



PRACTICAL GUIDE

To foster community acceptance of girls
associated with armed groups
in DR Congo

Preface by Madame
Jeanine Mabunda Lioko

CHILD
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In addition, we are grateful to all child protection actors (within the Congolese government, national NGOs, and international organisations based in DRC) who have contributed their time and effort to the development of this guide, including:

- The Office of the Presidential Advisor on sexual violence and child recruitment (or BRP);
- The Executive Unit in charge of the national DDR programme (known by its French acronym as UEPN-DDR);
- The provincial divisions of the Ministry of Social Affairs (or DIVAS);
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- Commission diocésaine justice et paix (CDJP);
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Preface

Significant progress has been made in recent years to end the phenomenon of children associated with armed forces and groups in Democratic Republic of Congo. The adoption in 2012 of an *Action Plan to Stop and Prevent Child Recruitment and Other Grave Child Rights Violations by the DRC armed forces and security services* has accelerated this progress through the establishment of a number of institutions and mechanisms for prevention and accountability.

Among these institutions, the Office of the Personal Representative to the Head of State for combatting sexual violence and child recruitment (the BRP), created in 2014, placed the issue of child soldiers at the highest level of the government's concerns and actions. Since I took office in July 2014, the BRP has focused on the prevention of child recruitment and combating impunity. The BRP has also ensured the socio-economic reintegration of children formerly associated with armed forces and groups in Kibumba, Rutshuru, Bunia and Aru.

In light of these efforts, the enlistment of children in the Congolese armed forces has virtually ceased, but thousands of children are still associated with armed groups active in DRC. More than 46,000 children have been demobilised from armed forces and groups in the country over the past decade, but the vast majority of these children were boys: many girls associated with armed groups are still not being reached by demobilisation efforts and reintegration programs.

It is to address this problem in the spirit of partnership, that the BRP has supported the initiative of Child Soldiers International and its national partners in developing this Practical Guide to facilitate the release of girls from armed groups, improve support for their reintegration into their community, and promote their sustainable return to civilian life.

We are therefore proud to support this Practical Guide, which provides ideas for small-scale interventions that draw on existing community resources - to help the work of child protection actors with limited resources. The BRP will continue to support the interventions proposed in this guide. The aspirations voiced by the girls whom Child Soldiers International met are no more than their fundamental rights as set out in various national and international legal instruments. They will be duly taken into account in our future activities regarding the demobilisation and reintegration of children associated with armed groups.

As the Personal Representative to the Head of State for combating sexual violence and child recruitment, I invite all child protection actors working in the DRC to use this Practical Guide in their work for and with girls associated with armed groups, and enrich it with their ideas and experiences.

Madame Jeanine Mabunda Lioko

Personal Representative to the Head of State for combatting sexual violence and child recruitment.

Introduction

Context

Guided by previous research by Child Soldiers International, recommendations to the DRC made by the Committee on the Rights of the Child, and consultations with Congolese NGOs, Child Soldiers International developed a project to assess the effectiveness of release, psychosocial recovery and reintegration programmes (DDR) for girls under the age of 18 associated with armed groups in eastern DRC.

As part of this project, a research team spent six weeks in South Kivu, North Kivu and Haut-Uélé in early 2016, and interviewed 150 girls formerly associated with armed groups¹, as well as 84 members of community-based child protection networks (known as “RECOPE” in French), 12 teachers and school principals, 8 religious leaders, 46 DDR actors and 14 local authority officials. The study sought to shed some light on the extent to which girls benefit from DDR programmes, and on the appropriateness of the support where it was received – primarily from the point of view of the girls themselves.

The research confirmed what previous studies² had already revealed; that girls are underrepresented in the total number of children demobilised from armed groups, that they have not had access to DDR services to the same extent as boys, and that in cases where they have received assistance, it has not been sufficiently adapted to their specific needs and circumstances. In particular, the research showed that, despite encouraging exceptions, girls are often discriminated against and stigmatised upon returning to their communities, and that DDR programs do not adequately address this fundamental issue of family and community acceptance.

In October 2016, Child Soldiers International presented its findings at a workshop in Goma which brought together DDR actors, UN agencies, NGOs and government representatives. The workshop participants listened to the hardships and recommendations of the girls, as reported by Child Soldiers International, and then discussed solutions and proposed interventions to meet the girls' needs, facilitate their release and reintegration while respecting their rights.

Objectives

This guide is a collection of practical ideas and experiences from the participants in the Goma workshop. It is presented as a “toolbox” to help DDR actors respond to the needs of girls formerly associated with armed groups in eastern DRC, and to overcome the many obstacles to their release and reintegration, reported by some of the girls themselves.³ Many of the interventions proposed in this guide are not new and have already been used by some NGOs. However, they are not necessarily known or systematically used by all DDR actors.

The child protection actors interviewed by the research team highlighted the fact that funding for child DDR had ceased (in some areas over two years ago, and in others more recently) or that it had become so restricted that they could only reach a very small number of children associated with armed groups in their area. For this reason, with the exception of education, this guide focuses on interventions that are inexpensive and can be carried out by community members - building on existing community resources. In some cases, initial support (technical or material) is required; this could come from the Executive Unit in charge of the national DDR programme (UEPN-DDR), the provincial divisions of the Ministry of women, family and children's affairs (DIVIFFAE), the provincial divisions of the Ministry of Social Affairs (DIVAS), or another DDR provider.

Some important clarifications:

- ▶ **This guide does not intend to provide definitive guidance on girls DDR in eastern DRC**, and even less so beyond this region. It presents the best practical recommendations that we were able to gather to circumvent some of the current difficulties faced in girls DDR. Its users are strongly encouraged to share any relevant or useful comments or experience they may have to enrich and complement it.
- ▶ **The guide is not meant to be exhaustive: it should be used to complement current guidelines for child DDR**, in particular the Principles and Guidelines for Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups (known as the “Paris Principles”) from February 2007, and not to replace them.
- ▶ **The recommendations in this guide do not exclude boys:** many of the actions proposed in this guide also apply to boys formerly associated with armed groups, who have also suffered immensely - both during their association and after their return home. However, from the perspective of child DDR actors, the needs of boys are to a greater extent considered in existing programs, which do not sufficiently address the specific problems of girls, such as the psychosocial consequences of repeated sexual violence and the subsequent community stigma. It is this deficiency that this Practical Guide seeks to address.

Notes

1. These armed groups were several different community-based self-defence militias ("Mai Mai"), the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), the M23 and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA).
2. United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in DRC (MONUSCO), *Invisible Survivors: Girls in Armed Groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo from 2009 to 2015*, November 2015: <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/151123-Girls-in-Armed-Groups-2009-2015-Final.pdf> ; Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers [former name of Child Soldiers International], *Report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child in advance of the DRC initial report on the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict*, 2011: <https://www.child-soldiers.org/shop/drc-opac-shadow-report-to-the-committee-on-the-rights-of-the-child-1>.
3. During its research, Child Soldiers International only met with girls who had left armed groups. It should however be noted that several interventions in this guide could also be used for the reintegration of girls formerly associated with state armed forces.





The ultimate suffering: Rejection by family and friends

***“It is better to die there than
come home and be rejected.”***

How community rejection affects the girls

Girls formerly associated with armed groups have often suffered physical and emotional abuse, violence, daily threats of death, exceptionally harsh living conditions and extreme loneliness. They need understanding, kindness, and emotional support to recover and resume their development into adulthood.

Instead, according to the research, when they finally come home, many are met with suspicion, isolation, discrimination and (in some cases) humiliation. They are profoundly hurt by this rejection, which is often the source of their deepest emotional suffering. Depending on their personality and experiences, they react in several different ways:

- **Anger and rebellion:** Some are angry at the hostility of the community towards them. They rebel against this treatment, which they consider to be a gross injustice given what they have experienced, and display a defiant attitude, adopting a behaviour that the community had automatically assigned to them. This behaviour, in turn, reinforces the community's negative perception of the girls and serves as a kind of “justification” for the ostracism they face.

- **Guilt and withdrawal:** Others internalise blame and suffer in silence. They withdraw from social life even when they so ardently wish to be included: for example, avoiding associating with boys and joining in dances. Some try to regain the acceptance of their community by working harder in the fields or taking blame for others. Many feel that they have “no choice but to bear it.”
- **Returning to the bush:** Another group cannot withstand the emotional pain of scorn, blame and constant rejection, so they decide to re-join an armed group, thinking that a life of misery in the bush is better than being rejected by their family and community.
- **Exile:** Lastly, despite their desire to see their family, some girls decide to move elsewhere, where their past is not known and where they may not risk rejection. These young girls are therefore not known to the DDR actors and receive no support: they are extremely vulnerable. Some of the girls we met indicated that several girls who lived with them in the bush are now being economically and sexually exploited by people who take advantage of their lower status in the community.

Promoting community acceptance

Research has shown that stigma prevents psychosocial recovery¹ and that family and community acceptance is the most critical factor for successful long-term reintegration of children who have been associated with armed forces or armed groups.

