



Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers

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Psychosocial web page Editor's introduction:

Suffer the Children: The psychosocial rehabilitation of child soldiers as a function of peace-building by Julie Guyot, 2007.

We publish in our 9th edition, an article by Julie Guyot in which she argues cogently for a revision in our ways of conceptualizing traditional models for the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) of child soldiers. From the social work perspective that she advocates, Julie urges us to take a 'child-in-environment' approach. Within this model, the child is seen as an active agent contributing to its own development, in the context of being both influenced by, and influencing, their surrounding environment. That is, there is an important reciprocal relationship between children and their social, cultural, economic and political contexts. In relation to child soldiers, therefore, the complexities of the situation facing them at the reintegration stage, can only be understood in the context of the larger systems within which they will be operating.

War and armed conflict will not only have impacted upon child soldiers, but also on the communities into which they seek to reintegrate. Communities, as children, can be traumatized by the atrocities of war, with consequent debilitating effects upon familial, cultural and social structures. Peace building efforts, therefore, need to recognize the needs and vulnerabilities of both the children and their communities. Importantly, in addition, such efforts should also seek to harness their existing strengths and resilience so as to facilitate a meaningful reintegration and peace building process. Viewed in this light, it can be seen that theoretical frameworks, or reintegration processes, which focus primarily on children as victims, independent of the systems within which they function, will fail to capitalize on the resilience they bring to their situations, and to develop their capacities to become partners in the peace process. Yet such involvement, Julie argues, is likely to enhance the prospect of a peace building process which will be durable over the longer term.

Dr. Linda Dowdney
Editor Psycho-social Webpage

The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers unites national, regional and international organisations and Coalitions in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and the Middle East. Its Steering Committee member organizations are Amnesty International, Defence for Children International, Human Rights Watch, International Federation Terre des Hommes, International Save the Children Alliance, Jesuit Refugee Service, and the Quaker United Nations Office-Geneva.



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SUFFER THE CHILDREN: THE PSYCHOSOCIAL REHABILITATION OF CHILD SOLDIERS AS A FUNCTION OF PEACE-BUILDING¹

**by Julie Guyot, Howard University School of Social Work,
Washington, D.C., 2007**

INTRODUCTION

Following a brief overview of the child soldier phenomenon, it is suggested that current models for the demobilization, rehabilitation and reintegration of child soldiers (DDR) would benefit from viewing DDR as a community process. A theoretical framework is proposed which sees each child as very much embedded in their social, cultural, economic and political situation – i.e. a ‘child-in-environment’ perspective. Such an ecological perspective not only suggests that children’s strengths should be taken into account, but also that the situation faced by children involved in armed conflict can only be understood within the context of the larger systems within which they operate.

CHILD SOLDIERS – A BRIEF OVERVIEW

In the minds of many, children are considered innocent bystanders to war, rather than active combatants. This view, however, is not in keeping with modern rules of war, which see youth as “a commodity for plunder,” marking a troubling period of deepened involvement of societies’ most vulnerable citizens (McIntyre, 2003, para 5). The prevalence of failed states, advances in technology, and an enduring small arms trade have all contributed to the increased recruitment of child soldiers by governments and armed groups throughout the world (CETO, 2002). Internal hostilities operate differently from other wars - lines of power are drawn not through the gracious favours of complex and mannered diplomacy, as allies sign pacts and make assurances of support. Rather such conflicts are increasingly characterized along ethnic/regional lines with no regard for the distinction between civilian and military populations. The proliferation of lightweight and easy-to-use small arms only adds to the temptation to enlist those elements of the community left out of wartime activities because of the lack of skill - namely children. “This dynamic has made possible a new mode of war, where immoral leaders seek to convert vulnerable,

¹ This paper is based on a presentation to the 4th World Congress on Family Law & Children’s Rights, Cape Town, South Africa, March 2005.

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disconnected children into low-cost and expendable troops, who fight and die for their own causes” (Singer, 2002, para 6).

Child soldiers are considered by some to be faster, more agile, and resilient than traditional combatants (Hughes, 2000). They are also more vulnerable to harsh recruitment techniques, more easily shaped to their new role, and less resistant in the face of authority. It is for this very reason that young children are seen as ripe for combat. As Jo Becker points out “commanders see children as cheap, compliant, and effective fighters. (Human Rights Watch World Report, 2004). It is, in part, their level of cognitive maturity that makes them so. Kurupparachchi and Wijeratne (2004) of Sri Lanka, commenting on this issue assert, “immaturity makes them less likely to contradict orders and more likely to be fearless. They are therefore ideal tools to be used in the hazardous and inhumane activities in the front line” (p. 1648). Furthermore, there is the sad truth that the shock value of child soldiers on of-age infantry personnel is a savvy war tactic as they may prove more hesitant to fire on children (Hughes, 2000; CETO, 2002).

