

# A New Conceptualisation of Child Reintegration in Conflict Contexts

Written by Tania González Veiga

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Children are the most vulnerable members of society (PRIO, 2017). In the last thirty years, tens of thousands of children have been recruited by state and non-state armed forces and groups worldwide to serve in a variety of roles. According to the Roos van der Haer study, between 1989 and 2010, approximately 80% of all state-based conflicts included armed groups or armed forces that used children. The annual UN Children Affected by Armed Conflict (CAAC) reports revealed that from 2005 to 2016 there were at least 49,640 verified cases of boys and girls recruited and used by armed forces and groups (Save the Children, 2018).

These reports also show the negative influence that protracted conflicts have on the recruitment of children. On the one hand, protracted armed conflicts have changed contemporary patterns of warfare making civilians (including children) easy targets as adult fighters killed or injured in earlier stages of the fighting need to be replaced. On the other hand, the lack of economic opportunities leaves children with few options other than joining armed groups. As a result, boys and girls are not only being forced to fight, carry supplies and perform frontline and support roles, but are also subjected to physical and mental violence by adult combatants (Save the Children, 2018).

International efforts to end these conflicts have focused on the sustained investment and implementation of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programmes as a key component to facilitate combatants' disarmament, formal discharge and reintegration into civil society (Banholzer, 2014).

Since their first implementation in the late 1980s, DDR programmes have featured in post-conflict reconstruction from Haiti to Nepal. However, to this day the vast majority of DDR interventions have occurred in Africa (UNDDR, 2018), where the prevalence of children associated with armed forces and groups (CAAFG) remains a constant feature in many contemporary conflicts taking part in the continent (Campbell, 2017; Dudenhoefer, 2016). Taking into account this and considering that the focus of this project revolves around the effectiveness of current DDR programmes for CAAFG, this project will focus on the analysis of child DDR programmes implemented in Africa.

In view of children's increasing involvement in armed conflict, it does not come as a surprise that since the mid-1990s the impact of war on children had been high on the international agenda (PRIO, 2017), and, consequently, CAAFG were incorporated into the DDR framework. However, while the growing acknowledgement of children's involvement in armed conflict has been translated into significant progress in the design of DDR programmes, experience has repeatedly proved that the very construction of the DDR programmes continues to fail at meeting the specific needs of CAAFG effectively, thus a reconceptualisation of the programmes is needed.

With this in mind, the purpose of this project is to address the research question of how DDR programmes can meet CAAFG's specific needs in an adequate and comprehensive manner. The project is based on a qualitative research method focused on the collection and analysis of secondary data. This secondary data includes country, regional and global reports; policy papers; academic journal articles; international and regional legal frameworks; standard guidelines; and academic publications coming from a wide range of international organizations, practitioners and scholars.

# **A New Conceptualisation of Child Reintegration in Conflict Contexts**

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The research project proceeds in four parts. Part II provides a general review of the main developments of child DDR programmes since their early implementation and the most important lessons learned since then. Taking these lessons as a starting point, the research identifies the need of reconceptualising the entire DDR notion for children if programmes are to meet children's specific needs in an adequate and comprehensive manner.

Part III, divided into two sections, serves as a contextualisation of the project and builds the theoretical framework that supports the research hypothesis. Section one analyses both the recruitment of children in armed forces and groups and the international legal framework developed to protect them; section two, breaks down the structure and components of child DDR programmes.

Part IV supports at the practical level the hypothesis put forward in part II by analysing the failures of two indicative DDR programmes for CAAFG implemented in Africa –the Sierra Leonean and the Liberian programmes.

Finally, part V draws conclusions on the evidence provided to support the hypothesis and gives response to the research question put forward initially. The conclusion also suggests a number of recommendations to implement within child DDR processes so that programmes can assist CAAFG effectively in the pursuit of a sustainable reintegration.

## **DDR Programmes for CAAFG in Africa: A Review of the Lessons Learned**

Since the late 1980s the UN has increasingly been involved in supporting the design and implementation of DDR programmes taking place in Africa (Banholzer, 2014). Since its origins, the DDR concept has evolved over time and has been object of multiple discussions and approaches. The below lines offer an outlined literature of the best practices and lessons learned from previous DDR programmes for CAAFG in Africa.

Originally, DDR emerged as a disarmament initiative within the UN peacekeeping operations (UNPKO). During the Cold War, UNPKO used it as a way to demobilise ex-combatants from the national armies of the defeated countries and ensure ceasefire agreements (Olarde Delgado, 2016).

Since their early implementation, the main objective of the programmes was to ensure security by avoiding ex-combatants to return to war through the promotion of economic growth and the provision of humanitarian assistance. It is for this reason that programmes were taken on by development agencies that, concerned with the identification of transferable lessons that could be applied in the future, started to implement programmes through a linear process. As a result, the complexity that each conflict entails and the diverse needs of programmes' beneficiaries were often overlooked. However, experience has proved that DDR programmes for children –as the ones targeting adults– should not be implemented in a prescriptive and linear manner, as there is the risk of overgeneralising and overriding the specific context of each programme (Berdal & Ucko, 2009). Programmes should be adapted to the political, social and economic conditions of the region and communities where they are being implemented (IDDRWG, 2005; Small Arms Survey, 2011 & The International Peace Support Training Centre, 2013).

The need to approach DDR programmes through a comprehensive framework that takes into account their political, social and economic dimensions led to widen the eligibility criteria of programmes' beneficiaries. Breaking the assumption that people associated with armed forces and groups are homogeneous has facilitated the participation in DDR of vulnerable groups (i.e., females, youth and children), initially excluded from the programmes in spite of the essential support roles that they play in armed conflict contexts (Poulligny, 2004).

