plan. It also emphasised mutual trust and transparency underpinning the relationship between the MILF and the UN/UNICEF at all levels and ultimately encouraged cooperation by commanders to deliver on their responsibility as a co-signatory of the Action Plan.

These great strides must now be carefully safeguarded to avoid future recruitment and use of children in Mindanao and ensure children affected by armed conflict enjoy their full rights. Young people also need reasons to believe they can have dignified lives and must be given the opportunity for making this possible. If not, there is a real possibility that strong political ideology and religious beliefs can be manipulated by other armed actors.

With the passage of the Bangsamoro Organic Law and progress in the normalisation process, the MILF is now in a better position to contribute to just and lasting peace and to the well-being of Bangsamoro children.



Peace 'Sambolayang' painted by children during the 'Pakaradian sa Kalilintad' celebration in MILF Headquarters, Camp Darapanan, Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao © UNICEF Philippines/2016/Nadarajah

ANNEX

The table below provides a snapshot of the enabling environments that characterise and facilitate children's association with armed forces or armed groups, as well as their identification for release and reintegration across different contexts. However, despite some similarities, these country situations present an interesting contrast to the Mindanao context of identifying and disengaging children associated with the MILF.

Release and reintegration of child soldiers through Action Plans
<p>At the time of this report, 28 listed parties had signed 29 Action Plans, including 11 Government forces and 17 non-State armed groups, according to the Office of the SRSG-CAAC. Of these, 11 parties had fully complied with their Action Plan to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children and were subsequently delisted.⁶⁵ Aside from the MILF, these parties include the Armée Nationale Tchadienne (ANT) and the Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo (FARDC) – both the national armed forces of Chad and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, respectively. The other parties are armed non-State actors from Cote d'Ivoire, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Uganda.</p>
<p>Armée Nationale Tchadienne (ANT) – delisted in 2014</p> <p>In 2014, the UNSG delisted the ANT based on the progress made by the Government of Chad to address child recruitment in its armed forces in fulfilment of its commitments under an Action Plan signed with the UN in 2011. The deployment of Chadian troops to the African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA) prompted renewed momentum to accelerate the implementation of the Action Plan.⁶⁶</p> <p>The recruitment and use of children by the ANT occurred primarily throughout the eastern part of the country affected by armed conflict. Children associated with the ANT were actively enlisted through recruitment drives conducted in villages, sites for internally displaced persons and refugee camps, and sent for military training in ANT training centres.⁶⁷ Financial incentives played an important role in luring children, including refugee children, to join the ANT,⁶⁸ as well as a lack of educational and employment opportunities. Many of the children associated with the ANT included underage soldiers integrated into the armed forces from armed groups.⁶⁹ The children identified underwent a DDR programme, based on an agreement between UNICEF and the Government of Chad, which included their release, temporary care at transit centres and eventual reunification with their families.⁷⁰ Children were accepted back by their families, including those who voluntarily returned home, given the absence of community grounded</p>

⁶⁵ Website of the Office of the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/tools-for-action/action-plans/> [June 2018]

⁶⁶ United Nations. Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict (A/68/878–S/2014/339), issued 13 May 2014.

⁶⁷ United Nations. Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict (A/67/845*–S/2013/245*), issued 15 May 2013.

⁶⁸ United Nations. Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Chad (S/2011/64), issued 9 February 2011.

⁶⁹ United Nations. Report of the Secretary-General (A/68/878–S/2014/339), issued 13 May 2014.

⁷⁰ United Nations. Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Chad (S/2008/532), issued 6 August 2008. United Nations. Report of the Secretary-General (A/67/845*–S/2013/245*), issued 15 May 2013.

taboos related to the association of children in their teenage years with armed groups. Similar to the MILF context, boys are considered adults at puberty and considered by their parents and communities to have a duty to protect the community or ethnic group by joining armed groups.⁷¹

Forces Armées des Forces Nouvelles (FAFN) – delisted in 2007

Pro-Government militias - Front de libération du Grand Ouest (FLGO); Mouvement Ivoirien de Libération de l'Ouest de la Côte d'Ivoire (MILOCI); Alliance patriotique de l'ethnie Wè (APWé); and Union patriotique de résistance du Grand Ouest (UPRGO) – delisted in 2007

Upon full implementation of the Action Plans by the FAFN and militia groups agreed with the UN in November 2005 and September 2006, respectively, the parties were delisted in 2007.

