



Child Soldiers: Prevention, Demobilization and Reintegration

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Demobilization and reintegration of child soldiers is difficult, but country case studies show they can become productive members of their communities. Key factors are political will, including child soldiers in peace agreements, resources to meet their special needs, and community and family involvement.

Introduction

An estimated 300,000 child soldiers are involved in armed conflicts, and their involvement has increased in recent years. When the Ugandan National Resistance Army arrived in Kampala in 1986 with children as young as four among their ranks, they caught the world's attention. Conflicts in Cambodia, Liberia, Mozambique and other countries also drew attention to the use of child soldiers.

Demobilization and reintegration of child soldiers is often portrayed as hopeless—especially where child soldiers have been forcibly recruited and made to participate in atrocities. Yet this study demonstrates that children and youths involved in armed conflict can re-engage positive social relations and productive civilian lives. It is not easy and depends crucially on political will, and the resources to include child soldiers in peace agreements and demobilization programs and to support their reintegration into family and community

Drawing from in-depth case studies of Angola and El Salvador, as well as other country program experiences, the working paper on which this Dissemination Note is based, provides concrete examples for use in future programs.¹ The paper stems from a collaboration with UNICEF on lessons learned in the prevention, demobilization and reintegration of children involved in armed conflict. The Conflict Prevention and Reconstruction (CPR) Unit of the World Bank funded the research and preparation of the working paper.

Prevention

Civil society actors, who have a vital role in preventing child recruitment, require external support. The demobilization and reintegration of child soldiers requires

persistent advocacy from both civil society and international actors. In addition child soldiers must be specifically included in peace agreements and processes.

Although advocacy efforts aiming to enforce international law will contribute to preventing future involvement of children in armed conflict, prevention must be considered more broadly. For example, education and other youth activities, food security and ensuring the security of refugee camps can help to prevent the recruitment of child soldiers.

Children growing up within the context of conflict, and their families, feel they have no choice about participating. Preventing recruitment requires that awareness of child rights be expanded. Best practice now recognizes the importance of incorporating child rights into humanitarian advocacy.

Preventing re-recruitment should also be a concern. The experience of Angola shows that some prevention of re-recruitment was effected through the accompaniment and family reunification strategy. It featured an extensive community-based network whose members accompanied child soldiers from demobilization through family reunification. Some officials of the UNITA rebel force acknowledged that family reunification obstructed their recruitment strategies.

Prevention will require greater investment in practical measures, such as education and non-formal youth activities, and community level advocacy. This paper identified obstacles to regaining education and provides early indications on the effectiveness of apprenticeship and micro-enterprise strategies in comparison to vocational training centers. There is also a need to improve programs that combine education and income-generating needs

Demobilization

Child soldiers must be separated from military authority and protected during demobilization. In a number of

¹ Verthey, Beth. 2001. "Child Soldiers: Preventing, Demobilizing and Reintegrating." Africa Region Working Paper Series, ARWPS #23, November. The paper can be found in: <http://www.worldbank.org/afr/wps/index.htm>

country experiences, a lack of protection for child soldiers allowed military authorities to manipulate the demobilization process for recruitment. This experience underscores the importance of establishing special and protected reception centers for child soldiers during demobilization.

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

While international law now establishes eighteen years as the minimum age for involvement in conflict, age criteria may not always be relevant to the actual experience of children as soldiers. Many child soldiers may not know their age and local conceptions of children and youths, and their role in society, may vary. Given the duration of many conflicts, some combatants may be a few years over eighteen and thus not be counted as child soldiers at the time of a peace accord or demobilization exercise, but they will have spent their developing years as a soldier—deprived of the normal skill development and moral socialization skills gained from their families and communities.

Practitioners in El Salvador and Angola usefully adopted the terms “underage soldier” and “youth combatant” to avoid emotional debates over the term child soldier. Child soldiers may also be excluded from peace accords when the term soldier is only understood to mean combatant, or if a peace accord only refers to the demobilization of combatants. Children and youths, especially girls, serving in so-called support functions will be excluded.

Child soldiers generally want to be recognized and included in formal demobilization programs. When they are excluded, resentment and a sense of abandonment lead some to return to violence as a way of improving their lives. For others, recognition plays an important protection role. In Uganda, the security clearance and document that former child soldiers receive gives them the confidence to return to their communities without suspicion. In an informal demobilization in Eastern Congo, child soldiers asked for demobilization documentation to protect themselves from re-recruitment or from being charged as deserters.

While ensuring equity of benefits between child and adult demobilizing soldiers, there should also be recognition of the special needs of child soldiers and the particular problems they face in reintegrating into their communities.

