Challenging Child Soldier DDR Processes and Policies in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo

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Abstract

Despite increasing international attention devoted to the issue of child soldiering, little research has been conducted on child soldier disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programmes in the context of an ongoing conflict. Too much emphasis is placed on child soldier reintegration into communities that are potentially highly threatening, ignoring the danger of re-recruitment into militant organisations. This article analyses South and North Kivu in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo as a case study to discuss how the lack of research into the socio-political and cultural context of each specific conflict may lead to ineffective and generalised DDR programmes, and may further endanger the psychosocial well-being of child soldiers. The article also argues that experiences of child soldiers cannot be separated from the conditions of society in general, and in the context of an ongoing conflict, that socio-economic, cultural and political factors are especially relevant in implementing effective DDR strategies.

Keywords: Democratic Republic of Congo, Kivu, DDR, child soldiers.

Introduction

The 2009 prosecution of Thomas Lubanga for enlisting child soldiers in the conflict in Ituri in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is striking. Lubanga is the first individual to be brought to trial for the recruitment of child soldiers. Mr Lubanga commanded the Union of Congolese Patriots (UPC), a militia which was active in Ituri in 1999.[1] He is charged with conscripting children under the age of 15 years into the military wing of the UPC, and using

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[1] "Profile: DR Congo Militia Leader Thomas Lubanga", *BBC News,* 23 January 2009, available at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/6131516.stm. Accessed 3 February 2010.

them to participate in hostilities in a conflict that took place between September 2002 and August 2003.[2] This violates Article 38 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which prohibits recruitment of children under the age of 15 in armed conflict.[3] His actions also violated Congolese law, which makes it illegal to recruit persons under the age of 18 into an armed group.[4] The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court has also made the conscription of child soldiers a war crime.[5]

The recruitment of child soldiers, particularly in Africa, has long been a challenging issue, yet political efforts to tackle it have been limited. Africa has had the largest number of conflicts since the end of the Cold War, and it has also seen the highest military conscription of children in war.[6] There are currently an estimated 300,000 child soldiers worldwide, of which approximately 8,000 are in the eastern part of the DRC,[7] a significant area of child soldier recruitment in the country.[8] While the sheer scale of this problem is evident, international and local efforts to address the problems associated with child recruitment into armed conflict have been ineffective.[9] Since the start of hostilities in 1997 in DRC, an estimated 30,000 children have been through the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programme, but in an ongoing and volatile conflict such as that in eastern DRC, re-recruitment of child soldiers is rampant, and it is difficult to ascertain how many children have been demobilized more than once, or for how long.[10] The DDR programme for children is seen as fundamentally different from that of adults. Children's rights dictate that child soldier DDR programmes are operationalized both during and after conflict, as it is a fundamental

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[2] "ICC: 'Use of Child Soldiers Abuse'", *Radio Netherlands Worldwide*, available at: http://www.rnw.nl/int-justice/article/icc-%E2%80%9Cuse-child-soldiers-abuse%E2%80%9D. Accessed 21 April 2010.

[3] See UNHCHR, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, available at: http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm. Accessed 21 April 2010.

[4] See the "Constitution de la République Démocratique du Congo", available at http://www.presidentrdc.cd/constitution.html. Accessed 21 April 2010.

[5] See the "Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court", available at http://untreaty.un.org/cod/icc/statute/romefra.htm . Accessed 21 April 2010.

[6] Vera Achvarina and Simon Reich, "No Place to Hide – Refugees, Displaced Persons, and the Recruitment of Child Soldiers", *International Security,* 31 no. 1 (2006): pp. 127–164.

[7] See SOS Children's Villages Canada, *Demobilizing Congo's Child Soldiers for Good,* available at http://www.soschildrensvillages.ca/News/News/child-charity-news/Pages/DemobilizingCongosChildSoldiersforGood9107.aspx. Accessed 21 April 2010.

[8] "Yemen's Child Soldiers go to War", *UPI,* 6 January 2010, available at http://www.upi.com/Top_News/Special/2010/01/06/Yemens-child-soldiers-go-to-war/UPI-89571262808410/. Accessed 21 April 2010.

[9] Alcinda Honwana, "Healing for Peace: Traditional Healers and Post-War Reconstruction in Southern Mozambique", *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 3 no. 3 (1997): pp. 293-305; Claude Rakisits, "Child Soldiers in the East of the Democratic Republic of Congo", *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 27 no. 4 (2008): pp. 108-122; Save the Children UK, "Can the Powerful Protect?", (Save the Children UK, 2007): http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/en/docs/canthepowerfulprotect.pdf. Accessed April 4 2010.

[10] See Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, available at http://www.childsoldiersglobalreport.org/content/congo-democratic-republic; Interview with a former Child Protection Coordinator for Save the Children UK in Goma, DRC on the 14 April 2010.

human rights issue and not a security one. Conversely, adult DDR is not seen as feasible during hostilities, and it is carried out strictly in post-conflict scenarios in order to maintain peace and security and to promote long-term development. The aim of child soldier DDR is thus to restore the rights children have to enjoy a happy childhood free from exploitation. The core features of this procedure involve removing children from hostilities, psychosocial support, and family reintegration.[11]

However, there are some limitations to the DDR process in the Kivus. Despite increasing international attention devoted to the issue of child soldiering, little research has been conducted on child soldier DDR in the context of on-going conflicts, particularly with regards to what implications a conflict has on the re-recruitment of demobilised children. This article therefore focuses on the ongoing conflict in North and South Kivu. A review of available literature suggests that DDR programmes are largely modelled on experience of long established post-conflict societies, where the risk of re-recruitment of children, as well as further war-related trauma is low.[12] For instance, it has been noted that in post-conflict Sierra Leone DDR was far more effective than during the war.[13] The Liberian experience also illustrates that children who lived outside the safe zone in Monrovia were easy targets for re-recruitment once hostilities resumed in 2000. There is a similar pattern of child soldier recruitment in the current conflict in the Kivus (in eastern DRC).[14] Here, DDR programmes may be ineffective, as the likelihood of further violence once a child has been demobilized is high. Children who have already served in an armed group may be even more at risk than others, as an experienced soldier is a valuable asset in war.[15]

Further, psychological diagnoses of children affected by war and analysis of the socio-political context of the conflict should also be explored in order to better understand the different individual experiences of child soldiers. This requires a thorough understanding of the cultural context, and studies on child soldiering in the DRC and elsewhere have neglected the cultural implications of imposing western psychological analysis and intervention on populations affected by armed conflict. Most notably, most studies ignore the origins of western assumptions about the universality of human, and specifically children's responses to trauma, failing to recognise "how the Western trauma discourse has come to

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[11] United Nations Disarmament Demobilisation and Reintegration Resource Centre, *5.30 Children and DDR*, http://www.unddr.org/iddrs/05/30.php. Accessed 21 August 2010.