The inclusion of these groups coupled with the emergence of the children's rights movement in the 1990s and early 2000s served as a stepping stone to the creation of a brand new framework of DDR programmes targeting children (OHCHR, 2002). By then, the reconceptualisation of security from a military and state approach to a people-oriented approach contributed to a more in-depth study of the realities of conflicts and acknowledged the need to broaden the scope of peace-building projects (Olarde Delgado, 2016). It was in this context that the concept of Release and Reintegration (RR) emerged as a way to convey the illegal dimension of the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict (UNDDR, 2006; Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2009; The International Peace Support Training

## **A New Conceptualisation of Child Reintegration in Conflict Contexts**

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Centre, 2013; AU DDR Resource & Research Centre, 2016). Nevertheless, so far, the use of the RR framework has been limited to the policy level and has not yet materialised in practice.

The importance of including children in the DDR process and protect their rights was also stressed in one of the most relevant standard guidelines created to date: the Integrated DDR Standards (IDDRS) operational guide launched by the UN in 2006. This compilation of best DDR practices already recognised the need of using a child-specific definition in the context of DDR to ensure that no child exposed to the effects of conflict was left behind. To this end, the IDDRS used the concept of “children associated with armed forces and groups” instead of the narrow and easily misleading concept of “child soldiers” –often associated exclusively to combatant boys (UNDDR, 2006; AU DDR Resource & Research Centre, 2016).

The literature has also acknowledged for some time now the specific needs that children have and their high level of vulnerability, particularly in the case of girls and girl mothers (Legrand, 1999; World Bank, 2002; Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008; Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2009; The International Peace Support Training Centre, 2013 & Matiyas, 2018). However, the literature has not yet identified the need to make accessible different, flexible and children-orientated programmes that can meet children’s diverse needs in a holistic manner.

The operational guide released by the African Union (AU), the DDR & Children Operational Guideline, stresses the need of African governments to own the design and implementation of DDR programmes in order to achieve successful reintegration of children (AU DDR Resource & Research Centre, 2016). The importance of political will for successful programme implementation has also been supported by numerous policy-makers and proved in recent child DDR programmes, such as is the case of South Sudan, where the lack of political will has considerably undermined the reintegration of CAAFG (UNICEF & VSF Germany, 2015; Matiyas, 2018).

There is overwhelming agreement across literature on the importance that children should be released from armed forces regardless of whether an official settlement has been reached or not (UNICEF, 2005). Some authors even claim that the demobilisation of children ahead of the official commencement of the DDR has a positive impact by building confidence and trust within the beneficiaries (Knight in Banholzer, 2014).

The inclusion of articles in the peace agreements recognising the needs of children within the post-conflict context has proved to help in establishing the grounds for children peacebuilding programmes. However, even when there is genuine political will, the incorporation of such policies itself is not sufficient to guarantee the inclusion of children in the DDR process (Ollek, 2007 & Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008).

Despite the progress made by acknowledging the need to include CAAFG in the DDR process, the repetition of mistakes has been particularly acute in the case of girls. Although girls’ special needs and higher vulnerability have long been recognised, the majority of girls associated with armed forces and groups continue not to participate in the programmes. Girls’ low levels of DDR participation in countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) demonstrate that much is yet to be done in order to increase girls’ participation in the programmes (The International Peace Support Training Centre, 2013).

It is worth mentioning that official policy guidelines (AU DDR Resource & Research Centre, 2016) exclude young adults recruited when they were children from participating in children DDR, which in stagnant conflicts can involve a high number of people. However, the development of these young adults cannot possibly be compared to the one of an adult who has lived in a civilian environment and therefore, these young adults often require as much assistance, if not more, as children.

One of the most crucial lessons learned in DDR for CAAFG is the need to physically separate children from adult commanders as soon as possible to ensure their security, break the authority relationship between them and prevent forced re-recruitment (UNICEF, 2005; UNDDR, 2006; UNICEF & VSF Germany, 2015). Experience has proved that breaking the nexus between children and commanders can be extremely challenging, especially because in most of the cases children demonstrate their association with armed forces and groups through their commanders’ confirmation (ILO, 2006; Ollek, 2007).

# **A New Conceptualisation of Child Reintegration in Conflict Contexts**

Written by Tania González Veiga

While the first two phases of the programmes, disarmament and demobilisation, can undergo major logistical problems, they are not usually the most problematic stages. However, reintegration, which requires a longer period of implementation and greater support, has proved to be the most complex and critical yet least prioritised phase of DDR –both in adult and children programmes. Experience proves that underfunded reintegration or lack of economic opportunities often create frustrating and distrustful feelings towards the effectiveness of the programmes that can lead to escalations in tensions, voluntary re-recruitment and, ultimately, relapses into violence (Prosper Nzekani, 2013 & Matiyas, 2018).

Research shows that the reintegration phase has indeed improved in order to better address children's needs. However, current programmes, like the one implemented in South Sudan, where the number of CAAFG has been increasing since 2013 due to the lack of opportunities for children (Matiyas, 2018), show that the reintegration phase needs to keep improving in order to achieve sustainable reintegration of CAAFG in their communities.

The literature available for child DDR makes evident the existence of gaps in children programmes. If we are to look at how these programmes can meet the needs of CAAFG in an adequate and comprehensive manner, the urgency to deconstruct and reconceptualise these programmes becomes obvious. On these grounds, this research project supports the following hypothesis: current DDR programmes do not take into account the heterogeneous nature and specific needs of CAAFG. DDR programmes can only meet children's needs adequately and comprehensively by becoming detached from the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) mechanism. The Release and Reintegration (RR) framework is more appropriate when framing and contextualising programmes for CAAFG.

On the one hand, because by automatically including children in a framework designed to target adult ex-combatants, we are directly managing the recruitment and use of children by armed forces and groups as we would manage adult ex-combatants' return to civilian life. However, reality demonstrates that children's recruitment is different, and thus, should not be addressed in the same way. On the other hand, because the current DDR design often leads to the exclusion of many children or hampers the programmes' ability to address the special needs of children.

The remainder of this research project aims at supporting this hypothesis. First, from a theoretical point of view, by analysing (a) how the recruitment of CAAFG happens, (b) the international legal framework developed to protect them and (c) the structure of DDR programmes for children; and second, from a practical point of view, through the analysis of the gaps of two relevant child DDR programmes –the Sierra Leonean & the Liberian programmes.

