THE EFFECTS OF INTRASTATE WAR AND REINTEGRATION ON LIBERIAN CHILD SOLDIERS: PART II

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ABSTRACT

The main focus of this article is on the effects of intrastate war and the reintegration of Liberian child soldiers into their families and former communities. In this context, legal frameworks for the protection of children, types of recruitment (forced, persuasive, and "voluntary"), reasons for recruitment, and the need for personal protection are dealt with. Also discussed are disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration processes, roles of communities, provision of psycho-social support and care to reintegrated child soldiers, the physical, social and emotional effects they experience, their reintegration into communities, social networks, the disengagement of children from former commanders, and the skills training options provided to these children. In this empirical, qualitative study, primary data was obtained from focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews, and secondary data was obtained from documentary sources. Some of the primary data substantiated the secondary data, confirming the finding that war caused profound damage and heartache but that it also helped children to become resilient. The study found that the brutal effects of war, culminating in the reintegration of child soldiers into communities, manifested themselves over many years.

Keywords: legal frameworks; child protection; social reintegration processes; community reconciliation

INTRODUCTION

The use of child soldiers in Liberian intrastate wars has been documented since the start of open hostilities in 1989. At every stage of the civil or intrastate conflict, different factions involved in the Liberian civil war used children to fight the war of adults. Children were recruited to fight, and where they joined "voluntarily" there were compelling factors that made them join, such as joining to avoid sexual abuse and being killed, and the lack of food in the community. Many children were abducted against their will and had little choice than to join rebel forces. Child soldiers have become weapons of choice in contemporary wars because for those who "recruit" them, "children are cheap, expendable and easier to condition into fearless killing and unthinking obedience" (UN Department of Public Information 2001, 10). Children are more impressionable and vulnerable to indoctrination. They can learn skills and tasks quickly and are fast and agile on the battlefield. They are seen as more willing than adults to take risks, and more loyal and less threatening to adult leadership. Children are typically viewed as cheap and expendable labour requiring less food and no payment.

A rebel incursion into Liberia by Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) in December 1989 degenerated into a seven-year bloody intrastate war that was characterised, among other things, by the proliferation of warring factions that deliberately resorted to the recruitment of child soldiers (Frempong 2002, 3). It is on record that 10 per cent of the estimated 60,000 fighters in the first Liberian civil war (1989–1997) were children below the age of 15, and another 20 per cent were between 15 and 17 years old (Human Rights Watch 1994, 2–3). While the NPFL pioneered the systematic use of small boys recruited by force and trained as rebel fighters in its infamous Small Boys Unit, all fighting factions, as well as government forces and affiliated militias, have since widely used children. The Liberian government conscripted or enlisted children under the legal age into the national armed forces to participate actively in hostilities. More than 15,000 were under the age of 15, and although perpetrators knew this, they still contravened various laws relating to international armed conflict (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia (TRC) 2009, 54).

For the period from 1989 to 1997, estimates of the number of children in the fighting forces in Liberia ranged from a low of 6,000 to a high of 15,000. For the period 1999 to 2003, 11,780 children were demobilised (9,042 boys and 2,738 girls). However, analysts suggest that several thousand children may have been left out of the demobilisation process and that the actual number may rather be in the region of 15,000 to 21,000 child soldiers (TRC 2009, 54).

There is no question that the war had terrible consequences for children associated with armed forces and armed groups (called child soldiers for the purpose of this study), and that they went through unimaginable psychological, social, and physical difficulties as a result of their participation. Nevertheless, children proved to display remarkable resilience and resourcefulness in dangerous situations. Rather than depending on adults in times of despair, they adopted effective coping mechanisms while being child soldiers

and taking part in the reintegration process, overcoming fears and anxieties, fending for themselves and younger ones, and displaying great resilience to survive (Abatneh 2006, 68). The ability of child soldiers to deal with factors that threaten post-war stability transforms them into key elements in the "calculus" of national security, and makes them key players in shaping the present as well as the future of the state (Ismail 2001, 4), be it functional or dysfunctional.

Legal frameworks for child protection, reasons for recruitment, effects of war and reintegration, experiences while in captivity, disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) processes, disengaging from former commanders, roles of communities, psycho-social support and special care, how children's lives were changed forever, and children's integration options form part of this article.

LEGAL FRAMEWORKS FOR CHILD PROTECTION

It is critical to understand and analyse the different global, national and regional legal and statutory frameworks in place for the protection of children. The standards to protect children involved in armed conflict are found in international humanitarian laws, international human rights laws, international jurisprudence, United Nations (UN) Security Council resolutions, and regional and national legislation and policies.

Only the relevant legal aspects are mentioned and applied in this study to serve as a basis to confirm the seriousness of preventing the recruitment, abduction, selling and trafficking of children with the purpose of getting them to serve in the armed forces, and of enhancing the sustainable reintegration of these children.

International Humanitarian Laws

International frameworks relating to child soldiers have evolved over time, starting with the Geneva Convention of 1949 and its additional protocols. This treaty deals among other things with children caught up in hostilities, and advocates the protection of vulnerable groups, including children. It defines a person younger than 15 years of age as a child. The convention's Optional Protocol 1 (UN General Assembly 2000a) is more explicit on the protection of children. It makes an urgent request to show special respect for children, and gives parties involved in a conflict the responsibility to ensure children's special protection. The Optional Protocol 2 (UN General Assembly 2000b) emphasises the care and protection of children, reunification of those separated from their parents, and the consent of primary caregivers in matters of child soldiers.

Different conventions constitute international humanitarian law, and these emphasise the need to protect civilians during armed conflict, differentiate between civilians and combatants, and afford child soldiers the special respect and protection they are entitled to. Member states are called upon to take decisions and immediate action regarding persistent perpetrators and violations.

The Geneva Convention (1949), which aims to protect civilian persons in times of war, states that children below the age of 15 who are orphaned or separated from their families as a result of war should not be left to their own resources, and that matters relating to their maintenance and their religious and academic education should be facilitated by persons who share their cultural traditions.

International Human Rights Laws

International human rights laws constitute a set of laws enhancing the protection of children involved in armed conflict. This includes the International Labour Organisation Convention No. 182 (International Labour Organization 1999) on prohibiting child labour and taking immediate action to eliminate the worst forms of child labour.

The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (UN General Assembly 1998) is a single treaty that criminalises violations of children's rights and holds parties in a conflict liable for violations. It specifies the recruitment of children into fighting forces as a war crime.

The single most important piece of legislation is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN General Assembly 1990) which has several provisions on the reintegration of child soldiers and on the conservation of tradition and culture as human rights. The Optional Protocol to this convention, which was drafted in 2000 and came into effect in 2002 (UN General Assembly 2000a), increased the age of recruitment into armed forces to 18. It emphasised the need for governments to protect children from all forms of sexual exploitation and abuse, abduction and trafficking.

Another legal provision that is relevant to this study is the Paris Principles (UNICEF 2007b) which is a review of the Cape Town Principles. The Paris Principles state that any solution relating to child soldiers should address the needs of these children and incorporate activities to develop and support local capacity to provide a protective environment for children. The interventions should prevent discrimination against girls, call for long-term commitment by all actors to prevent the unlawful recruitment or use of children, promote their release, protect them, and support their reintegration.