“Improved community acceptance was associated with reduced depression and improved confidence and increased prosocial attitudes regardless of violence exposure.”²

Notes

1. Joanne N. Corbin, "Returning home: resettlement of formerly abducted children in Northern Uganda" in *Disasters* (Volume 32, Issue 2, pp. 316–335), 2008: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-7717.2008.01042.x/abstract> ; SWAY – The Survey of War Affected Youth, *Making reintegration work for youth in northern Uganda*, 2007: <http://chrisblatman.com/documents/policy/sway/SWAYResearchBriefReintegration.pdf> ; Theresa S. Betancourt, Jessica Agnew-Blais, Stephen E. Gilman, David R. Williams, B. Heidi Ellis, "Past horrors, present struggles: The role of stigma in the association between war experiences and psychosocial adjustment among former child soldiers in Sierra Leone" in *Social Science and Medicine* (Volume 70, Issue 1, pp. 17–26), 2010: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3756934/>
2. Theresa S. Betancourt, Ivelina I. Borisova, Timothy P. Williams, Robert T. Brennan, T. Hatch Whitfield, Marie de la Soudière, John Williamson, Stephen E. Gilman, "Sierra Leone's Former Child Soldiers: A Follow-up Study of Psychosocial Adjustment and Community Reintegration", in *Child Development* (Volume 81, Issue 4, pp. 1077–1095), 2010: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2921972/pdf/nihms-94482.pdf>. (La traduction française est de Child Soldiers International).

Community acceptance must be at the heart of reintegration programmes.

HOW ?

Intervention A1: Sensitise key community members.

WHO BY? Awareness raising sessions can be organised by DDR providers and other child protection actors, DIVAS or DIVIFFAE representatives, heads of RECOPE, teachers or anyone trained in the reintegration of children.

WHO FOR? Key community members to sensitise must include:

- ▶ Families of former child soldiers and their neighbours;
- ▶ Traditional and religious leaders;
- ▶ Baraza members (community councils);
- ▶ RECOPE members;
- ▶ School headmasters, teachers and students;
- ▶ Women's associations;
- ▶ Youth associations and children's clubs;
- ▶ Any other individual or group/organisation who could influence the community.

WHO WITH? It would be beneficial to involve girls or women formerly associated with armed groups in these sessions if they so wish.

WHEN? The awareness raising should begin as early as possible, preferably before girls return to the community, to ensure that they are understood and welcomed upon their return. In cases of self-demobilisation, awareness raising must accompany the initial efforts to identify girls formerly associated with armed groups within the community. (See Intervention A4.)

PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR THOSE CONDUCTING THE AWARENESS RAISING SESSIONS

- ▶ Inform the participants of:
 - The girls' suffering;
 - The psychological and social impact of their past and current experiences;
 - That they are victims and do not deserve blame.
- ▶ Consider the circumstances of the girls concerned. Those conducting the awareness raising should, for example, mention the strong stigma directed towards girls associated with foreign groups or of another ethnicity, or girls returning with babies.
- ▶ Explain that the girls' behaviour is often a reaction to their rejection, or the fear of rejection; that they can isolate themselves even when they desperately want to be included. Emphasise that if the family and the community accept and support the girls, their behaviour will improve.
- ▶ Emphasise the responsibility of families and communities to help girls find their place again in the community (as with all children associated with armed groups). Inform them that they can receive support and advice if they need it (through a local NGO, a RECOPE, DIVAS social workers or a "Community Reintegration Group". (See Intervention A3.)
- ▶ Ask all participants to honestly examine their own feelings and judgments about girls returning from the bush: are they justified given what the girls have experienced?

! **It is not a matter of talking about individual experiences and suffering**, but rather of addressing the issue generally while giving concrete examples of the suffering commonly experienced by girls associated with armed groups. The objective is to encourage the community's understanding and compassion for this group of girls.

Intervention A2 : Organise “welcome” ceremonies for returning girls.

WHY? The purpose of such a ceremony is to offer a welcoming gesture on behalf of the family and the community and to emphasize their responsibility to care for their child who is coming home after much suffering.

HOW? The ceremony can take different forms: it can be a prayer, a traditional ritual, a meal, or simple words of thanks for the return of the girl.

WHO BY? This ceremony will be all the more effective if it is carried out by a respected member of the community and if, besides the girl and her family, it includes a large number of members of the community.

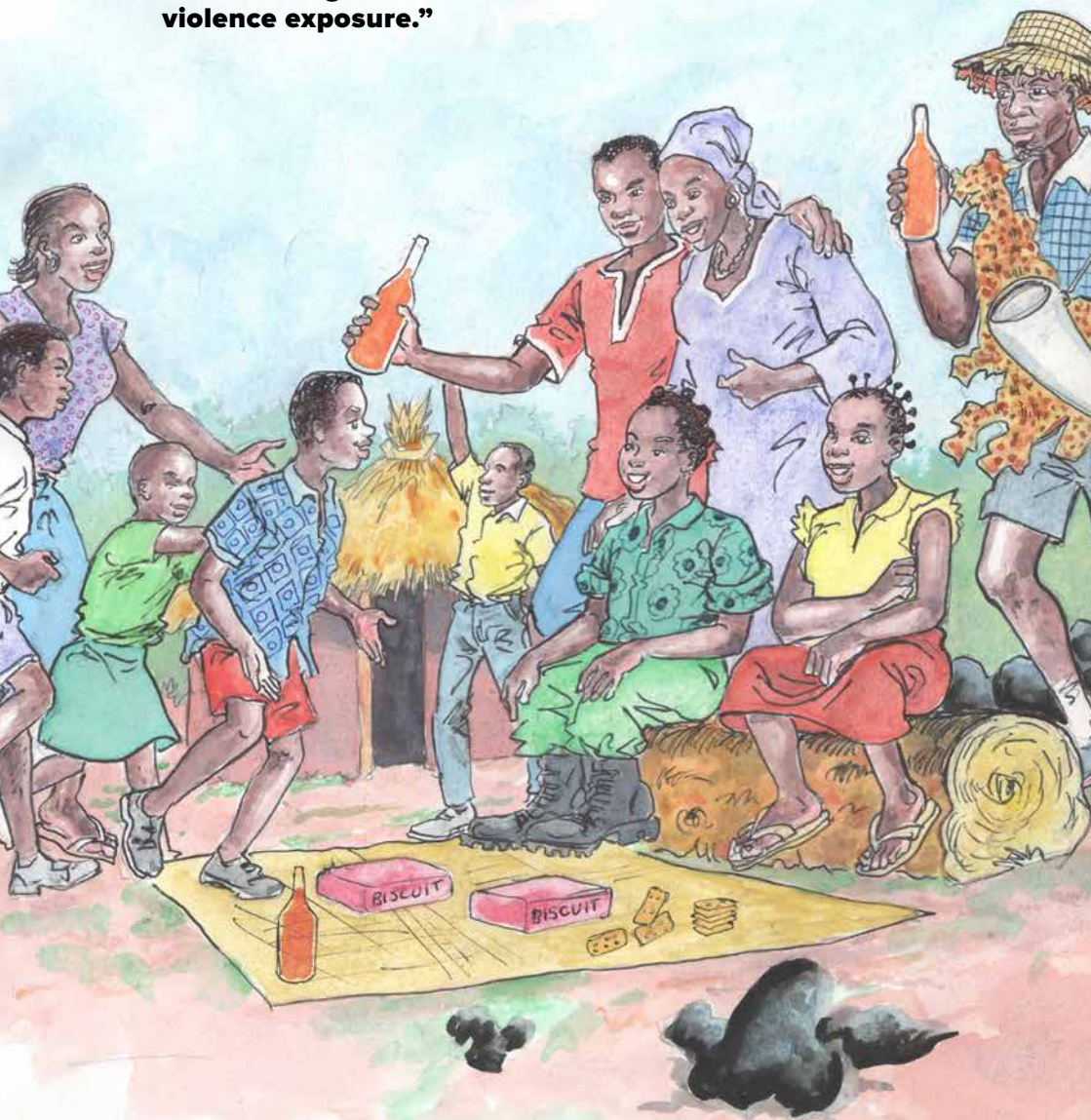
WHEN? If possible, the ceremony should take place at the very moment of the girl's return - but it's never too late! Such interventions have also proved effective in cases where girls have returned months or even years earlier. The need for such ceremonies for girls who still suffer rejection long after their return should therefore be considered.

PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR THOSE ORGANISING THE CEREMONIES

- ▶ Encourage all ceremony participants to welcome the girl, who deserves their sympathy and support; to be patient with her because she has suffered much; and to help her find her place among them, even if it is not always easy.
- ▶ **The children of returning girls should also be welcomed and recognised as new and full members of the community.**
- ▶ Provide a sharing of drinks and food during the ceremony if possible.

! **Avoid exposing girls who prefer to hide or isolate themselves,** even though the reasons for this isolation are usually linked to the fear of rejection. It is our duty to talk to these girls and to examine with them the benefits of such a ceremony.

“Improved community acceptance was associated with reduced depression and improved confidence and increased prosocial attitudes regardless of violence exposure.”



Intervention A3 : Create “Community Reintegration Groups”.

WHY? The aim of these groups is to promote community acceptance and respect for the girls through two distinct strategies:

Regularly sensitise families and the community about the girls’ past and present suffering to change their attitude towards them;

Develop concrete actions to be taken by a number of influential community members to overcome the barriers these girls face.

WHO? These groups must be composed of one or more influential community members (religious leaders, Baraza members, teachers, heads of RECOPE, etc.), families of girls formerly or currently associated with armed groups, as well as girls and young women who have successfully reintegrated in the community.

