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Nairobi, Kenya

Reintegration of Child Soldiers in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo: Challenges and Prospects



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Reintegration of Child Soldiers in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo: Challenges and Prospects

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Foreword

The International Peace Support Training Center (IPSTC) has made considerable contribution in research and training on peace support issues in the Great Lakes region and the Horn of Africa. The centre is a training and research institution focusing on capacity building at the strategic, operational and tactical levels within the African Peace and Security Architecture and has developed to be the regional center for the African Standby Force (ASF) in Eastern Africa. It addresses the complexities of contemporary UN/AU integrated Peace Support Operations through exposing actors to the multi-dimensional nature of these operations. The research conducted covers a broad spectrum ranging from conflict prevention, management, and post conflict reconstruction.

The Peace and Security Research Department (PSRD) of the IPSTC presents Occasional Paper Series 4 of (2013) on various themes on peace and conflict situation in Eastern Africa. IPSTC produced seven Occasional Papers in 2013. Five of them focused on Somalia while the others dealt with drivers of conflict and integration of child soldiers in eastern DRC. *Reintegration of Child Soldiers in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo: Challenges and Prospects*, provides insight into the plight of children in conflict prone Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo.

These papers provide insight into pertinent peace and security issues in the region that are useful to policy makers. These publications also provide significant contribution to the security debate and praxis in the region. The research products from IPSTC have been developed by researchers from Kenya, Burundi and Uganda and will inform the design of training modules at IPSTC.

This Occasional Paper is an important contribution to the vision and mission of IPSTC. The research and publication of this Occasional Paper has been made possible by the support of the Government of Japan through UNDP and the European Union.

Brig. Robert Kabage
Director, IPSTC

International Peace Support Training Center (IPSTC)

The International Peace Support Training Centre (IPSTC) is an international center of excellence in peace support operations training and research focusing on capacity building at the strategic, operational and tactical levels within the African Peace and Security Architecture. IPSTC is the regional training center for the African Standby Force (ASF) in Eastern Africa. It addresses the complexities of contemporary UN/AU integrated Peace Support Operations through exposing actors to the multi-dimensional nature of these operations.

The Research Department of the IPSTC undertakes research for two main purposes: a) the design of training curricula to support peace operations, and b) to contribute to the debate towards the enhancement of regional peace and security.

The Peace and Security Research Department (PSRD) develops annual occasional papers and issue briefs covering diverse themes from the Great Lakes region and the Horn of Africa. The 2013 Occasional Papers cover diverse topics in regional peace and security including the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Somalia. PSRD's Research Agenda is traditionally comprehensive and addresses issues related to a variety of regional issues. The research conducted covers a broad spectrum of peace and security concerns ranging from conflict prevention, management, and post conflict reconstruction. IPSTC has made considerable contribution in research and training on peace support issues in the Great Lakes region and the Horn of Africa.

The Target audiences for our publications are the decision makers in key peace and security institutions in the Great Lakes region and the Horn of Africa. These include policy makers in national security sector such as internal security, defence, judiciary and parliament and regional institutions dealing with conflict prevention and management such as East African Community (EAC), Inter Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), International Conference of the Great Lakes region (ICGLR), Regional Center for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (RECSA), African Union, Embassies of key development partners with special interests in regional peace and security issues and the United Nations agencies in the Great Lakes region and the Horn of Africa.

Occasional Papers are an important contribution to the vision and mission of IPSTC. The research and publication of this Occasional Paper has been made possible by the support of the Government of Japan through UNDP and the European Union.

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Abbreviations

AFDL	Alliance des Forces Démocratique pour la Libération du Congo
ALiR	Armée pour la Libération du Rwanda (the Rwanda Liberation Army)
CP	Child Protection
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child (of the UN)
DDRR	Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
FDD	Forces de Défense de la Démocratie
FDLR	Forces Démocratiques de libération du Rwanda
ICD	Inter-Congolese Dialogue
ICRC	The International Committee of the Red Cross
ILO	International Labor Organization
MONUC	UN Peacekeeping Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo
MONUSCO	UN Organization Stabilization Mission in Democratic Republic of Congo
NGOs	Non-governmental Organizations
PTSD	Post-traumatic Stress Disorder
RANU	Rwandese Alliance for National Unity
RCD	Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie
RDR	Rassemblement Démocratique pour la Rwanda
SCUK	Save the Children UK
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
UNLA	Ugandan National Liberation Army
WHO	World Health Organization

Abstract

A number of programs involving many actors have tried to address the issue of reintegration of child soldiers in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo but the process has been undermined by persistent instability in the region. The problem of follow up, re-recruitment of former child soldiers by different armed groups and the lack of long-term funding are some of the obstacles to successful child soldier reintegration in the DRC. The findings of this study suggest that the reintegration of child soldiers is a complex program and cannot be separated from the conditions of society in general especially in North and South Kivu. Analysis of Socio-economic, cultural, security and political factors is necessary to inform the implementation of effective DDR strategies.

Key words: disarmament, demobilization, rehabilitation and reintegration, the KIVU conflict.

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Background

Over 40 nations of the world are currently experiencing some form of armed conflict. These conflicts create instability and expose children to unfavorable environments. In recent cases of armed conflict, children have been increasingly victimized as both targets and agents of violence.¹ International organizations, policy-makers and humanitarian actors have raised the issue of child soldiers, making it one of the most debated humanitarian issues.

