

# Reaching All

## Core Principles for Working with Children Associated with Armed Groups and Forces

### Executive summary

The risks of conflict impacting directly on children has greatly increased, but so too has the involvement of children in hostilities. All children associated with armed groups and armed forces<sup>1</sup> are exposed to enormous risk and abuse. With children used in a variety of roles, as cooks, porters and spies, and for sexual services, this group is not limited to those directly engaged in fighting.

In seeking to prevent child<sup>2</sup> recruitment and protect all children associated with armed actors, Save the Children UK opposes:

- The deployment of children as part of any armed group or force either in combat or any other supporting role;
- The forced recruitment of children to any armed group or force; and
- The voluntary recruitment to any armed group or force where this is likely to lead to deployment.

While promoting increased ratification and national implementation of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (2002) as a minimum standard, SC UK country programmes and partners also seek to directly support the demobilisation and successful reintegration of children associated with armed actors, as well as to strengthen prevention strategies for all children at risk of recruitment.

Based on SC UK's long-term and broad programme experience, this paper seeks to outline the critical issues for children associated with armed groups and forces, highlighting the need for:

### **1. Consistent use and allocation of resources for the broader definition of Children Associated with Armed Groups and Armed Forces**

*Save the Children believes that any child associated in any way with an armed group or force should be protected – not just those that carry weapons.*

Consistently adopting this broader definition will ensure increased recognition and allocation of resources to support all children associated with armed actors, in accordance with the Cape Town definition<sup>3</sup>.

### **2. An integrated approach to child protection**

*Save the Children recognises that all children living in situations of armed conflict are affected and at risk of recruitment.*

*Save the Children believes that strategies to prevent recruitment need to be based on a thorough understanding of the reasons for recruitment and the different forms of recruitment.*

<sup>1</sup> 'Groups' refer to non-state actors, forces to state actors. The term 'armed actor' is used in this paper to encompass both 'armed groups' and 'armed forces'. However it's important to note that many people and agencies still use the terms 'groups' and 'forces' interchangeably.

<sup>2</sup> Save the Children UK define a 'child' as any person below the age of eighteen years.

<sup>3</sup> Cape Town Principles and Best Practice on the Prevention of Recruitment of Children into the Armed Forces and on Demobilisation and Social Reintegration of Child Soldiers in Africa, New York, UNICEF, 1997.



**Save the Children**

## Executive summary (continued)

An integrated approach to child protection is based on family and community support and built on an understanding of the risks, including the risk of recruitment, for all conflict-affected children. Such an approach requires the strengthening of family livelihoods and basic services, simultaneous with the promotion of child protection amongst armed actors and national governments at a local, national and regional level, as well as within multilateral institutions.

### 3. Demobilisation during conflict

*Save the Children believes that all children should be demobilised from armed groups and forces at the first available opportunity. The release of children from armed groups and forces should not have to wait for a peace process or for adult demobilisation to begin, and requires the early allocation of resources.*

Donors and national governments generally only commit to demobilisation after peace accords are signed and there are clear risks of re-recruitment in ongoing conflict. Yet the forced/compulsory recruitment of children and their use in hostilities by both armed groups and forces is illegal under international humanitarian and human rights law, and the recruitment and use in hostilities of children under 15 has been recognised as a war crime under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, making child demobilisation a legal obligation rather than a political issue.

### 4. Inclusive and long term reintegration

*Save the Children believes that, to reach all children associated with armed groups and forces, reintegration requires a community-based approach.*

*Save the Children believes that the reintegration assistance offered to demobilised children must also be offered to all vulnerable children within the community.*

An inclusive community-based approach to reintegration supports all children affected by armed conflict. This approach, with a long-term emphasis on family livelihoods, appears more likely to tackle the risks of recruitment and re-recruitment. It also appears to engender acceptance for children formerly associated with armed actors and address the needs of 'invisible soldiers', including the majority of children not formally demobilised or identified as associated with armed actors.

### 5. Girls Associated with Armed Groups and Forces and their children.

*Save the Children is concerned that the extent of involvement of girls associated with armed groups and forces often goes unrecognised by the international community and their specific needs remain unaddressed.*

While often unrecognised, girls make up a significant proportion of children associated with armed actors. Fear of stigma and lack of appropriate responses prevent girls' entry into formal demobilisation programmes. Girls with children are especially vulnerable to rejection, abuse and exploitation and may need to develop the capacity to live independently and support their children. Protection and support may be more effectively channelled to girls and their children through an inclusive, community-based approach to reintegration and services, which allow for both girls and their dependants.