Planning for demobilization should encompass the full demobilization and reintegration process, including

preparing staff, establishing partnerships, generating resources, and clarifying policy. In Angola, belated staff recruitment and training, inappropriate language skills and interpretation arrangements, and policy debates delayed child soldier demobilization.

Advance planning is vital to demobilization and reintegration. In many instances, peace negotiations and demobilization planning were out of step with the humanitarian programming framework vital to child soldiers. In Liberia, humanitarian programs had to rush to meet demobilization plans and agreements. Planning must also take into account the full demobilization and reintegration process. It must not only consider how to set up and supply reception centers, but also ensure policy coherence, appropriate staffing and training, partnerships and resources.

Advance preparations for staffing, training and resources are essential. In a number of instances in Liberia, agencies scrambled to deploy staff and programs to demobilization sites at only several days notice. In Angola, delays in staff training and deployment caused a delay of almost two years—one year after the peace accord—before quartering commenced and a further ten months while child soldiers languished in the quartering areas.

Planning should be based on an analysis of how child soldiers can be integrated into a comprehensive framework of family tracing, psychosocial support, and community-based skill-building opportunities. In Angola, it was expected that child soldiers could be incorporated into then existing family tracing and psychosocial programs without additional staff or resources. This was not the case and, belatedly, a community-based network of social promoters was mobilized, which proved invaluable.

Coordination structures must include all actors—UN agencies, government, representatives of armed groups, NGOs, local social organizations and communities, as well as child soldiers themselves and their families.

Agencies and partners spend a good deal of time debating policy development and program strategy. Debates include the basis for determining age, how to separate child soldiers from military authority, the role of trauma interventions, and whether special centers are needed for child soldiers. The issue of special centers is a particular challenge.

The question of establishing special centers arises in both the demobilization and reintegration phase. During demobilization, there is a question of how to receive child soldiers and ensure their interim care pending family tracing—especially to separate them from military authorities, and to protect them from re-recruitment, retribution, abuse and stigmatization. In the reintegration

phase, center-based care may be proposed for trauma counseling or as a locale for training.

The temporary need for special reception centers must be reconciled with the inherent risks of centers to stigmatize or marginalize child soldiers. Centers also run counter to the need to emphasize family and community links in the process of transition to civilian life. However, lessons learned in a number of countries demonstrate that reception centers can be organized in ways that model family and community life. In a 1993 demobilization in Sierra Leone, homes for demobilized children modeled family care, including chores and contact with the surrounding community. In addition, there should be measures to ensure that temporary center arrangements do not become long-term solutions.

There has also been considerable debate about the role of special centers as part of reintegration strategies for child soldiers. Arguments presented in favor of center-based reintegration strategies include: claims that the children are orphans, they will not be accepted in their communities because of atrocities committed, their families are too poor to support them, or that special health or training programs are best provided in centers. While centers are often necessary in the demobilization phase, lessons learned in re-integration emphasize the need to ensure as short a stay as possible. Child soldiers themselves express a preoccupation with being accepted by their family and community. For example, in Uganda, former child soldiers reported that one of their greatest fears was that their families would not visit them.

Reintegration

Child soldiers should remain in reception centers for as little as possible. While special centers are necessary in demobilization, experience shows that family reunification and community-based strategies are the most effective in reintegration.

Reintegration of child soldiers should emphasize three components: family reunification, psychosocial support and education, and economic opportunity. Family reunification—or, where that is not possible, foster placement or support for independent living—is crucial to successful reintegration. Psychosocial support, including traditional rituals and family and community mediation, is central to addressing the asocial and aggressive behavior learned by child soldiers and to helping them recover from stressful experiences. Finally, education and economic opportunities must be individually determined and must include family livelihood needs. In a number of experiences, apprenticeships and micro-enterprise support have been more effective than vocational training. Resources and programs must be able to meet the educational and livelihood needs of child soldiers. Reintegration requires a reasonable

period, at least three to five years, of committed resources.

Family reunification or alternative family-based living arrangements, rather than centers, are the most effective strategy to reintegrate child soldiers into the community. In a follow-up survey of former child soldiers in El Salvador, 84 percent reported that their family played the most important role in their transition to civilian life. Considering that 42 percent of child soldiers had lost one or both parents during the conflict, this finding was somewhat unexpected.

This is not to say that family reunifications always go smoothly. A demobilized child soldier is no longer the child he or she was before recruitment, and both the child and the family have to adjust to new roles. There may also be concerns about whether a family or community will accept a child soldier if he or she was involved in killings or atrocities. In Northern Uganda, families feared that reunited child soldiers would attract the attention of rebels in future attacks. Children themselves in Uganda note the importance of cleansing ceremonies so that their communities do not view them as “contaminated”. Supporting these socio-cultural processes is especially important for girls who have been forced to serve as “wives” to combatants.