Recent conflict in DRC began in 1996, two years after the Rwanda genocide which is sometimes referred to as the “African world war” because it involved nine African nations and twenty armed groups.² Despite the signing of peace accords in 2003, fighting has continued in the east of the country up to now. Recruitment and use of child soldiers has characterized the on-going conflict in the DRC as all actors in the conflict and foreign armed groups like FDLR, M-23, the National Armed Forces (FARDC), and local Mai-Mai militias, have employed children as soldiers.

According to a UN (2013) report on children and conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo, about 1,200 child soldiers were recruited by various armed groups. About 80 per cent of the recruitment took place in North and South Kivu. However, from 2007, about 30,000 child soldiers have been demobilized officially although thousands others including many girls did not go through official demobilization. UNICEF and Save the Children estimated that approximately 11,000 child soldiers have self-demobilized.³ This paper presents key findings on a study of child soldier’s reintegration process in DRC, and highlights the challenges and prospects for an effective child soldier’s reintegration programme in the country.

1 Women, Peace and Security Report submitted by the Secretary General pursuant to Security Council resolution 1325, 2002

2 MacLaughlin, A. W., *Rumblings of War in the Heart of Africa*, 2004

3 Minani, Bihuzo R *Unfinished Business: A Framework for Peace in the Great Lakes*, Africa Security Brief, 2012

The paper is divided into six sections. Section 1 provides a brief introduction of the study area, problem statement, methodology, objectives, conceptual framework, literature review and the scope of the study. Section 2 provides the definitions of key concepts. Section 3 presents an overview of child soldiers in the DRC. Section 4 focuses on the existing rehabilitation and reintegration program and process. Section 5 presents the challenges and opportunities for effective child soldier reintegration in the DRC and section 6 offers the conclusion and recommendations.

1.2 Problem Statement

Several actions have been taken in the past to end recruitment and use of child soldiers in the DRC. As a result, nearly 30, 000 child soldiers have been released from the ranks of armed forces and groups and recruitment levels have progressively reduced. However, for thousands of child soldiers who remain or risk re-recruitment, the situation remains substantially unchanged.⁴ The ongoing conflict in eastern DRC undermines the reintegration of former child soldiers as many of them are re-recruited by different armed groups. These critical peace and security issues have not been studied or documented. This study, therefore, sought to examine the capacity of stakeholders to successfully implement the reintegration of child soldiers in the DRC.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were to:

- Examine how reintegration of child soldiers in the DRC has been implemented;
- Assess the capacity of the national government, civil society and international organizations in reintegration of child soldiers in the DRC; and
- Identify opportunities for effective reintegration of child soldiers in the DRC.

⁴ UNICEF, Humanitarian Action: Partnering for Children in Emergencies, Report, 2010

1.4 Methodology

The study is both descriptive and analytical in approach. It was completed through key informant interviews carried out in the eastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Secondary data was also gathered from official documents, as well as national and international NGOs involved in the demobilization and reintegration process. The first phase involved extensive review of relevant literature on reintegration of child soldiers. The second phase involved field work which was carried out in the DRC. In this phase, the researcher met government officials from North and South Kivu, as well as national and international NGOs involved in DDR program specifically oriented to child soldiers' demobilization and reintegration. Purposively selected officials of UNICEF, MONUSCO and the national commission in charge of Demobilization and Reintegration process were also interviewed. A questionnaire and an interview guide were used as data collection tools.

1.5 Literature Review

The case of the Democratic Republic of Congo has interested many researchers. Beneduce et al (2006) explores the functions of violence with particular regard to current demobilization and reintegration efforts in the DRC. The authors focused their study on North and South Kivu and examined the child soldiers' participation in the violence. They argue that child participation has important consequences on the society's social fabric and culture. DDR programs for child soldiers should therefore address these issues.

Geenen (2007) links security and development by focusing on the reintegration process of ex-combatants. He describes the current situation of ex-combatants in Burundi and the DRC and identifies conditions that affect their reintegration. Both cases show that local context, immediate surroundings, personal capacities, culture and background impact on the reintegration process. In order to address these conditions the DDR programs should be supplemented with other aid programs and sensitizing the communities in which the reintegration takes place. This confirms the cultural relativists' view.

1.6 Theoretical Framework

Since the 1990s, the problem of child soldiers has received a lot of international attention. The end of the cold war saw an increase in intrastate conflicts which resulted in the recruitment of child soldiers. The need for demobilizing and reintegrating the child soldiers subsequently arose. This paper is informed by two theories that attempt to explain the recruitment of child soldiers: universalism and cultural relativism. The universalist perspective of children's rights holds that "childhood constitutes a coherent group or state defined by identical needs and desires, regardless of class, ethnic, or racial differences [and is] based on an assumed identity of the biological and physiological attributes of children across the world."⁵ Cultural relativists accuse the universalists of ignoring the social, cultural, and political diversity of childhood when running DDR programs. Cultural relativists insist on a better understanding of the local conditions and military dynamics of particular conflict situations⁶. This paper leans more towards cultural relativism in analyzing the study findings.