Of course, not all children fight along the frontlines with weapons. Children fill many roles in conflicts, serving as spies, messengers, sentries, porters, and servants. Some will be used to lay and clear landmines. Others will be forced into sexual service. Just as there is a variety of roles to play in conflict, there are many different reasons as to why children are drawn into war as actors in the first place (see review by Barenbaum, J., Ruchkin, V. and Schwab-Stone, M. 2004, www.child-soldiers.org/psycho-social). Some children will be recruited forcibly. The abduction of children is a pernicious form of displacement that affects both those stolen and the communities which experience their loss, a loss which has a radical impact upon local social structures. The community’s loss of its children is demoralizing, its mourning period characterized by terror. Yet other groups of children will be driven into armed forces/groups by poverty, alienation and discrimination. Thus, those who join armed groups “voluntarily” can do so for a variety of reasons. For some it is a way to organize the violent chaos taking place around them, while others may join up simply “because they noticed that gunmen ate better than those whose rice they stole” (Waterside, 2004, p. 47).

Some scholars have been quick to assert the agency of children who join armed groups, to view them as self-aware freedom fighters in contradiction to the assumption of child combatants as passive victims (West, not dated [n.d]). In seeking to understand this complex issue, they have taken issue with media portrayals which exoticize the African Continent, questioning Western notions of “innocence” and “vulnerability,” and even the terms “youth” and “trauma”. Indeed, some have chosen to emphasize the resourcefulness that children demonstrate when choosing to take up arms, characterizing it as an “appropriate adaptive strategy...an extremely practical survival mechanism” (West, n.d., p. 181). Boyden & Mann (2000) call upon researchers to recognize children “as social agents with the capacity to influence their situation.” They note how “much of the discussion of children’s competence in practice focuses on the rather passive notion of ‘protective factors’ rather than the idea of children actively managing and even in some instances improving their situation” (p. 11).

While recognizing the salience of these perspectives, we should nonetheless also recognize that, whatever the child’s stated reason for participating in combat may be, there are limitations on their ability to make informed and free choices in conflict situations. Both direct and indirect coercion may play a part in child recruitment



practices. Recruiters can capitalize on a child's need for employment and survival or their desire to redress injustices or seek revenge. Children can find it difficult to resist pressure from peer groups, and membership of an armed group may confer improved self and group esteem (Mendelson & Straker, 1998). Wessells (1997, cited in Mendelson & Straker, 1998) asserts that a child's involvement in the military may never be regarded as entirely voluntary. In an environment characterized by deprivation, with a military force providing access to shelter, protection, and food, the ability of anyone to exercise free will is questionable.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT UPON CHILDREN OF INVOLVEMENT IN ARMED CONFLICT

Research into the effects of armed conflict upon children has largely concerned itself with the negative psychosocial effects of exposure to trauma, alongside considerations of the impact of violence upon children's moral development.

Trauma and its after effects

The experience of war *may have a profound* impact upon the personality development and identity formation of affected children. The after effects of trauma may prove considerable, influencing how they view the world, as well as their responses to the social environment in which they find themselves. In relation to child soldiers, specific effects upon their behavioral repertoire have been noted. For example, their physical survival may be accompanied by certain ingrained coping mechanisms including fear-conditioned responses such as regressive or aggressive behavior, and an orientation towards violent exploitation (Pearn, 2003). Child soldiers may have been highly educated in the dark art of survival by any means, developing certain responses that served them well in wartime but which may not be conducive to maintaining a peaceful society in the post conflict situation. Furthermore, as trauma survivors, they may experience an array of physiological, behavioral and emotional symptoms associated with exposure to severe trauma. For example, physiological symptoms can include eating and sleep disturbances, increased sweating and concentration difficulties. Emotional and behavioral difficulties can include aggression, hyperactivity and withdrawal, along with fears of separation, nightmares, sadness and distress (Joshi and O'Donnell, 2003). Sometimes, the severity and duration of these symptoms are such that child soldiers are found to be suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). See, for example, the report by Derluyn, Broekaert, Schuyten, & de Temmerman, 2004. (For a fuller discussion of PTSD, see the following section in this paper).