# Reaching All

## Core Principles for Working with Children Associated with Armed Groups and Forces

### 1.0 Introduction

The risks of conflict impacting directly on children has greatly increased, but so too has the involvement of children in hostilities.<sup>4</sup> All children associated with armed groups and armed forces<sup>5</sup> are exposed to enormous risk and abuse. With children used in a variety of roles, as cooks, porters and spies, and for sexual services, this group is not limited to those directly engaged in fighting.

Even after the cessation of conflict, children associated with armed actors remain at risk due to the difficulties of reintegration and the dangers of rejection and re-recruitment, frequently across international borders. The process of reintegration often takes place in an environment which is socially and economically fragile and changed. Yet these changes may also provide important opportunities to develop integrated approaches to child protection and long-term enhancement of child rights.

Building on international conventions and regional charters<sup>6</sup>, the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (2002) strengthens child protection by raising from 15 to 18 years the minimum age for: direct participation in hostilities; compulsory recruitment; and both voluntary and forced recruitment by non-governmental armed groups. Furthermore, the recruitment and use in hostilities of children under 15 constitutes a war crime under the Rome Statute (2002) of the International Criminal Court.

While promoting increased ratification and national implementation of legal

instruments which promote child protection, SC UK country programmes and partners also seek to directly support the demobilisation and reintegration of children associated with armed actors, as well as to protect those at risk of recruitment. Based on SC UK ongoing programme experience in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Angola, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ivory Coast, the Sudan and Sri Lanka, and in line with the recently published Save the Children Alliance Guidelines<sup>7</sup>, this paper seeks to outline the critical issues for children associated with armed actors, including:

- Consistent use of the broader definition of Children Associated with Armed Groups and Armed Forces;
- An integrated approach to child protection;
- The specific needs of Girls Associated with Armed Groups and Armed Forces and their children;
- Demobilisation during ongoing conflict and outside of formal peace processes;
- Informed strategies to prevent recruitment; and
- Inclusive reintegration.

### 2.0 SC UK position

Save the Children UK opposes

- The deployment of children as part of any armed group or force either in combat or any other supporting role;
- The forced recruitment of children to any armed group or force; and
- The voluntary recruitment of children to any armed group or force where this is likely to lead to deployment.

Indeed, the voluntary nature of recruitment is questionable where children lack security and viable economic alternatives and where

inadequate birth registration prevents the implementation of age restrictions. SC UK supports as a minimum standard, the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict. While raising the standard for voluntary recruitment by government forces beyond 15 and requiring safeguards to ensure the voluntary recruitment of under 18s, the Optional Protocol does not, however, deal with the voluntary recruitment of 16 and 17 year olds or the indirect use of under 18s in military forces. It also permits states to add their own declarations on ratification, which have in some cases amounted to reservations.

In line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, established by SC UK's founder Eglantyne Jebb, the organisation's work in preventing recruitment and supporting the demobilisation and reintegration of children formerly associated with armed actors is underpinned by the guiding principles of the best interests of the child, family unity and children's participation in decisions which affect them. This last principle recognises the ability of children to contribute constructively and requires that children's opinions be listened to and accorded due weight. Children formerly associated with armed actors may, for example, be able to provide valuable information on how best to reduce the risk of re-recruitment and persuade children still associated with armed actors to demobilise. Children associated with armed actors may also have particular concerns and preferences, which can usefully inform and promote their longer-term reintegration.

<sup>4</sup> The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers' 2004 Global report documents the huge numbers of children currently associated with armed groups and armed forces. However, the "(r)apidly changing situation on the ground and the difficulties of accessing child soldiers in conflict areas made it impossible to establish the exact number of children involved" (Coalition Global Report 2004, p3).

<sup>5</sup> Groups refer to non-state actors, forces to state actors. The term 'armed actor' will be used in this paper to encompass both 'armed groups' and 'armed forces', in line with the Save the Children Alliance Guidelines and Implications for

Programmes Working with Children Associated with Armed groups and Armed Forces, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> 1977 Additional Protocol I, Article 77 (2) and 1977 Additional Protocol II to the Geneva Conventions, Article 4(3)(c) ban the recruitment and direct involvement in hostilities of children under 15 years. While Article 1 of the UNCRC defines a child as any person under 18, Article 38, banning recruitment and direct involvement in hostilities, refers to children under 15 years. The Optional Protocol further builds on International Labour Organization 182 (2000) concerning the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour and, amongst regional standards, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1999). The UN Security Council has adopted a series of resolutions on children and armed conflict, including UN SC Resolution 1460 (2003) under which armed forces using child soldiers in those countries on the agenda of the Security Council are named and against which 'appropriate steps' may be taken.