## **Children in Armed Conflict**

Twenty-two years have passed since the ground-breaking Graça Machel report on the impact of armed conflict on children was released as a request of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and the General Assembly. According to the report, one of the most alarming trends by then was already the recruitment and use of children by governments and rebel armies. The report also indicated that children served armies in support roles, such as cooks, porters, messengers and spies and that commanders had even noted the desirability of child soldiers because they are “more obedient, do not question orders and are easier to manipulate than adult soldiers” (UN-DPCSD 1996, p.11).

Since then, much progress has been made by the UN system, governments and NGOs in regards to standards and norms to assist and protect children caught up in war (UNIDIR, 2011). On May 2000 the UN General Assembly adopted the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict (OPAC), which set 18 as the minimum age for direct participation in hostilities and compulsory recruitment by state armed forces and non-state armed groups (OHCHR, 1990). According to the last data provided by Child Soldiers International (2018), 167 out of 197 UN Member States have ratified OPAC.

Despite the progress achieved since the 1996 Machel report and the many international human rights and humanitarian provisions approved for the protection of children in armed conflict, the shocking reality is that children are still victims of grave violations of their rights and continue to be overwhelmingly affected by armed conflict in

## **A New Conceptualisation of Child Reintegration in Conflict Contexts**

Written by Tania González Veiga

many countries. According to the last UN General Assembly report on children and armed conflict (UNGA, 2018), in 2017 there was a large increase in the number of violations compared with the numbers reported in 2016 and figures in African countries are by far the most alarming. Specifically, the recruitment and use of children quadrupled in Central African Republic (CAR) and doubled in the DRC compared to 2016 (UNICEF, 2017).

On the other hand, the report also reveals that international engagement with armed forces and groups contributed to the release and reintegration of children. However, too many children were unable to benefit from the reintegration programmes due to the lack of appropriate long-term reintegration, and consequently they “were particularly vulnerable and subject to mistreatment, social stigmatisation and re-recruitment” (UNGA 2018, p. 4).

### *Recruitment of Children & International Legal Framework*

In conflicts throughout the world, armed forces and groups have recruited and still recruit children to engage them in a variety of activities. Because children’s experiences are not uniform, the need of having a comprehensive definition encompassing them all became acute. As a result, the notion of “child soldier”[1], which can easily give the mistaken impression that combatants boys are the only children of concern, is now avoided and the term “children associated with armed forces and groups” (CAAFG) is unanimously preferred within the international community (UNDDR, 2006).

Boys and girls enter armed forces and groups in a variety of ways and due to a variety of reasons. They can play multiple roles—fighters, porters, domestic labourers, spies and sex slaves, to name a few. Many of them are abducted, some join “voluntarily” often motivated by the lack of alternatives, others follow family members into military service, while for others the military service is compulsory (Landau, 2007; UNIDIR, 2011). As the Machel report pointed out, hunger and poverty may also drive parents to offer children for service as a way to guarantee their livelihood (UN-DPCSD, 1996). There are also parents “who encourage their daughters to become soldiers if their marriage prospects are poor” (UN-DPCSD 1996, p.12). Some children become soldiers to protect themselves or their families in the face of violence around them, while others, particularly adolescents, are attracted by ideology (UNIDIR, 2011). Furthermore, child participation may be difficult to distinguish and become invisible because often whole families move with armed groups and birth registration is poor or simply unavailable (UN-DPCSD, 1996).

Due to the nature of the work they normally do (fetching water, collecting firewood, food gathering) and “the gender expectations that they can do any kind of useful work” (IDDRWG 2005, p. 7), girls are often more vulnerable to abduction than boys. Girls’ operational contributions are critical to the overall functioning of armed groups; hence, it is not coincidence that they are also often the last members of armed forces and groups to be released by commanders. In some instances, girls may also choose to stay with armed forces and groups because of the security vacuum caused by war and as a way to secure their protection (UNIDIR, 2011).

The complexity around the CAAFG phenomenon is for the most part due to the high vulnerability of children. Military organisations find easier to persuade or force children into service than adults because in general children are more compliant, easier to manipulate (Child Soldiers International, 2018), cheap (Landau, 2007), and less conscious of danger (Humanium, 2011). The recruitment of children is more common in protracted conflicts where there are fewer adult combatants and in countries where the use of inexpensive light weapons has spread (UN-DPCSD, 1996; Landau, 2007). The situation is exacerbated when there is no national legislation related to the use of children by armed forces and groups, or when there is one but it is not understood or directly neglected (IDDRWG, 2005). On the other hand, as conflicts persist, economic, social and political conditions suffer, educational opportunities become more limited or non-existent, and, as a consequence, recruits tend to get younger and younger (UN-DPCSD 1996, p.12).

Furthermore, it is difficult to extract children from armed forces and groups as frequently commanders are the closest semblance of community for many of these children and the ones who provide them with a livelihood. In these instances, the disarmament and demobilisation phases become more problematic as the attachment between the commander and the child is also emotional, and therefore more difficult to break (UNIDIR, 2011).

# A New Conceptualisation of Child Reintegration in Conflict Contexts

Written by Tania González Veiga

Children are protected from recruitment and use by armed forces and groups under international humanitarian law and international human rights law. The extensive international legal framework developed since the late 1980s by the international community to protect children from recruitment by armed forces and groups is the clearest representation of children's particular vulnerability and needs. These are the core international legal instruments developed for children's protection:

- The Geneva Conventions of 1949 & Additional Protocols of 1977 prohibit all recruitment under 15 years. The Additional Protocols I (Articles 77 (2) and 77 (3)) and II (Article 4-3 c) to the Geneva Conventions (1947) call for the protection of children in armed conflict, forbid the recruitment and use of children under the age of 15 in conflict, and provide special treatment for children in detention (The American Red Cross, 2011).
- The 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) addresses the recruitment of children in several articles and calls for governments to take all feasible measures to ensure that children under age 15 do not take a direct part in hostilities (OHCHR,

1990). The Optional Protocol to the CRC (OPAC) on the involvement of children in armed conflict raises the minimum age for direct participation in hostilities from 15 to 18 (art. 1) and prohibits conscription or forced recruitment below age 18 (art. 2) (OHCHR, 2002).