However, the impact of armed conflict upon individuals is likely to vary according to a multitude of factors. These include the type of exposure to, and level of involvement in, the conflict; the severity of stress which is experienced, and the family and social supports available during and after the conflict. Additionally, individual coping styles and personal temperament will all play a part (Saigh, Yasik, Sack, & Koplewicz, 1999; Summerfield, 2000). Research undertaken with Palestinian children exposed to armed conflict suggests that the developmental level of the child, and their understanding of the situation, is also likely to be influential (Punamaki, 2002). The author suggests that children in conflict situations can be resilient in the face of trauma when they possess a sense of personal agency and develop, and apply, their own perspective to the situation. In recognizing these strengths (and the struggle to exercise them) researchers are afforded greater understanding of the



transactional nature of young people's involvement in the world around them. In short, we should recognize that children as a group vary widely in all aspects of their development and in the capacities they bring to any situation, including that of war. For these reasons, a simple deficit-based approach cannot explain how involvement in conflicts *interacts with* - as opposed to *interferes with* - normative developmental tasks.

It seems reasonable to conclude, therefore, that there is room in the literature to explore the ways in which important developmental psychological processes occur during armed conflict situations. Within such contexts, young people may well take a leading role in organizing themselves around their collective survival. In such situations, they can form protective social networks which can assume the role of caregiver and which can serve to mitigate some of the negative impact of events. The importance of such factors is highlighted by Summerfield (2000) who writes: "psychiatric models give little acknowledgement to the role of social action and empowerment in promoting mental health" (p. 2). Rather than take the view that emotional, cognitive and spiritual growth is seriously disrupted during their participation in armed conflict, some have preferred to examine young people's functional resilience and active coping skills (for a discussion of functional resilience look to Bonanno, 2004, or Linley & Joseph's 2004 review, Positive Change following Trauma and Adversity).

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder: While the above authors emphasize resilience in the face of trauma, it is important to recognize that some individuals may be severely affected by their experiences, and may be diagnosed as suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).² Indeed, some may need specialized treatment to bring them back to a place of health, as the trauma may prove so severe as to preclude any ability to positively contribute to peacetime activities. When applied more generally, the PTSD framework may be useful in that it recognizes the less tangible harmful effects of trauma – for example, that bombs traumatize populations in addition to destroying community infrastructure. A holistic approach to post-conflict assistance gives consideration to the ways in which individuals relate to one another and their environment in the wake of grave trauma. Nonetheless, the concept of PTSD and its application to individuals in non-western societies has been challenged at a number of levels.

The diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is based on the physiological, emotional and behavioral *reactions* of individuals to severe trauma. As such, it makes no distinction between the types of trauma which may provoke the disorder. For example, PTSD has been reported in survivors of war, rape, abuse, and terror, as well as those involved in road traffic accidents, and amongst those who have experienced trauma second hand via, for example, survivor accounts. The result is that the concept has been regarded as over inclusive and over generalized,

² The term PTSD is used to describe the psychological and physical problems which can sometimes follow particular threatening or distressing events. These can include: repeated and intrusive memories of the distressing event(s); the experience of 'flashbacks' or nightmares; physical reactions such as sweating/shaking; avoidance of reminders of the distressing event(s); sleeping and/or concentration difficulties. For a fuller description of PTSD, and recommended guidelines for treatment responses, see Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD): the treatment of PTSD in adults and children. National Institute for Clinical Excellence: <http://www.nice.org.uk/pdf/CG026publicinfo.pdf>. For DSM IV criteria see also <http://www.mental-health-today.com/ptsd/dsm.htm> ; APA (2000)



with a failure to distinguish between brief and long-term exposure (see, e.g. the critique of Summerfield, 2001). Further, the application of a diagnosis of PTSD can result in the labelling and stigmatization of individuals, which may not be helpful to their social integration (See paper edited by Dowdney, 2007). There have also been criticisms of the PTSD model as being deficit based, with a failure to recognize and elucidate resilience in the face of trauma (Bracken, Giller & Summerfield, 1995; Ingleby, 2004; Scott, 1990; Summerfield, 2001; Pupavac, 2002).

The application of the concept of PTSD in non-Western societies has been regarded as inappropriate by many (see, e.g. Bracken, 1998; Bracken, 2002; Scott, 1990; Summerfield, 1999 & 2001; Young, 1995). These critiques occur even as the PTSD model experiences widespread use in nearly all modern post-conflict settings (Gozdziak, 2004). PTSD as a construct derives from an intra-individual medical model that has both conceptual and practical limitations in other cultures, particularly where the sense of self is socially defined (for further discussion of these points see, for example, the contributions by Adok, Jareg, & Robinson in the paper edited by Dowdney, 2007).