The conflict in Cote d'Ivoire began with an attempted coup against its President in 2002 and led to a split in territories – the south, controlled by the Government, and the north, by the opposition FAFN.⁷² Children were associated with armed groups both in Government-held territories and areas under the control of the FAFN. The pro-government militias – FLGO, MILOCI, APWé, and UPRGO were active in Government-controlled areas, notably in the west. As the conflict continued, a growing number of Ivorian children were recruited by these groups and received training in military camps.⁷³ Interestingly, the process of identifying Ivorian children associated with the militias shared similar challenges to the the Mindanao context. The combatants and associated children were not always based in military camp settings but often dispersed and living on a day-to-day basis within their communities and their family settings.⁷⁴ As part of the signed Action Plan, the groups designated military focal points to identify children, in collaboration with the national DDR programme (PNRCC), and UNICEF, for reintegration and rehabilitation.

The conflict also had a regional dimension, including the cross-border recruitment of hundreds of child soldiers or former child soldiers from Liberia. These children had been forcibly recruited and used in the conflict in Liberia, reunited with families following their demobilization, and subsequently re-recruited to fight alongside pro-government forces and the FAFN in Cote d'Ivoire. The migrant population included thousands of young fighters motivated by economic opportunity, crossed the borders between Liberia, Guinea, Sierra Leone and Cote d'Ivoire to participate in the conflict.⁷⁵ Lured by financial incentive, any were unaware or could not articulate the political objective of the group they fought with.⁷⁶ This was further bolstered by the recruitment, of Liberians, including children from refugee camps

Ivoire and Ghana. Recruits were offered payment, but those who refused to join were harassed and threatened. Children as young as 14 were reportedly recruited, some after heavy intimidation, and sent into combat.⁷⁷ Children associated with the FAFN were demobilized with

⁷¹ United Nations. Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Chad (S/2007/400), issued 3 July 2007.

⁷² Child Soldiers global report 2008, Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, <https://www.child-soldiers.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=26c0549d-aa35-4f1a-8e34-5956f8e2ec51>

⁷³ Press release. *Côte D'Ivoire: Ex-Child Soldiers Recruited For War*, Human Rights Watch, March 2005.

⁷⁴ United Nations. Report of the Secretary-General (S/2007/400), issued 3 July 2007.

⁷⁵ Child Soldiers global report 2008, Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Child Soldiers global report 2004, Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers; and United Nations. Report of UN Panel of Experts on Liberia (S/2003/498), issued 24 April 2003.

UNICEF's support, including self-mobilised children who received training from pro-FAFN Liberian fighters during the conflict, and reunited with their families.

Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo (FARDC) – delisted in 2017

In September 2015, the Government of the DRC adopted a roadmap to accelerate the implementation of its Action Plan, which was signed in 2012. In 2017, the FARDC, the armed forces of the DRC Government, was delisted.

Against the protracted and violent conflict in eastern DRC, thousands of boys and girls were forcibly conscripted by the FARDC. Children were abducted by FARDC from their homes and communities. Many children also joined the military 'voluntarily' due to poverty, breakdown of basic social services, and lack of educational or employment opportunities. Others were seeking revenge, food or a weapon, and sometimes, even escape from domestic violence. One of the most significant enabling factors for the association of children with the FARDC was the fractured and disorganized way armed groups were integrated into the army. Several thousands of children were found in FARDC integrated brigades across the region; whereas many were separated through fast-track integration, quite a number of children were hidden by commanders and subsequently integrated into FARDC. Further, a voluntary enlistment campaign by the FARDC in 2012-2013 allowed hundreds of children to enrol in its ranks. Girls were recruited in the thousands as well and some fought on the front lines. Most were mainly used for domestic work, porters or as sexual slaves, often becoming the wives of commanders. Thousands were raped, and many had children as a result of rape.