- The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (1998) recognises that the conscription or enlistment of children under the age of 15 into armed forces or groups or their use in hostilities constitutes a war crime (ICC, 2002).
- The International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour (1999) concerns the prohibition and immediate action for the elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including the forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict (ILO, 2000).
- The Paris Commitments and Paris Principles & Guidelines on CAAFAG (2007) aim at reinforcing the international consensus that recruitment contrary to law is not acceptable, reiterating measures that states can take to protect children who are involved or at risk of becoming involved in hostilities (UNICEF, 2007).

These legal instruments not only condemn the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict but also recognise it as a violation of international humanitarian law, international human rights law and international labour standards. This legal framework also acknowledges the need to approach CAAFAG's vulnerability through a specific legal framework for children, supporting the urgency to differentiate between adults and children's needs and, in turn, the importance of having child-specific DDR programmes. After all, children become involved in armed conflict under particular and unique circumstances, mostly because adults take advantage of children's physical and emotional susceptibility (Legrand, 1999).

## *DDR Programmes for Children*

According to the United Nations Integrated Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration Standards (IDDRS), the "objective of the DDR process is to contribute to security and stability in post-conflict environments so that recovery and development can begin (...). DDR aims at dealing with the post-conflict security problem that arises when ex-combatants are left without livelihoods or support networks (...) during the vital transition period from conflict to peace and development" (UNDDR 2006, p. 24). The process consists on removing weapons from the hands of combatants, taking them out of military structures and helping them to reintegrate socially and economically into society.

The earliest efforts to include children in DDR began in the middle of the 1990s when the international community came to realise that boys with military training returning to their communities where there were no economic opportunities posed a significant threat to peace. Only later on, when the DDR phenomenon started to be studied further, girls were also included in the process (UNIDIR, 2011).

According to the UN IDDRS (UNDDR 2006, p.285), "CAAFAG represent a special category of persons protected under international law and should be subject to a separate DDR process from adults". It is for this reason that the

## **A New Conceptualisation of Child Reintegration in Conflict Contexts**

Written by Tania González Veiga

DDR process for children should differ from the process for adults, because children –unlike adults– cannot legally be recruited, hence, “measures that aim to prevent their recruitment, or that attempt to reintegrate them into their communities, should not be viewed as a routine component of peace-making, but as an attempt to prevent or address a violation of children’s human rights” (UNDDR 2006, p.1).

Because children’s recruitment is illegal, the UN DDR standards for children require that their demobilisation and reintegration is carried out actively “at all times, even during a conflict” (UNDDR 2006, p.1). In this regard, the “at all times” element is crucial for two reasons: first because unlike child DDR, adult DDR processes are contingent upon a peace process; and second because CAAFG, particularly girls, have often been excluded from the programmes for not having presented a weapon during the disarmament phase (UNDDR, 2006).

Because child DDR has a different scope and timeframe from that of peacekeeping operations, child DDR does not have to wait until an adult DDR is established nor depend on it in any way (IDDRWG, 2005). However, the peace process often offers an opportunity to emphasise the needs of CAAFG. That is why in the event of having one, the immediate and unconditional release of all CAAFG should be specified in appropriate clauses of the peace agreement –particularly because “the parties to a conflict often resist acknowledging the presence of children in their ranks and such clauses help specialised child agencies (...) to speed the process of release” (UNDDR 2006, p. 226).

While the scope of adult DDR includes community-recovery efforts (World Bank, 2002), child DDR programmes are essentially community-based in a way that services are provided to communities so they can better care for children and make sure all children affected by conflict, and not only CAAFG, can benefit from these services.

According to the AU DDR Operational Guidelines (AU DDR Resource & Research Centre, 2016), CAAFG can enter the DDR process through a variety of channels: through spontaneous reporting to a community leader or a Peace Support Operation (PSO) Officer, through extraction from an armed force or group by a PSO Officer or the military forces, through a negotiated release by an armed force or group (often supported by UNICEF or other agency with a child protection mandate), and through other type of referrals.

Negotiators should make clear to armed forces and groups that the use of children under 15 in armed conflict is a war crime, thus, it is of paramount importance that they unconditionally release children as soon as possible. Whenever they do release children, DDR authorities must ensure that the lists of children prepared by armed forces or groups are accurate and do not leave behind any potential child beneficiary. Additionally, it is also crucial to ensure that eligibility criteria for children is never linked to weapons possession, weapons-knowledge or use so that all CAAFG, regardless of the role they played and the length of time associated with armed forces or groups, can benefit from the programmes.

The first stage of child DDR programmes is the disarmament phase.

According to the IDDRS (UNDDR 2006, p.25) “disarmament is the collection, documentation, control and disposal of small arms, ammunition, explosives and light and heavy weapons of combatants and often also of the civilian population (...)”.

The UN DDR Standard Guidelines (UNDDR, 2006) stipulate that CAAFG should preferably be disarmed by a military authority rather than a Child Protection Agency (CPA) but they should not be required to demonstrate their capacity to use a weapon or provide any proof of familiarity with weaponry. Eligibility should not be based neither on children presenting themselves at a pick up point with weapons. If applicable, children should be given the option to receive a document certifying the surrender of their weapons, but only if it is in their best interest and it can protect the child against any doubt over his or her surrender of the weapons (UNDDR, 2006).

Making sure that children are aware that DDR programmes are available to them, regardless of the role played, is also crucial. This is especially relevant in the case of girls as their presence in armed forces and groups is often invisible and, when they do benefit from the programmes, they are usually subject to higher rates of discrimination and stigma when they are back in their communities.

## A New Conceptualisation of Child Reintegration in Conflict Contexts

Written by Tania González Veiga

After disarmament, the demobilisation or release of children takes place.