Authors such as Bracken (1998), Summerfield (1999; 2001) and Young (1995) express concerns that PTSD is a Western culture-bound syndrome resting upon Euro-American definitions of 'trauma' and 'disorder' which may not be appropriate in other cultures. Such authors question the applicability and appropriateness of a perspective guided by a PTSD framework, believing that it is too widely and inappropriately applied (Agger, n.d., p. 15; Bracken, Giller & Summerfield, 1995; de Berry & Boyden, 2000; Pupavac, 2002, p. 490; Summerfield, 1997; Young, 1995). Concerns about imperialism arise when the PTSD framework is accompanied by an assumption that an outside force must manage a helpless people. When presented as a model of diagnosis and treatment requiring expert knowledge, using technical language and requiring expert skills from outside the local culture, it can undermine local explanations and understanding of trauma and local healing expertise. This failure to recognize the potential utility of indigenous practices can be both profoundly disempowering to affected individuals and their community, and counterproductive to healthy rehabilitation. Over-reliance on a medicalized, clinical approach may prevent practitioners from "a genuine learning exchange with community members about how issues of mutual concern are understood and how they might be addressed". Additionally, it could "at the least ... further erode the resilience that psychosocial interventions seek to strengthen; at worst it can do harm" (Williamson & Robinson, 2006, pp. 5-6.). Approaches that use community-identified interests as their starting point, which draw upon the resources present locally and facilitate rather than impose models of healing, carry multiple benefits for young people and the communities in which they live.

The impact of armed conflict upon children's moral development

There are conflicting views on the impact of armed conflict upon the moral development of children. Some scholars have contributed to this debate with views informed by the work of developmental psychologist, Lawrence Kohlberg (1965). This classic work outlining Kohlberg's stage theory has served to shape many arguments about the detrimental effects of this form of trauma upon young children.

Kohlberg suggests that our capacity for moral reasoning develops and matures over time, built in part on our understanding of the nature of human relationships. From this perspective, most moral development occurs through the process of social interaction. Operating within this framework, some have chosen to marry the issues



of child soldiering and moral reasoning (Garbarino, Kostelny & Dubrow, 1991; Hill & Langholtz, 2003). Whereas in healthy development, an emerging sense of virtues and vices, along with fundamental moral concepts such as *justice* serve to guide young people in their everyday activities, some would argue that extreme exposure to situations of armed conflict pervert a healthy worldview. The experience of extreme violence colors a young person's perception of normal interpersonal relations, affecting their own moral outlook. The resulting maladaptive behaviors may range from a deep and abiding suspicion of others to extreme psychopathology, resulting in the oft-heard adage from the field—however misinformed or divisive it may be—*once a killer, always a killer*. This style of thinking is counterproductive to notions of rehabilitation and community healing. The stigma placed on involvement in combat can be a tremendous obstacle to community acceptance. Issues of coercion and the absence of choices (Wessells, 2002) exist alongside discussion of resiliency (see paper edited by Dowdney, 2007) within the literature. For a discussion of the moral clarity some children may maintain, see Boothby & Knudsen (2000). For more information on the remorse expressed by former combatants, see Brett, 2002; Cohn, 1998; Honwana, n.d. The impact of child involvement in armed combat has been a topic of great interest and examples abound in the literature, probably most capably critiqued in *The Moral Development of Child Soldiers: What Do Adults Have to Fear?* by Jo Boyden (2003).

Some believe that involvement in combat is accompanied by a systematic emotional undernourishment of forcibly recruited or abducted children, which scars them in profound ways, fundamentally altering the healthy development of the self (Garbarino, Kostelny & Dubrow, 1991; Hill & Langholtz, 2003; Pearn, 2003; Punamaki, 2002; Pynoos & Nader, 1988). More generally, some argue that exposure to and participation in violent acts dramatically impacts upon the minds of children, who may be either recipients or perpetrators of trauma. In certain extreme situations, children are shaped and socialized into becoming soldiers, without regard for their humanity or psychological development. In addition to fear-conditioned responses such as regressive or aggressive behavior mentioned in the previous section, it has been suggested that an atmosphere of chronic danger peppered with political ideology may give rise to a "vendetta mentality" (Hill & Langholtz, 2003, p. 280). Here, the child's sense of being wronged feeds into a justification of revenge seeking behavior. In such circumstances, those children who have a desperate need for a sense of strength can experience enhanced identification with their captors. "As a result of this process, children model their behavior on the powerful and aggressive individuals in their environment, who have caused the danger" to themselves and their communities (Hill & Langholtz, 2003, p. 280). Consequently, children may be left imprinted with the conviction that "violence is the basic relationship that characterizes humankind" (Pearn, 2003, p. 168).