1.6.1 Conceptual Framework: Definition of Key Terms

Disarmament refers to the collection of weapons from combatants and possible destruction of those weapons. However, this is often a symbolic and confidence-building gesture by fighting forces.⁷

Demobilization refers to the process of screening, registering and encampment of the disarmed ex-combatants. Some psycho-social counseling is provided at this stage with information dissemination on issues such as HIV/AIDS. Release is usually preferred for children associated with armed forces or armed groups.⁸

5 Fernando, J. L. 'Childen's Rights'. The Annals of American Academy of Political science, 575. London and Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2001, PP 147-157

6 Cohn, I., Progress and Hurdles on the Road to Preventing the Use of Children as Soldiers and Ensuring their Rehabilitation and Reintegration. *Cornell International Law Journal*, 37, 2004, pp. 531-540.

7 Nilsson A, Reintegrating Ex-combatants in Post-conflict Societies, 2005, p. 30.

8 Taouti-Cherif, R. and Sewonet, A. Crossing the Border: The Demobilization and Reintegration of Rwandan Boys and Girls Associated with Armed Groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Kigali: Save the Children UK. ,2004

Rehabilitation refers to the process whereby ex-combatants are prepared to adjust to civilian life before they are reintegrated into their communities. Rehabilitation often takes place in cantons/camps for a period of 3-6 months where ex-combatants receive psychosocial counseling.⁹

Reintegration is seen as a means of absorbing back people who were away from their original communities due to war and displacement. In this case, reintegration is a way of reforming identities and rebuilding a child's life. It is a two way process: the return of children and receiving returnees who fled or committed atrocities against the community.¹⁰

The Kivu Conflict

The main war in DRC officially ended in 2003 after the Sun City Peace Agreement. However, the two Kivu regions are still in conflict. This is rooted in the politicization of Hutu-Tutsi ethnic divisions and the perception of different groups as being authentic Congolese or outsiders. Tutsi groups and pro-Hutu Mayi Mayi are especially resistant to all forms of demilitarization because they wish to continue defending their local populations and land.¹¹

9 Sewonet, Abatneh A. Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Rwandan Child Soldiers, 2006

10 Krech, R. The Reintegration of Former Child Combatants: A Case Study of NGO Programming in Sierra Leone. Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, 2003

11 Thakur, M : Demilitarising militias in the Kivus (eastern democratic Republic of Congo), African Security Review 17.1

2.0 Overview of Child Soldiers in the DRC Conflict

The ongoing war in eastern DRC has affected thousands of people in local communities, especially women and children. Armed groups such as CNDP (2004- 2009, and M-23) and the Mai-Mai as well as foreign groups such as FDLR and FNL recruited numerous children from this region who were used on the frontlines.¹²

The violent conflict in North and South Kivu creates circumstances conducive to the recruitment of child soldiers. All the armed groups in Congo are guilty including the Congolese Army itself. Once abducted, the children are brutalized and forced to serve as soldiers, porters, and in the case of girls, sex slaves.¹³ Since 2004, there has been an effort to demobilize many of these children. About 31,000 children have been demobilized from Congo's battlefields. It is estimated that 3,500 to 8,000 children may still be with armed groups in the eastern Congo provinces alone.¹⁴

Demobilization, disarmament and reintegration programs tried to bring children out of the conflict and back to their communities, homes and families but limited resources and endemic conflict made it difficult for them to access education, training, food and shelter. Another reason is the limited funding for reintegration programs as it is seen as the responsibility of the country, yet DRC faces numerous economic problems. However, international donors continue to provide long-term assistance to community-based organizations (CBOs) and international NGOs that are providing education, shelter, counseling and vocational training to these populations.

2.1 Causes of Child Soldiers in DRC

On-going conflict in the east of the country causes the displacement of families, thus making children more vulnerable to recruitment by armed

¹² Jason Stearns From CNDP to M23: The Evolution of an Armed Movement in Eastern Congo, 2012

¹³ www.child-soldiers.org: Mai Mai child soldier recruitment and use: entrenched and unending, 2010.

¹⁴ CORI Country Report Democratic Republic of Congo; Human Rights Issues, April 2013.

groups. Lack of resources for education and training makes it difficult for former child soldiers, orphans, and street children to access education and lead a normal life. The high cost of attending school also makes it difficult for pupils or students to go to school and all these problems open the window for recruitment of child soldiers.¹⁵

When interviewed on the issue of child soldiers, some armed group leaders claimed that:

“When it comes to fighting, we mobilize the children and young people. And even those who stay in the village and don’t participate directly in the fighting are capable of protecting the population.¹⁶ Children are available as they have nothing else to do, they are extremely obedient to orders, they make few demands which are easy to satisfy and many of them join as virgins which help us preserve the rituals as children perform these on adults.”¹⁷

This statement from an armed group leader demonstrates the prevalence of child recruitment and use as entrenched in social attitudes towards children. Association with an armed group that is perceived to defend the interests of their community is seen as another duty for children already accustomed to hard work. This was reinforced by the genocide threats where different communities had to defend themselves since the Congolese army was unable to provide security in all parts of the DRC. Such expectations of children’s responsibility for the protection of families and communities are legitimized by poverty and lack of opportunities for education. Most children recruited by armed groups have little or no formal education.¹⁸

2.2 Effects of Child Soldiers

The number of children and adolescents who have witnessed or experienced violence in DRC is arguably high. They are left traumatized and psychologically affected. A study in the northeastern Ituri district

15 Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, Child Soldiers Global Report 2008.