<sup>7</sup> Save the Children Alliance, A Fighting Chance: Guidelines and Implications for Programmes Working with Children Associated with Armed Groups and Armed Forces, 2004.

SC UK has identified the following as key issues in supporting the prevention of recruitment, demobilisation and sustainable reintegration of children formerly associated with armed actors:

## **2.1 Broadening the definition of “child soldiers”**

*Save the Children believes that any child associated in any way with armed group or force should be protected – not just those that carry weapons.*

There is a need for increased recognition and support for all children associated with armed actors, not limited to those actively engaged in hostilities. There is widespread acceptance by international organisations for the broad definition of a “child soldier” as contained in the Cape Town principles<sup>8</sup>, to encompass “any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers, and anyone accompanying such groups, other than family members. The definition includes girls recruited for sexual purposes and forced marriage.”

This definition has not, however, been consistently employed or accompanied with an appropriate commitment to resource reallocation. In Sierra Leone’s disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programme the broader definition of “child soldier” initially employed was narrowed to those demonstrating experience in using a weapon, largely due to funding constraints. Moreover, self-demobilised children may be reticent to be identified for fear of being stigmatised,

accused of deserting, or subject to violent retribution

To promote consistent use of the Cape Town definition, SC UK will:

- Identify when and why the broader definition is not used within all formal agreements and in relation to all demobilisation and other programmes to support children associated with armed actors; and
- Document the impact of such exclusion.

On the basis of this information, SC UK will reinforce its calls upon the international community to:

- Ensure that the broader definition is included within all formal agreements, including demobilisation programmes, and initiatives which support the reintegration of children associated with armed actors; and that resources are allocated accordingly.
- Undertake appropriate policy review and resource reallocation; and
- Reinforce efforts, including through information campaigns, to ensure that supports extends to all children associated with armed actors.

## **2.2 An integrated approach to child protection**

*Save the Children recognises that all children living in situations of armed conflict are affected and at risk of recruitment.*

While vulnerable children, such as children with disabilities, child-headed households and children separated from their families or who become directly associated with armed actors are exposed to great abuse, all children living in situations of armed conflict are

affected and the vast majority are at risk of recruitment. Effective protection may require simultaneous initiatives at family, community, national and regional levels.

Family unity is promoted as the best framework for a child’s protection. SC UK has been active in major family tracing and reunification (FTR) programmes for reunifying separated children with their families. However, despite an initial joyful reunion, the family may be unable or unwilling to afford their child long-term protection. Children living with extended family members in Sierra Leone have, for example, been found to be particularly vulnerable to mistreatment<sup>9</sup>.

Due to funding and resource constraints, large-scale demobilisation and FTR programmes are often unable to accommodate individual follow-up, necessitating the establishment of community-based systems for support and protection of both children formerly associated with armed actors and other vulnerable children. Such community-based systems integrate issues of family livelihood and access to basic services with individual protection, and have been successfully established in, among others, Liberia, the DRC and Uganda.<sup>10</sup> Teachers and local leaders often have a particularly important role in promoting acceptance of children formerly associated with armed actors.

<sup>8</sup> Cape Town Principles and Best Practice on the Prevention of Recruitment of Children into the Armed Forces and on Demobilisation and Social Reintegration of Child Soldiers in Africa, New York, UNICEF, 1997.

<sup>9</sup> Delap, 2004, p14.

<sup>10</sup> The Concerned Parents Association in Uganda and the Community Welfare and Monitoring System in Liberia are two such examples.

### 2.2.1 Preventing recruitment

*Save the Children believes that strategies to prevent recruitment need to be based on a thorough understanding of the reasons for recruitment and the different forms of recruitment.*

Participation from children formerly associated with armed actors may be particularly important in building such an understanding, as well as in considering how to contact and persuade other children still with armed actors to demobilise<sup>13</sup>. While local initiatives to prevent recruitment may be effective, they may not always be in the longer-term best interests of the child. In Sri Lanka, for example, some families are known to have encouraged the marriage of their children because married persons are not recruited.<sup>14</sup> While preventing recruitment, such practices may, nonetheless, be detrimental to the rights of girls or boys.

