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THE PSYCHO-SOCIAL CARE OF DEMOBILIZED CHILD SOLDIERS IN COLOMBIA: CONCEPTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS

By Fernando Jiovani Arias Morales (2005)

Psychosocial web page Editor's introduction

In this edition of our webpage, we present a new paper written by Fernando Jiovani Arias Morales: **The Psycho-social care of demobilized child soldiers in Colombia: Conceptual and Methodological Aspects**. The psychosocial model presented in this article conceptualises psychosocial care as a multi-level intervention in which the child and their experiences, their social and familial relationships, inter-institutional networks, and the larger society have a part to play, and all of which can influence child outcome.

A particular strength of the approach adopted by the Fundación Dos Mundos is the recognition that each child is unique and each brings their own understanding and life experiences to the intervention process. These experiences include their life before joining the armed group, their reasons for joining the group, their experiences within the group, whether they are demobilising on a voluntary or enforced basis, and the reintegration process itself. This is the starting point for any intervention, and understanding the meaning of each of these experiences to the children concerned, enables those working with them to 'accompany' them through the reintegration process. Because the child's social world exerts an important influence upon their emotional and psychological development, the child's experiences, beliefs, emotions, ethics and understanding will all have been influenced by their relationships within the armed group. An important task for the reintegration process, therefore, is to foster the child's functioning within a different 'relational context' that excludes armed group membership. Conceptualized broadly, this context includes the child's self-identity and understanding, their life history, their extended family, educational institutions and the larger society. With this in mind, the Fundación Dos Mundos programme offers a range of interventions which include peer group experiences, cultural activities and working with the child's familial and social networks, and local institutions, to facilitate their support and inclusion of the child. This article successfully weaves theory and practice to illustrate an exceptionally interesting approach to the demobilisation of child soldiers.

Dr. Linda Dowdney
Editor

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 founding organisations are Amnesty International, Defence for Children International, Human Rights Watch, International Federation Terre des Hommes, International Save the Children Alliance, Jesuit Refugee Service, the Quaker United Nations Office-Geneva and World Vision International.



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By Fernando Jiovani Arias Morales, Doctor and Psychotherapist,
Director of *Fundación Dos Mundos*¹ (2005)

INTRODUCTION

In their 1996 report, *The State of the World's Children*, UNICEF estimates that between 1985 and 1996, some 2 million children died world wide as a result of war. Over the same ten year time period, the report suggests that some 10 million children experienced psychological trauma. In Colombia, there are no accurate statistics on the true number of violent deaths caused by armed confrontations, assaults, terrorism and massacres. Similarly there are no true figures for the number of children involved in the conflict as combatants, or who have died in combat. In our country children are not only exposed to all types of socio-political violence - and therefore the resultant psychological sequelae - but the chances of them receiving emotional care are poor and, in fact, practically non-existent.

In spite of the absence of accurate statistics, we do know that children in Colombia grow up against a background of violence and armed conflict, and many will become involved in that conflict as 'helper's to one or other armed group. The "participation" of children as helpers for armed groups usually comes about either because they receive nominal payment for their services; because they see big strong armed men as role models, or because they are seeking revenge for violent events from their past. Once children start "helping out", however, there seems to be a certain inevitability that they will end up as combatants.

To say that children and youth help out, however, does not mean that compulsion does not come into it. To what extent do children have a real choice when their world is dominated by conflict, and when the symbols, relationships, language and activities intrinsic to war pervade their surroundings? , The fact that the child's involvement may be voluntary does not invalidate the decision that the same child or

¹ This article is based on a paper submitted by the *Fundación Dos Mundos* for an event entitled "*Alternativas de Intervención desde la prevención del reclutamiento y la atención de niños, niñas y jóvenes involucrados en el conflicto armado colombiano. Un abordaje desde las organizaciones sociales y la cooperación internacional*", 13 December 2000.

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youngster might have taken under different circumstances and with the benefit of reflection.

Conflict also impacts upon the socialization of children as families strive to deal with the new situations they encounter. Although they experience fear of war actors, some families manage to hold on to their identity and their desire not to get involved with armed groups. Such “independence” often obliges them to move away in order to save their lives, keep their family together and prevent their children from being forcibly recruited into an armed group.