16 Representative of Mai Mai Yakutumba, interviewed by the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers in South Kivu, 11 May 2009.

17 Former Mai- Mai Commander’s Declarations, May 2009.

18 www.child-soldiers.org: Coalition to stop the use of child soldiers: The Mai-Mai child Soldiers recruitment and use, 2010

bordering North Kivu revealed that 95% of people between the ages of 13 and 21 had experienced at least one, traumatic event.¹⁹ More than 90% of child soldiers in Goma and Bukavu had witnessed severe violence and/or murder. Acts of sexual abuse applied to almost one-third of them, while nearly 80% had been seriously beaten. Furthermore, 64% claimed they had personally killed someone. Children who were involved in killing are considered a threat even when demobilized and reintegrated.²⁰

The consequences of recruitment and use of children in armed forces are numerous and disastrous. They are brutalized, violated and raped, often contracting diseases such as HIV/AIDS. They are sent to massacre others and are themselves massacred. Those who survive lose their childhood irredeemably. The use of child soldiers is a crime, which must not only be denounced but also punished²¹

2.3 Girl Child Soldiers

It is estimated that approximately 40 % of child soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo are girls. Despite the high estimate, the numbers of girls are extremely low in reintegration programs. Some self-demobilized girls have been traced and included in the program, but most former girl soldiers in eastern DRC remain without any support. Evidently, very little is known about girl soldiers in the DRC. How girl soldiers are recruited or why they join, their experiences within armed groups, and their experiences after having left the armed groups, need to be investigated. The socio-cultural perceptions of girls in general, and in particular former girl soldiers, requires further investigation in order to understand how such negative perceptions about girl soldiers hamper their reintegration and how to properly address stigmatization of girl soldiers.²²

All the stakeholders in the reintegration of Congolese child soldiers concurred that very few girls had been demobilized and this remains a

19 Mels, C., Derluyn, I., Broekaert, E. and Rossee I, Y., Screening for Traumatic Exposure and Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms in Adolescents in the War-Affected Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo , Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine, June 2009.

20 Schauer, E :The Psychological Impact of Child Soldiering,2009

21 Ajedi-Ka/Projet Enfants Soldats : Working to Rehabilitate Child Soldiers in the DRC

22 Tonheim, M and Odden G ,Former Girl Soldiers in Congo: The Bumpy Road Towards Reintegration, 2013

priority concern for the future. NGOs and local organizations have found that though fewer girls participate in frontline combat, many are thought to be involved in armed groups in other capacities, including being used as porters, messengers, sex slaves and concubines.²³ It has been difficult to include the question of girls in advocacy discussions with various political and military authorities. NGOs and local organizations in the North and South Kivu programs reported that girls are rarely encouraged by their families to join and that the stigma, especially of an unmarried girl having been associated with military men, creates extremely difficult challenges for reintegration.²⁴

23 Bratislava, Slovakia: The Impact of Armed Conflict on Women and Girls, 2001.

24 United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, African Centre for Gender and Social Development (ACGSD): Violence Against Women in Africa: A Situational Analysis.

3.0 Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Child Soldiers in DRC: Study Findings

This section examines how reintegration of child soldiers has been implemented in the DRC and also explores how the national government and international community have responded to the challenge of reintegration of Congolese child soldiers. The focus is on how the numerous actors in charge of these programs contributed to the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration of child soldiers.

3.1 Different Actors and their Activities

The rehabilitation and reintegration of child soldiers in the DRC could not be possible without the contribution of many actors and institutions. Within DRC, several organizations were involved; from the national body in charge of the DDR process, Commission Nationale de la Demobilization et Reinsertion (CONADER), to international humanitarian agencies. However, all of these actors have been plagued with of low level of coordination, inefficiency, mismanagement, institutional rivalries and corruption.²⁵

3.1.1 The Demobilization and Reintegration Commission (CONADER)

The Commission Nationale de Désarmement, Démobilisation et Réinsertion (CONADER), was established in December 2003 to oversee a DDR program for an estimated 150,000 adult fighters and 30,000 children. CONADER is the main government body that coordinates the overall DDR programs in the DRC. Its main functions include implementing and coordinating rehabilitation and reintegration of ex-combatants, community sensitization and capacity-building activities.

25 UN Security Council, Twenty-first Report of the UN Secretary-General on UN Mission in the DRC, UN document S/2006/390, 13 June 2006, paragraph 50; MDRP, DDR in the Democratic Republic of Congo: Program Update. Washington DC, World Bank.

The CONADER programs have been undermined by ongoing conflicts and impunity in human rights violations including sexual violence which have hindered the successful reintegration of former child soldiers in North and South Kivu. Efforts by the government, the international community, donors and NGOs were hampered by persistent war, poverty, weak or non-existent state institutions and infrastructures. CONADER was also unable to put up sub-regional bodies in all parts of DRC which explains the lack of local ownership in its programmes.