The Paris Principles emphasise that families, clans, and communities should be actively involved to develop and implement interventions regarding children to find solutions for a long-term reintegration process. There should be continuous advocacy to raise awareness of the criminality of recruiting children (UNICEF 2007b, 5), in particular among parents who "volunteer" the services of their children. Where formal DDR processes have been put in place, special provision should be made for children to reintegrate into communities and families or to be integrated into an appropriate family and community environment (UNICEF 2007b, 10, 33).

Regional Legislation

Regional bodies have attempted to develop regional frameworks that reinforce their commitment to protect children. For instance, the Organisation of African Unity developed the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (OAU 1990) and the Commission of the Economic Community of West African States developed the Child Policy (ECOWAS 2009). Member states of ECOWAS, such as Liberia, applied the UNCRC to the Liberian context, and the Liberian Children's Law (Government of Liberia 2011) was developed to enhance the protection of children generally and child soldiers specifically. Section 22(1), (2) and (3) of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child calls upon OAU member states to respect international humanitarian laws, which prohibit any child below the age of 18 years to be recruited into armed forces, and which urge member states to provide care and protection to all those affected by armed conflict.

National Legislation and Policies

Liberia has ratified several UN conventions that provide a framework for the protection of children in armed conflict. The country also promulgated the Children's Law of Liberia in 2011. Sections 3 to 7 of this law recommend the institution of child welfare committees in every community and acknowledge the right of the child by providing sustainable reintegration processes for returning ex-combatants. The monitoring and follow-up of children are vital for ensuring long-term protection and care, upholding rights and benefits, preventing re-recruitment, and responding appropriately to children who experience serious difficulties with reintegration. In sections 4 and 5 of this law the focus is on the functions of child welfare committees to implement welfare plans and to be aware of the roles of parents, teachers, and families for the successful integration of child soldiers.

REASONS FOR RECRUITMENT

Stohl (2002, 12) defines a child soldier as any child (boy or girl) under the age of 18 who is compulsorily, forcibly or voluntarily recruited or otherwise used in hostilities by armed forces, paramilitaries, civil defence units, or other armed groups. This definition clearly emphasises the modes (manners) of recruitment as well as the extent of involvement. Child soldiers are recruited, not only by opposition rebel groups, but also by governmental armed forces around the world because they are easier to abduct, subjugate, and manipulate than adults. However, governments have used the issue of child soldiers as a powerful tool in discrediting rebel movements when their own practices may be equally brutal (McIntyre 2005, 91).

Children who find themselves in a situation of war and violence, and whose social ties suffer a breakdown, cannot be considered exercising free choice. A child soldier

summarised the predicament as follows: "Whenever the rebels would come, we were running. I decided it was too much running, so I had no choice but to join."

Therefore the modes of recruitment may be described as forced, persuasive or "voluntary." Forced recruitment includes abduction and press-ganging as well as the use of the quota system according to which families or communities may be required to provide a specified number of recruits (McConnan and Uppard 2001, 34). In the last instance, parents may hand over their children who are economically less important to the household than productive young men. Ironically, sending more children off to fight can be a way of securing local popularity. Also, armed groups may abduct children as a weapon against the children's own families and communities. The persuasive mode includes the use of propaganda, offers of food, promises of clothing or money and better opportunities, and the peer influence of those already recruited. Lastly, some children "volunteer" to join to seek economic livelihood and personal physical security or the protection of family or community, to avenge atrocities committed against close relations and loved ones, or simply for lack of anything else to do (McConnan and Uppard 2001, 36–37). However, this "voluntarism" connotes the loosest interpretation of a "volunteer" since the brutal circumstances leave very little room for a genuine choice. Again, the ability of children, whose opinions are unformed and uninformed, to objectively understand and evaluate the risks and advantages involved in bearing arms is too misleading to be considered voluntary, as opinions are not formed freely but by a manipulation of their emotional and physical immaturity. Therefore, the term "voluntary" has to be used cautiously when discussing child soldiers. Indeed, in the harsh war situation, recruitment becomes the best available survival strategy, and children may join "voluntarily" for their own protection and survival, but their actions are rarely voluntary in any genuine sense.

Children also join to bring back food for the family or other material goods to support them. War in some respect becomes an opportunity for a rise to prominence, something which pre-war Liberian society did not allow for the youth. In Liberia, becoming a fighter was also a form of freedom, since there was food, free drugs, alcohol, and girlfriends; everything the youth often did not or could not have access to during the pre-war period due to low levels of education, high unemployment, and economic dependence (Özerdem and Podder 2010, 57). Some children perceived that they and their families would be better protected from harassment if they were to join the fighting forces. Some girls joined in search of luxury material items such as make-up or shoes, or to be with a relative that was already serving in the fighting forces.

Specht (2006, 11) argues that it is striking in this case that explicitly "feminist" motives for enlisting have been so widely cited. Girls who were interviewed gave two main reasons for taking up arms: the first was to protect themselves and other women from sexual violence and rape, and the second was to avenge such violence by proving they were equal to boys (Specht 2006, 16). However, many girls willingly sought or were forced to form relationships with male combatants because they needed protection.

Some girls stayed with a particular male combatant after being raped by him, in some cases stating that the relationship was based on "love." In a conflict situation, there was evidence that the prevalence of gun ownership amongst males was accompanied by increasing incidences of rape.

Some relevant extracts from the final report of the TRC of Liberia (2009) summarise the involvement and recruitment of children in armed forces, and provide evidence of the suffering that children went through during armed conflict (TRC 2009, 55).

- Forced recruitment of children usually followed a similar pattern. Children were captured either when they were alone or forcefully separated from their parents. Then they were taken along by the armed group and with or without training sent into combat. The following account by a then 13-year-old boy from Monrovia is thus typical of many children:

  "I was actually abducted by a group of militias … of the government forces and taken to [a base near the frontline]. Without training I was armed. I was afraid to go on the front because every day the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) rebels were advancing and strong men were dying … One day, General … [name of a general] came and told all of us to go to the front. LURD was in Clara and Vai towns, we were in Waterside. Anyone who refused to go was shot in his head or body or toes or leg."

- If the children themselves or their family members resisted abduction and forced conscription, they were physically abused or threatened to be hurt or killed. An 18-year-old who was abducted and forcibly recruited by the LURD in 2003, tells how he was coerced into joining:

  "In February 2003, LURD fighters captured [the town] where I lived. … we saw ten LURD fighters. We were compelled to take arms. My friend Abu refused and the fighters cut his throat in my presence, so I accepted it."

- Forced recruitment was deliberate, widespread and systematic by all fighting factions. Even government troops, who were supposed to protect the population, preyed on children and enlisted them by force, often systematically by selecting young boys and girls from schools or by raiding internally displaced persons (IDP) camps to forcibly enlist new recruits. International and local child rights organizations reported that in mid-2003 parents in Monrovia had stopped sending their children to school because children as young as nine years old disappeared on their way to school. The common practice was to forcefully recruit children right at, or near schools.

Thus, many children were forced to join the fighting forces for a variety of reasons. The same problems that resulted in a lack of supportive systems for children were also the reasons why children joined the fighting forces. The large-scale atrocities committed in communities during the conflicts pushed children to join in search of food, protection,

belonging, and revenge, but also excitement. These occurrences caused profound damage and also heartache in children's lives. The effects of war, culminating in children's reintegration into former and new communities, manifest themselves over many years.

EFFECTS OF THE WAR ON CHILDREN, AND THEIR REINTEGRATION

At every stage of the civil or intrastate war in Liberia different factions used children to fight the war of adults. Different regional initiatives were established to address the crisis. The one with the most lasting solutions was the 2003 Accra Accord, which led to the establishment in October 2003 of the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNDP 2006, 8).