By contrast, in other families, the child may be seduced by the power that weapons, command and war in general can give. Attaining such power becomes a personal goal. At that point ideology is not a crucial component. Some children and young people do not care which armed group they enlist with. However, those who have been exposed to violent events such as the murder or disappearance of a member of their family, or who have witnessed a massacre, can grow up with a strong desire for vengeance that prompts them to join the armed group opposed to the one they believe was responsible for such acts.

CHILDREN’S INVOLVEMENT IN WAR: SOME POINTS TO BEAR IN MIND FROM AN EMOTIONAL STANDPOINT

Children who become involved in armed conflict have to cope with changes to their lives that result from their new status. Their previous roles, as son or daughter, brother or sister, child or teenager, will not form the basis of how they will be defined by their new comrades, nor how they will come to predominantly define themselves. They gradually become caught up in a new kind of life involving different forms of interaction, different roles and expectations and new fears. As they develop particular relationships with their new companions, commanding officers and weapons, they leave behind their families of origin and former daily lives. They have to set aside personal and family roots, and replace these with permanent physical and emotional mobility. Being on a permanent combat footing, leads to behaviour and beliefs that range from being on constant alert to being convinced that the solution to conflict is through the use of arms. In order to be able to properly implement the politico-military ideas of the group to which they belong, group members must rise above their own emotions and abide by the opinion of the group. Over the course of time this leads to the development of a dependency on others, low self-esteem and an inability to solve difficulties and to take decisions for themselves.

While there is no “typical type” of child who becomes involved in armed conflict as a combatant, we can point to some important characteristics which, in our experience, tend to be found in such children. These are as follows:-

- The children evidence difficulty in establishing emotional connections outside of the members of their group - perhaps because the latter have become their closest socio-family referent, or ‘substitute’ family.
- Because these children are accustomed to acting according to the will of others and/or the group they belong to, they show little recognition that they could potentially exercise autonomy over their own lives



- Children and young people find difficulty in benefitting from more traditional forms of training and learning which emphasise individual achievement and the provision of knowledge from teachers as experts, rather than children learning from each other. This may be because within the armed group, individual achievement is measured in terms of group achievements and learning is confined to knowledge or experience which is useful for achieving the group's objective.
- The development of the children's moral and ethical values is determined by the inherent logic of war.

FACTORS INVOLVED IN CHILDREN'S EMOTIONAL RESPONSES TO DEMOBILIZATION

Children do not all respond in the same way to the prospect of demobilization from an armed group. Their emotional response is likely to depend on a number of different factors, including whether demobilization is voluntary or enforced. With voluntary demobilization, the interest in change and the wish to no longer belong to an armed group springs from the individual themselves. Where demobilization is enforced, however, the fact that it is obligatory in of itself constitutes a new element with its own emotional repercussions. This is discussed later in this paper, in the section outlining our Psycho-social Care model.

Other factors that influence children's attitudes to demobilisation include the age of the child, and how long he or she has been involved in the conflict. The younger the child, and the longer he or she has been involved with a group which participates in armed conflict, the harder it will be for him or her to recognize that there are alternative ways of living, and the demobilization process can therefore have a major emotional impact. The way in which the child came to join up can also be important. The emotional significance of demobilisation for children can vary according to whether their recruitment was voluntary, enforced, induced as a result of payment, or was the result of a denunciation. The violent events which the child has experienced, whilst living under arms and the extent of their involvement in these events, will also be influential. The emotional impact of leaving the armed group will be different according to whether the child was directly involved in war-related activities or played more of a support role. Where children or youth have taken active roles in armed actions such as kidnapping, armed raids, extortion or killing, or where they have participated in decision making related to such activities, then their subsequent sense of responsibility for these events can be overwhelming and can limit their openness to new learning. This is less likely to be so where children or youth have had roles confined to logistic support, or domestic tasks of one kind or another. These participants, by and large, show less self-reproach and a greater ability to participate in new learning.