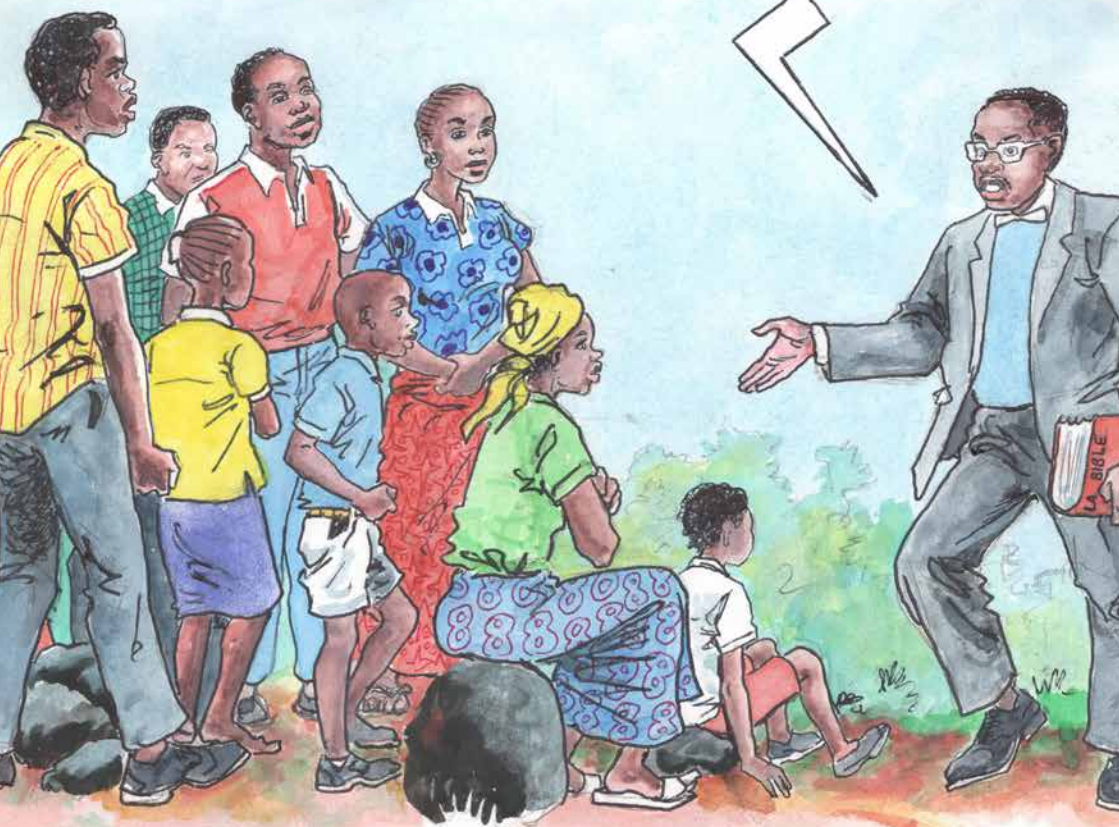
PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR MEMBERS OF COMMUNITY REINTEGRATION GROUPS

- ▶ Meet regularly to work on awareness raising and the development of concrete reintegration strategies, while assessing the effectiveness of actions already undertaken by adapting them if necessary.

Awareness raising

- ▶ Reflect, individually and collectively, on what the association of girls with an armed group means to the group members themselves.
- ▶ Analyse together to what extent the judgments they make do not sufficiently consider the girls’ suffering. Realise that their own judgments can be an obstacle to the reintegration of girls, and thereby improve their behaviour.

**Priests could use
their sermons to
talk about the
girls suffering.**



- ▶ Identify community members to be targeted as a priority and sensitise them, individually and collectively, as opportunities arise. For example:
 - Priests, pastors and Imams could use their sermons to talk about the girls' suffering and the injustice done to them, and to exhort the congregation to understanding and tolerance, while suggesting gestures that would promote community integration.
 - Teachers could discuss concepts such as stigma and tolerance with their students; and act against harassment. They could set an example by encouraging girls formerly associated with armed groups and other marginalised children and by systematically treating them with respect. Children can pass on messages to their parents and thus become advocates within their families.
 - The group could organise community dialogue sessions to encourage a spirit of openness by addressing taboos and myths linked to the stigmatisation of girls who have "been with men outside marriage".
- ▶ Regularly visit families where the problem persists and where girls are not yet fully accepted, to sensitise the parents and conduct family mediation if necessary.
- ▶ Also promote the acceptance and inclusion of children with disabilities and other vulnerable or marginalised children.

Concrete Actions

- ▶ Reflect together on the development and implementation of concrete actions that could help promote community acceptance and respect towards the girls. (See section B: How can a girl regain her "lost value"?).

**Teachers could discuss
concepts such as
stigma and tolerance
with their students.**



Intervention A4: Identify self-demobilised girls who have not received any assistance.

WHO BY? This is the responsibility of the UEPN-DDR, DIVIFFAE, DIVAS and the RECOPE, with the support of child protection agencies.

WHO FOR? Self-demobilised girls, or those abandoned by an armed group, are less likely to have received help and must be identified. Even if funding is low or non-existent, all girls coming out of armed groups should receive the attention of a DDR actor - especially those who are not yet accepted by their family or community.

PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR DDR ACTORS

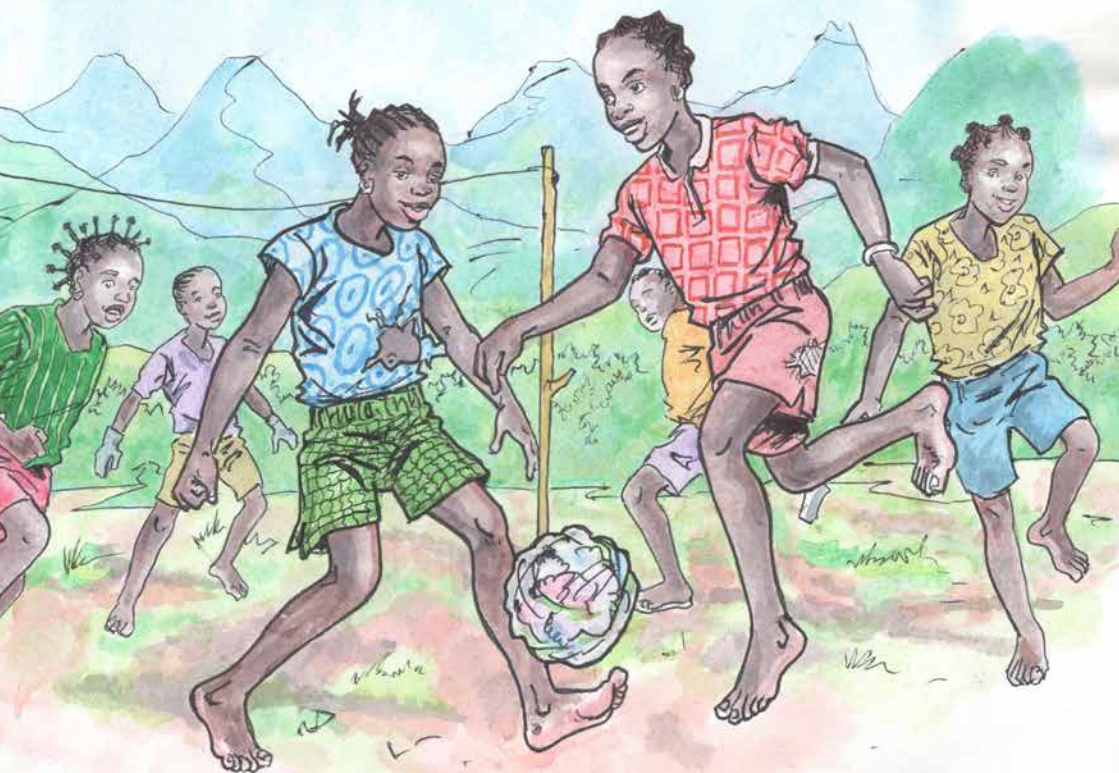
- ▶ Ask girls formerly associated with armed groups if they know other girls who were with them in the bush and who have never received assistance. If so, ask them to contact them to find out if they want help.
- ▶ Establish contact with any girl who wishes to receive help and assess her needs:
 - Is she accepted by her family and community, or could she benefit from family mediation?
 - Is she isolated and could she benefit from interventions to facilitate her integration into community life? (See interventions B1 and F4.)
 - Conduct a small investigation: How does she earn her living? What does she do during the day? Who cares for her? This is to find out whether she is being exploited by people taking advantage of her vulnerability.
 - Does she have access to a trusted person with whom she can talk? (See intervention C1.)
 - If she left the armed group recently, it is important to refer her to health services for a medical check-up.

! Respect for confidentiality. Ensure that the methods used to contact these girls do not stigmatise or harm them by disclosing sensitive information about them. For example, to not draw attention, arrange your meeting in a public place on a market day so it appears like a normal encounter.

Identify self-demobilised girls who have not received any assistance.



**A teacher could form a
football team with the
girls and other children
in the community.**



B.

How can a girl regain her “lost value”?

“Not two days goes by without neighbours making us feel we have known men. We are not allowed to associate with their daughters.”

The majority of girls, DDR providers and RECOPE members interviewed agreed that girls returning from the bush had “lost their social value” because they had “known men”.

Let us acknowledge that this is their reality, but also work towards changing it: many hinted at the fact that, whatever their past, girls would be more accepted if they could find a positive role and identity in their community.

Help girls identify and acquire a positive and valued status within their families and communities.

HOW?

Active participation in community life

“It’s they [the girls] who do not want to join youth groups. When they join a group, men point and talk about them.” (RECOPE member)

To regain the respect of the community and recover their psychosocial wellbeing, a child must once again find their place in their family and community environment - a place in which they are given the opportunity to shine and flourish.