Initiatives to strengthen familial and community protection and build an understanding of recruitment practices are bolstered by simultaneous advocacy at higher levels, including efforts to increase ratification and implementation of the Optional Protocol. The inclusion of children's issues in peace negotiations, such as those ongoing in Sri Lanka and Somalia, together with the training of armed and peacekeeping forces on child rights and child protection during and after armed conflict, provide further opportunities to promote child rights and child protection. SC UK's military training programme in Kivu Province in the DRC, which has sought to persuade rather than denunciate military leaders, was seen to have been one of the most influential factors in promoting progress

### Community-based protection in North and South Kivu Provinces of the DRC

The Community Child Protection Network (CCPN), initiated by SC UK, enables a comprehensive approach, integrating health, nutrition, economic poverty, issues of discrimination and protection. The community selects representatives, including children and representatives of key economic activities. The informal but recognised nature of these networks promotes community ownership and legitimises the activities of their membership. Networks have been able to address specific cases of recruitment through direct negotiation with local authorities and commanders, and have resisted recruitment quotas imposed on them by armed groups. Overall, areas with networks are observed to have a reduced incidence of child recruitment. However, the development of this approach requires significant staff resources in the initial phases and is an extensive process.<sup>11</sup>

The Child Welfare Committees established in Sierra Leone have, however, proved less effective, with limited participation afforded to children or links with children's clubs.<sup>12</sup>

### Recruitment of Children in Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, 53% of former Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) child soldiers in SC UK's Underage Recruits' project in the Trincomalee district, come from families that are separated or where one parent is dead and has re-married. Moreover, with few employment opportunities locally available, 27% of parents are working or have worked abroad, leaving children vulnerable to recruitment. Adolescents may be particularly vulnerable to (re-)recruitment due to limited leisure opportunities, delays in implementing vocational training and the lack of a livelihood. While education can engage children and promote reintegration, it can also be a place of recruitment, with two out of three children in the SC UK Trincomalee project recruited from their school.<sup>15</sup>

for child soldiers<sup>16</sup>, as well as promoting longer-term inclusion of child protection within security force training.

Agreements on their own are not, however, sufficient. While the DRC was one of the first states to ratify the Optional Protocol and authorities may be more aware of their international obligations, new recruitments are now being carried out in more rural, less

accessible, areas of Kivu Province. Furthermore, the complex nature of recent and ongoing conflicts, including in Ivory Coast, Liberia, Sudan, and DRC, demands a regional approach to protection initiatives.

<sup>11</sup> Verhey, 2003.

<sup>12</sup> Delap, 2004, p17.

<sup>13</sup> McConnan and Uppard, 2001, p233.

<sup>14</sup> Rono, 2004.

<sup>15</sup> Rono, 2004.

<sup>16</sup> Verhey, 2003, p31.

Recognizing that efforts to prevent recruitment need to be built on specific contextual understanding and carried out simultaneously at community, national, regional and international levels, SC UK seeks to:

- Strengthen understanding of the reasons why children are recruited into armed groups in order to develop strategies to prevent recruitment and support reintegration through ongoing programme-based research.
- Ensure that all legal provisions to prevent the use of children in armed conflict are adopted and implemented, through:
  - supporting the work of national coalitions for signing and ratifying the Optional Protocol;
  - monitoring the actions of national governments, armed groups and regional inter-Governmental bodies to prevent the recruitment and deployment of under 18s; and
  - collaborating with international partners, including the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers and the International Save the Children Alliance.
- Advocate for more effective protection of children and other civilians affected by conflict. This can be addressed for example, through deployment of peacekeepers or observer missions to affected areas in order to prevent recruitment.

### 2.3 Demobilisation during conflict

*Save the Children believes that all children should be demobilised from armed groups and forces at the first available opportunity. The release of*

#### DDR During Conflict

SC UK's work in the DRC has demonstrated that it is possible to support the demobilisation and reintegration of children associated with armed actors even during ongoing conflict. Demobilisation in North and South Kivu Provinces includes formal recognition through demobilisation orders, and individual demobilisation documents as protection against re-recruitment.