[12] Interview with a former Child Protection Coordinator for Save the Children UK in Goma, DRC on the 14 April 2010.

[13] J. Williamson, "The Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration of Child Soldiers: Social and Psychological Transformation in Sierra Leone", *Intervention*, 4 no. 3 (2006): pp. 185-205.

[14] Achvarina and Reich, "No Place to Hide – Refugees, Displaced Persons, and the Recruitment of Child Soldiers", pp 156-160.

[15] Sarah Uppard, "Child Soldiers and Children Associated with the Fighting Forces", *Medicine, Conflict and Survival*, 19 no. 2 (2003): pp. 121-127.

shape the way experiences of violence are understood and communicated."[16] Western informed definitions of childhood and trauma being applied to non-Western contexts may thus be unsuitable. The danger is that too much emphasis may be put on reintegration into communities that are potentially highly threatening, and research is lacking on how this is more effective in a region where conflict is ongoing. The difficulty of accessing the population poses a formidable constraint not only in researching the nature of child conscription, but also in adopting the best practices for the reintegration of a child into a highly dangerous and volatile environment. As such, current literature focuses on post-conflict cases such as Mozambique and Sierra Leone, and results are generalized to the full spectrum of the child soldiering experience.[17] This article, however, argues on the side of caution in blue-printing DDR policies. The nature of the conflict, the local attitude towards it, the nature of conscription of children, and the psychological effects of war can differ drastically from country to country, and region to region, and DDR practices should be tailored accordingly.

This article thus seeks to expose how lack of research into the socio-political and cultural context of each specific conflict may lead to ineffective DDR programmes for child soldiers and may further endanger their mental and psychosocial health. In particular, a one-size-fits-all Western definition of childhood as an idyllic time free from responsibility may not be applicable in non-Western societies. The experiences of child soldiers cannot be separated from the conditions of society in general, and in the context of an ongoing conflict, the socio-economic, cultural and political factors are especially relevant in implementing effective DDR strategies.

After brief discussion of the methods used to inform this study, the first section will describe child soldier recruitment patterns in eastern DRC. The second section will discuss psychological issues related to child soldering in the region. The final section will make recommendations on policies and outline further research areas, before ending with some brief conclusions.

Methods

Academic journals and anecdotal reports are the main sources used in this article. Information is also based on the primary author's (EP) personal observations while working in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo between November 2007 and September 2008 for a local organization, Caritas Goma. This branch of Caritas Internationalis[18] focuses on delivering humanitarian aid to North Kivu, including food distribution in displaced persons camps, gender based violence support, and running DDR programmes, for which it runs five

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[16] David Summerfield, "A Critique of Seven Assumptions Behind Psychological Trauma Programmes in War-affected Countries", *Social Science & Medicine*, 48 no. 10 (1999): pp. 1449–1462.

[17] Wessells, "Children, Armed Conflict, and Peace", p. 637.

[18] Caritas Internationalis is a global network consisting of 165 national members committed to reducing poverty and inequality worldwide (www.caritas.org).

transition centres.[19] EP came into contact with former child soldiers living in demobilization centres, and observed the demobilization and reintegration process. She also spoke directly to the children and their social workers, though none of this information is reported directly in this article. The centres were located in the territories of Masisi, Lubero and Rutshuru, which are situated approximately 80km west and north of Goma respectively. Goma is the capital of North Kivu, and is located on the border with Rwanda. EP also conducted interviews with policy and child protection specialists during her work in DRC and subsequent research in London.

Relevant literature on child soldiers and DDR programmes was found through an extensive search of SagePub, Informaworld and Jstor. Anecdotal reports and press material were located via the internet and NGO websites such as Save the Children UK, Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, SOS Children's Villages Canada, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and War Child. Searches were conducted in English and French. Examples of English search term entries include 'child soldiers', 'young soldiers', 'child combatants', 'former combatants' and 'children and complex emergencies'. Examples of French search terms include '*enfants soldats*', and '*enfants associés aux forces ou groupes armées*'. French was also used to access Congolese documents such as the Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Congo, as well as to examine local Kivutian sources, such as Radio Okapi.

Discussion

Child Soldier Recruitment in Eastern DRC

In DRC children reach full adult age at 18 years,[20] and for the purpose of this article, the term 'child soldiers' is used to reflect the Paris Principles definition of children associated with armed forces and armed groups, which refers to:

> Any person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys, and girls used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies, or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities. [21]

Young boys and girls are targeted by armed groups for the purposes of training for combat, spying, forced labour, or cooking.[22] Young girls may also be used for forced

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[19] EP personal observation in North Kivu, DRC, February 2008.

[20] Cartias Développement, Diocéce de Goma, *Module de Sensibilisation des Cadres de Base et Officiers des FARDC sur les Droit des Enfants et Processus DDR*, (Goma :Caritas, 2006), p. 1.

[21] See UNICEF, *The Paris Principles: Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated With Armed Forces or Armed Groups*, http://www.un.org/children/conflict/_documents/parisprinciples/ParisPrinciples_EN.pdf. Accessed 31 May 2010.