The war had diverse effects on children in Liberia. As their social growth and development were interrupted, children lost their innocence because they had to take on the roles and functions of adults. Children were psycho-socially affected due to the atrocities they had witnessed and those they had been made to commit. As a result, children developed negative coping mechanisms (e.g. drug and alcohol abuse) to deal with these situations. Attachment to parents was replaced by attachment to commanders, which in some cases had a negative impact on children. The girl soldiers were very vulnerable as they were sexually exploited, often resulting in pregnancy.

According to Wessels (2009, 643) and Brett (2000, 8), child soldiers are not just victims like other war-affected children. They have been made perpetrators of violence as well. They are trained to kill, inducted into drug use and are made to experience events that are traditionally outside the realm of children. Child soldiers, therefore, are located in a twilight zone, which embodies the contradictions and ambiguities of being simultaneously children and soldiers as well as victims and perpetrators. Separating the "child" from the "soldier" and the "victim" from the "perpetrator" becomes a problem that needs special attention in the eyes of their families and communities as they carry the stigma and scars of their violent past.

Experiences of Children While in Captivity

Children experienced suffering while in the bush; some were shot at but managed to survive, whereas others died. They witnessed deaths of colleagues and reported seeing a lot of wicked things, watching colleagues being raped, killed, and amputated. Girls especially went through a lot of sexual abuse and harm. The following responses of children who were interviewed confirmed their experiences:

The girls could be raped in my presence.

One of the commanders killed a pregnant woman and removed the foetus, and cut it into two.

> We were denied food whenever we got lost. We were made to roll in dirty waters and our clothes would get torn. Whenever you would complain to the commander you would be harassed more.

> If a girl is found loving several, they would shave her hair and undress her.

The Liberian government had a unit of very young boys who belonged to the NPFL and were trained to terrorise people. They were nicknamed "worse" (i.e. the worst at meting out atrocities to their victims). These were young, short boys whose common method of torturing adults was to inflict pain on sensitive body parts (genitals): all they had to do was ensure they were within range in terms of reach and height. They referred to this as "making adults come up to their (small children's) level." This was very painful.

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) (2007a, 8–9) states that child soldiers in Liberia were largely perceived with fear because of the way they terrorised communities. Often under the influence of drugs, they could be disproportionately violent. Harsh behaviours were attributed to factors such as the use of magic charms, which were believed to make them resistant to attacks, thus reducing fear, and the fact that they were young and less socialised, leaving them highly susceptible to peer pressure and other manipulative influences. These circumstances turned them into killing machines unaware of the moral implications of their actions (McIntyre 2005, 1). One of the boys who were interviewed said:

> If you move lovingly from one person to another, they would cut your hands or legs. They heard my friend was moving with another man, they cut her leg. She now uses crutches. I witnessed several rape cases; my sister was raped by more than five soldiers, and she died in the process.

The atrocities meted out to victims corrupted children's minds. It left them in fear that if they did not follow the instructions they would meet the same fate. As a result, children were compelled to commit atrocities out of fear. The Liberian TRC (2009, 65) states that there is no doubt that children were at the receiving end of some of the worst atrocities, but were also involved in committing brutal acts of killing and torturing civilians. Some of the child rights violations were even committed by children on children. Often the violation of child rights and children committing crimes are closely linked, in that children were first forcibly recruited, physically and psychologically coerced into submission, and then asked to commit acts that were equally heinous against enemies and other civilians (TRC 2009, 65).

Armed groups committed crimes of sexual violence against girls (some of them 10 years of age or younger), including rape, gang rape, sexual slavery, and forced marriages. Liberian girls suffered immeasurable physical and psychological pain and trauma from sexual violence and rape, which were widespread and systematically committed during the war (TRC 2009, 96–97). Specht (2006, 16) asserts that although the war in Liberia has ended and the girls have stopped fighting, it is unclear how their involvement with armed groups will affect their future lives. They face many challenges

and adopt different methods of coping with life as civilians and possibly as mothers or wives. For many, the hardships they face in rebuilding traumatised lives in the context of peace and reconstruction prove just as difficult as the hazards of war.

Many children returned to the same communities or neighbourhoods as their tormentors where they now have to interact with them. They are constantly reminded of their ordeals and often have to live close to former perpetrators who continue to threaten them. Responses from the interviews showed that the children's way of life changed as a result of the war. This was seen in the children's unorthodox way of behaving: applying force was the only way of life they knew. The skills to negotiate, bargain, and live in harmony were absent. Politeness was negatively construed, indicating interrupted socialisation, child growth and development. A former child soldier said:

> I had a girlfriend in the bush; we separated when I returned, because she cannot make business. The girl's behaviour was not good. She does not know how to talk to people. The parents said she was never like that before she went to the bush. The things she used to take like grass [marijuana] and beer spoilt her.

Force was the more acceptable way of doing things and was a way of life to child soldiers:

> My colleague is in prison; he tried to make love to a girl, and she refused. He went at night and cut the girl's arms. He was arrested; he has now spent 12 months in prison.

The response below of one of the children who had gone through the demobilisation and disarmament processes proves that the behaviour of children was different afterwards. In addition, it was evident that they lacked knowledge of what was morally acceptable.

> I used to behave funny, abuse and jump on people. After the DDRR [disarmament, demobilisation, rehabilitation, and reintegration], I left all those behaviours. I now concentrate on taking palm wine.

Some acts and atrocities committed by the rebel commanders were aimed at getting the children to commit crimes. The commanders did outrageous things which made children live in constant fear and submission. A girl child soldier observed as follows:

> We joined 15 children. Five died in the fighting, three were boys and two were girls. I was very scared; I did not have the way out. Any thought of running away, I would risk being killed. I was very scared of the commanders. I was not feeling good and was just moving behind the commanders. Whenever I would go with them, they start killing people, I would feel bad.

Children were both victims and perpetrators during the war. They were routinely coerced and manipulated by commanders into committing brutal acts in violation of international law that protects civilians, including family members and other children. These acts included abductions, killings, torture, rape and other forms of sexual violence, pillage, and the destruction of property. Children were exploited and manipulated through repeated physical and psychological means and frequently drugged to be able to commit

these crimes. They were socialised into committing abuse and routinely using violence and the power of the gun as central norms ruling their lives (TRC 2009, 96).

Children's Roles and Socialisation

Children fulfilled different roles in armed groups. Although they had had very limited training, some were involved in direct fighting, ranging from two to seven days. Others carried ammunition and weapons, while some did the cooking, washed dishes, and fetched water. Many girls served as wives of commanders. These roles are seen as unconventional, irregular warfare roles, but were needed in the armed groups that the children joined.

The involvement of children in fighting and the experiences they had gone through had a major effect on the re-socialisation process of these children. Due to a breakdown of community structures, children were introduced to new environments of violence. They had to shed off the norms and values acquired before the conflict and learn new values to enable them to cope with the bush war. The social system had fractured and new forms of social equilibrium had to be re-established. The children found themselves submerged between different roles as victims and as perpetrators; they lost their innocence and took on roles as abusers which are normally assigned to adults, instead of only being normal, carefree children. The years children are involved in soldiering affect their future identity, because child soldiers are deprived of cultural and moral values of socialisation gained from families and communities and have to experience a process of re-socialisation. Re-socialisation refers to a reversed socialisation process where their original socialisation, albeit poor, is stripped away and the child's personality is effectively restructured.

