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## Child Soldiers Lessons Learned on Prevention, Demobilization and Reintegration

Among the most egregious child rights violations, an estimated 300,000 child soldiers are involved in armed conflicts.<sup>1</sup> As highlighted in the seminal UN Study on the *Impact of Armed Conflict on Children* by Graça Machel,<sup>2</sup> the involvement of children in conflict has increased in recent decades due to the length of many conflicts, the blurring of civilian and military targets, and the proliferation of small arms.

Child soldiers have often been portrayed in the media as "future barbarians" and "killing machines," and their rehabilitation and reintegration is often portrayed as hopeless.

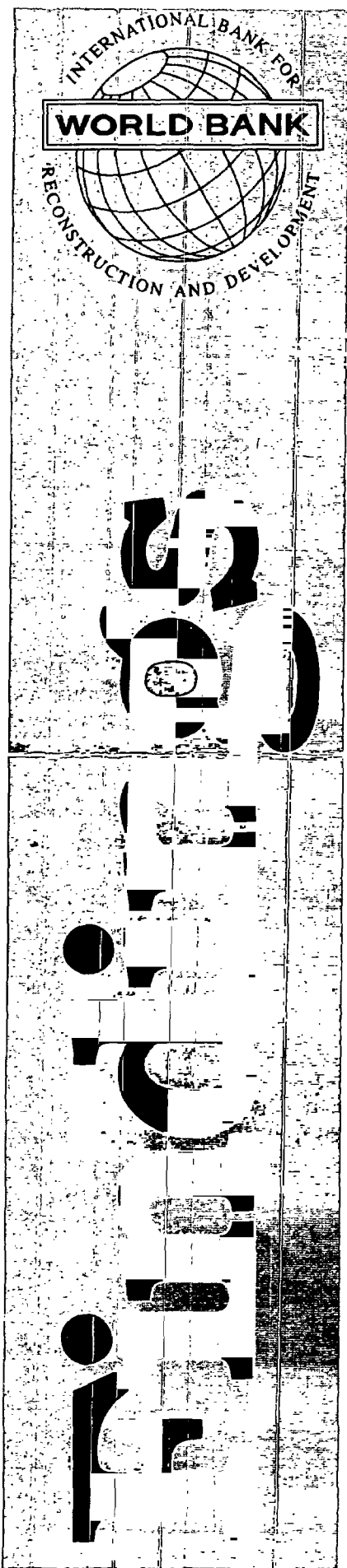
Yet, a new study, *Child Soldiers: Preventing, Demobilizing and Reintegrating*, demonstrates that children and youth involved in armed conflict can re-engage positive social relations and productive civilian lives. This is no easy task and will depend crucially on mobilizing political will and resources to include child soldiers in demobilization programs and support their reintegration to family and community.

A number of countries have undertaken demobilization and reintegration programs for child soldiers, although they have had little guidance or access to the experi-

ence of others because of a dearth of documentation and dissemination of program experience. Unfortunately, efforts at practical action for child soldiers are often overshadowed by intense political and emotional debates. Whilst programming must be specific to the context of the country concerned, some lessons and principles are consistent across various experiences and provide guidance towards best practice. The reintegration of child soldiers in tandem with community recovery for children affected by armed conflict is a key area of post-conflict reconstruction and sustainable development goals.

The study is a contribution towards sharing practical experience and lessons learned. It draws primarily from in-depth case studies on Angola and El Salvador,<sup>3</sup> researched in collaboration with UNICEF, and integrates other country program experiences. Angola's demobilization from 1995 to 1997 was one of the most extensive in the history of the United Nations and was perhaps the first time that children were specifically included in a peace process. The experience of El Salvador provides a longer-term perspective on the transition process to civilian life for child soldiers and is significant be-

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cause some 30 percent of child soldiers were girls.