The IDDRS define demobilisation as “the formal and controlled discharge of active combatants from armed forces or other armed groups. The first stage of demobilisation may extend from the processing of individual combatants in temporary centres to the massing of troops in camps designated for this purpose” (UNDDR 2006, p.25). Due to the illegal dimension of CAAFG, the main guidelines for child DDR refer to the second phase of the programmes as the “release” phase. Nevertheless, at the implementation level most children must still go through the standard demobilisation phase in order to have access to the reintegration services.

Unlike adults, “children can be demobilised in the absence of an official demobilisation process (...) or during an on-going conflict” (Legrand 1999, p.20). Within the demobilisation phase, children are given information about the DDR process and their rights to human treatment. Children normally spend no more than 48 hours at the cantonments sites, from where they are then transferred to an Interim Care Centre (ICC) or another location under civilian control.

In terms of eligibility, it is relevant to highlight that those who are no longer considered children and fall under the category of young adults cannot benefit from child programmes despite the fact that they were recruited when they were children and their needs are often very similar to children’s needs. According to the standard guidelines they “should be referred and transported to an adult DDR programme” (AU DDR Resource & Research Centre 2016, p. 20 & 27).

Girls are particularly vulnerable in cantonments sites as most sites are designed to attract and accommodate large numbers of adult male combatants. These sites tend to facilitate the exploitation and abuse of women and girls due to the “lack of protection measures, overcrowded conditions, poor lighting, lack of safe spaces, privacy for girls and the expectation that they will cook, which requires them to fetch wood and water from outside the camp boundaries” (IDDRWG 2005, p. 14).

Physical separation and protection of children from military authority during the demobilisation stage is of paramount importance. A security system must be put into place to ensure commanders cannot reach children. The situation of girls is particular sensitive in those instances in which forced marriages have taken place; in these cases, violent protests from men that have been separated from their “wives” are very common (UNIDIR, 2011).

Once at the ICCs –facilities that provide long-term care for CAAFG– the emphasis of the DDR process is on reunifying children with their families and communities as soon as possible. ICCs are centres run by trained civilians and separated from adult DDR facilities. These centres encourage daily activities and include educational tasks that facilitate the transition to civilian life (AU DDR Resource & Research Centre, 2016). In ICCs, children are grouped according to age, except in the case of girl mothers, who receive separate and more personalised assistance (UNDDR, 2006). However, ICCs’ organisation according to age critically affects girls’ wellbeing as sexual abuse and exploitation by adults at the centres is very frequent, even though it often remains hidden because girls are usually afraid of reporting their experiences (IDDRWG 2005). At worst, girls do not even know they have the right and ability to report abuse through complaints mechanisms (IDDRWG, 2005). But unawareness is not only experienced by girls: it is estimated that a high percentage of CAAFG end up demobilising “spontaneously” either because they are not aware of their rights to access DDR programmes or because they have been deliberately excluded by their commanders (UNDDR, 2006).

During children’s stay at the ICCs, information on their identity, history of their recruitment and special needs is collected and safely stored. Special assistance for children normally includes general health check-ups, gender-sensitive reproductive health and diagnosis of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (AU DDR Resource & Research Centre, 2016; UNDDR, 2006). The ultimate goal of children’s stay at the ICCs is family reunification. Families and communities must be prepared and aware that children may face certain problems to reintegrate, including “aggressive and rebellious behaviour, drug or alcohol use, challenges in resuming education as well as stigmatisation and discrimination” (AU DDR Resource & Research Centre 2016, p. 20). Once –and if– the reunification is achieved, CPAs monitor the reintegration of children in their families and communities (UNDDR, 2006).



## **A New Conceptualisation of Child Reintegration in Conflict Contexts**

Written by Tania González Veiga

The main aim of the last and most difficult phase, reintegration, is to restore or establish meaningful and long-lasting attachments among children, their families and communities.

The IDDRS define reintegration as “the process by which ex-combatants acquire civilian status and gain sustainable employment and income. Reintegration is essentially a social and economic process with an open time frame, primarily taking place in communities at the local level. It is part of the general development of a country and a national responsibility and often necessitates long-term external assistance” (UNDDR 2006, p.25). In the case of children, due to their special needs, reintegration does not revolve around economic factors as much as it does around family reunification and community reintegration.

Indeed, reintegration programmes include economic assistance to support children’s development within their community, either given to the parents or in the form of indirect assistance through investments in schools or any other primary services. Unlike adults, who receive a Transitional Safety Allowance (TSA) upon discharge, direct monetary payments to children are avoided as payments might be perceived as a reward for being part of armed forces and groups by the other children (UNDDR, 2006).

Unlike the first two phases, the reintegration process is not linear. While economic reintegration may be achieved within a relatively short period of time, community reintegration may take a few years. Being the last and the most decisive phase of the process, the reintegration phase has often suffered funding shortfalls and delays (both in child and adult DDR), which usually creates frustration and lack of trust in the programmes, often leading into escalation of tensions and even re-recruitment (Prosper Nzekani, 2013; UNICEF, 2009).

Education is one of the pillars of the reintegration phase in children DDR. Wherever possible, children are provided with an opportunity to access formal education; otherwise, income-generating activities consistent with legal norms on child labour may also be offered to them (UNDDR 2006). Reintegration is also focused on community-based approaches that aim to cover not only children’s needs but also the needs of the communities in which children are reintegrated. In this regard, psychosocial support and family and community-support mechanisms are central on the reintegration phase (IDDRWG, 2005).

In spite of all the lessons learned from previous programmes and the great progress made since early implementations, the structure of children programmes is still very much focused on an adult ex-combatant framework. This design can easily neglect assistance to a large number of children, especially to those children playing non-combatant roles and those more attached (or being forced to stay attached) to their military lives. In this sense, the central role given to commanders in the selection of beneficiaries not only reinforces the military dimension of children programmes but also stresses children’s vulnerability and hampers their inclusion in the programmes. On the other hand, many CAAFAG do not need to be disarmed neither demobilised, but they always need to be released from the armed forces or groups, reunified with their families and reintegrated into their communities. At the same time, as children are exposed to very different levels of vulnerability (different ways of recruitment, different roles played and different social and gender expectations) the reintegration process should not be the same for them all but adapted to their specific cases and needs.