The consequences of the disruption of refugee children resulting from armed conflict can be extremely serious. When a society's guiding and regulating mechanisms are lost, individuals are deprived of their normal social, economic, and cultural development. Separation from one or both parents (often the father fled before the rebel attacks occurred) can deprive children of an important role model (Van Bueren 1998, 455–6). Özerdem and Podder (2010, 3) state that children's incomplete socialisation and maturation processes in family settings, and their in-group experiences are important processes impacting on young minds, involving elements of identity transformation and rebirth into being a rebel or child soldier. Relationships between child soldiers and commanders or peers create a semblance of regularity and stability in a world where every moment is insecure. Becoming a soldier marks a transition away from the normal and accepted, hence the return to a prior set of values and norms can be a significant challenge and may need traditional interventions, involving ritualistic cleansing and sacrifice in societies with strong communication visions of death, illness, and healing to create a possible socially acceptable return (Özerdem and Podder 2010, 312–3). These

ceremonies date from pre-colonial times and are believed to be especially important when events, such as war and population displacement, upset the normal course of life.

Traditional ceremonies afford individuals a chance to be cleansed of their acts during the war and provide protection for the community from ancestral rebuke that may be brought on because of what the children had done. At the onset of reintegration, traditional cleansing ceremonies help repair relationships with families and communities and realign the children's well-being with the spirit world. The rituals performed by cultural leaders enable these children to deepen their sense of acceptance and ameliorate the degree of guilt and shame felt because of past misdeeds. Rituals also represent a form of protection for community members who worry about what these children might do once they come home. Through the strategy of abduction, many children are denied being socialised by the norms and values of their villages, normally strengthened by adolescents undergoing initiation in omnipresent secret societies. But, rebel movements create new solidarities in which, after some time, a high level of solidarity is experienced by fighters (Özerdem and Podder 2010, 87).

Awodola (2009, 7) observes that the 2003 DDRR programme in Liberia paid diligent attention to cultural matters in addressing psychological and social problems. However, the ceremonies turned out to be nothing beyond symbolism, as they failed to provide the children with a means of imbibing the morals, ethics, and values of their societies. A deeper and more authentic engagement with cultures and traditions of Liberian society would have benefited the programme if they had been planned and implemented with greater community involvement.

DISARMAMENT, DEMOBILISATION AND REINTEGRATION PROCESSES

According to the legislative documents discussed and explained in this paper, the recruitment of children into armed forces and rebel groups is a serious violation of human rights and is prohibited under international law. International standards for social protection are spelt out in the United Nations Integrated Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration Standards (UN DDR Resource Centre 2006, 1). The UN is mandated to ensure the unconditional release of child soldiers at all times: during open conflict, while peace negotiations are taking place, and before the establishment of a national disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) process. The UNCRC establishes 18 as the age for legal capability, but concepts and experiences of childhood vary significantly among cultures and communities.

The DDR programme in Liberia began on 7 December 2003 and ended on 31 December 2004. By the end of the programme a total of 103,019 adults and children had been disarmed. Of this number, 11,780 children (9,042 boys and 2,738 girls) were demobilised and formally registered (UN DDR Resource Centre 2006, 9). After disarming at the cantonment sites, children went to interim care centres or drop-in

centres. An interim care centre is defined as a residence that provides temporary care, services, and protection for child soldiers and other separated children while family tracing and reintegration activities are ongoing. The children stayed at the centre for a period of four to six weeks (but not exceeding 12 weeks) (UNDP 2006, 61–62). However, the children who had returned to their communities before the official disarmament and demobilisation process went to the drop-in centres. The UNDP (2006, 74) defines a drop-in centre as a facility where child soldiers and those who participated in the disarmament and demobilisation process could access case management services and psycho-social care and support closer to their homes. Most of the children accessing these facilities had already reunited with families prior to participation in the DDRR process and therefore did not need family reunification services and overnight facilities offered at the interim care centres. At this point the process of tracing missing parents started, supported by social workers. The first batch of demobilisation packages (i.e. the transitional safety allowance) was paid out at the interim care centres.

Some of the children who were interviewed had not gone through the formal demobilisation process. This was acknowledged by children and by child welfare committees (CWCs). Several reasons were advanced, one of which was the fear of being blacklisted and not allowed to travel to America, which the children treasured highly, in search of new opportunities. There are a number of Liberians in America and it is a dream of most Liberians to go to there. They felt if their names appeared on a list as child soldiers, their chances to go there would be significantly reduced. Some children were actually left out of formal demobilisation as they were very far from demobilisation centres, whereas others had not been involved in direct fighting and therefore could not provide materials or proof, such as bullets or a gun, to qualify for demobilisation.

The UNDP (2006, 14–16) indicates that there was a lack of understanding about who the children were that had to be demobilised, although the Liberian DDRR programme strategy clearly stated who the child soldiers were according to the Cape Town Principles (UNICEF 2007b). In terms of these principles, most military observers found the inclusion of boys and girls without weapons confusing and subject to changing orders by superiors. Some military observers expressed the opinion that it was wrong to include children in the disarmament and demobilisation programme if they did not know how to operate weapons as they were not a security threat. Determining the age of children was yet another challenge. Some eligible children were turned away due to disputes about their ages as birth records were not issued in Liberia.

Some of the former commanders, on realising there was payment to child soldiers, submitted names of relatives who had not even been involved in fighting simply to ensure they accessed financial resources. The information flow regarding demobilisation was poor, especially for children in rural areas. They just returned to communities. Over half of the children interviewed acknowledged having friends they knew who had never disarmed. One girl said:

> We were six in a group (five girls, one boy); three of the girls were very small, including me. Out of three girls, it is only me who disarmed. Others did not have the materials as proof to disarm.

Community members and CWCs confirmed that many children had never been formally demobilised. One CWC member remarked:

> I am new in Tappita community; I know at least 10 that never went through disarmament and demobilisation. In Central Tappita and other communities, I know close to eight who never went through disarmament and demobilisation.

In addition, one boy who was interviewed said: "I had five friends, four never disarmed."

Community members who were interviewed observed that children who had not gone through the formal DDRR process faced more challenges than those who had. This is affirmed by the TRC (2009, 97) that states that while the process was considered largely successful for those children who rightfully went through the process, numerous gaps still remain. The TRC has found that a significant number of child soldiers who testified before the TRC had never gone through the DDRR process. They had difficulties reintegrating into civilian life and were particularly vulnerable to exploitation and homelessness. It was reported that there was a remarkable difference between those who had disarmed and those who had not. Those who had were able to be rehabilitated and acquire a skill. The DDRR process helped them to stay with communities and linked them to members who in the end acted as a source of support.

Some CWC members who were interviewed stated that children who had never disarmed hardly ever came to community meetings. They never liked cooperating with CWCs. Some community members, however, stated that even those who had gone through disarmament and demobilisation required time to recover. Some did not abandon the behaviour they had displayed in captivity: a few cases of crime were committed by former child soldiers.

Neither the community structures nor social workers made a deliberate attempt to include all child soldiers in programmes. Some children remained excluded because the first criterion to access the programmes, especially for skills training, was a formal demobilisation identity document, which they did not have. The situation was compounded by the fact that some CWCs thought that children who had never demobilised were not part of their mandate and that they therefore did not have to train them in any skills.