The majority of children associated with armed actors have been demobilised in a quasi-official manner, with commanders bringing children to a transit centre or contacting SC UK or a partner organisation to fetch the children. Captured or detained children associated with armed actors have also been released or their release sought by child protection organisations. Some of the children in transit centres reported learning about the demobilisation programme on the radio. Some sought out child protection organisations, others approached their commanders to request demobilisation.<sup>18</sup>

*children from armed groups and forces should not have to wait for a peace process or for adult demobilisation to begin, and requires the early allocation of resources*

While there are clear risks of re-recruitment in situations of ongoing conflict, children frequently leave armed groups and forces outside formal demobilisation and should be supported to do so. Yet donors and national governments generally only commit to a process of DDR for children after peace accords are signed. The engagement of children in armed conflict is a child rights concern and an international legal obligation rather than a political issue. The forced/compulsory recruitment of children and their use in hostilities by both armed groups and forces is illegal under international humanitarian and human rights law, and increasingly recognised within regional and national human rights legislation<sup>17</sup>. The conscription, enlistment and use in hostilities of children under 15 years has been recognised as a war crime under the Rome Statute of the

International Criminal Court (2002), and the Security Council maintains ongoing scrutiny on this issue.

While family unity may offer the best framework for a child's protection, ongoing conflict may prevent or slow down family tracing and reintegration activities, and preclude follow up<sup>19</sup>, necessitating alternative forms of interim care.

Efforts to promote demobilisation during conflict also provide an opportunity to promote awareness of prohibitions on child recruitment. For even where child demobilisation is officially recognised, all military officials may not, as noted in the DRC, respect demobilisation documents.<sup>20</sup> Other humanitarian activities, such as outreach health support, also enable contact with girls associated with armed actors and their children.

<sup>17</sup> See further footnote 5.

<sup>18</sup> Verhey, 2003.

<sup>19</sup> Verhey, 2003, p54.

<sup>20</sup> Verhey initial report notes, 2004.



Children should not have to wait to leave armed groups whilst structures are put in place to support large and complex adult demobilisation processes. There is a humanitarian imperative to release children and separate them from adults in armed groups and forces as rapidly as possible and the allocation of resources to support the release of children should not be held back. Organisations working with children need to be prepared to receive children as soon as they can be released.

SC UK programmes (in, for example, the DRC, the Ivory Coast, Sri Lanka and Sudan) have undertaken to:

- Support the release and reintegration of children from armed groups and forces where it is safe to do so;
- Document programme experience of demobilisation during ongoing conflict;
- Document government and donor reticence to commit to the process of demobilisation during conflict; and
- Develop strategies and build awareness of the need to prevent and monitor re-recruitment in case of further conflict.

## 2.4 Inclusive and long term reintegration

*Save the Children believes that, to reach all children associated with armed groups and forces, reintegration requires a community-based approach.*

*Save the Children believes that the reintegration assistance offered to demobilised children must also be offered to all vulnerable children within the community.*

In recent SC UK research in Sierra Leone amongst separated children and

*"My greatest hope is to go home."*

Patrik, Kivu Province, the DRC, recruited in 1996 at the age of 9.<sup>21</sup>

*"During the war life was not easy but now it is difficult too."*

Ex-child soldier, Liberia

*"Seven years of war can take as much as 14 years for reintegration."*

NGO Programme Director, Liberia.<sup>22</sup>

children formerly associated with armed actors, boys and girls defined successful reintegration as "being loved and cared for by their families, accepted and welcomed by the community, and living in peace and unity with others. Reintegration also involves having basic needs, such as food, shelter and water, met, and being able to make productive contributions through skills training, school or work."<sup>23</sup> These children thus view reintegration as a process, rather than a one-off event, requiring sustained allocation of resources. Yet a number of national governments and multi-lateral institutions have been forced to adopt short-sighted and short-term solutions to reintegration due to financial and other resource constraints, as occurred, for example, in Liberia.

Promoting reintegration requires careful balancing to address the specific needs of children formerly associated with armed actors while avoiding singling them out. As with child protection, an integrated and inclusive approach to reintegration which supports all children affected by armed conflict is more likely to engender acceptance for children formerly associated with armed actors. Such an approach is also more likely to address the needs of 'invisible soldiers', including the majority of children not formally demobilised or identified as

*"We are not respected because they [peers] are always calling us rebels. Even when we are given school supplies by [an NGO supplying DDR benefits], our friends tell us that the supplies are blood supplies."*

(13 year-old girl ex-combatant who had been through the DDR in Sierra Leone).<sup>24</sup>

associated with armed actors, amongst whom are significant numbers of girls.