[22] "Bleak Future for Congo's Child Soldiers", *BBC News*, available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/5213996.stm. Accessed 21 April 2010.

marriage or sexual enslavement.[23] In this context, children are forcefully recruited as they are separated from their families and have little choice but to join the armed groups that take them. Other scenarios include children being abducted while working in fields or directly from school, as armed groups raid the schools or have 'agreements' where teachers hand children over to them.[24] The vast majority of children however, join armed groups voluntarily.[25] Forcible population displacement is endemic in eastern DRC, which has contributed to the weakening of the social fabric. Displacement and subsequent lack of access to resources such as food and water serve to fragment the population, which often splits along ethnic lines to compete for these scarce resources. As a result, communities lose a sense of cohesion, and further conflict is likely to break out within them. As families and communities split up, they lose the ability to provide for themselves, keep their schools open, and be supportive of their children.[26] This leads to a situation in which certain children go hungry, cannot go to school - as it is either closed or too expensive - or do not have a family member to rely on for emotional and/or financial support.[27] Widespread poverty implies that many parents are not able to feed their children, who are abandoned and forced to live on the streets as vagabonds and petty thieves.[28] In eastern DRC it is also common for children to be accused of witchcraft, with children's alleged magical powers blamed for unfortunate events such as illnesses or deaths in the family. Behaviour considered to be unusual, such as bedwetting or nightmares, can trigger accusations of sorcery and lead to the banishment of children from the home.[29] These factors cumulatively result in a large number of vulnerable children who are easily attracted to joining the armed forces.[30]

Though most of the DRC is currently politically stable, North and South Kivu in the east of the country have been in active conflict since 1996. Following the 1994 Rwanda genocide, thousands of Rwandans flocked to the Kivus in search of protection, not knowing that they were being infiltrated by the Hutu *génocidaires.* The Rwandan genocide was perpetrated by a Hutu majority that feared the domination of the powerful Tutsi minority, following prospects of a Hutu-Tutsi coalition government put forth at the 1993 Arusha Accords. When the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), composed of Tutsi rebels, put an end to the violence in July

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[23] This is also an important issue that deserves concerted attention, but that is beyond the scope of this article.

[24] Boyden, "The Moral Development of Child Soldiers: What do Adults have to Fear?", pp. 39-63.

[25] Interview with a former Child Protection Coordinator for Save the Children UK in Goma, DRC on the 14 April 2010.

[26] Boyden, "The Moral Development of Child Soldiers: What do Adults have to Fear?" pp. 9-36.

[27] Save the Children UK, "Can the Powerful Protect?", (Save the Children UK, 2007): http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/en/docs/canthepowerfulprotect.pdf. Accessed April 4 2010.

[28] Oliver Furley, "Child Soldiers in Africa", in Oliver Furley ed., *Conflict in Africa,* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 1995).

[29] "Children Targeted as Witches in the Congo", *Women's* News, available at http://womensenews.org/story/the-world/091120/children-targeted-witches-in-the-congo. Accessed 29 May 2010.

[30] EP Personal Observation, Goma, DRC, July 2008.

1994, 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus had been killed, and the perpetrators had fled to DRC (then Zaire). The Tutsi-governed Rwanda invaded the Kivus in 1996, eventually resulting in a regime change in DRC in 1997 under the leadership of President Laurent Kabila. This exacerbated tensions between Tutsis living in the Kivus and the other ethnic groups, who felt the Tutsis were impinging on their land, and who took action by organising armed movements against them. Most notably, the *Forces Démocratiques pour la Liberation du Rwanda* (FDLR) are largely composed of *génocidaire* sympathisers, and claim to oppose Tutsi influence in the region. The Mai Mai are a nationalist militia that in principle is opposed to all foreign intervention, but which collaborates with the FDLR despite their status as foreign militia. Numerous factions characterise each group, and they do not necessarily cooperate with each other.[31] Congolese government troops, the *Forces Armées de la Republique Démocratique du Congo* (FARDC), are also deployed in the region. All armed factions regularly recruit and make use of child soldiers, including the FARDC.[32]

Despite a peace agreement in 2003, hostilities persist, illegitimating post-conflict strategies and their application to the case of eastern DRC. For instance, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) found that 2.1 million people have died since the end of the Congolese war, indicating that the peace agreement only ended the conflict in theory. The total death rate between 1998 and 2007 is estimated to be 5.4 million. Though most of these deaths are not attributed directly to violence, they result from the diseases and malnutrition that accompany mass human displacement due to the conflict.[33] The DDR process is not designed for situations where hostilities are still taking place, and it is best modelled for post-conflict scenarios.[34] The difficulty arises when it is not possible to determine the parameters of what constitutes war and what constitutes peace. Skirmishes and pillaging frequently continue after a peace treaty has been announced and, conversely, calm and order can prevail even in areas controlled by rebels. The term post-conflict is a fluid one, and it becomes clear that the success of a DDR programme hinges on an elusive and sometimes indefinable state of affairs. Further, the post-conflict concept is modelled on the preconception of Westphalian order, where state and non-state actors are clearly separate, and where it is assumed that the state has the intent and capability to maintain internal stability. However, the complex nature of contemporary wars sees internal factions posited

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[31] Gerard Prunier, *From Genocide to Continental War : The 'Congolese' Conflict and the Crisis of Contemporary Africa* (London: Hurst &Company, 2009).

[32] Elizabeth Schauer, *The Psychological Impact of Child Soldiering*, (VIVO, 2005), available at http://www.icc-cpi.int/iccdocs/doc/doc636752.PDF. Accessed 21 April 2010.

[33] International Rescue Committee, "Mortality in the Democratic Republic of Congo", (International Rescue Committee, 2007): http://www.theirc.org/sites/default/files/migrated/resources/2007/2006-7_congomortalitysurvey.pdf. Accessed 21 April 2010.

[34] Caritas Développement, Diocèse de Goma, *Module de Sensibilisation des Cadres de Bse et Officiers des FARDC sur les Droit des Enfants et Processus DDR*

against each other, with little or no regard to international norms and laws, and above all, with limited accountability[35]

Thus, while there is relative peace in much of the DRC, the Kivus have long been the site of cyclical violence that fails to fit the definition of sustainable post-conflict, and which is made all the more complex by a myriad of inter-personal allegiances that shift indiscriminately between state and non-state actors. In this context, general assumptions of transition to post-conflict are fundamentally flawed, as skirmishes, killings, sexual violence, pillage, and large-scale episodes of violence are common throughout the region, indicating that the conflict is 'ongoing'.[36] In order to render child soldier reintegration more effective, evidence for effective DDR practices must be produced, rather than relying on intuitive assumptions of what is best for a Congolese child soldier based on stable post-conflict settings.