One of the criticisms of the disarmament and demobilisation process is highlighted in the evaluation of the process (UNDP 2006, 14–15). This relates to the fact that some child soldiers committed atrocities illegally (in the context of armed conflict) in their communities of origin. The preparation of the communities ought to have been a very important component of the conciliatory programme. There was, however, no functional allocation of funds to mobilise the communities. The communities were therefore not engaged in discussions relating to their role in accepting children or in initiating possible reconciliation mechanisms, such as traditional curative or cleansing cultural ceremonies

to "decontaminate" them. These ceremonies would have strengthened the reintegration of the child soldiers and provided them with the beneficial support of the community. Because some community members did not adequately fulfil the roles and functions that their particular religious systems, cultures, and communities required of them in the reintegration process, this process became dysfunctional.

The disarmament process was an important attempt to re-engage social institutions, which included formal (government) and informal (community) structures, in reconstructing children's lives. The government as a defender of children's rights ensured the children were back in their rightful positions where their social development took place. The community, which included the clan, extended relatives, neighbours, and other community members, started to pass on some of the cultural values to children that are vital for the survival and maintenance of society and for the children's sustainable reintegration.

The DDR process for children is not the same as that for adults. Child DDR is a specific process with its own requirements, several of which are fundamentally different from those of adult demobilisation programmes. In a situation of open conflict, peace negotiations take place before the establishment of a national DDRR process. Only afterwards an adult DDR process is established. The implementation of child DDR should not be postponed until a mechanism for adult DDR has been established, since the UN is mandated to ensure the unconditional release of all child soldiers at all times during open conflict. Efforts should be made to ensure that child DDR is not contingent on adult DDR (UN DDR Resource Centre 2006, 1). Since child recruitment into armed forces and rebel groups is illegal according to international law, the issue of child demobilisation (or release) and reintegration is a human rights issue and is not contingent on any political negotiation (UN DDR Resource Centre 2006, 3).

Child soldiers are key stakeholders and must be carefully consulted when DDR processes are set up. To ease their return into civilian life they should be integrated into programmes that benefit all war-affected children (UN DDR Resource Centre 2006). Child-specific integration into community structures should allow the child access to education, a livelihood, life skills, and a meaningful role in society. The socio-economic and psycho-social aspects of reintegration of children are central to global DDR programming and budgeting. Successful reintegration requires long-term funding of child protection agencies and programmes, which are expected to extend over a period of five years or more to ensure continuous support for education and training and essential follow-up or monitoring once children return to civilian life. Reintegration must be based on a broad community development process to provide adequate services to communities to enable them to care better for children, since everybody must benefit from a child's return (UN DDR Resource Centre 2006, 6).

Programmes must include all children in communities to avoid stigmatisation of child soldiers and to build and reinforce community-based solutions and capacities (UN DDR Resource Centre 2006, 3). Long-term success depends on capacities of local actors and communities, which can be strengthened by involving them in the prevention

of child recruitment. Prevention of recruitment and the demobilisation of child soldiers are tools to achieve and ensure sustainable reintegration, which aims to prevent re-recruitment.

DDR programmes face many challenges, and the inclusion of girls in these programmes is one of them. The girls are invisible and normally neglected by armed forces and rebel groups, as well as DDR planners. Girls fear to demobilise for several reasons, including shame and stigma; therefore programmes must be designed to minimise these aspects and maximise security. Girls normally do not gather at cantonment sites as many prefer to just return to communities, while others move to different communities. It is important that women groups be carefully identified and trained to support girls and provide care through transition.

If recipient communities are prepared for returning ex-combatants, tension of reintegration will be less. Communities and local authorities should be included in public information, sensitisation, and outreach strategies to have an opportunity before ex-combatants return to ask questions and discuss the reintegration process, including the issue of ex-combatant accountability. Community acceptance, willingness, involvement and preparedness are needed to facilitate reception of returning ex-combatants. Reintegration messages should be explained within the context of broader reconciliation and recovery, not just focused on a one-way message of accepting ex-combatants (Mutiti 2012, 80).

Therefore, for reintegration to be effective, a critical step is to understand the local socio-cultural context the ex-combatants will encounter when they return. This context relates to the remnants of the extended family networks, the ethnic mix, traditional land tenure patterns, and the community's ability and willingness to support and control its returning sons and daughters (Ismail 2001, 25). In this connection, the issue of stigma has to be handled carefully. When the community labels ex-combatants negatively as illiterate thugs, conveyers of violence, crime and sexually transmitted diseases, and when they reject them, the community's fears may well become a self-fulfilling prophecy (Ismail 2001, 24). The fact is that communities, who mobilised their children for service in war, should accept the responsibility for receiving and assisting them as demobilised ex-combatants. The role of NGOs and other interveners is to educate the communities and make available all-inclusive support projects that can help alleviate the initial community mistrust. These projects to protect child soldiers should be based on appropriate legal frameworks to facilitate the children's sustainable reintegration.

Child ex-combatants require targeted assistance in a post-conflict society. The reintegration phase that follows on disarmament and demobilisation comprises many aspects, among which are:

• The challenges of rehabilitating former child soldiers, both physically, socially and psychologically;

- The difficulties of tracing their families and convincing them to accept the children back. Reintegration is difficult due to loneliness and loss of families;

- The difficulties of creating viable opportunities for demobilised child soldiers in a post-conflict society;

- The communities and families to which former child soldiers return are social institutions that must nurture the children back into society, protect them, and lay the foundation for their sustainable effective mental health and psycho-social support (Inter-Agency Standing Committee 2010, 15).

- Local circumstances must be taken into consideration by the DDR process and must include the context of wider post-conflict reconstruction and peace-building. The process has to address the needs of the entire community into which the child soldier is to be reintegrated (Gislesen 2006, 4).

- In Liberia and Sierra Leone many children feared rejection by families and stigmatisation by communities if participating in the reintegration programme as it would label them as ex-combatants; therefore many of them preferred to self-reintegrate. This occurred mostly amongst girl soldiers, who feared being labelled as "used goods" with no prospects of getting married (Mazurana et al. 2002, 115). Their children, usually conceived as a result of rape, are often branded as "rebel children" and are likely to suffer the same stigmatisation and rejection their teenage mothers suffer. Addressing the community stigma would re-assure them of being accepted.

- Girls who have experienced sexual violence suffer from shock, shame, and low self-esteem. Often the effects of trauma, or post-traumatic stress disorder, are not evident until months or years later. An important part of the rehabilitation and reintegration process is to re-establish these girls' former civilian identities.

- Child soldiers need to be taught to renounce violence and develop skills necessary for civilian life such as decision-making, coping mechanisms, and peaceful means of resolving conflict (Jareg and McCallin 1993, 14).

DISENGAGING FROM FORMER COMMANDERS

Development of trust and allegiance among child soldiers results in lasting social networks and bonds flowing from wartime relationships, which in turn make re-recruitment more likely for a long duration. Children often form attachments with their commanders, and their sense of individual identity may become closely linked with the identity of their fighting groups. When children demobilise, breaking this attachment can be painful even though the relationship could have been abusive (Frempong 2002, 20).

This study recognised the need to de-link the children from former commanders and it examined whether positive relations had been built during the bush war and whether these had been explored during the reintegration programmes.

The literature (UNICEF 2007a, 24) reviewed emphasises the surrogate relationship formed between children and their former commanders and describes it as the "proximity of demobilised children to their commanders." This association appears to continue when children are geographically close to commanders, and this was especially the case with the Liberian children who were subordinate troops and served under their officer parents, siblings or relatives. The disengagement or dissociation of children from commanders is a central part of any demobilisation process. It is a process where children are assisted in breaking away from formal or informal command structures, redefine their individual and group identities, go through a process of behavioural modification to help them adapt to the norms and values of their communities, and rethink alternative and realistic aspirations (UNDP 2006, 19–20). The dissociation of demobilised children, which was identified as a major issue at the initial stage of reintegration, would have to be assessed to determine the possibilities of successful reintegration of children within communities. Children also formed networks with young people during the conflict. However, the literature is silent about these relationships and about whether these could serve as vital structures in the reintegration process.