Local development of strategies to promote the reintegration of children formerly associated with armed actors in Kivu Province, the DRC, found that, rather than a pre-determined 'kit', reintegration required a community-based approach with an emphasis on family livelihood activities and efforts to extend education and health benefits to all vulnerable children.<sup>25</sup> Support for successful reintegration needs to be based on an analysis of household economies, which may, particularly in situations of ongoing conflict, be closely linked with establishing an understanding of the reasons for recruitment. Reintegration support, such as small livestock projects, may, for example, support prevention of re-recruitment as a source of livelihood. Further "infra-structure repair and development can be as important to children's reintegration as elements more usually focused on, such as skills training, and particularly amongst remote communities."<sup>26</sup> While such community-based support necessarily limits the support available to individual children formerly associated with armed actors, it may be extremely important in promoting their sustainable reintegration.

<sup>21</sup> Verhey, 2003, p10.

<sup>22</sup> Peters with Laws, 2003.

<sup>23</sup> Delap, 2004, p22.

<sup>24</sup> Delap, 2004, p17.

<sup>25</sup> Verhey, 2003.

<sup>26</sup> Delap, 2004, p4.

Evaluations on reintegration and efforts to develop an inclusive approach which address the needs of all conflict-affected children are, as yet, limited. Following the 2002 Luena Memorandum of Understanding, Angola has focused on general support to community reintegration and developed a comprehensive 'Post-war Child Protection strategy'.

SC UK is supporting and monitoring this process in Angola, as well as ongoing SC UK programme in the DRC, Liberia, Rwanda, the Sudan and Sierra Leone to:

- Assess whether an inclusive approach effectively meets the specific needs of children, and particularly girls, formerly associated with armed actors; and
- Reinforce understanding of what these specific needs are.

Children formerly associated with armed actors frequently report being forced to attack their own families and communities in an effort to break former ties and prevent their return home. While an amnesty may be granted to children formerly associated with armed actors, as was extended to all ex-Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) child combatants and abductees in Uganda, it may remain extremely difficult for these children, and their parents, to be accepted by their former community.

Community-based mechanisms such as religious and cultural rituals have generally been much more successful in supporting children to cope with the psychological impact of the atrocities associated with war and promoting social reacceptance than imported

### **Children develop constructive and innovative forms of reintegration.**

In Liberia, children formerly associated with armed actors themselves came up with a proposal to "win back" back their place in the village by doing communal labour, often through a short project, like digging a well or repairing a road.<sup>27</sup>

Carefour des Enfants du Congo (CARECO), a local SC UK partner in South Kivu Province of the DRC, engaged child participation in a 'children's parliament' advocacy activity to inform peers and local authorities. A group of the children has been instrumental in convincing local authorities to initiate discussion on demobilising and reintegrating children involved with a local armed group.<sup>28</sup>

models of psychosocial therapy. However, caution must be taken as some of these rituals, such as female genital mutilation, actually violate the rights of children. In such cases support can be channelled to indigenous initiatives seeking to combat harmful traditional practices and gender discrimination.

A number of children have been disappointed at the situation they found on their return and by failures to fulfil promised support.<sup>29</sup> Conflict may also have engendered changes in relationships, with the older generation now more dependent on the younger.<sup>30</sup> Children formerly associated with armed actors may choose to stay in urban areas or with friends, seeking work in labour intensive industries, such as mining and logging, where former commanders may have got management positions. While such migrant work has a history and does not translate as failure to reintegrate, children who stay with former commanders often continue violent practices, believing that they lack viable alternatives.<sup>31</sup>

Education services need to be carefully tailored with support to family livelihoods if children are to be in a

position to take them up. Uncertain of financial support for their continued education, children formerly associated with armed actors in Angola for example have even expressed "a preference to return to the armed forces where at least they were guaranteed something to eat and a dry place to sleep."<sup>32</sup> Education provision also needs to facilitate the inclusion of children formerly associated with armed actors with additional responsibilities, amongst whom particularly those girls with children. Condensed curriculum may enable children to catch up on missed education, but will also need to suit children whose experience may have resulted in serious problems with concentration.

In a child protection study carried out in Somalia in 2003, children reported that they had joined militias due to the economic situation, but "expressed concern about their futures after the end of hostilities since they feel they will have few skills with which to rejoin society."<sup>33</sup>

Given the affect of conflict on access to and standards of education, vocational training may require a greater emphasis on hands-on learning.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Peters, Krijn with Sophie Laws, 2003, p97.

<sup>28</sup> Verhey, 2003, p61

<sup>29</sup> Delap, 2004, p20.

<sup>30</sup> Peters, Krijn with Sophie Laws, 2003, p111 and 135.

<sup>31</sup> Peters, Krijn with Sophie Laws, 2003, p95.

<sup>32</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Forgotten Fighters: Child Soldiers in Angola*, Vol 15 No 10(A), April 2003, p3 and 17.