DDR in Eastern DRC

DDR processes for children and adults are fundamentally different, because when an adult joins an armed group it is seen as a choice, while children's involvement is a violation of their rights, regardless of whether they joined voluntarily or not. For this reason, traditional adult DDR processes that include transitional justice, whereby the former combatants may be held accountable for their crimes, is not applicable to children, who are seen as victims of the criminal policies of adults. Child soldier DDR is also conducted regardless of whether a particular conflict is over or not because their demobilisation is a human right. Further, child soldier DDR does not in itself aim to improve the welfare of the children to the point where it would exceed the quality of life they experienced at home with their families. This might provide an incentive for more war-affected children to join rebel groups, as they might feel envious of former child soldiers receiving higher levels of care.[37] Ultimately, child soldier DDR programmes are aimed at removing children from a context of violence and delivering them to a safe place where they can complete their development in a nurturing environment. Where the conflict is ongoing therefore, children should not necessarily be returned to their families, but alternative carers should be identified in safe areas. However, since reintegration

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[35] John Heathershaw and Daniel Lambach, "Introduction: Post-Conflict Spaces and Approaches to Statebuilding", *Journal of Intervention and State Building,* 2 no. 3 (2008): pp. 269 -289.

[36]Human Rights Watch, "Eastern DR Congo: Surge in Army Atrocities", (Human Rights Watch, 2009): http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2009/11/02/eastern-dr-congo-surge-army-atrocities. Accessed 21 April 2010; US State Department, *2009 Human Rights Report: Democratic Republic of Congo*, available at http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2009/af/135947.htm. Accessed 21 April 2010; "Deuxième Rapport Conjoint de sept experts des Nations Unies sur la situation en République Démocratique du Congo", *Reliefweb,* available at http://reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900sid/EGUA-83FNR7?OpenDocument&query=Experts%20on%20the%20Situation%20in%20the%20DRC. Accessed 21 April 2010; "Fighting Foils Exams in South Kivu ", *AllAfrica.com,* 16 April 2010, available at http://allafrica.com/stories/201004160684.html. Accessed 21 April 2010.

[37] United Nations Disarmament Demobilisation and Reintegration Resource Centre, *5.30 Children and DDR*, http://www.unddr.org/iddrs/05/30.php. Accessed 21 August 2010.

with family members is often thought to be paramount, current child soldier DDR arguments clash on the fundamental issue of family reunification in an ongoing conflict.

The current DDR programmes in North Kivu, and particularly those conducted by Caritas, are aimed at rehabilitating children who have been associated with armed forces, and reintegrating them back into their communities of origin. The process begins with the disarmament of children who used weapons.[38] This stage of disarmament is generally conducted by the military or militia with which the child was involved. The second stage is demobilisation, where the child is helped with the transition to civilian life, often through social activities and schooling. During this stage, children may also undergo psychological interventions in the form of individual counselling sessions. The final stage is reintegration, which involves either reunification with the family or the child being given to a relative or foster parent. This usually takes place after social workers have traced family members or appropriate guardians for the children, so that they can be reunited and cared for by a responsible adult or family. This stage also aims to provide a viable alternative to the army by continuing to offer schooling, vocational training or income-generating activities. Psychological intervention is often added to this, as Caritas tries to help children come to terms with their experience of being associated with an armed group.[39]

Caritas' DDR programme generally accommodates fourteen to sixteen children in a three month transition centre. Caritas Goma has based this procedure on Congolese law on violence against minors as well as on a selection of principles from international institutions such as the United Nations and the African Union. Its DDR guidelines thus focus on the right children have to be protected from abuse and violence. However, there is a clear discontinuity between the guidelines, Congolese law, and respect for the rights of the people on the ground.[40] For instance, many laws and procedures exist for the protection of children associated with an armed group, but government records of demobilised children are frequently lost or destroyed, causing demobilised children to lose their DDR support, and risk re-recruitment. Drafting provisions for the protection of children is commendable, but without the concerted effort of officials on the ground, DDR principles become merely nominal in value.[41]

Save the Children UK (SCUK) was able to accommodate a greater number of children than Caritas, demobilising up to 3,000 children in 2009 alone. Their DDR programme differed from Caritas as they had a strong emphasis on reintegrating children with their families at the

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[38] Not all children were made to use weapons, and the DDR process does not discriminate against children who were not directly involved in combat.

[39] See the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, *DDR,* available at http://www.child-soldiers.org/childsoldiers/ddr. Accessed 21 April 2010.

[40] Caritas Développement, Diocèse de Goma, *Module de Sensibilisation des Cadres de Bse et Officiers des FARDC sur les Droit des Enfants et Processus DDR*), pp 16-22.

[41] Interview with a former Child Protection Coordinator for Save the Children UK in Goma, DRC on the 14 April 2010.

earliest possible opportunity, without providing direct psychological support, but supporting children with education, vocational training and psychosocial support. However, though they were able to support a larger number of children, the acceptance they received from the local community was often faltering. Foreign NGOs are targeted for theft and suffer politically motivated kidnappings, reflecting local resentment towards them.[42] The most cited reason is that foreign agencies retreat at the first sign of trouble, abandoning communities in need.[43] SCUK's status as a foreign aid agency, along with the operational constraints of the volatile nature of the conflict, meant that during periods of insecurity, SCUK would have to evacuate its staff, sometimes jeopardising its trust with the community. After each episode of violence, SCUK would then have to face the challenge of re-establishing trust with the community.[44]

The operational constraints of an ongoing conflict greatly hinder the demobilisation of children, and methods based on peaceful post-conflict contexts are neither effective nor sustainable. Importantly, ongoing and chronic conflicts differ from post-conflict in one key area: the risk of re-recruitment of children is extremely high.[45] Vera Achvarina and Simon Reich suggest that access of rebels to refugee and internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, where there is usually a high concentration of vulnerable children, provides a large pool of youths amongst which armed groups can recruit.[46] In Liberia for example, the fact that the IDP camps were located outside the patrolled safe zone, as in eastern DRC, made it easy for rebels to re-recruit children.[47] Congolese children living outside the safe zone of cities such as Goma (which are protected and patrolled by the FARDC as well as the UN peacekeeping troops of the *Mission Organisation Nations Unies de Stabilisation au Congo* (MONUSCO)) are at high risk of re-recruitment, suggesting that reunification with a family that resides in a conflict zone is not ideal for the rehabilitation of the child soldier. This problem is compounded by the recruitment pattern of the armed groups involved. While the FDLR often kidnap children, those children who join the Mai Mai do so voluntarily. In a context of widespread poverty, limited socio-economic opportunities and insecurity, an organised militia can provide protection, food, and a surrogate family.[48]

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[42] "DR Congo Rebels Seize Red Cross Workers", *BBC News*, available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/8617160.stm. Accessed 21 April 2010.