While there is evidence that armed conflict affects children and childhood development in profound ways (Boothby, 1992; Despert, 1942; Faulkner, 2001; Freud & Burlingham, 1943; Joshi & O'Donnell, 2003; Machel, 2001; Mendelsohn & Straker, 1998; Pearn, 2003; Punamaki 2000; West, n.d.), there is evidence, too that these effects need not always be negative (Boyden, 2003; Utas, 2005; Wessells, 2006; Williamson & Robinson, 2006).

Boyden (2003) explores the issue by reviewing the literature, noting the "shortage of systematic empirical research in this area" (p. 343), and concludes that children are able to negotiate a landscape marked by violence and limited resources without losing their humanity. In fact, research suggests that "children may not be as liable to



moral disorientation as many imagine” (Boyden, 2003, p. 350). Furthermore, while presenting individuals with incredible challenges, soldiering does not unequivocally empty children of their moral and ethical potential. Certain core pathologies may, of course, be attributed to wartime experiences (e.g. mistrust, aggressive orientation, reliance on power assertion, role confusion), but there are also several developmental tasks which are exercised very much to the benefit of the child. Positive aspects of the soldiering experience have been cited—bonding with a peer group; a sense of purpose; a semblance of order; security and solidarity are among those listed (Mendelson & Straker, 1998). These elements contribute to a child’s ability to endure. Mastery of war craft may feed a child’s inherent yearning for competence, especially in those of school age. Children’s exposure to political ideology may allow them to organize the events taking place around them, rather than succumbing to chaotic circumstance. Although the “role will be characterized by violence, brutality, deprivation, death, sexual exploitation and callous indifference to others” the military may prove a psychological stand-in for a lost parental presence, providing a framework of understanding, a social role, and opportunity for physical survival where there otherwise would be none (Faulkner, 2001).

A child exercising tremendous resilience, making use of her/his own internal capacities to stay alive, to construct or participate in an organized group that will allow her/him to endure, should not be treated simply as a victim if only because it robs the community of her/his strengths in peace time (Guyot, 2006).

A ‘CHILD-IN ENVIRONMENT PERSPECTIVE’

The need for a new integrative perspective in the field of DDR derives in part from the limitations of current research in this area. An individualized approach to children’s needs ignores the important mutual interactions between the children and their familial and social context. As discussed in the previous section, the emphasis has largely been on the vulnerability of children drawn into conflict, their moral development and the devastating impact of trauma. Studies of war-affected children which stress pathological outcomes in the context of a medicalized, individualized approach, risk an over-emphasis on victimization and a failure to recognize the resources, resilience and potential contribution, of many children.

This historically narrow view of children involved in armed conflict may have occurred in response to a deepening appreciation of the traumatic experience of war and the accompanying use of a psychological framework. The emphasis on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) has resulted in an approach that does not fully balance individual agency with victimization. A medicalized approach to the rehabilitation of former child soldiers places the child at the center of the complex issue of post-conflict healing, while at the same time denying them any role in further peace-building activities. Or, as Boyden & Mann (2000) put it: “the notion of rehabilitation implies that it is the child rather than society that needs changing” (p. 3). The fact is that both face the challenge of transitioning successfully from conflict to peace.

In contrast, the child-in-environment perspective concentrates less exclusively on how a war environment affects the development of the child and more on how the developing child interacts over time with the totality of their environment. A basic tenet of social work, the person-in-environment framework, observes individual activity within the context of social realities, recognizing how each operates on the other. Thus, whilst acknowledging that children are influenced by their environment, it is emphasized that they also have the capacity to influence that environment. From



this perspective, programs would seek to empower children rather than leave them as passive recipients to donor largesse. We need to recognize children for what they are - experts in their own complex experience, valued partners in community healing, future leaders, and potential peace-builders. That is, capitalizing on their strengths, in developmentally appropriate ways, in addition to recognizing their needs (for fuller discussion, see Lansdown, 2004; Miller, 1997).