Experiences from DRC and elsewhere show that if a girl receives a specific task to accomplish, or is invited to join a group activity, especially if the initiative comes from an influential person in the community, this can greatly contribute to the girl recovering her “lost value” and gaining the respect that follows.

Intervention B1: Involve girls in activities organised by and for the community.

WHY? This type of intervention requires very little or no funding, but it is very effective in restoring girls' "lost value" by helping them gradually regain the community's trust. It must be given priority.

WHAT? These activities may be of public interest, or community-based recreational activities. They are never mutually exclusive: as much participation as possible in community activities is necessary for the girl to feel part of the community again.

WHO BY? Influential community members should be approached for this type of intervention since the influence of the people involving girls in community activities is crucial: a sustained attention paid by people with a certain status will more quickly evoke the family's and other community members' confidence, and will help change their attitude towards the girls.

PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR THOSE WHO INVOLVE GIRLS IN COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES

- ▶ Identify tasks or activities (individual or group) that are relevant to their village or area and that have the potential to restore the community's confidence in the girl.
- ▶ Make sustained efforts to invite girls to join community leisure and worship activities, be they child-specific (child-friendly spaces, youth clubs, day centres, etc.) or not (women's associations, religious groups, etc.). If such activities are absent, they should be organised to encourage socialising between girls formerly associated with armed groups and other girls (and boys, if appropriate) in the community. For example:
 - A teacher could form a football team with the girls and other children in the community, and regularly organise games;
 - Priests or pastors should do their utmost to include girls in the activities of the congregation, especially by inviting them to be part of the choir, but also to any youth group organised by the congregation (bible study, discussion groups, etc.)

- ▶ Ask girls formerly associated with armed groups to help with public service activities that benefit the entire community. For example:
 - Priests, pastors or Imams could from time to time solicit the help of one or more girls in their daily tasks, such as collecting missals after mass, helping to prepare the church for a baptism or the mosque for a celebration of Tabaski, or to take care of the younger children when there is a parents' meeting;
 - The village chief could ask girls to help decorate a room for a community event.
- ▶ Make sure that the task or specific role given to the girl is noticed and known by all, and that she is given the necessary help to accomplish it successfully.

! Never give up on a girl if she refuses to join community activities. It is very likely that she does not dare to participate in these activities out of fear of receiving derogatory comments. You must talk to her so that she understands that she is welcome, and that no malicious behaviour towards her will be tolerated. Reassure yourself that the community will welcome her, and repeat the invitation as often as necessary.

EGLISE

Priests or pastors should do their utmost to include girls in the activities of the congregation, especially by inviting them to be part of the choir.



"Since I went back to school, everyone takes interest in me..."



Education

***“To give them some social value,
the girls should be in school.”
(RECOPE member)***

***“Since I went back to school, everyone
takes interest in me and asks my advice
if there’s an issue. The situation has changed
completely and all the other young people in
our community respect me and invite me to
youth decision-making meetings.”***

According to the girls themselves, and according to the RECOPE, going to school is another very effective way for a girl formerly associated with an armed group to regain her social value and the acceptance of the community. School is seen as a way to erase their past, to assume a positive identity and to achieve a form of redemption in the eyes of the community.

All the girls we met desperately want to go back to school, or learn to read and write if they are illiterate. But there are many difficulties, including lack of funding, and stigma

Intervention B2: Help all girls formerly associated with armed groups to go back to school or to attend literacy and numeracy classes.

School

HOW? Given that funding is often largely inadequate to enable girls to go back to school, we need to find creative ways to enable them to return to some form of formal learning. (See guidance below.) Enrolment efforts will often need to be accompanied by awareness raising activities to overcome stigmatising attitudes of some parents, teachers and students. (See Intervention A1.)

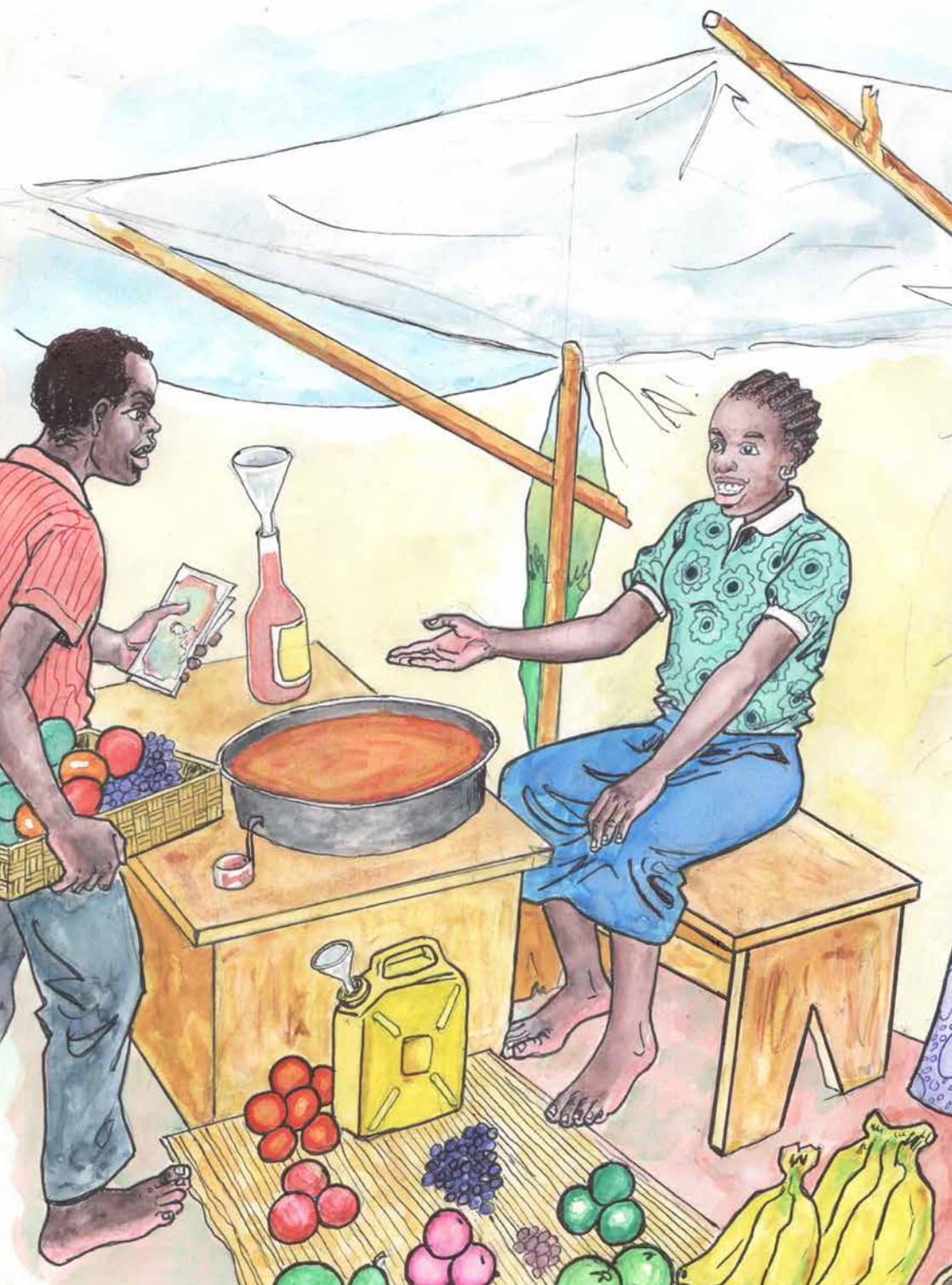
Literacy and numeracy classes

WHO FOR? All illiterate girls should receive literacy and numeracy classes, even in cases where they also receive vocational training or support for an income-generating activity. (See Intervention B3.)

WHO BY? Volunteer teachers (in their free time). In addition, members of the community with specific expertise (RECOPE members trained in child protection, nurses, etc.) could also be invited to share their knowledge.

PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR PARENTS, TEACHERS AND CHILD PROTECTION ACTORS

- ▶ Sensitise families of girls who prevent them from returning to school because they have “known men”. Explain that school is precisely what their daughters need to be accepted by the community.
- ▶ Strive to reach an agreement with some schools to obtain free (or at a reduced cost) enrolment of girls formerly associated with armed groups in exchange for material and financial support.
- ▶ Discuss the possibility of obtaining “vulnerability certificates” with DIVAS representatives so that girls coming out of armed groups receive free or at a reduced-rate school enrolment.
- ▶ Explore (with the girls and their families) different possibilities to increase their income to cover school fees, for example by improving their agricultural production. (See Interventions B3 and B4.)
- ▶ Encourage donors to allocate multi-year grants for the schooling of children formerly associated with armed groups by citing (in funding proposals) the psychosocial benefits of education (see section C) and its importance in preventing child recruitment and re-recruitment by armed groups.
- ▶ Arrange “catch-up” classes for girls who cannot return to school immediately. These classes are not very expensive.
- ▶ Arrange literacy and numeracy classes for all illiterate girls. Systematically include other illiterate girls in the community, as they are also vulnerable to recruitment and other violations of their rights. These classes may include modules on life skills, hygiene, child rights, etc.
- ▶ Try to find a volunteer teacher (or someone who would accept a modest financial contribution) for the literacy and numeracy classes, and to use the classrooms for free after school hours.



Vocational training and income-generating activities

“I am proud to sell charcoal. It means people respect me because I contribute to the development of my community.”

Vocational training and income-generating activities (IGA) which enable girls to contribute to the family finances and give them more financial independence and better prospects for the future, also greatly contribute to restoring the social value of girls formerly associated with armed groups and to promote their acceptance by the community.