[43] EP personal observation in North Kivu, November 2007.

[44] Save the Children UK no longer has a DDR programme in eastern DRC. This is primarily due to lack of funding and priorities being shifted to areas where the organization feels it can make the biggest impact: Interview with a former Child Protection Coordinator for Save the Children UK in Goma, DRC on the 14 April 2010.

[45] Uppard, "Child Soldiers and Children Associated with the Fighting Forces", p 123.

[46] Achyarina and Reich, "No Place to Hide – Refugees, Displaced Persons, and the Recruitment of Child Soldiers", p. 150.

[47] *Ibidem*.

[48] Interview with a former Child Protection Coordinator for Save the Children UK in Goma, DRC on the 14 April 2010.

The effectiveness of reintegration of child soldiers is contingent on whether the process is tailored to the individual as well as to the particular features of each conflict. There are many different types and processes of DDR, and not all are suitable to each situation. For example, a minimalist approach, which aims to demobilise soldiers in order to prevent them from posing a security risk, is not very appropriate in the case of children, who are largely victims of circumstance. A maximalist approach, on the other hand, may be more suitable, as it aims to create opportunities for development by reintroducing children to school or providing them with vocational training.[49] However, neither of these approaches may be appropriate during an ongoing conflict, where spending any significant period of time at school may not be feasible. This raises the question of whether DDR should be implemented at all, pointing to a focus on development and political processes as a better way of tackling the security issues faced by child soldiers.

It is also important to note that not all children associated with armed forces have been involved in combat. The experiences of children vary significantly between roles they played, across conflicts and based on the length of time they spent in the armed forces. In North and South Kivu most children are used as cooks or porters and are protected from the violence.[50] Additionally, children's experiences of conflict are as varied as the conflicts themselves. For instance, children in the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), which originated in northern Uganda, are made to perform violent initiation rituals, such as killing loved ones in front of their communities. Conversely, children in North and South Kivu are rarely made to do these things.[51] These idiosyncrasies often determine the state of mind of each individual child. Recruitment style and the level of violence inflicted on children should also determine the urgency with which children should be demobilised. For instance, children should be removed from the LRA's fiercely violent practices at the very first opportunity, as their lives are much more in danger in the LRA than if they were at home with their families, however destitute their circumstances. Conversely, in the Kivus, where children are not subjected to violent rituals and are not necessarily forced to fight or kill, the focus should be more on finding a long-term, sustainable solution rather implementing a short-term poorly planned DDR process.

Not all conflicts are in the established post-conflict stage where the likelihood of returning to war is low. Ultimately, the challenge of high levels of re-recruitment of demobilised children in conflict zones can only be tackled effectively with a political solution

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[49] Muggah Robert et al., *The Long Shadow of War: Prospects for Disarmament Demobilisation and Reintegration in the Republic of Congo: A Joint Independent Evaluation for the European Commission, UNDP and the MDRP Secretariat.* See http://unddr.org/docs/Congo_Rapport%20eval%20DDR%20final%20english.pdf. Accessed 21 August 2010.

[50] Betancourt *et al.*, "Child Soldiers: Reintegration, Pathways to Recovery, and Reflections From the Field", p. 139.

[51] Interview with a former Child Protection Coordinator for Save the Children UK in Goma, DRC on the 14 April 2010.

and long-term conflict resolution strategy. In DRC, political processes such as the Amani Peace Accord of January 2008, which called for the cessation of hostilities and the mass demobilisation of child soldiers, have been important milestones, but they have always treated child soldiering as a specialist category, affecting a sub-group of the population to be singled out for specialised programmes. However, the fact that in DRC people under of the age of 18 constitute 50 percent of the population is important.[52] Many children in eastern DRC are forced into manual labour by parents and economic circumstances. By contrast, armed groups offer food, protection and a sense of adventure. As such, a DDR strategy that supports a political as well as developmental solution is needed in order to support operational changes that would lower the attractiveness of joining the armed forces.[53] As Helen Brocklehurst notes, "children are seemingly still fought for as if they are 'safely inside' and away from the politics that will be acted out for them",[54] though it is clear from this case study that children are more like protagonists in the politics of the conflicts that shape their lives.

Psychological Issues of Child Soldiers in Eastern DRC

The phenomenon of child soldiering is inherently political, as are the related psychological challenges of community reintegration. In eastern DRC, where ethnic and political schisms are pervasive, well integrated and peaceful communities do not necessarily exist. Communities are thus likely to be divided on the procedure for child soldier reintegration just as they are on other issues, such as distribution of land and resources. Further, each individual within a community may require different mechanisms for tackling the psychological aspects of reintegrating a child soldier. Psychological needs of child soldiers differ across different conflicts highlighting the importance of context-specific psychological interventions during DDR programmes. Systematic research into best practices for helping children in conflict zones is constrained, largely due to the difficulty of accessing populations living in dangerous environments.[55] DDR programmes have thus heavily relied on the assumption that children who have been associated with an armed group are inevitably more traumatised than other vulnerable groups, particularly with regards to developing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).[56] Significant research has been devoted to assessing how

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[52] See MONUC, *Why the DRC Matters*, available at http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/monuc/documents/drc.pdf. Accessed 21 April 2010.

[53] Interview with a former Child Protection Coordinator for Save the Children UK in Goma, DRC on the 14 April 2010.

[54] Helen Brocklehurst, "Children and War", in Alan Collins ed., *Contemporary Security Studies*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[55] Wessels, "Children, Armed Conflict, and Peace", p. 636.