According to the DDRR framework document (UNDDR Resource Centre 2006, 24), "combatants will be 'civilianised' as soon as they have handed over their weapons." This is based on the assumption that children will discontinue contact with their commanders after the process of disarmament. This issue and the process of breaking the line of command were not fully appreciated or understood at the time of planning the programme. For example, no occasions were created for the commanders to officially and formally tell the children that they were no longer under their command. It is generally perceived that there was no significant dissociation of the children from their commanders. This posed a serious challenge to the demilitarisation of the children and their social reintegration into former communities.

How a child first became associated with the fighting forces has a critical impact on how the child will deal with the process of dissociation. During the process of doing research and reaching the findings a number of reasons were identified as to why children first became child soldiers. According to some of the interviewees, the practice of abductions into the fighting forces had been widespread during the war. In other cases, children had for various reasons become separated from their families, and these children joined the forces and formed surrogate relationships with commanders over time (UNICEF 2007a, 24). Many children spent their formative years in an environment of conflict under the influence of one or various commanders. Relationships between commanders and children subordinate to them were based not only on military responsibilities, but also on bonds created over a long-term surrogate relationship. In many cases these relationships served developmental purposes in terms of fulfilling

basic needs and providing protection, and supporting and guiding children. In this sense, a bush-war family resembled the structure of an ordinary family.

Relationships with Former Commanders and Peers

The pattern of or reason for recruitment made some children bond together in the bush. The armed groups would raid a village and abduct children there, or there would be a wave of abductions across villages at a given time. The children were either neighbours or they came from the same area. They were often recruited as a group and in most cases they stayed together in small groups. When the children returned after the war, they remained neighbours. Some even continued going to the same school. Although some of the children were in a boyfriend-girlfriend relationship during the war, most of these relationships did not last after the war. Some of the girls became the wives of commanders and when the war ended most of them moved to areas where the commanders went. For example, it was reported that most of the girls from Grand Bassa went to Grand Gedeh, because the commanders were from there. Apart from having good relationships with children during the war, some of the commanders had known the children before the bush interaction and had established good relations with them even then. The following response from an interview showed the relationship children had with their commanders and commanders' colleagues:

> The bullet hit me in the face. The people thought I was dead. The commander picked me up and treated me. The commander used to be my father's friend. When the war came down small, he took me home. My parents gave the commander a goat for saving my life.

The UNDP (2006, 20–21) confirms that the dynamics of a children-commander relationship can change due to the establishment of a long-term surrogate relationship. After the war, children maintained contact with their commanders or the wives of their commanders because they had good relationships with them. Some parents and villagers were reported to refer misbehaving children to their former commanders for disciplinary action. This confirms the community's realisation that previous relationships could play an important role in the reintegration process.

Relationships between child soldiers and former commanders continued to present a challenge in reintegration programmes as the focus was on disengaging child soldiers from former commanders. However, practitioners forget that former commanders became part of the social system of child soldiers and influenced their lives.

Considering the role peers play in socialisation processes, a deeper analysis is needed of networks formed by peer groups during bush wars and how these could continue to influence the lives of children during reintegration. Re-engaging positive networks formed by peer groups could lead to a positive re-socialisation process. This was attested to by a child soldier who reported as follows:

I met with one of my former friends in the bush at school. We are now friends again, we do assignments together.

THE ROLE OF COMMUNITIES

Given that the physical and social environment to which child soldiers return has been affected by intangible, invisible changes, both the host communities and the returnees must re-socialise the principles of community living. Hence reintegration involves the whole complex series of interrelated processes that people, who have experienced different things and developed different conceptions and attitudes, must renegotiate so that they can adapt and rebuild their identities and livelihoods (Özerdem and Podder 2010, 6). This notion advocates the interrelatedness and interdependency of communities.

Community acceptance is essential for a child's reintegration, but preconceived ideas and expectations about children coming out of armed forces or groups, or the scars of violence committed against families and/or communities, could severely limit community support. To prevent reprisals, communities have to be prepared for returning children through raising awareness and education, which can start with the sensitisation of community leaders, strengthening of local child protection networks, peace and reconciliation education, and events aimed at encouraging a lasting reintegration of children. Cultural, religious, and traditional rituals can play an important role in the protection and reintegration of children. Reconciliation ceremonies increase the commitment of communities to reintegration processes. However, it is also essential to understand and neutralise community traditions that are physically or mentally harmful to a child, causing the child to become dysfunctional. Particular attention should be paid to the information circulating among communities about returning children so that harmful rumours and misconceptions, e.g. about real or presumed rates of HIV and AIDS among them, can be effectively countered and a nurturing environment can be created to receive children, especially those who really are terminally ill (UNDDR Resource Centre 2006, 26).

PSYCHO-SOCIAL SUPPORT AND SPECIAL CARE

Child soldiers often have serious psycho-social problems which must be addressed if they are to reintegrate successfully into the post-conflict society and contribute positively towards peace and development. If such problems are not dealt with, child ex-combatants may have a destabilising impact on society even years after a conflict has ended. Many children experience problems when re-entering their former communities, because adapting to the environment in which they used to live before the war requires them to make a tremendous effort. Problems result from anxiety and uncertainty,

idleness, stigmatisation, fear of being rejected, poverty, and a lack of livelihood, among other things (UNDDR Resource Centre 2006, 25).

Psycho-social reintegration is based on a community approach that involves more than providing individual therapy by supporting families and communities, schooling or learning facilities, integration in youth group activities, and healing and reconciliation (UNDDR Resource Centre 2006, 25). Psycho-social support should be offered instead of individual therapy to help develop new patterns of behaviour to improve children's self-esteem, their capacity to make future decisions, and their ability to express emotions. Children and communities do, with support, have the capacity and resilience to cope with distress caused by war. Psycho-social support activities build upon children's natural resilience and on family and community support mechanisms to encourage coping and developing. The more children are supported within and through their new reintegration environment, the more reintegration is likely to succeed (UNDDR Resource Centre 2006, 25).

Children are the main actors in their reintegration. To develop their resilience, children need reliable, positive adult role models outside of the military and a sense of cohesion and being useful to and responsible for others (e.g. by fulfilling roles that benefit the community). They also need to be capable of making important decisions that affect them.

Communities have resilience and support programmes that reinforce the desire to protect their children and cope with the consequences of the transformation that occurs. Some children may need specific assistance to overcome particularly negative or harmful experiences of their bush stay with an armed force or belligerent group. Injured and disabled children and the terminally ill, in particular, need care that is specifically adapted to their needs. The aim of child-based reintegration is to offer children a participatory support programme that has been specifically designed for their needs and gives them a viable, long-term alternative to military life (UNDDR Resource Centre 2006, 26).

Psycho-social interventions should draw on local methods of healing and strengths in the community, understand and address cultural belief systems surrounding reactions to war experiences, and avoid imposing models of psychological care that are mostly inappropriate to the culture and context. In Liberia it was found that the most important reintegration factor had to be a normal environment and a sense of forgiveness conveyed through religious and cultural ceremonies. The psycho-social programme promoted community sensitisation and provided training and support (Verhey 2001, 17).