Consequently, not only the legal framework developed to protect CAAFAG but also the nature of children’s recruitment and the very structure of the current programmes clearly demand and justify the implementation of new child-specific programmes that are not dependent on the disarmament and demobilisation mechanism. Only then DDR programmes can aim at assisting all CAAFAG adequately and comprehensively.

### **Children DDR in Sierra Leone & Liberia**

Despite the progress made in child DDR programmes since the second half of the twentieth century, some important lessons learned from previous child DDR experiences continue to be ignored at the implementation level. In DRC, for example, data from 2017 confirms that girls make up only about 7% of children released to date largely because of the influence exerted by the commanders and the stigma that they face when they return to their communities (Reliefweb, 2017). However, experience has repeatedly shown that girls’ exclusion from DDR programmes and the

## **A New Conceptualisation of Child Reintegration in Conflict Contexts**

Written by Tania González Veiga

lack of adequate assistance available for them only reinforce their vulnerability.

When trying to understand the reality of children programmes at the implementation level, child DDR experiences in Sierra Leone and Liberia are two cases worth studying because of the central role that children played in the conflicts of these two countries (McIntyre & Thusi, 2003; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2001); the spill over effect that the Sierra Leone's DDR failure had in Liberia (Weinstein & Humphreys, 2005); and the wide consensus within the existing literature on the success of these two programmes despite their undeniable failure in regards to CAAFG (Hanson, 2007; Jaye, 2009; Regional Working Group on DDR Programmes and Post-conflict Management in West Africa, 2006; Weinstein & Humphreys, 2005; World Bank, 2002).

### *Children DDR in Sierra Leone: Programme Gaps*

The people of Sierra Leone suffered over a decade of horrific war and the country has one of the world's worst records for recruiting and using children in conflict to this day. Several coups, economic and social unrest and government corruption featured the first three decades of the country's independence.

The civil war in Sierra Leone started in 1991 when the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) invaded eastern Sierra Leone from neighbouring Liberia supported by Charles Taylor, who tried to overthrow the Sierra Leonean government under Major General Joseph Momoh after he had supported Taylor's rival in Liberia (Truffer, 2015). The RUF launched a war known globally for its brutality and the abduction of children. Children were forced to commit atrocities against their own families or others in the villages to instil in them the sense that they could never return. Many of the girls abducted were sexually abused, with some eventually becoming "bush wives" and therefore permanently attached to an adult combatant. It is not certain how many children were abducted, however, studies estimate that around 8,466 children went "missing" between 1991 and 2002, of which girls accounted for over half of them (Williamson, 2006).

The child DDR programme in Sierra Leone was mainly coordinated by UNICEF with support of other local and international bodies. The programme was composed by three different phases. The process begun with phase I in August 1998 but was suspended in December of the same year as tensions arose. In July 1999 the Lomé Peace Accord was signed between the key factions, which included a provision for a separate DDR process for children (Sesay & Suma, 2009). The process resumed in November 1999 (phase II) and finalised with the official end of the war in January 2002 (phase III) (UNICEF, 2005). Although the National Committee on DDR (NCDDR) had already put in place written guidelines stipulating that certain NGOs would take care of children's DDR, most military observers did not accept these guidelines, and, as a result, the release and participation of children in the process often had to be negotiated by UNICEF with peacekeepers (Williamson, 2006). The guidelines also specified that any children associated with armed forces should be demobilised and have access to the programmes, regardless of weapon possession or knowledge. However, the implementation was highly inconsistent with the guidelines and peacekeepers often undertook weapon tests and required children to present a weapon and demonstrate familiarity with it as a prerequisite to be demobilised (Sesay & Suma, 2009). As a result, many CAAFG were excluded from the DDR process, especially girls, who were predominantly used "to carry loads, do domestic work, and other support tasks (...)" (Williamson 2006, p.188).

It was already known from previous child DDR experiences that separating CAAFG from commanders was necessary in order to break the commander's control over children. However, breaking this control link often took more than physical separation, especially for those children who had been part of the insurgent group RUF, which deliberately instilled in former children combatants the feeling that they could never go back to their communities due to the violence they had committed there. In other cases, the RUF and other insurgent groups would carve the initials of the group into children's skin to label them permanently (Williamson, 2006).

The participation of girls in Sierra Leone's DDR was particularly low and many of them never received assistance. While it is not certain how many girls were abducted during the war, data from UNICEF estimates that out of the 6,845 overall children demobilised, 92% were boys and only 8% were girls (UNICEF in Williamson, 2006). Additional research studies (McKay & Mazurana, 2004) confirmed massive disparity between the numbers of girls associated

## **A New Conceptualisation of Child Reintegration in Conflict Contexts**

Written by Tania González Veiga

with armed forces and groups and the number of girls that had entered the process.

Even though the guidelines specified that children were not required to present a weapon to enter DDR, studies found a widespread perception among girls that a weapon was required to enter the programme. Research also revealed that 46% of the girls who were excluded from the programme confirmed that not having a weapon was the reason of exclusion. In other instances, girls were simply not allowed by their commanders or “bush husbands” to go through the DDR (Sesay & Suma, 2009), and others decided to opt out themselves due to fear towards their commanders or fear of stigmatisation back in their communities (McKay & Mazurana, 2004). Many girls escaped from the men who had abducted them, others also reported to have come to accept the forced relationship or simply have stayed with them due to unawareness of better alternatives available (Williamson, 2006). It is worth noting that many of those who managed to go through the demobilisation phase “reported sexual harassment at the ICCs, either by male residents or visiting adult combatants” (Williamson 2006, p. 194), while others experienced verbal abuse, beatings and exclusion in their communities (Sesay & Suma, 2009; UNICEF, 2005).