### Prevention

Prevention lessons highlight the vital role of civil society actors and their need for external support. Awareness of the law has in many cases empowered children and their families to resist recruitment and to contribute to prevention and advocacy. Most vital to the legal protection framework is the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, adopted in May 2000 by the UN General Assembly.<sup>4</sup>

Practical measures to prevent the involvement of children in armed conflict require much greater attention from humanitarian and development actors. For example, formal and non-formal education and other youth activities, food security and the security of refugee camps have a direct relationship in preventing child recruitment.

### Demobilization

Demobilization lessons stress that child soldiers must be specifically included in peace agreements and demobilization processes. The exclusion of child soldiers in El Salvador hindered their reintegration, engendered resentment and left them socially and economically marginalized. A formal resolution prioritizing child soldiers in Angola proved essential to achieving their demobilization. These lessons have already borne fruit in Sierra Leone.

With regard to formal demobilization procedures, the use of special centres in demobilization and reintegration requires careful analysis. Most importantly, child

soldiers must be effectively separated from military authority and protected during demobilization. In a number of country experiences, a lack of protection for child soldiers allowed military authorities to manipulate the demobilization process for recruitment. In Angola, of 8,613 child soldiers

registered with adult soldiers in UNITA quartering areas, only 57 percent could be tracked for family reunification. This lesson underscores the prudence of establishing procedures to separate child soldiers to special 'centres' in demobilization exercises.

On the other hand, measures must be adopted from the outset to ensure that child soldiers remain in centers for the shortest amount of time possible. While special centers are often necessary in the interim, experience profoundly demonstrates that family reunification and community-based strategies are fundamental to effective reintegration.

Lessons on preparing for demobilization include: training appropriate staff, establishing partnerships, generating resources and mobilizing policy coherence. In Angola, belated staff recruitment, inappropriate interpretation arrangements, and policy debates delayed and obstructed child soldier demobilization for some eighteen months after the official decree prioritizing their demobilization.

### The numbers game and interviewing child soldiers

The logistics of preparing for demobilization and other pressures often fuel considerable discussion about the number of child soldiers. Equally, there is often a disproportionate focus on pre-demobilization profiling of child soldiers rather than investments in programming relevant to reintegration.

Interviewing child soldiers raises important protection and ethical concerns. The question of language skills and military control raises issues of confidentiality, freedom of expression and the veracity of interviews. Child soldiers may be exposed to retaliation and a child soldier's war experiences should not be exploited for media and propaganda purposes.

Although statistics on child soldiers contribute to understanding the problem, many will be excluded from 'counts' and a large proportion of children may be involved in the conflict.

Estimates are important for budget preparations, but more essential is the early mobilization and support of community based structures for family reunification and psychosocial support. Such a program framework can accommodate any increase or decrease in actual numbers throughout the demobilization and reintegration process.

While most of the attention on child soldiers concerns formal demobilization, informal demobilization also requires programming centered on family reunification and community-based reintegration. In many instances, child soldiers may escape, be released or "left behind" in the course of military developments. In other instances, local, quasi-formal demobilizations may be achieved. Establishing programming frameworks to support the demobilization and reintegration of child soldiers is thus necessary while waiting for more formal demobilization results. Protection and legal advocacy must be assured so that such cases are not accused of being "deserters."

Appropriate partners and community organizations can effectively support non-formally demobilized child soldiers in line with strategies reaching other children affected by armed conflict. Harmonizing programming for child soldiers with that for other children affected by armed conflict is of crucial importance. A careful balance is required between the potential

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## What is psychosocial?

The diverse and often violent experiences of armed conflict have profound effects on child development and well-being. The word "psychosocial" simply underlines the dynamic relationship between psychological and social effects, each continually influencing the other.

"Psychological effects" are those, which affect emotion, behavior, thoughts, memory, learning ability, perceptions and understanding.

"Social effects" refer to altered relationships due to death, separation, estrangement and other losses, family and community breakdown, damage to social values and customary practices and the destruction of social facilities and services. Social effects also extend to the economic dimension as many individuals and families become destitute through the material and economic devastation of armed conflict, thus losing status and place in their social network.

for stigmatizing child soldiers and favoring them at the expense of equally or more distressed war-affected children. The study highlights lessons where communities have resented the favored attention and benefits given to child soldiers. Indeed, this can create perverse incentives exacerbating the phenomena of child soldiers.