Intervention B3: Provide girls with relevant vocational training and help them develop viable IGAs when needed.

WHO FOR? These activities are to be considered on a case-by-case basis for girls formerly associated with armed groups according to their personal and family circumstances (see guidance below), and without necessarily excluding girls who are in school or attending literacy and numeracy classes: learning a trade or managing an IGA could increase their income to cover the costs of their education.

WHO BY? NGOs are the best qualified actors to implement these interventions, but they can rely on the RECOPE and Community Reintegration Groups for monitoring and supervision. Girls must also be fully involved in all decisions concerning them, but remember: they are not necessarily well informed about the skills needed for certain trades or the commercial potential of a business.

PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR NGOS

- ▶ Ensure that the market is not saturated by conducting a market survey. Be aware of its limitations: How many seamstresses or hairdressers can coexist in a small village? Do existing seamstresses make a profit? If they are already struggling to make a living, introducing competition may increase the number of vulnerable girls and women.
- ▶ Obtain parents' support for any vocational training and IGA, and consider whether other personal responsibilities (schooling) or family responsibilities (caring for siblings, working in the fields, etc.) may compromise them. Assess the type of support the girl will receive at home.
- ▶ Ensure that sufficient funds are available to finance the entire training, and to give girls the tools to practice their profession. Arrange for close support for at least six months after completion of training.

- ▶ Provide training on small business management and accounting, even if the business is very modest. Many IGAs fail because the apprentice does not know how to balance their budget.
- ▶ Organise literacy and numeracy classes for illiterate girls, or they will not be able to benefit from training in small business management, and the risk that the IGA will fail will be even greater.
- ▶ Discuss the handling of any edible products received as part of the IGA with the family, emphasise the benefit for all, in the medium and long term, if they are sold and not consumed. In case of extreme scarcity, consider a one-time supply of food for the family to give the IGA the best chance of bearing fruit.
- ▶ Ask DIVAS representatives for “vulnerability certificates” so that girls formerly associated with armed groups are exempted from taxes for their IGAs.

! The relevance and success of the economic activity is crucial.

- Vocational training and IGAs will only improve a girl’s status if she can manage her business successfully. Any intervention therefore requires a rigorous preliminary assessment. It is extremely difficult, sometimes even counterproductive, to introduce trades and IGAs that are not already part of the local economy. Continuous monitoring is also crucial.
-



Agriculture and small animal husbandry

“Our neighbours have sheep and goats. We would love to have some too.”

The majority of the girls we met in the Kivus and Haut-Uélé lived in rural areas and, regardless of whether they were in school, they were all working either in their families' fields, or in other people's fields, in order to earn a living. Whenever they could, families also raised small animals.

Offering farming and animal husbandry training to girls formerly associated with armed groups would provide them with sustainable economic opportunities. It would also raise the quality of agricultural and animal production, thus benefiting the entire community.

Such interventions are often also more realistic and sustainable than many of the vocational trainings routinely offered to former child soldiers in conflict-affected regions with poor market opportunities.

As with vocational trainings and IGAs, revenues from agriculture and animal husbandry can considerably improve the girls' financial independence and their prospects, and thus give them a positive and valued role in the eyes of the community.

Intervention B4: Enhance girls' capacity in agriculture and animal husbandry.

WHO FOR? These activities should be considered for all girls in rural areas with experience in agriculture and animal husbandry.

WHO BY? NGOs are the most qualified actors to implement these interventions, but they can rely on RECOPE and Community Reintegration Groups for monitoring and support.

PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR NGOs

- ▶ Assess the family's capacity and needs in terms of agriculture and animal husbandry.
- ▶ Provide farming tools, seeds and animals to improve and increase the family's production.
- ▶ Train girls in animal husbandry, even if the family already has animals, to reduce the incidence of diseases and deaths of animals.
- ▶ Provide follow-up and support for a minimum of six months, and regularly check that the tools are in good working order.

! Strengthening the capacity of girls in agriculture and animal husbandry does not simply mean giving them material and animals. To ensure a profit and increase the social status of the girls, it is essential to provide close follow-up with advice, encouragement and technical support.

“A child’s adaptation to the environment they return to is a more significant factor in their psychosocial recovery than their experiences in an armed group.”¹

Notes

1. Child Soldiers International, *What the Girls Say: Improving practices for the demobilisation and reintegration of girls associated with armed forces and armed groups*, 2017 : <http://www.child-soldiers.org/shop/what-the-girls-say-improving-practices-for-the-demobilisation-and-reintegration-of-girls-associated>

**“If I did not have the
[RECOPE] president’s
advice, I would have
gone back to the
bush.”**





Direct psychosocial support: The importance of supportive listening

“Today is the first time that someone is asking me about what happened.”

All the interventions mentioned in this guide so far are examples of psychosocial support since they automatically and positively influence the social relationships and psychological wellbeing of girls formerly associated with armed groups.

Schooling, for example (see Intervention B2), plays a crucial role in psychosocial recovery since it mitigates the effects of war and trauma on children affected by armed conflict and builds their resilience. It helps distressed children regulate their emotions, allows them to develop a positive identity, builds their self-esteem through the acquisition of knowledge while offering opportunities for socialising with their peers.

However, there is another type of intervention which can more directly address the emotional distress that some girls may suffer as a result of past experiences and/or present circumstances: it is called “supportive listening”.

More than three quarters of the girls we met told us they longed to have someone to talk to about their present suffering, and an important number also wanted to talk about their past suffering.

They had been physically and emotionally abused and hurt, sometimes for years, and some had been forced to commit acts that still haunted them. These experiences build up emotional distress which makes their social life and reintegration difficult, as it prevents them from behaving exactly as their family and community expects them to.

However, the girls we met felt that their pain had not been sufficiently acknowledged, including by their families. They felt forgotten – a feeling which was reinforced by the isolation in which they lived. They craved positive attention; even a simple acknowledgement of their suffering would lighten their emotional burden.

Some girls told us that the simple fact that we listened and cared made them feel better, and asked if we would come back. Supportive listening is crucial: their life may depend on it.

“If I did not have the [RECOPE] president’s advice, I would have gone back to the bush.”

In some areas, RECOPE members play a crucial psychosocial support role, providing considerable emotional relief to many girls in distress and thus facilitating their reintegration. However, there are still far too few RECOPE and they are not receiving the support they need. (See section D.)

Dedicate more time to supportive listening in order to support girls formerly associated with armed groups.

HOW?

Intervention C1: Identify and train community members who are willing and able to provide regular listening without judgement.

WHO BY? RECOPE members, teachers, or religious leaders might be the best placed to provide this support, but it may be any sympathetic person in the community that the girl trusts and who can demonstrate empathy and an interest in her concerns for a few months or more.

HOW? NGOs, DIVIFFAE and DIVAS should train these “listeners” (see guidance below) to the extent possible. Such training should only take a few days. If this is not possible, the child protection actor must at minimum guide the “listeners” in the main elements of supportive listening (see below), with particular emphasis on the importance of confidentiality.

PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR THE “LISTENER”

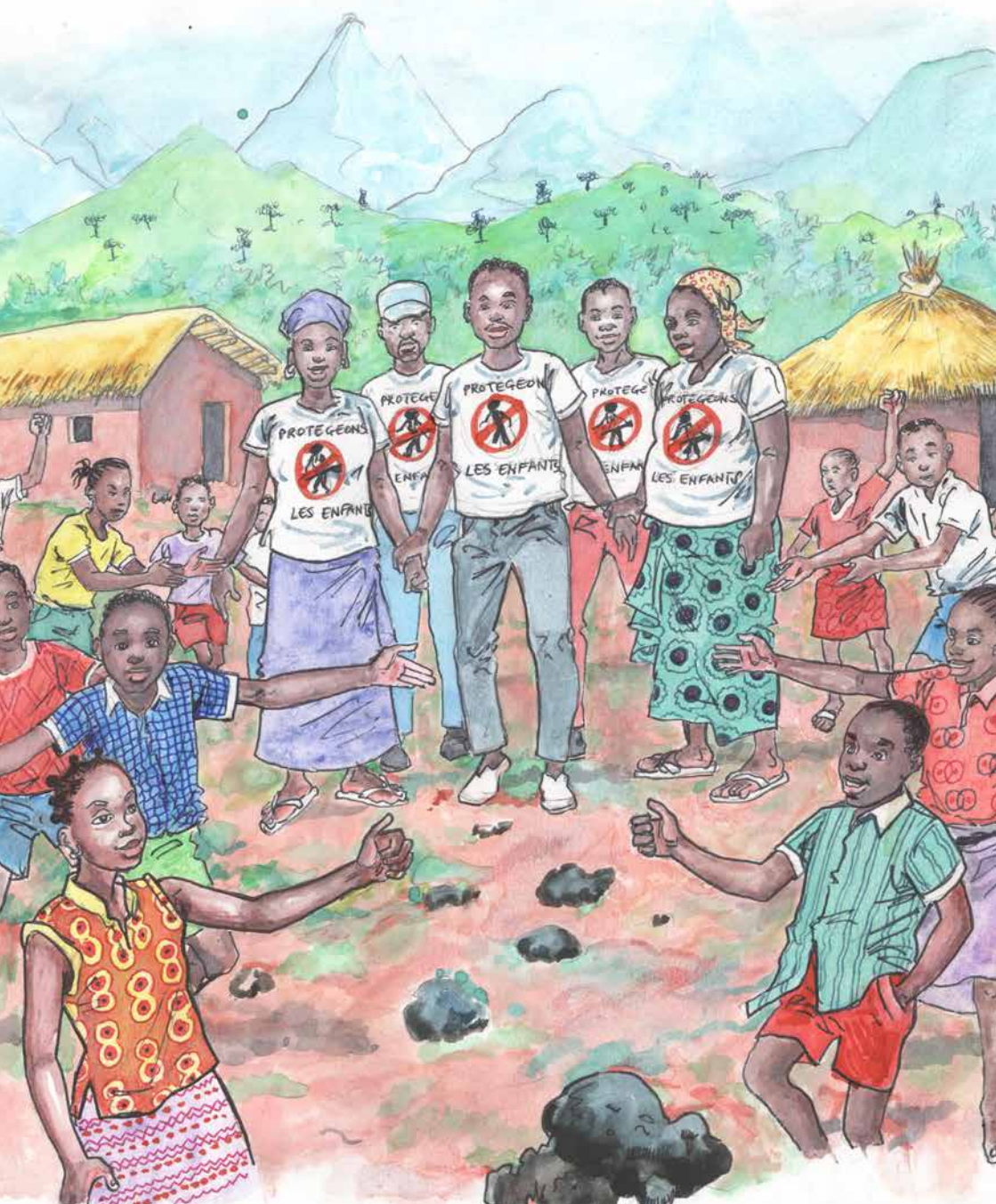
- ▶ Meet with the girl regularly; listen and talk to her; take an interest in her life and problems; always be positive and encouraging; offer advice.
- ▶ Never judge the girl or criticise her actions. The “listener” must accept and respect the girl, no matter what has happened to her. Supportive listening means not being judgmental, whatever the girl says and does.