During the reintegration phase, children who were fifteen years old of age and over could choose between going to school and receiving skill training. Apprenticeships were the main channel used to provide technical skills; however, the DDR programme provided little support with finding jobs or initiating enterprise activities upon completion of the apprenticeship. In addition, little market research was done to determine the needs of the economies where children were trying to reintegrate into and too many children ended up trained in certain skills, more than the Sierra Leonean economy could absorb, which reduced the guarantee of long-term employment (Williamson, 2006). Studies done by the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers (2006) and Human Rights Watch (2005) revealed that children who had previously been part of armed forces and groups in Sierra Leone were re-recruited in Liberia because of the disappointment and the lack of financial alternatives for them in Sierra Leone.

Lastly, the programme gave little attention to young adults who had been recruited when they were children even though they had been subjected to extreme forms of violence that influenced their personal growth (McIntyre & Thusi 2003, p.4). Because they were over 18 years old by the time they were demobilised, these young adults were only eligible for adults’ programmes, which meant having only access to the quick reintegration package given to adults that did not include any psychological support (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2006).

### *Children DDR in Liberia: Programme Gaps*

From 1989 to 2003 Liberia was immersed in war. The war has often been analysed as an ethnic conflict, even though other factors such as political repression, economic mismanagement, lack of access to health and education and inexistent political participation played a crucial role in its development. All armed factions were involved in massive killings of civilians, widespread sexual violence and forced recruitment of children (Jaye, 2009). More than half of those affected by the war were children. It is estimated that as many as 15,000 children have been associated with armed forces and groups in Liberia’s civil war (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2001). The use and abuse of children was a deliberate policy from the government and armed opposition groups. They would use children, often under the influence of drugs provided by the commanders, to witness and participate in massive killings, rapes and other abuses.

In August 2003, the UN Security Council authorised the deployment of an Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), President Taylor left for exile in Nigeria and the Accra Peace Accord was signed (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2006). While the peace accord recognised the importance to give special attention to vulnerable groups, it did not include any specific provisions on the reintegration components of DDR, suggesting that the primary objective of the programme was only to establish short-term security (Ollek, 2007).

The child DDR process in Liberia was mainly coordinated by UNICEF with support of other local and international bodies. In a ten-year period, Liberia underwent two different DDR processes. It is estimated that during the first DDR programme in Liberia (April-July 1997), only 4,306 CAAFG out of 15,000 to 20,000 were disarmed and demobilised –without any data available on the proportion of girls involved. During this first phase, adults and children stayed in the same cantonment sites. It was reported that some of the children gave their weapons to their commanders to

## **A New Conceptualisation of Child Reintegration in Conflict Contexts**

Written by Tania González Veiga

hand in because they were afraid to give them to the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG)'s soldiers, whom they considered to be the enemies. Due to the misinformation and fear about the programmes, some children gave false information about themselves and many never entered the DDR process (Jaye, 2009).

Liberia's second DDR programme took place from 2003 to 2004. According to Ollek's study (2007), the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) confirmed that 10,972 children were disarmed and demobilised in total (8,532 boys and 2,440 girls). While in Liberia's DDR programme any child associated with armed forces or groups was eligible to participate in the programme regardless of the possession or use of weapons, girls' participation rate was considerable low when compared to that of boys. In addition, children who had self-demobilised prior to the programme were ineligible to enter the process (Ollek, 2007).

Child DDR emphasis on breaking the bonds between CAAFG and their commanders made girls reluctant to enter the programmes. According to Specht (2006, p.105), leaving the military life meant a "loss of status" and capacities for some girls. Others feared being discriminated back in their communities or simply were fearful of being contacted by their commanders (Ollek, 2007). Children were separated from their ex-commanders at the cantonment sites and girls and boys were lodged in the same ICCs. The accommodation at the cantonments was in most cases traumatic for girls. The exploitation and abuse of girls during the war was predominant, therefore girls were often afraid of encountering commanders at the cantonment sites. In other instances, girls returned to cantonment sites to sell themselves as prostitutes because of the perception that there were no other options for survival (Jaye 2009, p. 16).

The child DDR in Liberia was very contentious due to the cash payments that were given to CAAFG. For the first time in any demobilisation exercise, children being demobilised were given cash payments (TSA), just like adult beneficiaries (Human Rights Watch, 2005). As an attempt to cope with the high number of people demanding DDR benefits and satisfy them all, UNMIL handed payments to everyone without making distinction between adults and children (Jaye, 2009). Giving money to CAAFG undermined children's reintegration process. According to Human Rights Watch (2005), children's families and commanders used to pressure children to leave the ICCs as soon as possible so that they could have access to children's money. In other instances, commanders would force children to claim that they were close family members in order to get access to children's TSA (Human Rights Watch, 2005; Jaye, 2009).

The reintegration phase in Liberia was complex and particularly challenging. As in any child DDR, education was one of the main priorities of the programme, however, school absenteeism rates in Liberia were notably high and of those children who did attend school, two-thirds had unqualified teachers. Girls' enrolment rates were especially low in comparison to those of boys (Jaye, 2009). In this context, shortfalls in the reintegration phase only served to reduce CAAFG's expectations of the programmes. The lack of support for schools brought inadequate educational opportunities, making children vulnerable to re-recruitment and facilitating further exploitation by commanders (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2006; Human Rights Watch, 2005).

### *Analysis of the Case Studies*

The gaps identified in these two case studies, commonly regarded as successful, show the existence of shared issues between the two programmes with respect to their capacity to provide adequate assistance to CAAFG. They also exemplify to what extent adults can take advantage of children's vulnerability, forcing them to commit atrocities that tie them to the military life. Furthermore, they also prove how CAAFG can be negatively affected by the very design of the DDR process.

In both case studies, there were guidelines in place determining that weapon possession or knowledge were not prerequisites to enter the programmes. Still, misinformation and lack of awareness hindered CAAFG's participation in both instances, particularly in the case of girls. Moreover, due to the rigid structure of the programmes, children who had not participated in the disarmament and demobilisation phases had automatically been excluded from the reintegration phase in Liberia.