Mobilizing community-based capacity is the essential foundation to sustainable support to demobilized child soldiers. Furthermore, community-based networks can reach those excluded, most often girls and the disabled, from formal demobilization. In turn, this builds capacity towards potential formal demobilization programs. A notably successful network in Angola is described in the reintegration chapter of the working paper.

### Reintegration

Working with child soldiers can be extremely difficult. They often have highly inflated expectations, exaggerated pride in their military identity, and have learned to rely on aggression to meet needs and solve problems. Children involved in armed conflict are deprived of the normal cultural, moral and values

socialization usually gained from family and community. In the words of a national NGO in El Salvador, they are "socialized into a polarized existence of hostility." The focus of reintegration must be the socio-economic fabric of

community life as the anchor in the transition from military to civilian identity. Program lessons demonstrate that three components are essential to effective reintegration:

- Family reunification;
- Psychosocial support; and,
- Education and economic opportunity.

Family reunification or, where that is not possible, foster placement or support for independent living, are fundamental to successful reintegration. Many programs have struggled with arguments that center-based approaches are necessary. International child welfare practice consistently concludes that institutional settings are inappropriate to the emotional, social and cognitive development needs of children and adolescents. In follow-up work with former child soldiers in El Salvador, 84 percent reported that family ties played the most important role in their reintegration.

Programming must also proactively address the needs of child soldiers living independently or having children, with or without a partner. In Angola, one of the most successful projects was a

"self-building project" to support home construction. Either extended family members or traditional community leaders gave the land for the new homes.

Psychosocial support, including traditional rituals and family and community mediation, is pivotal to addressing the asocial and aggressive behavior learned by child soldiers, facilitating their recovery from distressful experiences and contributing to community healing and justice. Experience shows that psychosocial approaches are more beneficial than Western-derived trauma assistance. For example, counselors in Liberia estimated that less than 5 percent of child soldiers required specialized psychological care. Estimates in El Salvador were less than 2 percent.

Group counseling, collective conflict resolution approaches and the incorporation of traditional ceremonies were the most effective. In Uganda, children themselves note the importance of cleansing ceremonies so that their communities do not view them as *cen* or "contaminated."

Other reintegration lessons stress that education and economic opportunities must be individually determined and inclusive of family livelihood needs. Apprenticeships, micro-enterprise and support to locally based small businesses have been shown to be more effective than vocational training centers. A balance must be achieved between the need to earn income and the need for education and life-skills training. Former child soldiers face many obstacles to formal education and more attention to innovative program development in this area is needed.

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Just as vital as political will to include child soldiers in peace agreements and demobilization, reintegration of child soldiers requires a reasonable period, at least three to five years, of committed resources. Many formal demobilization programs emphasize immediate quartering and reinsertion efforts and timeframes, undermining the process necessary to successful reintegration.

In conclusion, whilst prevention is the best solution, the efforts of those working to demobilize and reintegrate child soldiers require full support. Former child soldiers striving to achieve a better future — often despite ongoing tensions, social violence and distressed support systems — demonstrate the possibilities of regaining productive civilian life.

This article was written by Beth Verhey, Child Protection consultant and the author of *Child Soldiers: Preventing, Demobilizing and Reintegrating*, Africa Region Working Paper Series No. 23, November 2001.

1. Monitoring and estimates of child soldiers are primarily undertaken by Save the Children ( Redd Barna ) and the NGO Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers. Cfr. Brett, Rachel and Margaret McCallin, *Children : The Invisible Soldiers*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Save the Children Sweden, 1998; [www.rb.se](http://www.rb.se)
2. UN Document A/51/306 and Add. 1, New York, 1996.
3. The full case studies on Angola and El Salvador are available in full text via the World Bank's Post Conflict web page: [www.worldbank.org](http://www.worldbank.org), then click on 'Topics', 'Social Development' and then 'Post-Conflict'.
4. The study has annexes on the legal framework regarding child soldiers and definition of terms.

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