Since 2004, children associated with the FARDC and its integrated brigades were demobilized and reintegrated with the support of UNICEF and partners, under the auspices of the national body on DDR (Commission Nationale de la Demobilization et Reinsertion (CONADER)). The programme did not reach all children, as many escaped the military or self-demobilised. Upon returning to their communities without having received support or assistance, many were forcibly re-recruited by other armed groups or re-enlisted 'voluntarily' given no alternatives. Family reunification was also not always successful for all children; some requested to be resettled away from their homes as they feared returning to their villages where they would be accused of committing atrocities and violence.⁷⁸ Further, identifying and securing the release of girl soldiers was a challenge, as most did not enter the DDR programme, fearing stigmatization by their communities. Military commanders and fighters also frequently assumed possession of girls, claimed them as wives and saw no obligation to identify or release them.⁷⁹ Many returning girls faced rejection from their communities.⁸⁰

Unified Communist Party of Nepal Maoist (U-CPNM) – Delisted in 2012

The armed conflict in Nepal between the Government and U-CPNM ended with the signing of a ceasefire agreement and the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2006. The agreement prohibited abduction, sexual violence, denial of humanitarian access and the military recruitment or use of children under 18. It also committed both parties to the immediate release and

⁷⁸ Nduwimana, Donatien (Lt.Col), *Reintegration of Child Soldiers in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo: Challenges and Prospects*, Occasional Paper, Series 4, No.2, 2013, International Peace Support Training Centre Kenya.

⁷⁹ Child Soldiers global report 2008, Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

reintegration of associated children.⁸¹ The Action Plan was signed three years later in 2009 and in line with the CPA, outlined a framework for the immediate and unconditional discharge of almost 3,000 verified minors who remained in the Maoist army cantonments.⁸² The completion of the discharge of the minors in 2010 in full compliance with the Action Plan led to the delisting of the U-CPNM in 2012.

The Maoist Party instituted special recruitment campaigns, such as the 'one family, one member for the Party', where children were forcibly or 'voluntarily' recruited into its military wing, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and its militias.⁸³ Children were also lured into the movement through community activities and cultural groups of the Maoists to gather popular support for the cause in their areas of control.⁸⁴ These, and the widespread practice of mass abductions and coercive recruitment of children from their homes and schools in rural areas of Nepal funnelled children into the various organisations of the Party.⁸⁵ The children eventually were directly or indirectly involved in military activities. Under the DDR process, the Maoist moved their forces into cantonments where registration was conducted, and "disqualified" verified minors were eventually discharged and availed reintegration support from UNICEF and NGOs. The children were allowed to freely and independently determine their areas of return or resettlement. Many other children were informally released from the cantonment by the Maoist army, escaped or self-released without the assistance of measures for their recovery or reintegration. Subsequent studies found that most ex-cadres were unwilling to return to their original home communities, with most moving to urban areas or to new communities in which there was a significant presence of ex-Maoists.⁸⁶ The latter often depended on motivations for leaving their communities and joining the Maoist movement in the first place - whether challenging social exclusion and discrimination in their communities based on caste, ethnicity or gender.⁸⁷ Many were also stigmatized, often linked to the label "disqualified" – or 'ayogya' in Nepali, meaning 'unfit' or 'incapable'.⁸⁸

The Nepal/Maoist context is also interesting in that the role of personal or social relationships among girl soldiers resulted in many girls joining the Maoist army. Girl soldiers would return to their villages to recruit friends and neighbours,⁸⁹ or made friends in communities where they were recruiting causing other girls to join as a result of these friendships.⁹⁰ Older female role models among the Maoists were an influencing factor.⁹¹ Unlike in the African context where girls' association with armed groups is characterized by sexual slavery, girl soldiers in Nepal found joining the Maoist army empowering and an escape from patriarchal societal structures,

⁸¹ United Nations. Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Nepal (A/63/785–S/2009/158), issued 26 March 2009.

⁸² United Nations. Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Nepal (S/2010/183), issued 13 April 2010.

⁸³ United Nations. Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Nepal (S/2006/1007), issued 20 December 2006.

⁸⁴ Partnerships to Protect Children in Armed Conflict (PPCC), The Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on Grave Violations against Children in Armed Conflict in Nepal 2005 – 2012, A Civil Society Perspective, September 2012.

⁸⁵ United Nations. Report of the Secretary-General (S/2006/1007), issued 20 December 2006.

⁸⁶ R. Simon et al. *Poverty, stigma and alienation: Reintegration challenges of ex-Maoist combatants in Nepal: A participatory action research project with ex-PLA fighters in Nepal*, p.46, May 2016.

⁸⁷ Ibid p.31.

⁸⁸ Ibid p.38.