<sup>33</sup> UNICEF, *From perceptions to reality: A study on Child Protection in Somalia, 2003, Executive Summary and Chapter 4, 6.1.*

<sup>34</sup> Verhey, 2003, p63.



Training programmes need to ensure that: the skills provided are viable in the war-affected community; the market is not saturated by providing only a limited number of skills; and start-up resources are provided.<sup>35</sup> Such initiatives also need to recognise that those who have received vocational training may be more willing and able to leave their families.

Successful reintegration may also require support to directly address the impediments to livelihood. In Sierra Leone, micro-credit was found to have provided an opportunity for girls to escape sexual exploitation through establishing small businesses.<sup>36</sup> While, in Rwanda, the successful reintegration of 21% children formerly associated with armed actors required redress of land rights, where tenure had been appropriated by other family members.<sup>37</sup>

SC UK is assessing the impact of its current reintegration support to:

- Ensure that reintegration support in situations of ongoing conflict is based on an informed understanding of the reasons for and methods of recruitment;
- Develop an understanding, through pilot programmes, of the relevance and potential for a livelihood-based approach to reintegration;
- Build best practice of an inclusive and integrated approach to reintegration, which is community-based and addresses all children affected by conflict, not limited to those who were associated with armed actors;
- Ensure that such support meets the specific reintegration needs of girls, particularly those formerly associated

with armed actors and their dependents; and

- Develop training for community members and international and national partners, particularly those charged with designing DDR programmes.

## 2.5 Girls Associated with Armed Group and Armed Forces<sup>38</sup>

*Save the Children is concerned that the extent of involvement of girls associated with armed groups and forces often goes unrecognised by the international community and their specific needs remain unaddressed.*

Girls often make up a significant proportion of children associated with armed actors, active in both combatant and non-combatant roles. In Sri Lanka, for example, girls comprise 55% of the national caseload.<sup>39</sup> While some girls may have been left with recognizable scars or tattoos, as occurred in Sierra Leone, or have had their hair cut short, as among Sri Lanka's LTTE, many more girls are not identified as formerly associated with armed actors nor, indeed, may they wish to be so.

The requirement of turning in, and functional knowledge of a weapon, fear of insecurity within demobilisation centres and the perception of abducted girls as predominantly 'sex-slaves', may prevent their entry into formal demobilisation processes. DDR programmes generally have little to offer girls, while information campaigns, informing them of their rights and potential benefits, are rarely successful in reaching girls. While active as combatants within Sierra Leone's Civil Defence Forces, of the 12,056 girls identified as associated with armed

actors, only 506 were formally included within the DDR.<sup>40</sup>

Failure to recognise the extent of involvement of girls associated with armed actors and not addressing their specific needs amounts to discrimination. This contravenes Article 2 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child on non-discrimination.

*"I remember that when the information about disarmament reached our base and the girl-soldiers asked the commander about it, he said that this disarmament had nothing to do with them; that it was only for men."<sup>41</sup>*

Ex-child soldier, Liberia.

While some girls engage in fighting, many provide sexual services and, as in the DRC, may be perceived as 'wives'. Demobilisation may appear bleak in a society where a girl who has had sexual relations outside of marriage is considered to no longer have any value in society. Indeed, in situations of ongoing conflict, such as the DRC, staying as one of an armed group member's wives may appear more secure than being vulnerable to the attentions of men outside this relationship. Further, as noted in Sierra Leone, wives of Revolutionary United Front commanders may have little incentive to leave their sometimes influential positions<sup>42</sup>. Intimidation by commanders, including against a girl's family members, may also be used to prevent the girls' departure.

<sup>35</sup> Delap, p20.

<sup>36</sup> Delap, p21.

<sup>37</sup> Save the Children Alliance, A Fighting Chance: Guidelines and Implications for Programmes Working with Children Associated with Armed Groups and Armed Forces, 2004, p29.

<sup>38</sup> The shorter term 'girls associated with armed actors' has been employed in most of this paper.

<sup>39</sup> Rono, 2004, p1.

<sup>40</sup> Mazurana/McKay, Sierra Leone, 2003. Workshop on Girls who did not go through the DDR process, August 2004, indicate that the DDR registered only 548 girls of 6,845 children demobilised.

<sup>41</sup> Peters, Krijn with Sophie Laws, 2003, p22.

<sup>42</sup> Mazurana/McKay, 2003.