# **A New Conceptualisation of Child Reintegration in Conflict Contexts**

Written by Tania González Veiga

Both instances show the excessive control that commanders have over children's participation in the programmes. In Sierra Leone commanders instilled in children the feeling that they could never return to their communities, while in Liberia they took advantage of children's cash payments. In addition, girl's loyalty towards commanders and perceptions of "loss of status" made more difficult to break the link between them.

In both case studies, girls' stay at the cantonment sites and ICCs reinforced their vulnerability. The fact that they had to demobilise in order to access reintegration assistance reinforced their susceptibility, particularly while staying at the cantonment sites, where contact with commanders and other males was common. The stay at the ICCs where boys and girls shared the same facilities only worsened the problem.

On the other hand, families and communities' perceptions of CAAFG played a paramount role in children's long-term reintegration. As the Sierra Leonean case shows, children were seen as perpetrators of violence by their communities due to the atrocities committed while associated with armed forces and groups. Furthermore, the capacity of communities to provide for CAAFG is determinant in the achievement of a sustainable reintegration. On the one hand, the lack of labour opportunities in Sierra Leone fostered the re-recruitment of Sierra Leonean children in Liberia's conflict; on the other hand, the lack of adequate educational opportunities in Liberia made Liberian children vulnerable to re-recruitment.

Finally, in both cases, the stagnation of the conflicts gave rise to the development of very young populations. The guidelines put in place to guide the child DDR process in Sierra Leone stipulated that because of their age, young adults were only eligible to access adults' programmes in spite of the fact that their needs were more similar to those of CAAFG.

The analysis of these two child DDR experiences supports, at the practical level, the arguments put forward in the theoretical framework through the analysis of the recruitment of children, the international legal framework developed to protect them and the structure of children DDR:

- According to the legal international framework, children's use and recruitment by armed forces and groups is illegal and children's mental and physical vulnerability explains why. As the two case studies prove, children are not only easily recruited because of their high susceptibility but it is also this susceptibility what usually forces them to stay attached to military life.
- As the recruitment analysis explains, children are recruited through a variety of means to play a wide range of roles. As shown in these two case studies, boy, girls and young adults go through different experiences and often face different levels of vulnerability, therefore their challenges to access programmes and reintegrate also often differ.
- CAAFG are, as the case studies prove, adversely affected by the structure of the programmes. The central role of commanders, girls' compulsory stay at the cantonment sites & ICCs and the lack of flexibility of the child DDR process jeopardise children's sustainable reintegration into their communities.

## **Conclusion & Recommendations**

The recruitment and use of children by armed forces and groups is not a new phenomenon, the 1996 Machel Report on the impact of armed conflict on children already denounced the increasing and alarming trend of recruitment and use of children by governments and rebel armies. Today children continue to be disproportionately recruited and used in armed conflict. According to UNICEF (2017), the recruitment and use of children in 2017 has quadrupled in CAR and doubled in the DRC compared to 2016. The growing global attention on children's rights over the last two decades coupled with the security threat that child ex-combatants could pose when resuming civilian life promoted the inclusion of CAAFG in the UN peacekeeping DDR programmes.

Over time, the inclusion of children in the DDR process has led to numerous attempts to adapt programmes to children's needs. Despite the progress achieved, this research project confirms, first, from a theoretical point of view, and then, from a practical one, that the design of current programmes is not yet capable of meeting children's specific needs in an adequate and comprehensive manner.

# A New Conceptualisation of Child Reintegration in Conflict Contexts

Written by Tania González Veiga

From a theoretical point of view, the international legal framework developed to protect children affected by conflict acknowledges that children's vulnerability makes it necessary to protect them from recruitment. Furthermore, the conditions under which children are recruited and used by armed forces and groups can differ significantly and also the roles they play during this period. On these grounds, the different needs of CAAFG indeed require to be addressed in different ways and through flexible and child-orientated approaches. Furthermore, the analysis of the current child DDR programmes reveals that programmes repeatedly exclude a large number of CAAFG and often reinforce children's vulnerability.

From a practical point of view, the analyses of the Sierra Leonean and Liberian child DDR experiences, both widely regarded by the literature as successful programmes, confirm the gaps identified in the structure of children DDR process:

- The prevalence of a narrow eligibility criteria to access programmes and the lack of children's awareness of their rights to access them continue to keep many children out of the process. Programmes should guarantee that all CAAFG without exception can access reintegration services directly after being released from armed forces and groups.
- Current programmes give disproportionate authority to commanders. Those taking part in the illegal recruitment and use of children should under no circumstances be part of the process that determines children's eligibility to access programmes. Only CPAs and other civil society organizations working for the protection of children should be in charge of the eligibility process.
- Girls tend to face more difficulties to access programmes than boys. Any form of contact with military life and commanders should be left behind from the moment children are released. Given the high levels of sexual abuse that girls are exposed to, girls and boys should be separated in the first place, at least until girls' specific needs are determined by CPAs.
- Stigmatisation and discrimination are often one of the biggest challenges for children during the integration phase. Increasing and promoting awareness within local communities that absorb CAAFG is as important as assuring that children are reunified with their families. Working with communities must be a constant effort, regardless of whether there is an ongoing conflict or not.
- Lack of flexibility in the structure of the programmes increases discrimination and marginalisation of certain groups of CAAFG. Programmes can only aim at the sustainable reintegration of children when their functioning is flexible enough to adapt to the different conditions under which children are recruited and used.

Through the evidence provided, the research question of how child DDR programmes can address children's needs adequately and comprehensively is supported by the hypothesis initially put forward: current child DDR programmes do not take into account the heterogeneous and specific needs of CAAFG. Programmes can only do so by becoming detached from the DDR mechanism. In this sense, the Release & Reintegration (RR) framework is more appropriate when framing and conceptualising programmes for CAAFG.

Indeed, a new conceptualisation of child programmes will certainly face various challenges and leaving behind the current dependence of programmes on commanders is one of the most, if not the most, urgent ones. This detachment would require developing new and reliable mechanisms that determine children's association with armed forces and groups, the roles they played and the nature of their needs so they can all have access to an adequate and sustainable reintegration into their families and communities.

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### **Notes**

[1] 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 (WGCRC & UNICEF, 1997).

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