⁸⁹ Kohrt, Brandon A. et al. *Recruitment of Child Soldiers in Nepal: Mental Health Status and Risk Factors for Voluntary Participation of Youth in Armed Groups*, Peace and conflict : journal of peace psychology : the journal of the Division of Peace Psychology of the American Psychological Association 22.3 (2016): 208–216. PMC. August 2016.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

including from child marriages.⁹² Their decision to not return to their communities was thus often influenced accordingly, particularly if they had married a Maoist member not from the same caste or ethnic group.⁹³

Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal (TMVP) – Delisted in 2012

Also known as the “Karuna Group, TMVP, a former breakaway faction of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) signed an Action Plan with the Government of Sri Lanka and UNICEF on 1 December 2008, and upon its full implementation, was delisted in 2012.

Similar to the modus operandi of the LTTE, the Karuna Group/TMVP forcibly recruited children from their families in the eastern districts of the country, frequently targeting the poor and uneducated families in rural areas. Many of the children were taken through group abductions in villages or near their homes,⁹⁴ or were grabbed off the streets, playgrounds, IDP camps, their homes, and even from temples^{95 96} - sometimes, within close proximity to Government military and police checkpoints and security force camps. Children who were previously associated with the LTTE were particularly targeted following their release and return home. Some recruits and their families received a monthly payment for their child’s services, encouraging impoverished families to allow their children to stay with the group.⁹⁷

After abducting the children, the Karuna Group/TMVP would hold them temporarily in their nearest office and then transferred to one of its military camps. In this context, the local community knew the location of the military camps and the offices of the TMVP. The Karuna Group rarely released children, and even when they did, most were re-recruited within a short span while others escaped. The group often use a coercion tactic of ‘compensation recruitment’ where if a child who had been recruited escaped the TMVP would recruit a sibling or another family member as replacement.⁹⁸ Escaping or returning home was therefore a risk for the children. Parents and family member of abducted children would still make efforts to get their children back, including visiting the camps to see their children or negotiating their release. On some occasions, the Karuna Group/TMVP allowed the children to go home on supervised visits to their families for a night.⁹⁹ Other parents lodged police reports, and some went to the extent of petitioning the Supreme Court on the abduction of their children to obtain their release. Parents were however threatened against reporting to the UN; which often resulted in their children being quickly and continuously moved from one camp to another, obstructing the families’ ability to stay in touch with them.¹⁰⁰

With the signing of the Action Plan and the end of conflict in 2009, children associated with the Karuna Group/TMVP (known as ‘surrendeers’ under Emergency Regulation No. 1580/5 on the reintegration of children leaving armed groups) were released after completing their

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ R. Simon et al. *Poverty, stigma and alienation: Reintegration challenges of ex-Maoist combatants in Nepal*, p.32, May 2016.

⁹⁴ United Nations. Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Sri Lanka (S/2007/758), issued 21 December 2007.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Human Rights Watch, *Complicit in Crimes: State Collusion in Abductions and Child Recruitment by the Karuna Group*, Vol.19, No 1 (c), January 2007.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ United Nations. Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Sri Lanka (S/2009/325), issued 25 June 2009.

⁹⁹ Human Rights Watch, *Complicit in Crimes*, January 2007.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

rehabilitation and reunited with their families where they received reintegration support.¹⁰¹ Rehabilitation and reintegration services were coordinated and led by the Office of the Commissioner-General for Rehabilitation and supported by UNICEF. There was no stigma attached to children's return to their communities.

Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF) and allied Local Defence Units (LDU) – Delisted in 2009

The UPDF and its auxiliary local defence units, were delisted in January 2009 following the signing of the Action Plan between the Government of Uganda and the UN in 2007.

Children, mostly young boys, were recruited to serve with the UPDF, particularly the LDUs. UPDF had also re-recruited children who had escaped or were rescued from the Lord's Resistance Army.¹⁰² While the Government had no explicit policy of recruiting children in its armed forces, weak age verification measures and lack of safeguards allowed children to slip through established procedures. In other instances, corruption at the village council level that provided forged birth certificates to adolescents also allowed for the enlistment of minors. Children often joined with the consent or even the encouragement of their families, attracted by the prospect of receiving wages and providing security for their camps.¹⁰³ After receiving training, many children fought alongside UPDF and did not return to their home communities.¹⁰⁴ The Government eventually disbanded the LDUs as part of professionalizing UPDF, and minors were demobilized with a compensation package and reintegrated into their communities.

¹⁰¹ United Nations. Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict (A/65/820-S/2011/250), issued 23 April 2011.

¹⁰² United Nations. Report of the Secretary-General (A/58/546-S/2003/1053), issued 10 November 2003.

¹⁰³ United Nations. Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Uganda (S/2007/260), issued 7 May 2007.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

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