Social systems that serve the community often pre-date the arrival of NGO interventionists. Collaborative efforts would make use of local capacity to address issues, building on these resources to support competencies and enhance adaptive capacities. For example, any treatment of the spiritual wounds of war present in the individual certainly requires an understanding of non-harmful indigenous practice and belief systems. The opportunity to work from the perspective of partnership shifts the focus of psychosocial programming to increasing personal, interpersonal, and intergenerational connections so that communities are able to themselves make use of indigenous capacity to improve the situation. Such community-based approaches have the added benefit of breadth - the ability to “address multiple sources of vulnerability in a system transformation approach” (Wessells, 2006, personal communication). This alternative perspective takes into account the larger systems affected by conflict, in addition to the developing child: its peer group, family, local community, ethnic group, and the state.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF A CHILD-IN-ENVIRONMENT PERSPECTIVE

An ecological, strengths-based theoretical framework, as offered by a child-in-environment perspective, provides a basis for the analysis of the social, economic, and political reality of child soldiers as it takes into consideration the complex dynamics of social functioning and social oppression. In appreciating the interdependent nature of the situation, a child-in-environment paradigm functions alongside the radical notion that the situation faced by children involved in armed conflict cannot be understood in isolation from the larger systems in which they operate. Not only do “prolonged conflict and the resulting disruption of the community infrastructure and resources affect everyone in the community,” but one of the characteristics of modern conflict is how entire communities are targeted (Farwell & Cole, 2001/2). Therefore the situation faced by children involved in armed conflict cannot be understood in isolation. Any discussion of child soldiers must recognize the dynamic relationship between the socio-eco-geo-political environment and the individual child.

Reintegration and rehabilitation

The traditional focus of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration programs has been limited by a concentration on the external aspects (e.g. collection of arms, geographical return to the communities of origin), with children and youth who are subjects of larger narratives whereby their needs are subsumed within other issues such as peace-building discourses or other security-centered concerns (e.g. small arms use). Shifting attention to the children as potential implementers and partners in endeavors would place the issues that affect them at the center of dialogue. Furthermore, participatory exploration of young people’s engagement in the *processes* of recruitment, participation, and rehabilitation lends itself to a more comprehensive view of the whole situation and yields an understanding which may prove useful in crafting more effective and welcome programming.



The interrelatedness of trauma and psychosocial development in the population is significant. The impact of trauma is experienced not only by individual children and youth, but it also impacts on social cohesion in that it serves to undermine the trust between community members formerly bound by complex extended networks that comprised traditional affiliations. Community-level effects of conflict are characterized by a fundamental renegotiation of dynamics that were once taken for granted, such as informal leadership, alliances, shared experience, perspective, and goals. Attempts to mend the social fabric bring with them the opportunity to address issues that are relevant to the community as a whole. (See Farwell & Cole (2001/2). This is why the reintegration of child soldiers must go hand-in-hand with concerted community recovery. Investment in the social reintegration of former child soldiers needs to contribute to national reconstruction and reconciliation efforts, if we are to “address the structural conditions that make it so easy to militarize African youth,” as Alex de Waal so argues (de Waal, 2002, p. 22; McIntyre, 2003; Faulkner, 2001). We must work to reduce both the supply and the demand for this precious resource.

Economic empowerment, capacity building that funnels the skills developed through war craft into positive and healthy behavior, trauma-healing that occurs in conjunction with indigenous leadership, and community-building tasks must all take place alongside one another. It is not enough to effect change in an individual. Interventions must take place on several fronts if rehabilitation efforts are to prove lasting. In their research, Hill & Langholtz cite elders in Sierra Leone, Uganda, and Angola who have noted that “youth with limited education and economic opportunities who view violence as normal and who have seen the power of a gun are at risk for continuing cycles of violence.” (2003, p. 281). That is why it is essential that these young people receive proper and adequate attention - the issue of re-recruitment into freelance mercenary corps should be of great concern. Programs must demonstrably invest in human capital as the way to ensure peace. As the world learned when conflict in Sierra Leone and Angola came to a close, and the curtain rose on new theatres in Liberia and Cote d'Ivoire, these youth may prove a vastly destabilizing force if ignored (Becker, 2004).

Certainly the time lag between the close of active conflict and the initiation of child-centered rehabilitation efforts must be narrowed to increase the likelihood of success and to protect these children and youth from the very real threat of re-recruitment. This will also diminish the threat that these youth, if mobilized, would pose to neighboring countries. Access to a safe environment and exposure to normalizing influences (e.g. structured activities) will aid psychosocial recovery (Loughry et al., 2006). This is an essential step towards regional stability and peace.