On the other hand, the concern that former child soldiers will be rejected by their families or communities can be overstated. In Angola, practitioners quickly learned that families recognized that acts committed by child soldiers were the responsibility of the adults who recruited them. In El Salvador, 98.5 percent of former child soldiers reported that their family relations were good or very good.

The reintegration of child soldiers faces a challenging process of reconciliation and mediation. Family and community reintegration takes time and must allow for an appropriate process of acceptance and definition of new roles. In this context, community mobilization is as important as the more technical tracing and logistics of family reunification.

Child soldiers experience a process of asocialization in armed conflict. Adolescence is a time of establishing identity, and the child soldier may resist changing his identity from soldier to civilian. Overcoming the mistrust they learn in order to survive during a time of conflict can be difficult when transitioning to civilian life. This is why reintegration programs must emphasize the opportunity to form positive, trusting, consistent relationships with adults, with an emphasis on a family-based environment. Experience shows that psychosocial approaches are more beneficial than Western-derived trauma assistance interventions. The former approach emphasizes that the psychological process takes place in a social context, with family and community.

Program practitioners in Liberia found the most important reintegration factors were a “normal” environment, a sense of forgiveness through religious or cultural ceremonies or rituals, and family reunification. Religious rituals provide acceptance of the child, assuage the ill spirits associated with the child soldier’s actions during the conflict, and reconcile the child with ancestral spirits. Although it is important to guard against any harmful effects of the rituals and some question the extent to which a ceremony can “cleanse” a former child soldier, reintegration programs should support these processes when the communities and families consider them important in healing and post-conflict recovery.

The third essential component of reintegration is access to education and economic opportunity. This is linked to the psychosocial component because establishing a new identity for the child soldier will depend on the availability of productive activities and new learning opportunities. Experience teaches, however, that a balance must be achieved between the child soldier’s need to earn income and the need to resume education. Access to education is one of the most often requested supports by child soldiers but often forgone for economic reasons.

Reintegration efforts face challenges where child soldiers have committed atrocities or war crimes. The child’s reintegration involves a complex process that should attempt to balance the child soldier’s needs with the need of many communities for justice. A number of experiences demonstrate the important role of traditional healing rituals in addressing family and community concerns about a child soldier’s actions. Rwanda provides perspective on working with children accused of atrocities. Further program documentation and exchange, especially regarding legal and amnesty provisions, are required in this area.

Access to formal education, however, presents special challenges for the reintegration of child soldiers. Former child soldiers cite many obstacles, including:

- Cannot attend during formal school hours because they must earn their own income or contribute to family livelihood;
- Their families cannot afford school fees, supplies and uniforms;
- Schools were destroyed or there is a lack of teachers in their community;
- They have difficulty getting documentation for enrolment, or they are not allowed to join at the same grade as younger children; and
- They feel shame or resentment about going to school with much younger children.

While flexible programs can address some of these concerns, economic considerations pose the most significant obstacle. Soldier reintegration programs to date have offered few meaningful training and income-earning opportunities. Vocational training programs have had little success. In El Salvador, evaluations of the program for demobilized adults found only 25 percent working in the area for which they were trained. The Angola apprenticeships and micro-enterprise programs were more effective than vocational training schemes because they provided a quicker way of acquiring skills and income.

Community-based networks are essential for sustainable support to demobilized child soldiers and for reaching those excluded, most often girls and the disabled, from formal demobilization.

The needs of girls used in conflict require much greater program attention. For example, although 33 percent of the child soldiers followed up in El Salvador were female, special program strategies for girls did not exist. While girls in El Salvador have not reported being stigmatized by family or community for having sexual relations and children outside of marriage, support programs must address the needs of female-headed households.

Improved links are needed between child soldier, disability, and mine awareness programs. While programs for disabled and war-injured were developed in Angola and El Salvador, neither incorporated child soldiers nor adequate child-conscious measures.

Also, the impact of drug use by child soldiers has not been adequately addressed. Staff working with child soldiers are often ill-prepared for working with child soldiers influenced by drugs and affected by sexually transmitted diseases.

CPR Unit

This note summarizes the findings from a study by Beth Verhey, published in the Africa Region Working Paper Series. This note series is intended to disseminate good practice and key findings on conflict prevention and reconstruction. The series is edited by the Conflict Prevention and Reconstruction (CPR) Unit in the Social Development Department of the Environmentally and Socially Sustainable Development Network of the World Bank. The views expressed in these notes are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the World Bank Group, its Executive Directors, or the countries they represent. CPR Dissemination Notes are distributed widely to Bank staff and are also available on the CPR website (<http://www.worldbank.org/conflict>).