3.I.2 Multi-Country Demobilization and Reintegration Program

The multi-country Demobilization and Reintegration Program (MDRP) was a regional structure to support the DDR of ex-combatants in the African Great Lakes Region. It was by far the largest DDR program in the world in terms of countries involved, individuals demobilized and level of funding provided by the World Bank. The program was set up in 2002 and closed in 2009. The World Bank and twelve other donors provided over US\$450 million to finance the demobilization and reintegration of 300,000 ex-combatants, among them 53,871 child soldiers (see Annex 2).

The seven countries of Angola, Burundi, Central African Republic, DRC, Rwanda and Uganda that had been involved in the DRC conflict were targeted. This World Bank program ended with significant achievements but many of the former child soldiers ended up being re-recruited into various armed groups in eastern DRC.

3. I.3 The UN Mission for the Stabilization of Congo (MONUSCO)

Through its radio channel, Radio Okapi, MONUSCO managed to sensitize armed groups to disarm and demobilize child soldiers. This strategy demonstrated the effectiveness of the media, especially in on-going conflicts as it is usually difficult to access child soldiers in such situations.

MONUSCO has two sections that deal with child soldiers: the Disarmament, Demobilization, Repatriation and Reintegration section (DDRR) and the Child Protection Section (CPS). The DDRR section undertakes screening of the ex-combatants which includes practical military skills tests to establish whether the individuals involved were actually combatants to weed out civilians seeking to benefit from the DDRR program. If qualified, they are sent to an assembly point for demobilization before the reintegration process. At that point, foreign child combatants are repatriated to their respective countries.

Between 2002 and mid-2011, the DDRR section of the UN Mission in the DRC repatriated more than 25,000 foreign ex-combatants (58% of total repatriated) and destroyed 1,435 arms and 46,006 rounds of ammunition. Rwanda was the destination of 80% of the total repatriated individuals. A strategic success was the facilitation of the demobilization and repatriation of some FDLR officers, including FDLR liaison officers from North and South Kivu, which consequently reduced the recruitment of child soldiers, logistical support and illicit trading by the armed groups.²⁶

3. I.4 International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)

The ICRC's major role in the reintegration process has been to re-establish family links and reunite child ex-combatants with their families. Once the latter gather at the rehabilitation centre, the ICRC visits and interviews each child in order to launch family tracing activities and facilitate communication between the two. The ICRC's major challenges during family tracing in DRC was that the much younger child ex-combatants between 10 and 14 years of age could not often remember much about their lives before joining the armed groups and were not always able to provide tangible information to enable family tracing. This problem was compounded when the child's family was located outside the DRC.²⁷

26 UN Security Council, Interim Report of the UN Group of Experts on the DRC, UN document S/2011/345, 12 May 2011.

27 Rakisits, C. 'Child Soldiers in the East of the Democratic Republic of Congo'. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 27 No. 4, 2008

3.I.5 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

Armed groups seeking to recruit young people often target refugee and IDP camps.²⁸ Because the youth are viewed as incapable of making major decisions in their lives, the responsibility to deliver assistance rests on powerful individuals or refugee leaders. In most cases, aid agencies do not provide aid to the young people directly but through their care-givers, thus leaving the young ones often frustrated. Young girls are particularly sidelined in the provision of aid. While there is an increasing awareness that women should be the initial point of control in distribution of assistance, in practice this has not been implemented. The response of the young people to the exclusion is sometimes to join an armed group where they could easily take charge of resources using their guns²⁹.

In the case of DRC, the UNHCR has played a limited role in the reintegration process in North and South Kivu because of the mandate that restricts its interventions. UNHCR's conventions and protocols do not specifically deal with issues related to child recruitment in armed conflicts but it plays a major role in the protection of refugee camps so that they do not become youth recruitment centres. In the DRC, one of UNHCR's roles was to provide separate accommodation for refugees and ex-combatants in the Bukavu Transit Camp. This provision was limited to no more than two days, until the ex-combatants were transferred to other areas.

3.I.6 United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

Generally, UNICEF has important responsibilities for the protection of vulnerable people such as children particularly in times of conflict. Within the framework of DDDR, UNICEF has the responsibility to monitor the implementation of CRC which is the standard against which UNICEF measures the success or failure of efforts to serve the best interest of children. UNICEF advocates for parental education and psycho-social counseling initiatives in all of its country programs in order to assist child

28 Alfredson, L. (Child Soldiers, Displacement and Human Security, 2002

29 Graca Machel, 10-Year Strategic Review: Children and Conflict in a Changing World-2009, UNICEF

development and build capacities that will facilitate a re-attachment to families and communities.³⁰

From 2001, UNICEF has been an active partner providing financial and technical support to NGOs and government to implement demobilization, rehabilitation and reintegration programs with a particular focus on child soldiers. However, UNICEF's involvement in rehabilitation and reintegration activities has been reduced significantly due to the recurrence of war in the region. Its main focus is limited to advocacy of children's rights and provision of training to the Congolese military officers on child rights (*Interviews with UNICEF's Child Protection Officer, Goma, 2013*). UNICEF is still active in the areas of psychological counseling, reintegration of self demobilized child soldiers and follow-up. Nevertheless, the DDDR program in that region, particularly the reintegration component was not successful because most of the ex-child soldiers who had been reintegrated with their communities were re-recruited by the various armed groups in the area.³¹

3.1.7 Save the Children

Save the Children is quite active in eastern DRC. It has played a major role in lobbying the government for opening separate rehabilitation centres for child soldiers in Uvira, Bukavu and Goma within South and North Kivu provinces. Prior to this, child soldiers were rehabilitated in the same centre as the adult ex-combatants, which exposed them to further physical abuse. Save the Children has also been involved in many projects focusing on reintegration activities and follow-up of ex-child soldiers after going back to their communities.