Continued social and economic marginalization of these children can only make for a lingering risk of destabilization. It is counterproductive and may threaten peace-building activities. Community-based strategies have the potential to empower communities to exercise control over their collective lives and to heal together (Boothby, 1996; Farwell & Cole, 2001/2; Wessells, Poulton & Javed, n.d.). Facilitating community empowerment can counteract the destructive effects of wartime upon communities and the emotional lives of the extended families that populate them. Programs that address the behavior of individual children whilst ignoring the vulnerability of their communal context do not operate to the full benefit of either individuals or their communities which are charged with providing sustenance and social healing.



Transitioning children out of war is an intensive and time-consuming endeavor. The World Bank recommends “a reasonable period, at least three to five years, of committed resources,” which grant applicants should be quick to remind them of repeatedly (World Bank, n.d., p. 4). We must remain mindful of the fact that recruitment is a process whereby children are conditioned to obey without question, desensitized to violence, and indoctrinated. Rehabilitation efforts need to be as comprehensive and provide new role models to replace the old. It is no accident of place and time that pushes children into warfare but, “a result of sustained and orchestrated brutalization [that] these children [are] turned into some of the most vicious and inhumane killers at the disposal of various factions” (Faulkner 2001). As outlined earlier, in spite of their brutal experiences, some child soldiers return to their communities with new skills and competencies which they can contribute. These returnees have been transformed by the experience of having endured and survived the challenges of negotiating terrible circumstances independent of their families. There is a need, therefore, for programs that balance out the challenges and strengths which child soldiers bring, whilst drawing on local, culturally grounded supports. This type of approach would require, however, a significant investment of time. Therefore, “a longer-term perspective on the transition process to civilian life for child soldiers” is required (World Bank, n.d, p. 1).

The period of community adjustment may be shortened by drawing local people into the process, thus preventing the effects of traumatic life events being transferred to succeeding generations (Baider et. al., 2000; Danieli, 1998; Halasz, 2001; Rakoff, Sigal, & Epstein, 1966; Rowland-Klein & Dunlop, 1998). When local people act as agents, the impact of their action multiplies the benefit of psychosocial/rehabilitation programs. Children are (or certainly should be) universally recognized as any society’s most precious asset: the future. The successful rehabilitation and reintegration of former child soldiers lays the groundwork for a stable and lasting peace. To this end the World Bank has funded the Christian Children’s Fund Angola land purchase and small business start up programs. Their approach to social reintegration has been to identify school, job, and vocational training placements, which are “vital for building hope for the future and giving young people skills that will enable them to support themselves” - with the added benefit of linking psychosocial healing with economic reconstruction (Wessells, Poulton, & Javed, n.d., p. 5).

Hill & Langholtz (2003) identify the innovative approach taken by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) to encourage school attendance, which has multiple benefits for the community, including: mobilizing former child soldiers in a healthy and constructive manner, new infrastructure (e.g. a school house), and a future oriented toward education and the ability to locate a livelihood outside of the realm of soldiering. Since returning students may be self-conscious because of the disparate ages between themselves and others, UNICEF has created a program of accelerated learning, which halves the “catch up” period required, thereby effectively narrowing the age gap significantly. By respecting the personhood and guarding the sense of self of these young people, who are viewed as leaders by their peers, the program spares non-traditional-age students a sense of diminished social esteem in the eyes of their communities. It can also foster the development of a new peer group comprised of both former child soldiers and others that holds so much promise for the possibility of knitting together these two groups in the community at large. By recognizing and responding to the actual needs of youth leadership, program benefits are multiplied.



Alternative models of reconciliation and social healing

The post-conflict situation is complicated where former child soldiers are blamed and stigmatized for their participation in wartime atrocities – particularly when they were directed against the communities from which they were abducted (Derluyn et al, 2004). Of course military commanders exploited this psychological vulnerability, forcing children to “commit horrifying acts of violence within their own communities with the intention of breaking the bond between children and their communities so *that the children will fear ever returning home,*” and would thus be less likely to attempt to run away (Hill & Langholtz, 2003, p. 280). It is for this reason that local communities play a vital role in post-conflict healing and reconciliation. The participation of local leadership in reconciliation efforts provides an opportunity to transcend the social cleavages between victims and perpetrators which were created during the period of active conflict.