[56] Kari Hill and Harvey Langholtz, "Rehabilitation Programs for African Child Soldiers", *Peace Review*, 15 no. 3 (2003): pp. 279-285; Uppard, "Child Soldiers and Children Associated with the Fighting Forces"; Kenneth Miller and Andrew Rasmussen, "War Exposure, Daily Stressors, and Mental Health in Conflict and Post-conflict Settings: Bridging the Divide Between Trauma-focused and Psychosocial Frameworks", *Social Science and Medicine,* 70 no. 1 (2010): pp. 7-16.

children exposed to armed conflict change personality and patterns of behaviour, and how their moral development may have been compromised.[57] However, these findings do not necessarily apply to the full spectrum of child soldiering experiences, and there is a lack of research concerning psychological effects on children who were recruited several times compared to just once. Further, these explanations ignore the fact that where there are child soldiers, the whole society is usually at war. More attention has been given to child soldiers due to an assumption that they are most affected within the army rather than outside of it, though this is not necessarily true. As Derek Summerfield argues, there is a risk that:

> trauma models, where the focus is on a particular event (rape) or particular population group (children) exaggerate the difference between some victims and others…disconnecting them from others in their community and from the wider context of their experiences and the meanings they give to them.[58]

While it is important to protect children recruited by armed forces, it must be noted that they are a minority among children affected by war. The role of daily stressors, such as procuring food and water, can also contribute heavily to an individual's notion of trauma, particularly when the entire community shares in these experiences.[59] Catherine Panter-Brick notes that, "in the aftermath of war, the notion of trauma overlaps with that of social suffering, drawing significance from consequences in both medical and social domains."[60] Children thus prioritise particular traumatic events based on their current life circumstances and needs, whether or not the trauma was related to war. Crucially, as child soldiers are rehabilitated and reintegrated, they need the support of a stable family or community, and in a conflict-affected setting this may not be possible. As Sarah Uppard points out, "children are much more vulnerable to recruitment in situations where the usual protective factors within their own family and community have broken down, for example in chronic conflict."[61]

In the Sierra Leonean conflict, where a civil war raged between 1991 and 2002, child soldiers were recruited on both sides of the conflict, from the government to the Revolutionary United Front, and they were brutally beaten, killed and made to kill.[62] Following the conflict however, children were demobilized and reintegrated into society much more successfully than during the conflict. This shows that post-conflict reintegration worked more

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[57] Hill and Langholtz, "Rehabilitation Programs for African Child Soldiers"; Betancourt et al, "Child Soldiers: Reintegration, Pathways to Recovery, and Reflections From the Field"; Christophe Pierre Bayer et al, "Association of Trauma and PTSD Symptoms With Openness to Reconciliation and Feelings of Revenge Among Former Ugandan and Congolese Child Soldiers", *JAMA,* 298 no. 5 (2007): pp. 555- 559.

[58] Summerfield, "A Critique of Seven Assumptions Behind Psychological Trauma Programmes in War-affected Countries", p. 1455.

[59] Vanessa Pupavac, "Misanthropy Without Borders: The International Children's Rights Regime", *Disasters*, 25 no. 2 (2001): pp.95-112.

[60] Catherine Panter-Brick et al, "Violence, Suffering, and Mental Health in Afghanistan: A School-based Survey", *The Lancet*, 374 no. 9692 (2009): pp. 807-816.

[61] Uppard, "Child Soldiers and Children Associated with the Fighting Forces", p. 124.

[62] Ismael Beah, *A long way gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*. (New York: Sarah Crichton Books, 2007).

effectively than during the conflict, as child soldier reintegration into an ongoing conflict risks forfeiting children's psychological and physical rehabilitation, and threatens to marginalize other vulnerable children.[63] Hence the post-conflict success models of DDR exported from Sierra Leone and elsewhere may be inappropriate for the ongoing conflict in eastern DRC. If the daily stressors related to conflict are still present, and these factors are ignored, blue-printing psychological interventions may do more harm than good.[64] For instance, child soldiers associated with the armed forces are identified by aid agencies as highly vulnerable to mental illness and stunted moral development because of their involvement with an armed group. However, this risks imposing an identity on former child combatants, a childhood or adolescent identity that they may no longer possess, or that their community may no longer wish to accept. It also removes their agency. Michael Wessells points out that,

> In contrast to developed nations, many cultures define individuals as adults if they have participated in the culturally appropriate rites of passage. Developmental science has tended to embrace a universal model of childhood and to overlook the fact that 'the child' is a socially constructed idealization that reflects the values and agendas of particular researchers, cultures, and traditions.[65]

The child may feel more inclined to identify other aspects of his or her life as more traumatic, such as suffering domestic violence, which might be particularly relevant in the socio-political context of war.[66] Child soldiers may have experienced multiple events, yet it is the child soldier identity that is forced on them for the purposes of reintegration. It is assumed that being part of an armed group is more traumatic than living in a general context of war. Further, images and memories of the brutality faced by child soldiers in the Sierra Leone and the LRA haunt development and child protection agencies, causing them to forget that the scale and intensity of the conflict, and of the children's experiences, can vary greatly, and that child soldiers in DRC may not be subject to similar inhumane practices.

Evidence suggests that the reintegration process determines the success of the child's rehabilitation.[67] Alcinda Honwana's research in Mozambique illustrates that the Western styled government-led DDR was not acceptable to many rural communities, and traditional healing methods were preferred by the community for the psychological rehabilitation of children returning from war. The rituals, which were aimed at restoring the child's identity as a member of the community, relied on specific community beliefs concerning psychological recovery, which may not fit into Western assumptions of the universality of human

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[63] Williamson, "The Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration of Child Soldiers: Social and Psychological Transformation in Sierra Leone", p. 190; Claude Rakisits, "Child Soldiers in the East of the Democratic Republic of Congo", *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 27 no. 4 (2008): pp. 108-122.

[64] Miller and Rasmussen, "War Exposure, Daily Stressors, and Mental Health in Conflict and Post-conflict Settings: Bridging the Divide Between Trauma-focused and Psychosocial Frameworks", p. 8.