3.2 Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration

While disarmament and demobilization represent the point at which a child leaves military life, reintegration represents the process of establishing

30 Burde, D., *Education in Emergencies and Post-Conflict Situations: Problems, Responses and Possibilities*, 2005

31 Legrand, J. C., *Lessons Learned from UNICEF Field Programs For the Prevention of Recruitment, Demobilization and Reintegration of Child Soldiers*, 1999.

a civilian life. Reintegration programs are meant to support the child in constructing a new, positive course of development.³²

The following section discusses the various forms of reintegration and rehabilitation of child soldiers that have been used in eastern DRC. The rehabilitation and reintegration program targeted 20,291 children for demobilization and reintegration before the war restarted in eastern DRC. Humanitarian agencies (UNICEF, Save the Children) reported that out of the targeted 20,291 children, only 10,975 were involved in reintegration programs. This implies that 9,316 were reunified with their families or were re-recruited. Different approaches were used in child soldier reintegration the two most important are social and economic reintegration. Social and economic reintegration can be separated but must be executed at the same time for a successful reintegration process.

3.2.1 Social Reintegration

The social aspects of reintegration include the permanent role of the child's family, and key community members. Their role and capacity to support and advise the demobilized children was more important in the reintegration process than the role of NGOs. The roles of family and local community were critical in follow-up. Some NGOs requested three-month follow-up reports on demobilized children from their local partners, while the latter were not remunerated for that work. NGO objectives were to support the initiatives of local organizations that advocated for children in need of special protection.

The three-month reports from families and local community members constituted a monitoring and evaluation tool. Social reintegration promoted social activities that engaged former child soldiers in civilian life. Religious activities, sports, cultural events, and youth dance or theatre groups contributed to the social reintegration of demobilized child soldiers. The social rehabilitation and reintegration of child soldiers was executed through two main aspects: family reunification and school education.

32 Beth, V., *Child Soldiers Preventing, Demobilizing and Reintegrating*, 2001

The tracing of families is a priority during a child soldier's reintegration process. In North and South Kivu, this activity was led by the ICRC, national Red Cross volunteers, Save the Children and their extensive network of local partners.³³ While often constrained by security and access issues, this system has functioned effectively for more than five years. Family reunification was not always successful for all child soldiers. Some children asked to be resettled far from their homes because they feared going back to their villages where they would be accused of atrocities and violence. That situation compelled NGOs to implement a transition phase to prepare child soldiers for reunification.

Assessment of community contexts exposed instances where family or community mediation may have been necessary and/or where neighbors could reject the return of the child because of an unacceptable act committed during the conflict or where the security situation was too precarious.

Education was passionately desired by the demobilized children and their families but this faced many obstacles. Both access to and quality of education in DRC had deteriorated significantly in recent years due to the conflict and development setbacks. Government statistics reported that school enrolment rates had dropped from 94 per cent in 1978 to 60 per cent in 2002. As at the time of this study, in North and South Kivu provinces, the rates were estimated to be lower than those of 2002.³⁴ The program for school education was implemented in collaboration with education authorities. The authorities facilitated the reintegration of many former child soldiers who had missed many years of schooling. In South Kivu, Save the Children and local partners combined non-formal education with vocational training activities.

3.2.2 Economic Reintegration

For those who were not able to attend schools because of age, reintegration activities were oriented towards enhancing their capacity to financially support themselves. These activities were divided into three phases. The

³³ The Democratic Republic of Congo Country of Origin Information (COI) Report, March 2012.

³⁴ Kasuku, Kalaba E. and Wasso Milenge, J. 'Diagnostic Institutionnel des ONG Locales Partenaires de Save the Children travaillant avec les enfants en Situation Difficile dans Sud-Kivu (Bukavu) et Nord-Kivu (Goma)'. Save the Children, 2002

first phase aimed at securing their immediate survival until they could provide for themselves or recover the family network. This was followed by an intermediate phase that sought to give the ex-child soldiers the skills, knowledge and information to enable them to support themselves.

The final stage was achieving economic self-sufficiency through production or gainful employment. Apart from those who were able to join schools, most of the other demobilized child soldiers were interested in technical and vocational training like carpentry, welding and agro-pastoral activities. Agro-pastoral activities were found to be the most effective because they facilitated the most immediate and tangible impact. However, this study found out that the results or impact of these micro-projects may not have been immediately ascertainable as the reintegration process was faced with a myriad challenges. Lack of funds, corruption, and disruption by armed groups that were not party to the ceasefire/peace accords constituted the main challenges³⁵.