Protection of the Protective Shield

A situation of mass causalities challenges both the reality and the perception of what is called a protective shield (Pynoos, Steinberg, and Wraith 1995, 82). This protective shield is especially critical for children whose well-being is largely based on the belief

that their parents and the social institutions that they interact with (e.g. schools, the police) will keep them safe. A protective shield consists of a web of resources that the family and culture naturally provide to children in safe circumstances. It is certainly a perceived shield, but such resources, which are in part material resources (e.g. food, clothing) and in part resources of condition (e.g. safe schools, safe streets), are very much reality-based. The rings of protection are broken as a result of conflict, exposing children to effects of conflict, which negatively impact on their social and psychological development.

Pynoos and Nader (1998, 460) suggest that the adult protective shield for children is critical for sustaining resilience in communities that have been ravaged by disaster and war. The adults' protective shield promotes a sense of safety and security vital to the initial response to mass trauma. Some resources for support may be damaged during mass trauma; others are likely to be available. Children's resources are families and institutions. Because children are especially susceptible to resource loss through disruption within the family, special attention from parents to reinstate lost resources, such as social networks, is needed to re-establish the protective shield to provide access to health care, improve bonding, attachment, interrelated dynamics within the community and between stakeholders, improve self-esteem, increase social skills, and minimise the residual effects of trauma. Community structures in different environments, for instance in the ecological, family, peer support and school environment, must be involved in providing a vital protective shield necessary for the re-socialisation process of children.

Preparation of Communities

The range of atrocities committed by child soldiers in their communities of origin makes the preparation of reintegration into these communities an essential component of any DDRR programme. Dialogue with communities to accept demobilised children is a priority. The process of children returning to their communities is complex and requires a great deal of technical preparation, advance planning, repeated visits, and adequate resources.

On Returning

Most children reported being well received on returning from captivity. After their return, some stayed with their biological parents, whereas some had not had any communication with their parents since their abduction. They had been assumed dead. From the testimony of children, it was evident that parents required support as well, as some had lost hope of their children being alive. Seeing them return was a shock. They needed support both to come to terms with the assumed loss of their children and to manage their anxieties on their children's return.

One child, who had been reported to have died, narrated his ordeal as follows:

> When I came home and my parents saw me, they just started running away from me; they thought it was my spirit they were seeing. I started to run after them; I caught up with them, and I told them I was the one. Tears of joy rolled in their eyes as we hugged.

In celebration of their children's return, parents slaughtered animals such as pigs (which are important and significant animals in many Liberian communities) to signify the importance of the occasion. In other cases, a white rooster was slaughtered to signify purity on return. For others, a goat was slaughtered. It was an opportunity for families and neighbours to celebrate—a time of joy and happiness. Return ceremonies signified acceptance.

After returning, some children went to live with relatives such as grandparents, sisters, and uncles. This is important as families provide a first line of support. Some communities were supportive of children and assisted with transport fees to government hospitals when they fell sick, whereas others bought exercise books for the children to go back to school. It was also reported that some of the extended relatives who accepted children were motivated to assist by the USD300 transitional safety net allowance that a child soldier received. The love for these children ceased after the money had been spent.

The acceptance of children back into the community is a major step in starting the journey to re-socialise and re-learn the values they have lost over time. The family is the primary socialisation agent because it represents the centre of children's lives (Macionis 1997, 133). It has the task of socialising children into cultural values, attitudes, and prejudices. Parents confer on children a social position; not only do they bring children into the physical world, but they also place them in society in terms of race, ethnicity, religion, and class. Schools, peer groups, and mass media are secondary socialisation agents in children's lives.

Children's Changed Lives

Despite children's good reception back into their communities, their way of life had radically changed due to their war experiences. On their return, the children presented deviant behaviour due to the re-socialisation process they had gone through at the hands of the commanders. They had lost the shared values of their communities and took to drinking and smoking opium, and their general behaviour was bad. Some were very abusive and aggressive. They acknowledged that they were quick to harm anybody if annoyed. A former girl child soldier observed that, "We, who fought, are quick to harm somebody."

Some community members were very negative towards these children. Many believed that they had committed countless atrocities. They had lost their innocence as children in the eyes of the community. Some children said they had no respect for their parents because of the long absence from them. They did not bond with their parents, did not experience parent-child relationships, and did not regard them as parents. A girl

child soldier confirmed this when she said: "I consider my Pa (father) as a big brother and my Ma (mother) as big sister."

The attainment of adulthood is preceded by various socialisation procedures. However, in war-affected communities, the process of acquiring social values is more difficult. Efforts to attain adulthood are frustrated by lack of opportunities and personal attachments (UNICEF 2007a, 21). As a result of the Liberian children's engagement with fighting forces, new social values emerged. Harassing and killing elderly persons, raping, and looting became more acceptable practices as these satisfied certain needs. Child soldiers came to be dreaded by communities due to their excessively aggressive behaviour and disregard for community values and norms. Parents, relatives, and siblings who had joined fighting forces tended to make fighting more tolerable and normal in the eyes of children. In many cases, the role of parents/adults and children were reversed, with child soldiers holding a significant amount of power over adults. This clearly shows a change of roles; the parents' roles were taken over by commanders and peers who seemed to have control over child soldiers (UNICEF 2007a, 23).

REINTEGRATION OPTIONS

Two major reintegration options were offered to formerly demobilised child soldiers, namely vocational skills training and apprenticeship for those over the age of 14, and support to undergo formal education through the community education investment programme (CEIP). Various reintegration services were also provided to child soldiers to foster the social reintegration process.

Community Education Investment Programme

The community education investment programme (CEIP) was designed to support the reintegration of school-age demobilised children by providing access to formal primary education in government, community, and private schools. Schools and not individual children were targeted for assistance. The education goal of the reintegration programme was to enrol former child soldiers into schools so that they became engaged in routine and constructive activities aimed at a better future (UNICEF 2007a, 15–16). Demobilised and other children in the community who attended schools and made use of the support of the CEIP benefited from this support, thus enhancing the overall education level, minimising the stigma associated with returning demobilised children in communities, and promoting their reintegration (UNICEF 2007a, 13).

In total, 4,295 children (3,295 male and 1,000 female) enrolled in the programme, and 582 elementary schools implemented CEIP (329 public schools, 208 private schools, and 45 community schools). It is important to note that the original thinking was that CEIP was to be implemented in public schools. However, many private and community schools came on board (UNICEF 2007a, 15–16).

In areas where CEIP was implemented in schools, the conditions at the schools in terms of the provision of psycho-social care and support and educational materials improved. In addition, in areas where CEIP was implemented the level of participation of ex-child soldiers was high, especially in recreational activities. Provision of formal education was crucial to the social reintegration of demobilised children whereas the CEIP contributed greatly in creating a supportive environment. This eventually increased demobilised children's self-esteem and self-value. The enrolments in formal education led to children rediscovering the opportunities they had lost out on during the war era. One of the child soldiers reported:

> I was very clever in class before I was recruited in the fighting. I would get 85 per cent and above in the class. When war came to the end, I chose to go back to school. I chose the academic programme. I am even doing better.

On-the-job training was provided to teachers to enhance their capacity to provide psycho-social care to children in a learning environment. This training was important in contributing to a child-friendly and supportive environment for formerly demobilised children. The teachers were able to identify children with learning difficulties and provide basic psycho-social support to them. The peer support system among teachers was established to further enhance the teachers' capacity to deliver psycho-social support to children.