[65] Wessells, "Children, Armed Conflict, and Peace", p. 640.

[66] Panter-Brick, "Violence, Suffering, and Mental Health in Afghanistan: A School-based Survey", p. 813.

[67] Uppard, "Child Soldiers and Children Associated with the Fighting Forces", p. 125.

psychological processes.[68] This idea is strengthened by the fact that communities themselves are not monolithic, so traditional methods that involve dialogue and reconciliation are more appropriate to quell the fears of distrustful community members.[69] Urban-rural divides in traditional beliefs must also be noted, particularly for the DRC, where large cities are safe zones that allow rehabilitation to be conducted more effectively, while rural areas are relatively more challenging environments. With the Caritas programme, this is most evident in the disparity between the methods of the transition centres located in potentially dangerous areas, and those of the central offices in the safer zones of Goma.[70] More generally, rural areas are more likely to subject children to traditional healing methods, and while Western informed post-conflict approaches may work in urban areas, it is worth exploring whether traditional methods are better suited to rehabilitating children in the insecure rural areas of ongoing conflicts.[71]

It follows that western psychological intervention in some conflict-affected areas may be inappropriate as far as child soldier DDR programmes are concerned. Interventions that involve individual counselling may not be well suited to contexts where conflict-related trauma is experienced by the whole society; also it may not be well received in non-Western cultures. The Western approach to war trauma is thus, objectification of suffering as an entity apart, relabeling it as a technical problem `trauma'  to which technical solutions (like counselling or other psychological approaches) are supposedly applicable. However, misery or distress per se is surely not psychological disturbance in any meaningful sense and for the vast majority of survivors, `traumatisation' is a pseudocondition.[72]

The success of helping former child soldiers recover psychologically may thus be contingent on the meaning the children and the society give to 'trauma' and recovery. For example, "though the trauma literature suggests that PTSD has a worldwide prevalence, it is a mistake to assume that because phenomena can be regularly identified in different social settings, they mean the same thing in those settings."[73] Most research conducted on the child soldier phenomenon presumes the child's innocence. As children, they were either forced to fight or face death, or their choice was impaired by their moral underdevelopment as children. However, while there is no question that in one way or another these children were

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[68] Alcinda Honwana, "Healing for Peace: Traditional Healers and Post-War Reconstruction in Southern Mozambique".

[69] Office of Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, *Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Programmes for Children.* See http://www.un.org/children/conflict/english/ddrforchildren.html. Accessed 22 August 2010.

[70] Interview with Paola Briganti, a psychologist consultant with Caritas Rome on its child soldier demobilization project in DRC (interview by email).

[71] Honwana, "Healing for Peace: Traditional Healers and Post-War Reconstruction in Southern Mozambique".

[72] Summerfield, "A Critique of Seven Assumptions Behind Psychological Trauma Programmes in War-affected Countries", p 1452.

[73] *Ibidem*, p. 1453.

indeed forced, the act of taking responsibility may actually be helpful. Some cultures see rites of passage, such as participating in war, as an effective transition to adulthood.[74] Denying children agency by removing their responsibility and attempting to impose a lost childhood on them may hinder rehabilitation. Dr Paola Briganti notes that the most reliable neuroscientific theories demonstrate that though victims of war can learn to reduce their suffering, they cannot erase it entirely, and it is therefore more realistic to teach children that their psychological reactions are normal components of the war experience. To that end, rather than trying to magically eliminate children's experiences of war, it may be more useful to highlight the positive lessons of being a child soldier, such as loyalty, tenacity, inner strength and wish to contribute to their communities, without glorifying the experience. This may also prepare them psychologically in the event of being re-recruited or otherwise forced to rejoin the army.[75] Literature produced by former child soldiers supports this point. Novels such as Amadou Kourouma's *Allah n'Est Pas Obligé*[76]*,* or Ismael Beah's *A Long Way Gone*,[77] feature an "unwavering voice that refuses the protection of victimhood by never making excuses."[78] The accounts explicitly depict the children's thought processes and active participation, indicating a moral development and agency that often go unrecognized in children, and that are in large part gained from the experience of being a child soldier. Former child soldiers across the world are most likely to express regret at having committed crimes, and indicate a desire to complete their education or become valuable members of society.[79] Aside from demonstrating that given the circumstances, joining an armed group may be a logical step, these observations also point to the possibility that children in armed groups receive added emotional and economic support, rendering them, in this sense, less vulnerable than other local children who were never associated with a militia.[80]

Recommendations

The factors discussed above suggest that DDR programmes for child soldiers during an ongoing conflict may not always be effective. They highlight the problematic framing of the child soldier issue, which "posits child soldiers as social and military aberrations that

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[74] Lamberg, "Reclaiming Child Soldiers' Lost Lives".

[75] Interview with Paola Briganti, a psychologist consultant for Caritas Rome on its child soldier demobilization project in DRC (interview by email).

[76] Amadou Kourouma, *Allah n'est pas Obligé* (Paris : Editions du Seuil, 2000).

[77] Ismael Beah, *A long way gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*. (New York: Sarah Crichton Books, 2007).

[78] Alexandra Schultheis, "African Child Soldiers and Humanitarian Consumption", *Peace Review*, 20 no. 1 (2008): pp. 31-40.

[79] Lamberg, "Reclaiming Child Soldiers' Lost Lives".

[80] This may be relatable to a study done in Nepal, where children in the study who were still associated with an armed group had better mental health than children who were no longer with one. Brandon Kohrt *et al.*, 'Comparison of Mental Health Between Former Child Soldiers and Children Never Conscripted by Armed Groups in Nepal', *JAMA*, 300 no. 6 (2008): pp. 691– 701.

humanitarian assistance might correct, rather than as possible products and indicators of global inequalities that would require structural changes to rectify".[81] While addressing structural changes is important for conflict-affected societies, as acknowledged by the developmental aims of DDR, other socio-economic, cultural and political factors are also important to inform policy recommendations for more effective DDR programmes.