While few girls associated with armed actors have been through formal demobilisation, many may be accessed through: an inclusive approach to community-based reintegration<sup>43</sup>; outreach health services; negotiation with commanders; and other girls formerly associated with armed actors<sup>44</sup>.

*"This programme is for teenage mothers and war affected girls. If we would call it a programme for girl ex-child soldiers, nobody would come because of the stigmatisation by using this term."*

Programme Director, Liberia.<sup>45</sup>

### 2.5.1 Girls Associated with Armed Groups and Armed Forces and their children

30 percent of all returnee girls from the conflict in northern Uganda are estimated to be girl mothers.<sup>46</sup>

A significant number of girls associated with armed actors have children and they and their dependents often encounter significant constraints to re-acceptance, particularly where the father of the child is unknown. Girl mothers may themselves have difficulties in accepting their own children conceived through rape.

STDs, including HIV/AIDS, are a high risk during conflict, as well as in situations of economic vulnerability. Girls associated with armed actors who have dependents need to be supported to become economically independent, with training options which are locally viable, provide transport where necessary, and allow for child care. The provision of cooked food, or 'wet feeding', at schools and skills centres may act as a valuable incentive for these girls and their children.

*"A very important point of the programme is that we have facilities to take care of their babies, while they are in school. Otherwise, it would have been difficult for these teenage mothers to attend."*

Programme Director, Liberia.<sup>47</sup>

Addressing the stigma associated with sexual violence and children conceived during conflict is essential to ensure the longer-term acceptance and protection of both the girls and their children, particularly where mother and/or child are HIV positive.

Where sexual violence has been widespread during the conflict, this may be carried into post-war situations. In Liberia, "one fifth of women's first sexual experience is rape."<sup>48</sup> In Sierra Leone, gender-based violence committees have been established to address this issue.

A significant commitment is required to support the reintegration of girls, particularly in terms of mediation with communities. This goes beyond awareness raising and requires the skills and resources to engage with individuals and groups in order to understand the attitudes towards girls returning home, particularly girl mothers, and work towards building a supportive environment.

SC UK seeks to ensure increased recognition of and allocation of resources to meet the special requirements of girls associated with armed actors, and will:

- Continue to train other key actors; and
- Promote best practice for working with girls associated with armed actors.

Through research, evaluation and documentation, SC UK programmes will:

- Establish the factors which led to girls' recruitment and prevented their participation in demobilisation processes;
- Demonstrate how their special needs can be met through innovative pilot projects; and
- Feed this understanding into the organisation's work on gender-based violence towards children.

<sup>43</sup> Verhey, 2004; Mazurana/McKay, 2003.

<sup>44</sup> Peters, Krijn with Sophie Laws, 2003, p142.

<sup>45</sup> Peters, Krijn with Sophie Laws, 2003.

<sup>46</sup> Mazurana/McKay, 2003, p9.

<sup>47</sup> Peters, Krijn with Sophie Laws, 2003, p148.

<sup>48</sup> Peters, Krijn with Sophie Laws, 2003, p149.

### 3.0 Concluding note

SC UK has experience of working with children associated with armed actors in a number of ongoing and long-term armed conflicts. This experience underlines the need for an integrated approach which addresses the rights and needs of all children affected by armed conflict, while mindful of the personal experience and specific needs of individual and groups of children. Family unity and community-based approaches offer the best opportunity for durable reintegration and protection. Such approaches demand continued support during, and even long after, the cessation of violent conflict.

A sustained and sustainable approach to protection and reintegration, which provides the essential ingredients for resurrecting livelihoods, will assist in ensuring children no longer become associated with armed actors or embroiled in the cyclical recruitment – demobilisation – reintegration – re-recruitment spiral.

To prevent child recruitment and promote the reintegration of children associated with armed actors, there is a need for:

- Consistent use and allocation of resources in line with the Cape Town definition, recognising that all children associated with armed actors require protection, not just those that carry weapons;
- Developing an integrated approach to child protection which recognizes that all children living in situations of armed conflict are affected and at risk of recruitment;
- Establishing increased recognition of and allocation of resources to meet the special requirements of girls

associated with armed actors and their dependents;

- Building strategies to prevent recruitment, based on an informed understanding of the reasons for and forms of recruitment
- Promoting processes which build upon girls and boys own insights, views and self-protection strategies and which strengthen their active role in society;
- Supporting ratification, implementation and monitoring of the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict as a minimum standard;
- Enforcing international legal obligations to demobilise children during ongoing conflict; and
- Supporting sustained and inclusive community-based support for reintegration.

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