The CEIP provided scholastic materials to schools. There were no school fees or charges. The materials were a pull factor for schools to accept formerly demobilised children. The whole school was targeted to contribute to the reintegration of students, and no specific students were singled out for support. The structures enhanced the acceptance of formerly demobilised children into the community.

Skills Training and Apprenticeship Programme

The skills training programme was designed with the understanding that many ex-child soldiers had lost the opportunity for education during the time of their engagement with the fighting forces (UNICEF 2007a, 13). This programme sought to empower young people with basic skills to enable them to reintegrate socially and earn a livelihood. The specific objectives of the programme were to increase opportunities in the weak labour market for employment through the self-development of children, to provide trainees with basic literacy, numeracy, and small-business management skills, to support the children's social reintegration, and to provide follow-ups and psycho-social care. Some of the trainees were placed into apprenticeship programmes, with trained ex-child soldiers presenting on-the-job training. Demobilised and other war-affected boys and girls above 14 years of age were eligible for the programme. Special attention was given to girls who had been child soldiers but who had not been formally demobilised. No children were required to relocate from their homes for the sole purpose of accessing

the programme. Overall, 5,136 children (3,628 boys and 1,510 girls) benefited from the UNICEF-supported skills training and apprenticeship programmes (UNICEF 2007a, 4).

It was acknowledged that the child protection agencies supporting the disarmament and demobilisation of children did not have the capacity to provide skills and apprenticeship training. UNICEF identified and commissioned 14 training organisations to implement the project. The main roles of the training organisations were to mobilise the children to participate in the training programmes, verify and register them, identify the most central locations in communities to establish training centres, provide the training, identify apprentices to participate in the programmes, and do follow-ups after trainees had graduated (UNICEF 2007a, 5).

Most of the children interviewed were happy with the training they had received. Below are some of the statements that affirmed this.

> The training brought many things in my life. People look at us good [happy with us]. We are assisting the community.

> I made LD3,400 [Liberian dollars] during the festival season. I pay LD1,600 every year for private school.

> I learned pastry. I make some money. I have now saved LD1,500. At times I pay my own school fees.

> I trained in masonry. I am now moulding blocks. I get between LD500 and LD600 per week. I feed and clothe myself.

Children felt they were offering a good service to the community, improving their self-esteem by utilising the networks established to enhance social reintegration, and becoming self-sustainable.

Post-Reintegration Structures

The children who were interviewed had undertaken skills training in various trades, for instance in the fields of agriculture, carpentry, cosmetology, masonry, pastry making, plumbing, poultry, tailoring, tyre repair, food processing, and blacksmithing. Some of the children were practising their trades and saving up money while going to school. Some of the trades were very useful during festive seasons, and the graduates reported making good sales and saving up money as there were many customers. This was particularly the case for those involved in cosmetology (hair dressing).

Child soldiers who had done masonry seemed to have done extremely well. This was what one boy said:

> I trained in masonry; I have got a lot of jobs in Ganta, which I can show you. The training brought many things to my life. People look at us good. We are assisting the community. NGOs should help other children get the same skills.

> We have maintained our group of six boys. We are currently building a house to give a key [contracted to finish the house]. We charge USD5,000 for the work.

One of the parents in Nimba County observed:

> It is better a child learns skills. My son is paying his school fees. I am only paying for copy books and feeding him. But he is paying his tuition. I am going to send his brother for mechanics training as well.

The above interviews indicated that some of the children had regained their status in the community and were viewed as productive members of the community.

Although several child soldiers were trained successfully, it was found that in effect the skills training programme was not creating enough sustainable jobs to cater for the large number of unemployed youths and to develop business skills to cope with this situation. To counter this and avoid the possible outcome of a bleak future for reintegrated child soldiers, the Business Development Skills (BDS) programme was instituted to assist and prepare them economically.

Business Development Skills Programme

The Business Development Skills (BDS) programme was established in response to the finding of the reintegration evaluation that showed that the formerly demobilised children who had completed their skills training were confronted with the harsh reality of a depressed market and vigorous competition from older and more experienced professionals. In addition, some of the students had low levels of determination and were faced with the pressure of responsibility placed on them by other children or siblings, a weak supportive environment, unworkable business ventures, and a general lack of entrepreneurial competencies. A critical outcome of the UNICEF project (2007a, 4) was that skills training should lead to sustainable jobs. It was also recognised that if adolescents failed to gain vocational and life skills, the risk existed that they could become caught up in a cycle of dependency, delinquency, aggression, depression, and hopelessness, which could cause them to be re-recruited. They might turn to or be forced into military activities or prostitution because they were searching for basic sustenance and were not provided with sufficient protection to avoid being pressed into such activities.

Although the skills training programme did not lead to sustainable jobs for a large number of unemployed youths (UNICEF 2007a, 4), offering the social reintegration options were important in supporting child soldiers to become productive members of society again. Training helped some children re-discover their place in the community and re-establish social order, with child soldiers taking on children's roles again.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that children of all ages were recruited by armed groups and armed forces. The children joined the fighting forces for various social, economic, and political reasons. Personal reasons for joining included the children's need to escape a feeling of desperation and to protect themselves against abuse. Children went through very difficult experiences as they watched and supervised violence. Their social growth and development were interrupted—they lost their innocence as children and took on the roles and functions of adults. The war disoriented their lives; they were re-socialised and acquired values that were unacceptable on return. Children coped, but they did so negatively as they had to rely on a constructed community composed of commanders and other child soldiers. The pattern of relationships established with peers and commanders during the war continued after the child soldiers returned to their communities. Girl child soldiers were very vulnerable—they were sexually exploited, and some fell pregnant.

In some cases, child soldiers returned to a dysfunctional community, a community that did not provide them with an adequate support system. Their return was to families and extended families like uncles, aunts, and grandparents. Their lives had been disrupted: some could not continue with their education; some returned without legs and arms. The physical and psychological trauma the war had caused the children to go through had a profound effect on them.

There are relevant international legal provisions and national legislations to protect children in war situations and on reintegration. However, the findings point to the limited capacity-building of community structures and the limited funding and training of demobilised child soldiers. Sufficient investment in Liberian structures to enable them to operate efficiently after the reintegration programme was lacking. The situation seemed bleak for children as their support systems did not offer the support they required. The humanitarian-led community approaches delivered results; however, these were short-lived. The engagement of community structures was not based on clear analyses of the relevant communities. The DDRR programmes were eventually dysfunctional in most cases in terms of their intended functions and reintegration objectives for sustainability.

The study findings showed that a great number of the children who had been demobilised accessed the reintegration services. One of the most daunting challenges a country faces in the aftermath of war is the reintegration of those who entered the war as child soldiers and became youthful war veterans. If their energies are not re-channelled, they will remain a time-bomb ready to explode at the least provocation. Unless children demobilised from armies are given alternatives to soldiering, they are likely to be re-recruited into armed groups. This falls within the broad principle that if the wounds inflicted by armed conflicts on children are allowed to scar them for life, they cripple the very generations that must one day rebuild their devastated societies (Pearson 2000, 3).

The long years of exposure to war resulted in children becoming vulnerable in multiple ways. Family breakdowns, separations, the collapse of infrastructure such

as education, and the lack of economic opportunities for parents and older children exposed children to serious problems. Child soldiers are exploited in various ways and widespread abuse of drugs and alcohol has been reported. The involvement of children in Liberian wars is linked to other conflicts in the region, something that is considered to be a motive for cross-border movement and the engagement of children in more conflicts.

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