- ▶ Never push or force a girl to talk or give details about a particular event or feeling.
- ▶ Keep all information confidential.
- ▶ Assist the girl in accessing any social or medical services she may need, including through the **117 number** (see “Resources”).
- ▶ Never make promises that are impossible or difficult to fulfil.

! Be prepared to continue the work over time. If the support is to be interrupted or stopped permanently, prepare the girl in advance. To stop these support meetings without warning the girl would break the established trust, risking the reopening of an old emotional or psychological wound.

Children's resilience:

The work of child protection professionals with children formerly associated with armed forces and groups in many countries has demonstrated the remarkable resilience of these children who have been subjected to often extreme adversities. When they were able to benefit from family and community acceptance, had the opportunity to conduct an activity valued by their community, and had friends or other confidants providing a sympathetic ear, the vast majority resumed their development and reached adulthood with minor psychological aftermath which did not prevent them from living a life comparable to that of their peers. If these conditions are met, only a very small number requires a professional intervention by a psychologist or psychiatrist.



D.

RECOPE: On the front line of reintegration efforts

“How can we write reports? We don’t have paper.”
(RECOPE member)

With a child protection mandate, and as members of communities who receive children returning from armed groups, the RECOPE are best placed to promote and support the reintegration of girls coming out of armed groups, and to negotiate their release. Where they have sufficient resources and support from NGOs, they have been doing excellent work on behalf of children associated with armed groups, including by providing supportive listening.

However, for far too long we have been expecting them to do much more than their means will allow them to. These networks still have too few members and are particularly short of women. Most have insufficient resources and training to support vulnerable children, including girls formerly associated with armed groups. The important work of these volunteers must be publicly acknowledged. It is only right that they should be appreciated and given moral support.

Support the RECOPE, which are on the front line of reintegration efforts.

HOW?

Intervention D1: Invest more systematically in providing training and follow-up support to RECOPE members, as well as in recognising their work.

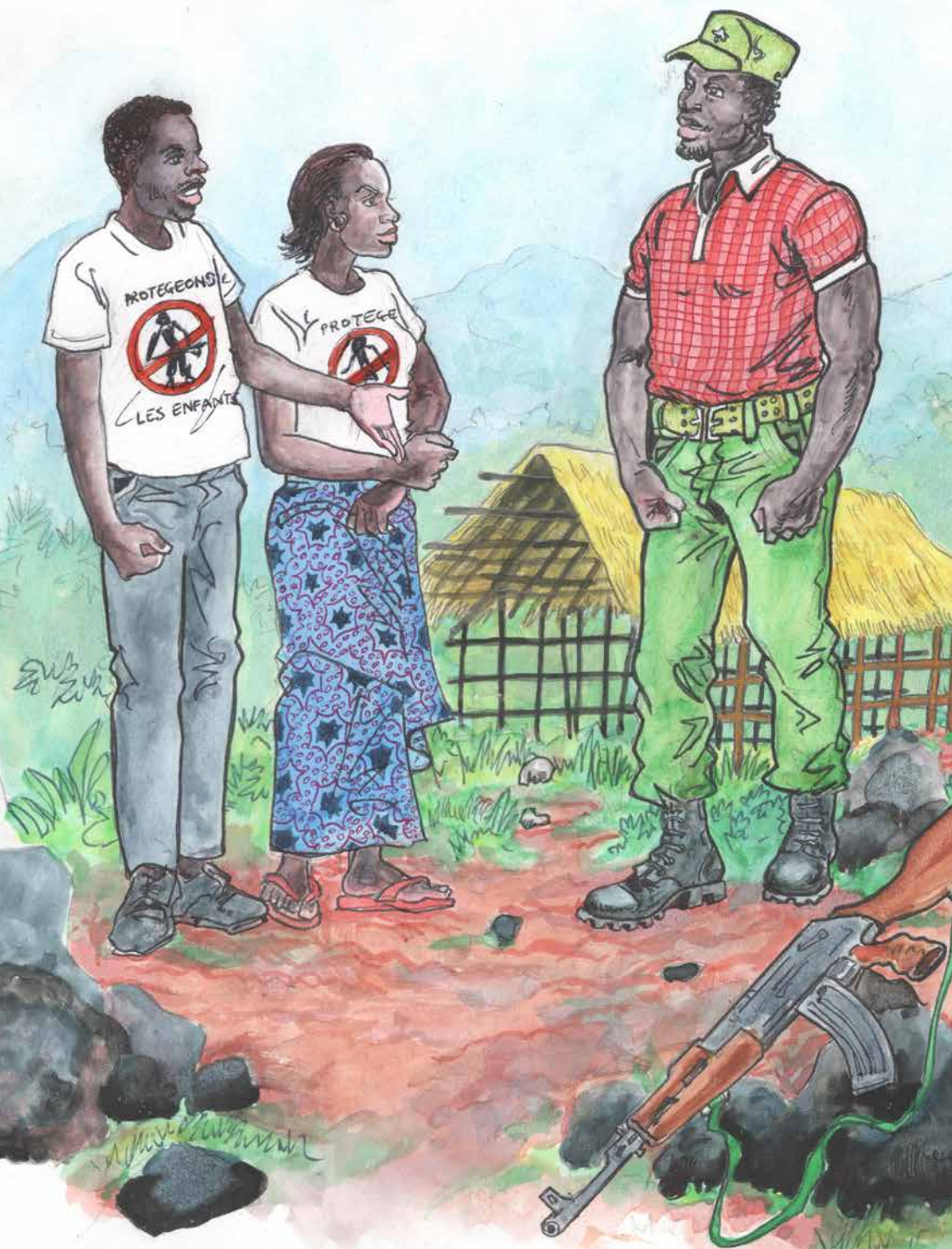
WHO? Target all RECOPE and sub-RECOPE (on which the RECOPE rely on in the most remote areas). Sub-RECOPE members generally lack training and support to an even greater extent, although they are often in the best position to negotiate the release of children from armed groups.

WHO BY? Strengthening the capacity of RECOPE and sub-RECOPE is the responsibility of all: DIVIFFAE, DIVAS, the UN and the NGOs.

PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR THOSE COMMITTED TO BUILDING RECOPE CAPACITY

- ▶ Mobilise more community members to join the RECOPE and sub-RECOPE, making special efforts to increase the representation of women, who are often best placed to support girls coming out of armed groups.
- ▶ Equip RECOPE and sub-RECOPE with sufficient resources to be able to provide adequate support for returning girls and to negotiate the release of those still held by armed groups. This means, at a minimum:
 - Conduct regular training and follow-up visits, offer support and encouragement;

- When these trainings cannot be given regularly, try to send them training materials;
 - Contribute to costs for transport, communication (telephone credit), office supplies (notebooks and pens) and weather appropriate clothing (especially during the rainy season).
- Systematically advocate with the Congolese government (at national and local levels) and with other donors to raise funds to strengthen the capacity of RECOPE and sub-RECOPE.



E.

The girls left behind: Can we do more to release them from armed groups?

***“Please, I beg you, do everything
you can to rescue the girls still there.
We sometimes get such terrible news.”***

Direct engagement with armed groups aimed at the release of children has been successfully done for years by MONUSCO, NGOs, and courageous community members, but it mostly results in the release of boys.

This is the case in most conflicts where children are recruited and used by armed groups: there are often more girls used by armed groups than it first appears, but for many reasons, it is usually more difficult to demobilise them than the boys.

It seems that the effectiveness of demobilisation has been limited for girls: the majority of girls we interviewed had not been officially demobilised but had escaped and indicated that they had left “a lot of other girls” behind them. In addition, many girls choose to stay with an armed group because they fear shame and rejection if they return home.

Make systematic efforts to identify and demobilise girls associated with armed groups.

HOW?

Intervention E1: Encourage and train communities to engage with armed groups to negotiate the release of children, including girls.