First, it must be recognized that child soldiering is a political issue, which needs political solutions. When in 1995 Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni successfully reintegrated Uganda's child soldiers after the formerly rebel National Resistance Army was transformed into the Uganda People's Defence Forces, it was clear he was responding to international pressure. Given this precedent, it would be helpful if such pressure were exerted on other military commanders.[82] The culture of impunity also needs to be addressed, particularly in the context of conflicts such as that of eastern DRC. More effort should be made to bring perpetrators such as Thomas Lubanga to justice. Lubanga's trial inspired Nepalese rebels to release 3,000 child soldiers at once, an unprecedented figure. The role of the international community is thus instrumental in applying political pressure to continue to bring perpetrators of recruitment of children to trial. It must be noted that the Nepalese reaction to the ICC was optimistic, and that other rebels have reacted by hiding their child soldiers, making it more difficult for aid agencies to seek them out.[83] Strengthening this initiative by placing more emphasis on the role played by political and judicial institutions would therefore help to tackle this challenge.

Second, further research needs to be conducted on how best to disarm, demobilize, and reintegrate child soldiers within the operational difficulties of an ongoing conflict. In eastern DRC skirmishes are common and the risk of re-recruitment of child soldiers is high. Children should be taught coping strategies in case they are re-abducted. If rehabilitation programmes are designed to reintegrate children once and for all, but then fail because of re-recruitment, there may be a sense of lost hope. SCUK has often been confronted with this dilemma in the Kivus, resulting in an erosion of trust of the community.[84] Research should focus on the benefits versus the constraints of child demobilization, relating them to the broader socio-political context and the circumstances of other vulnerable children. From a psychological standpoint, research should focus on whether there are increased psychological repercussions of a recruitment–rehabilitation–recruitment cycle, so that such an eventuality can be specifically planned for in rehabilitation policies.

Third, the idiosyncrasies of each conflict need to be taken into account. The recruitment style in eastern DRC, and the way in which child soldiers are treated must be

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[81] Schulthers, "African Child Soldiers and Humanitarian Consumption", p. 32.

[82] Oliver Furley, "Child Soldiers in Africa", in Oliver Furley ed., *Conflict in Africa.*

[83] Interview with a former Child Protection Coordinator for Save the Children UK in Goma, DRC on the 14 April 2010

[84] *Ibidem*

carefully compared to the lifestyle they would conduct outside of the army in the context of the ongoing conflict. If basic needs such as food and security are found to be lacking in a child's home community, alternative care options need to be considered, such as life in a foster family. Further, where army conditions are safer and more sustainable than living as a civilian, it may be more appropriate to take time to address the structural inadequacies that create this condition rather than rushing through a poorly planned DDR programme.

Fourth, local customs must be studied, and research should focus on whether local healing strategies are more appropriate than Western style interventions; this can be achieved by harmonizing aid agencies' and local notions of the role of the child in society. Children's agency in the demobilization process should also be encouraged.[85] Recruitment prevention strategies should be incorporated with peace education in order to reduce the attractiveness of joining a rebel group.[86] There is also evidence that local approaches to transitional justice can build on traditional norms to promote empathy and reconciliation, and that as part of this, child soldiers should understand and take responsibility for their actions in order to reconcile the victim, offender and the wider community.[87] To that end, the community as a whole must be targeted for an investment in education and livelihoods, and the focus should be addressing structural and developmental challenges rather than DDR itself. When the entire society is vulnerable, all children are at risk of joining an armed group, and a focus on the minority who have already been recruited may be ineffective and could serve to promote social divisions and jealousy.

Lastly, structural changes are imperative for addressing the main problems for children involved in armed conflict. Specifically, these include stressors such as poverty and loss of family, which can hinder psychological resilience to trauma.[88] Concerted efforts must therefore be made to tackle these issues, and while achieving the complete cessation of hostilities may be too idealistic a goal in the short term, more realistic structural policies can be implemented in the meantime. Strengthening the number and quality of education programmes is necessary, along with providing appropriate skills for employment. Additionally, the economic incentives that drive rebel armed groups, such as the natural resource trade in diamonds, coltan, and tin, must be reduced through a coordinated

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[85] Rachel Brett and Irma Specht, *Young Soldiers: Why They Choose to Fight*, (Boulder: Lyanne Rienner Publishers, 2004).

[86] Ilene and Guy Goodwin-Gill, *Child Soldiers: The Role of Children in Armed Conflicts*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); Michael Wessells, "Child Soldiers, Peace Education, and Post-Conflict Reconstruction for Peace", *Theory into Practice,* 44 no. 4 (2005): pp. 363-369.

[87] United Nations Disarmament Demobilisation and Reintegration Resource Centre, *5.30 Children and DDR*, http://www.unddr.org/iddrs/05/30.php. Accessed 21 August 2010; Children and Armed Conflict; Office of Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, *Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Programmes for Children.* See http://www.un.org/children/conflict/english/ddrforchildren.html. Accessed 22 August 2010.

[88] Wessells, "Children, Armed Conflict, and Peace", pp. 641-642;Machel, Graça, *The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children,* (New York: UNICEF, 1996); Interview with a former Child Protection Coordinator for Save the Children UK in Goma, DRC on the 14 April 2010.

international political effort that takes into account the political prominence of non-state actors. Most critical of all however, is the need to recognize that child soldiering is part and parcel of these structural inadequacies, and that until these are addressed, armed groups may, on many occasions, provide the comfort and security sought by Congolese children.

Conclusion

The challenge of child soldiers in eastern DRC, as in other conflict-affected regions, is serious and harmful. A full restoration of childhood may be impossible, and rehabilitation in an ongoing conflict may encounter barriers that preclude post-conflict DDR programmes from being effective. Crucially, this involves recognizing that not all conflicts or child soldiering experiences are the same, and that as such, they require different types and degrees of intervention. In the context of ongoing conflicts such as that in eastern DRC, where the whole society experiences conflict and trauma collectively, socio-cultural practices should also figure prominently in the rehabilitation process, as children's experiences cannot be separated from the conditions of society in general. Structural inadequacies must be given priority, or joining the armed forces will continue to be the most logical step for a child who wants a sense of security and purpose. The meaning children and the society give to trauma must be explored, and children's agency must be fully recognized if they are to have a degree of ownership in their own rehabilitation. Further research is essential for improving the evidence base for more effective rehabilitation programmes for child soldiers in areas of armed conflict.

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