35 Amnesty International, Democratic Republic of Congo: Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) and Reform of the Army. London: Amnesty International, 2007

4.0 Challenges of Effective Reintegration in DRC

4.1 Lack of Long-term Financing

Besides corruption and disruption by armed groups, funding of education for ex-child soldiers was insufficient and only covered a period not exceeding two years. This de-motivated the children especially when they knew that they would return home to depend on families affected by war and/or displacement and unable to pay their school fees. The lack of long term planning was responsible, among other reasons, for the failure of the reintegration of former child soldiers. For such programmes, sound and sustainable financing models should be considered.

4.2 Security Situation in DRC

The reintegration process could not be effective due to persistent fighting in eastern DRC. The M23 rebel group and various other armed groups launched several attacks in the region from 2011. Factors like ethnicity, minerals, contentious citizenship, security and grievance fuelled the violent conflict resulting in frequent massacres, mass displacement and human rights violations. These issues are still relevant despite the recent defeat of the M23 rebels. Even after various peace agreements, thousands of civilians have continued to die daily. Regular Congolese soldiers (FARDC) and armed groups operating within this region, have consistently perpetrated violent acts for the control of natural resources mainly in the eastern parts of the country.³⁶

4.3 The Problem of Re-recruitment

Re-recruitment rates in eastern DRC have generally been regarded as high. About 60% of active child soldiers have belonged to one or two armed groups.³⁷ The insufficient attention to the reintegration program made

³⁶ Autesserre, S. *The Trouble with the Congo: Local Violence and the Failure of International Peace building*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010.

³⁷ *The hidden crisis: Armed conflict and education: Independent report publication commissioned by UNESCO on behalf of the international community*, 2011

former child soldiers available and ready to rejoin the militias. Even if the re-recruitment were almost exclusively done through abduction and coercion, it is their previous experience with armed groups that has made them the preferred candidates.

4.4 Opportunities for Effective Reintegration of Child Soldiers in Eastern DRC

The DRC was one of the first states to ratify the Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict and to declare 18 years as the minimum age for recruitment. It is also important to mention that several peace and cease-fire agreements have consistently stressed the obligation of armed groups to neither recruit nor use children and to ensure their demobilization.³⁸ However, international pressure regarding child recruitment has achieved some results in the DRC.

A number of armed groups and the government have made pledges to UNICEF and the Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children in Armed Conflict to stop recruiting children and to release those who have been recruited. Save the Children and other partners have been trying to convince many armed groups not to recruit child soldiers. The following armed groups have formally agreed to observe the Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflicts:

- The armed forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC) have concluded an action plan with the United Nations in line with Security Council resolutions 1539 (2004) and 1612 (2005).
- Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda (FDLR).
- Front de résistance patriotique en Ituri/Front populaire pour la justice au Congo (FRPI/FPJC).
- Mai Mai Alliance des patriotes pour un Congo libre et souverain (APCLS).

38 International Review of the Red Cross (2011), 'Understanding Armed Groups and the Applicable Law: Humanitarian Debate'. Law, Policy and Action, Volume 93 Number 882 June 2011.

- Mai Mai “Lafontaine” and former elements of the Patriotes résistants congolais (PARECO).
- Mai Mai Simba ‘Morgan’.
- Mai Mai ‘Tawimbi’.
- Mouvement du 23 Mars (M23)³⁹

This suggests that opportunities for achieving the release and reintegration of child soldiers may be increasing. It is hoped that in North and South Kivu, future programs for child soldiers will benefit from lessons learned in other parts of the DRC and from harmonized approaches.

4.5 Implementation of International Laws

The implementation of international laws became effective with the detention of Thomas Lubanga Dyilo, who has been tried on crimes relating to the recruitment of children as soldiers. Prosecutors began investigating crimes committed in the DRC in June 2004. The Court’s trial chamber confirmed the charges against him and he was the first person from the DRC to stand trial at the ICC.⁴⁰ The surrender of Bosco Ntaganda to ICC also had a positive effect on the issue of child soldiers in DRC, both for the government forces and armed groups. All armed group leaders agreed with UNICEF and MONUSCO to closely cooperate in the demobilization and reintegration of child soldiers and not to recruit them.

4.6 Determination of UN and Humanitarian Agencies

Reintegration of former child soldiers in the DRC has to a large extent been the domain of international agencies. International NGOs have been the main contributors of funds to support research on the issue. Most of their academic work has addressed programs ran by NGOs in many countries. Even though the activities of the civil society have been limited, the work of these NGOs has endured even during periods of heavy fighting.

39 Children and Armed Conflict, Report of the Secretary-General, A/67/845– S/2013/245.

40 UN News: ‘Congolese War Crimes Suspect Turned Over’, October 18, 2007.

4.7 The Presence of MONUSCO

With the deployment of the first United Nations task force to the Kivus in May 2003, MONUC was able to establish a UN presence in vital locations, including those inaccessible to military observers. In addition, these deployments provided the necessary support to DDRR-related activities. The robust and mobile nature of the task force, equipped with armored personnel carriers and helicopters, has permitted the simultaneous deployment of MONUSCO's DDRR teams to some of the remotest parts of the region. The increased mobile capability brought with it a quick response predisposition that has been lacking for many years.⁴¹