WHO? Among existing community structures, sub-RECOPE and Barazas are located in the most remote areas, often in areas where armed groups are active; they are therefore particularly well placed to negotiate the release of girls and should be targeted for this type of intervention.

WHO BY? Demobilisation actors (MONUSCO, UEPN-DDR, NGOs) should encourage, train and support communities to engage with armed groups.

PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR DEMOBILISATION ACTORS

- ▶ Train members of sub-RECOPE and Barazas and contribute to their transport and communication costs so that they can reach the armed groups, negotiate the release of girls, and ensure their return to the community. Refer them to medical services and other existing DDR services. Regularly give them updated contacts for such services.
- ▶ Provide sub-RECOPE and Barazas with basic training materials in cases where it is impossible to access the communities in which they are based.
- ▶ Encourage more women to engage in the awareness raising activities with armed groups, when this could facilitate access to these girls.

- Convey the message that the use of children for domestic or sexual purposes is a grave violation and a war crime punishable by law. Provide examples of convictions of Congolese armed group commanders for the recruitment of children and sexual violence against children, at the national and international level.

Intervention E2: While the girls are still in the bush, sensitise the communities on their suffering and their vital need for understanding and support. (See intervention A1.)

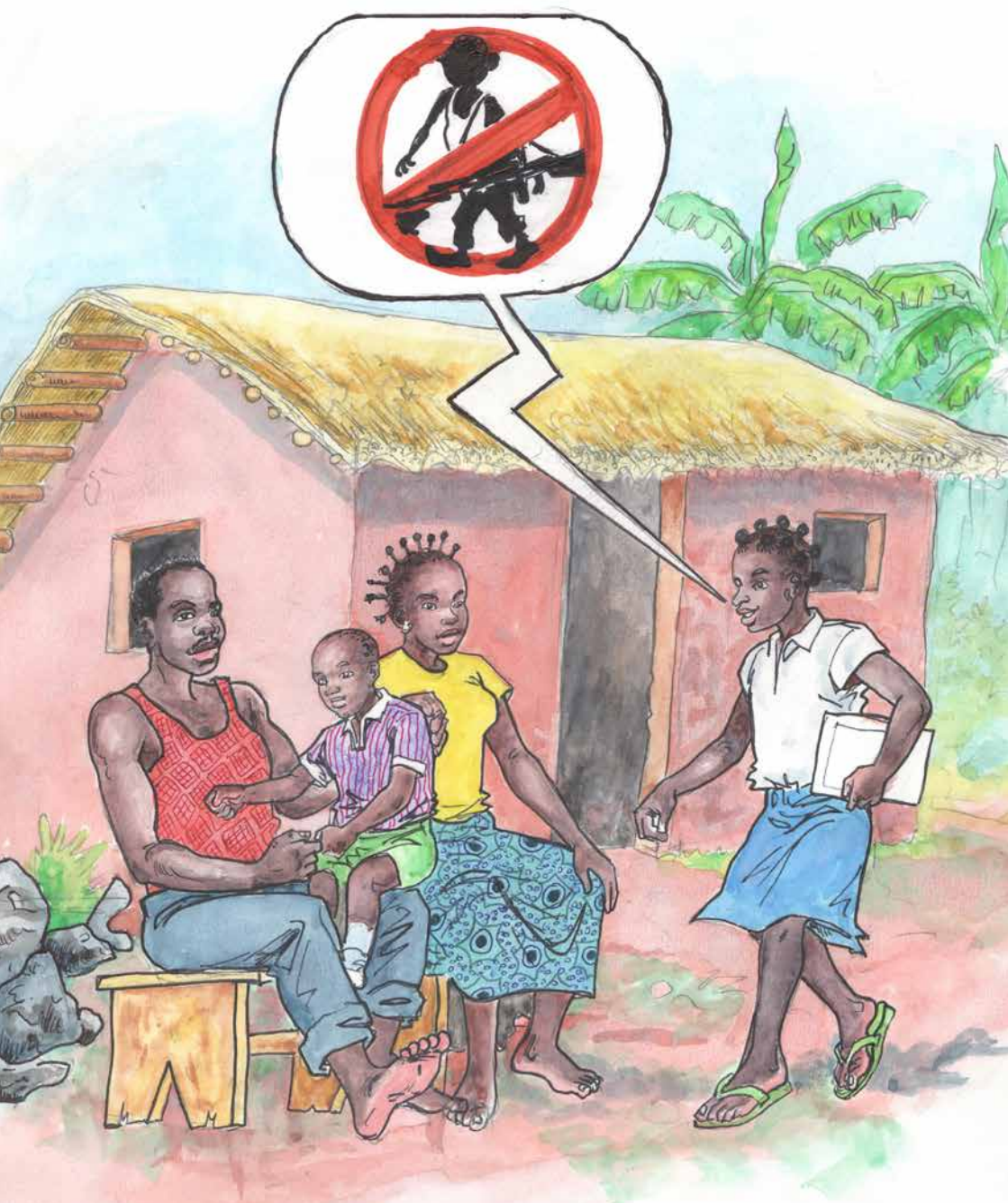
WHO FOR? All communities affected by child recruitment should be sensitised, regardless of whether girls have started to return.

WHO BY? DDR providers and other child protection actors who are in contact with these communities are best placed to carry out these interventions, but must work with RECOPE, Barazas, and Community Reintegration Groups where they exist.

WHY? News travels fast, and girls who hear that their community is ready to welcome them will be more likely to escape from the armed group if they can, or to make themselves known to a DDR team.

PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR THOSE CONDUCTING THE AWARENESS RAISING

- Develop community acceptance interventions in areas affected by child recruitment while girls are still in armed groups.
- Start establishing Community Reintegration Groups to carry out ongoing awareness raising activities and prepare for the eventual homecoming of girls. (See Intervention A3.)
- Broadly disseminate information about the communities that have been sensitised and are ready to welcome their girls so that this information reaches the girls still associated with armed groups and can help them to make the decision to go home, if they can.





Preventing recruitment and re-recruitment

“I discourage other girls who think that life is better in the bush to change their minds, because it is a certain death.”

Our study highlights the complex causes of the recruitment of girls in DRC. Two-thirds of the girls interviewed told us that they had been abducted by an armed group, but a third said they had decided themselves to go and join “them in the bush”.

The girls we met gave us four, not mutually exclusive, main reasons for their decision to join an armed group. These were:

- interruption of schooling;
- need for protection;
- desire for revenge;
- and poverty.

However, in many cases, family problems and peer influence also played a role.

We also found that, in a not insignificant number of areas, some members of the community (including parents, village leaders, or even RECOPE members) supports self-defence militias (Mai-Mai) and encourage children to join them.

Prevention strategies must consider this complexity and target all actors and factors that contribute to the recruitment of girls, at the community level.

Promote and strengthen community efforts to prevent the recruitment of their children.

HOW?

Intervention F1: Sensitise communities to prevent child recruitment in the first place.

BY WHO? The UEPN-DDR, MONUSCO and NGOs working on DDR, in collaboration with DIVIFFAE and DIVAS, are the best placed to organise these interventions. It is essential that they involve community actors such as RECOPE in this sensitisation. (See Intervention A1.)

PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR DDR PROVIDERS AND THOSE CONDUCTING THE AWARENESS RAISING

- ▶ Initially, identify the communities that support child recruitment.
- ▶ Organise regular group discussions in these communities, at a minimum targeting village leaders, religious leaders and RECOPE members, to reinforce information on the prohibition of child recruitment (even for self-defence purposes) and the long-term harm it inflicts on children, especially girls. Use **Child Soldiers International**'s awareness raising booklet (+243 813 182 039) which is available in French, Lingala and Swahili.
- ▶ Use peer-to-peer awareness raising (including with children formerly associated with armed groups) targeting children educated in schools, churches and other community settings. Inform them of the legal prohibition of child recruitment as they are able to convey this message to their parents and thus become advocates within their families and communities.

Intervention F2: Inform armed group commanders of the illegality of child recruitment and the applicable penal sanctions. (See Intervention E1.)