What forms should reconciliation efforts take to effectively overcome the emotional pain suffered not only by the children, but by the communities that once suffered at their hands? An approach emphasized in the literature is the employment of community-based treatments that make use of “indigenous religious and cultural methods” (Mendelson & Straker, 1998). In healing social bonds and resolving social displacement, non-harmful, pre-existing traditional rituals are potentially excellent tools for peace-building. One-to-one therapy may not be appropriate to a culture with a strong collective identity. Instead, programs should build on “the practices that people have used to survive and heal through history” (Agger, n.d., p. 7). Focusing resources on capacity-building measures for culturally defined and/or traditional support networks may render added benefits.

Indigenous forms of what we might term “therapy” have the advantage of being “accepted by local communities, and thus are more sustainable”, in the longer term (Hill & Langholtz, 2003, p. 283). They are authentic to the culture and may serve to strengthen the connections that transcend the war experience (Green & Honwana, 1999). They may also be viewed as a means of community empowerment, as local traditions are used to reaffirm social networks (Wessells & Moneiro, 2001). Healing rituals may even serve as a rite of passage for those who were not afforded them. Just as these children were often given amulets, “which they are told will make them impervious to bullets” as part of their indoctrination into the world of child soldiering, these children may receive spiritual sustenance in rituals of group forgiveness and cleansing (CETO, 2002).

In Bantu cultures, for example, rural peoples believe that children who kill in combat are contaminated by the unavenged spirits of the people they had killed. Trauma is less the problem than is the breach between the living community and the community of the ancestors. A traditional purification ritual may be more appropriate in this context than would Western counseling. In fact, many people believe that talking about one’s war experiences invites the bad spirits to re-enter. (Honwana, 1997, cited in Wessells, Poulton and Javed, n.d.)

Culturally appropriate cleansing rituals practiced by local spiritual leaders can pave the way for community healing. In addition to the emotional/psychological/spiritual benefits, these rituals address a social need, signifying the child’s return to their kinship. The World Bank documents the importance of these practices for children in Uganda, who were eager for cleansing ceremonies “so that their communities do not view them as *cen* (contaminated)” (World Bank, n.d., p. 3). Furthermore, indigenous



practices are sustainable in addition to being effective, with the expertise rooted within the community.

Targeting children without engaging the community is not unlike attempting to seed untilled land. Interventions focused solely on the children will wash away with little chance of developing roots if their environment is not properly cultivated. Practitioners must share the simple common goal of assisting the community to embrace the children they lost and who, when they return, will have developed and matured in difficult circumstances away from the emotional and moral support of their family and community. The children who return will, in many ways, be different to the children who left, and both their families and communities may find these changes hard to accept. Local communities have a vital role to play in post-conflict healing, reconciliation, and the social reintegration of war-affected children. Non-harmful indigenous practices, such as cleansing rituals for returning children, by virtue of their cultural meaning and integration, and their employment by key community actors, are sustainable, can facilitate reintegration and healing, and greatly assist in resolving social displacement. They can also be a vehicle for community empowerment, and are thus excellent tools for peace building. To this end, development efforts must target traditional healers, amongst other key community actors, as they “play a critical role in helping the community to forgive the former child soldiers for their atrocities” (Hill & Langholtz, 2003). Purifying rituals can in some ways be a pre-condition of meaningful peace. They punctuate the war, delineating a shift to peace. A wonderful example of the effect is an Angolan cleansing ritual as documented by Wessells (1997), in Mendelson & Straker (1998):

First, he lives with the child for a month, feeding him a special diet designed to cleanse. During the month, he also advises the child on proper behavior and what the village expects from him. At the end of the month, the healer convenes the village for a ritual. As part of the ceremony, the healer buries frequently used weapons—a machete, perhaps, or an AK-47—and announces that on this day the boy’s life as a soldier has ended and his life as a civilian has begun.

Clearly, it is important to protect all children in the aftermath of war. Though many strides have been made in the field of child protection, their legal protection requires at the minimum an intact and functioning state. Therefore, in situations where states need rebuilding, effective support for the demobilization, rehabilitation, and reintegration of former child soldiers is integral to a successful rebuilding process. One cannot reasonably be separated from the other. Concerted, systematic efforts to rehabilitate and reintegrate these children are not only morally imperative, but serve as a safeguard against a failing state in the future and the security concern that would represent. Successful reintegration is a sign of successful rebuilding. Children must be made a priority, as they are the bridge between past instability and future state health. Just as an essential part of recruitment is to drive a wedge between conscripts and community, national reconciliation efforts should focus on healing that divide.

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