4.8 The Defeat of M23

The recent victory of the Congolese army against M-23 rebels is a positive development for stabilization of the security situation in Eastern DRC and a window of opportunity for all stakeholders to implement a viable child Soldiers DDRR. Many areas will become more accessible for identification, disarmament, and reintegration and follow up of ex-child soldiers. However, successful reintegration of child soldiers in Eastern DRC will depend on how MONUSCO and FRDC will proceed on disarming many other armed groups that still operating in the region. It will also depend on how the DRC government will solve the problem of nationality of Banyamulenge. The question is of whether or not people of Rwandan origin, or Banyarwanda (Hutu, Tutsi and Twa), can claim Zairean citizenship on basis of being native to Zaire as of August 1885, when this country came into existence as the Congo Free State. If so, they would, as other indigenous people all over Africa, lay claim to ancestral lands in eastern Zaire.⁴²

41 Boshoff, H., Overview of MONUC's Military Strategy and Concept of Operations, 2010, p. 142

42 Aderman, H& Suhrke, 2000, The Rwanda crisis from Uganda to Zaire, the path of a genocide, London, transaction publishers, p51-59

5.0 Conclusion

The problem of re-recruitment of child soldiers by various armed groups in the eastern DRC poses a serious challenge for effective reintegration of child soldiers. National and international efforts have been made to demobilize and reintegrate child soldiers in the society. The World Bank and other donors funded a high level multi-country demobilization and reintegration process which took into account a special program for child soldiers. Despite a nationwide reduction in child soldiers, recruitment persists especially in the South and Northeastern parts of the country.

On-going conflict, poverty, displacement, lack of long-term funding and adequate education programs for child soldiers, remain critical challenges towards the successful reintegration of child soldiers in eastern DRC. Furthermore, girl soldiers are not seen in the demobilization programs while around 40 % of child soldiers in DRC are girls and future studies could help identify the reasons behind the non-demobilization of girl soldiers in the DRC.

However, there has been some success in the rehabilitation and reintegration of child soldiers in the country. The national government and different armed groups are aware of the problem associated with child soldiers and following the indictment of high ranking officers at the ICC for the recruitment and use of child soldiers, many are now moving away from this practice. MONUSCO and other international and humanitarian agencies in the region have managed to bring and retain the attention of policy makers and human rights defenders on the issues of child soldiers. The recent defeat of the M23 rebel group is likely to increase the chances for successful reintegration of child soldiers in the DRC.

5.1 Recommendations

For effective child soldier reintegration in the DRC, the following recommendations may be addressed to the government of the DRC, the international community (UN/AU), and the different armed groups.

Government of DRC and International Community (UN/AU/Regional Organizations)

- Initiate as soon as possible, an inclusive regional peace agreement that addresses the question of nationality of the Banyamulenge and the repatriation of foreign armed groups from the DRC.
- Plan and implement peace education programs for the Congolese population and their leaders to enhance their levels of tolerance and respect for others. The different ethnic groups in eastern DRC need to embrace the virtues of non-violence and promote a culture of peace. This is the responsibility of the government of DRC, regional organizations, AU and UN.
- Prioritize child protection training for military officers, political and local leaders, especially those involved in PSOs. This is likely to produce positive effects in terms of persuasion and dissemination. Save the Children's training was consistently cited as one of the most influential factors in the progress of ex-child soldiers.
- Establish structures for civilian protection and coordinate with humanitarian agencies for better monitoring of human rights violations and child protection.

Humanitarian and UN Agencies

- To maintain contact with the rebel group leaders and sensitize them on the importance and necessity of releasing all child soldiers and to participate in the reintegration process. This participation can only take place when they understand the seriousness of the question of child soldiers.
- To encourage the practice of self-demobilization by sensitizing local communities, military and political leaders on the necessity of demobilization and reintegration of girl soldiers.

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Annexes

Annex 1: A Map of Eastern DRC



Annex 2: Child Soldiers Demobilized by MDRP

	FEMALE	MALE	TOTAL NUMBER
Angola	n. a	n. a	13,804
Burundi	49	3212	3261
CAR	9	14	23
DRC	n. a	n. a	30,210
ROC	n. a	n. a	348
Rwanda	2	669	671
Uganda	1778	3776	5554
TOTAL	1829	7571	53,871

Source: MDRP, Monthly Progress Report, table 2, October 2008; MDRP Final ICM table10, cited in Scan team, Multi-country Demobilization and Reintegration Program: End of Program Evaluation, Final Report, June 2010.

Reintegration of Child Soldiers in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo: *Challenges and Prospects*

The war situation in DR Congo which began in 1996, two years after the Rwanda genocide, devastated the country and is sometimes referred to as the “African world war” because it involved nine African nations and twenty armed groups. Despite the signing of peace accords in 2003, fighting has continued in the east of the country up to now. In DRC, the prevalence of rape and other sexual violence and the recruitment and use of child soldiers are described as the worst in the world.

Armed groups in the conflict such as FDLR, M23, the national armed forces of the DRC (FARDC), and local Mai-Mai militias have employed children as soldiers. In 2007, some 30,000 child soldiers were demobilized. Thousands of others, including many girls, went through self demobilization. UNICEF and Save the Children estimated that approximately 11,000 child soldiers self-demobilized.

This paper seeks to present key findings on child soldiers’ reintegration process in DRC, as well as highlight the challenges and prospects for an effective child soldiers reintegration policy in that country.

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