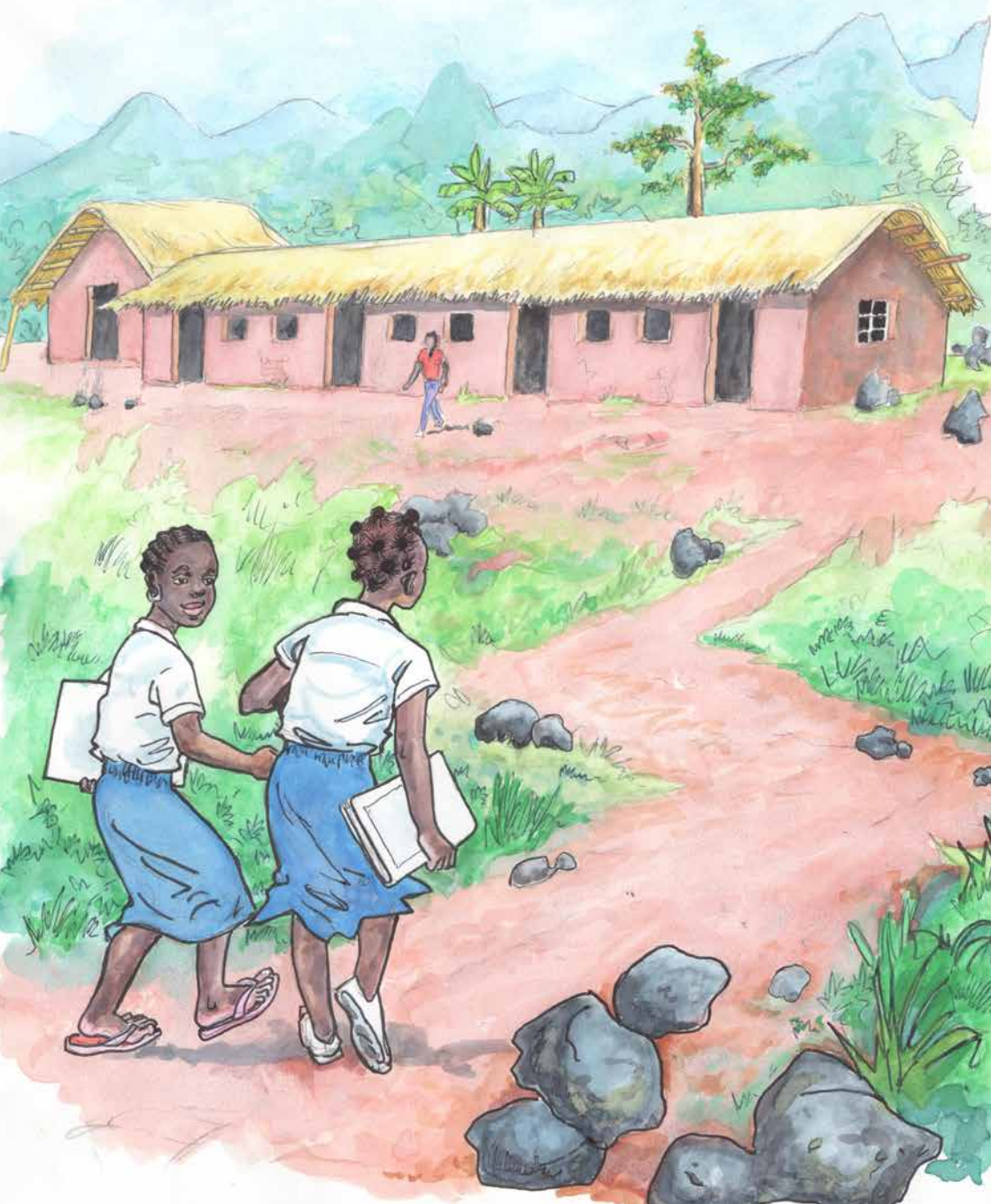
BY WHO? For self-defence militias (Mai Mai), which often consist of community members, the most respected leaders of the same community will be the best placed to sensitise the commanders.

HOW? Initially, the UEPN-DDR, MONUSCO, NGOs, DIVIFFAE and DIVAS must update the mapping of non-state armed actors recruiting and using children.

PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR THOSE CONDUCTING THE AWARENESS RAISING:

- ▶ Seek the support and advice of individuals, organisations or groups (especially RECOPE, sub-RECOPE and Barazas) who have already carried out such activities and successfully negotiated the release of children from armed groups.
- ▶ Contact the organisation **Geneva Call** (+243 824 770 703), which is specialised in engagement with armed groups to promote the respect of humanitarian standards, to request technical support.
- ▶ Order and use **Child Soldiers International's** awareness raising booklet (+243 813 182 039), developed for training of, and advocacy with, armed groups on the prohibition of child recruitment. This booklet is available in French, Lingala and Swahili.
- ▶ Convey the message that the use of children for domestic or sexual purposes is also a grave violation and a war crime punishable by law. Provide examples of convictions of Congolese armed group commanders responsible for the recruitment of children and sexual violence against children, at the national and international levels.
- ▶ A deed of commitment could be signed with commanders to stop the use and recruitment of children, including the use of girls for domestic or sexual purposes (as “wives”).





Intervention F3: Sensitise communities and donors on the importance of education in preventing recruitment.

WHY? Many of the girls we met had joined an armed group because they had had to interrupt their studies due to lack of financial means or because their parents had taken them out of school.

BY WHO? DDR providers, in partnership with community-based child protection structures (RECOPE, sub-RECOPE, Community Reintegration Groups, etc.) should lead this type of intervention.

***“Not attending school is at the core of
child recruitment.” (RECOPE member)***

***“My father made me stop going to school.
I was so furious that I joined the Mai Mai.”***

PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR THOSE CONDUCTING THE AWARENESS RAISING

- ▶ Sensitise girls’ families so that they will facilitate the schooling of their daughters by explaining that school protects children from recruitment.
- ▶ Alert and educate donors in the education and DDR sectors, on the important role of girls’ education in preventing recruitment, and appeal for funding to promote (a) schooling, and (b) literacy for a larger number of girls at risk of recruitment. (See also Intervention B2.)



Intervention F4: Promote children's active participation in community life, particularly that of out-of-school girls.

WHY? Adults and girls both agree that the lack of activities and opportunities for out-of-school children is largely responsible for their association with an armed group. In addition to enrolment efforts (see Interventions B2 and F3), children should be encouraged to participate in constructive community activities (see Intervention B1).

BY WHO? Community-based actors (RECOPE and Community Reintegration Groups) are the best placed to carry out these activities since they are in direct contact with the girls and are part of the community. Where present, DIVAS should support these actors.

“I was pushed out of school because we could no longer pay, so instead of roaming aimlessly in town, it was better to go and help them in the bush.”

“Us girls in the bush, we roam here and there, because we have nothing to do, no occupation. If we could go to school, that would be good. But without school, what can we do all day?”

PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR COMMUNITY-BASED ACTORS

- ▶ Promote the participation of out-of-school girls in community activities that are within their reach and where they can be useful and / or learn. For example, invite girls to take on small responsibilities in village associations and financial cooperatives, and to participate in meetings.
- ▶ Ensure that girls regularly participate in sports and games. If these activities are insufficient or non-existent, try to organise them. If equipment is needed, ask DIVAS, a local NGO or UNICEF.
- ▶ Ask the girls to organise games and sports activities for the younger children in the community, and help them to carry out these activities.
- ▶ Ask school principals to provide classrooms and playgrounds for out-of-school children so that they can organise games and sport activities after school hours.

Summary

A. The ultimate suffering: Rejection by family and friends

Community acceptance must be at the heart of reintegration programmes. HOW?

- A1 : Sensitise key community members.
- A2 : Organise “welcome” ceremonies for returning girls.
- A3 : Create “Community Reintegration Groups.”
- A4 : Identify self-demobilised girls who have not received any assistance.

B. How can a girl regain her “lost value”?

Help girls identify and acquire a positive and valued status within their families and communities. HOW?

- B1 : Involve girls in activities organised by and for the community.
- B2 : Help all girls formerly associated with armed groups to go back to school or to attend literacy and numeracy classes.
- B3 : Provide girls with relevant vocational training and help them develop viable IGAs when needed.
- B4 : Strengthen girls’ capacity in agriculture and animal husbandry.

C. Direct psychosocial support: The importance of supportive listening

Dedicate more time to supportive listening in order to support for girls formerly associated with armed groups. HOW?

- C1 : Identify and train community members who are willing and able to provide regular listening without judgement.

D. RECOPE: On the front line of reintegration efforts

Support the RECOPE, which are on the front line of reintegration efforts. HOW?

D1 : Invest more systematically in providing training and follow-up support to RECOPE members, as well as in recognising their work.

E. The girls left behind: Can we do more to release them from armed groups?

Make systematic efforts to identify and demobilise girls associated with armed groups. HOW?

- E1 : Encourage and train communities to engage with armed groups to advocate for the release of children, including girls.
- E2 : While the girls are still in the bush, sensitise the communities on their suffering and their vital need for understanding and support. (See intervention A1).

F. Preventing recruitment and re-recruitment

Promote and strengthen community efforts to prevent the recruitment of their children. HOW?

- F1 : Sensitise communities to prevent child recruitment in the first place.
- F2 : Inform armed group commanders of the illegality of child recruitment and the penal sanctions.
- F3 : Sensitise communities and donors on the importance of education in preventing recruitment.
- F4 : Promote children's active participation in community life, particularly that of out-of-school girls.





The road to reintegration is long and difficult, it starts when the girl leaves the armed group but only ends when she has found a place in her family and community again and is fully accepted by them.

Ressources utiles

- **Child Soldiers International, research report:** *What the girls say : Improving practices for the demobilisation and reintegration of girls associated with armed forces and armed groups*, 2017 : <https://www.child-soldiers.org/shop/what-the-girls-say-improving-practices-for-the-demobilisation-and-reintegration-of-girls-associated>
- **Child Soldiers International, awareness raising booklet:** *Awareness raising booklet on the prohibition of the use of child soldiers in DRC*, 2018 : <http://www.child-soldiers.org/shop/awareness-raising-booklet-on-the-prohibition-of-the-use-of-child-soldiers-in-drc/>. To receive a copy, call: +243 813 182 039.
- **Technical support on engagement with armed groups:** Contact the organisation **Geneva Call** on +243 824 770 703 (in DRC) or +41 22 879 1050 (in Switzerland).
- **Number 117: Telephone helpline for children in DRC.** This number has been set up to listen and offer advice to children in distress and to facilitate their access to specialised services. Girls (or others who wish to help them) can use it. This number is free with the operators Tigo, Orange, Vodacom and Airtel.

To receive more copies of this Practical Guide contact:
info@child-soldiers.org

Notes

[illegible]



Child Soldiers International was founded in 1998 and works to achieve a global ban on child recruitment in law and practice. To achieve our goal, we seek to strengthen and uphold national and international laws, provide technical support to governments, support and equip child protection actors, and build community resistance to child recruitment.

**CHILD
SOLDIERS**

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