In addition to the factors already mentioned, there are other equally important emotional responses that stem from the child's fear of having to deal with a new lifestyle as well as different relationships and responsibilities, and changes in habitual ways of behaving. There are also the experiences and feelings the child has that come from holding a weapon in his or her hand or, indeed, from having to relinquish it. Sometimes, the weapon has functioned not only as a means of protection but has psychologically become a part of the child, so that not having it can feel like being mutilated. Children also go through a grieving process for the loss of their daily



chores, the roles they had when leading an armed life, the emotional bonds they had established and the life plan they had been following. Returning to civilian life can also provoke in the children a fear of what their family's attitude towards them might be if they return home, a fear of social stigma and a fear of the new obligations and work or school roles they will have to take on. Some children may be distrustful and insecure, show a lack of emotion and find it hard to adapt to new rules and authority. They may also suffer from sleep disorders, depression, anxiety, phobias and even post-traumatic stress disorder.

Thus, the milieu facing the child following demobilization will be extremely important. The provision of a social support network that, among other things, seeks to rid the child of derogatory labels, fosters their emotional support, allows the children to reflect on their experiences and enables them to look to the future, will help to ensure that the process of changing from an armed life to a life without weapons has a greater sense of purpose.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONCEPTS – THE FUNDACION DOS MUNDOS' MODEL OF PSYCHO-SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

Our experiences and reflections on the subject of the psycho-social assistance provided to children who are directly involved as actors in the Colombian armed conflict, have contributed to the development of the Fundación Dos Mundos guidelines on the treatment of these children, as well as other children who have been affected by violence and adversity. Before outlining our psycho-social care model, I will describe the theory and methodology on which is based.

Theoretical and conceptual issues:

A relational understanding of emotion: Traditionally emotions are taken to be "intrapsychic realities" that are located inside individuals. The work we have undertaken with populations affected by the armed conflict in this country, shows that this approach is too narrow. We have learned that it is necessary to take a different and broader approach to emotion, so that emotion is seen as a constituent feature *not of individuals* but of *the relationships* those individuals are involved in. From this perspective it is neither sufficient nor useful to describe how children's involvement in the armed conflict and their subsequent demobilization affects them as individuals. Such an intra-individual focus can result in an unnecessary psychologisation and pathologisation of those who have experienced extreme situations – such as being involved in war as a combatant. Instead, emphasis should be placed on the *resources and capabilities* of the children concerned, rather than on what they are lacking. It is important to recognise the *complexity* of the psycho-social impact that involvement in extreme experiences can have. Thus, it is important to gain not only a concrete understanding of what has happened to the child, but also what repercussions the experience of joining up, and then later abandoning, the armed group has had on his or her relational and emotionally significant world in its broadest sense. The language in which the child's relationships will have been conducted will have its own symbolisation and meaning. This language will have developed within the context of membership of an armed group – and its meaning will reflect the ethos, activities and relationships within the group. Language will be a symbolic reflection of the identities acceptable to, or encouraged within, the group. For example, when the word 'cobardía' (cowardice) is used, it will reflect group expectations of how an individual should have behaved in a particular context. What constitutes a lack of 'courage' or 'decisiveness', therefore, will be defined by the



group rather than by the individual. Thus, psycho-social work with these young people requires an understanding of the meaning of the language children and youth use to describe themselves and their history, and to recognise this has evolved within, and has been reinforced by, interactions of the armed group.

Contextual levels as a tool of psycho-social analysis: When accompanying children through the psycho-social process following demobilization, we use a way of describing their situation which we have called "*Identification of the Problem*". This will be unique to each child, and our identification and understanding of each child's 'problem' will be developed in conjunction with the child, and wherever possible, with those involved in key relationships with him/her. We try to gain an understanding of each child at a number of levels. These include: their experiences whilst associated with the armed group and the changes this has brought about in them; their life story, their family background, structure and functioning; their school; their community; their culture and their socio-political situation. We have found that these contextual levels do not have a hierarchical relationship, but that each context influences and is influenced by the others. When taking this approach it is useful to establish which of these contextual levels has particular meaning for the emotional situation of any given child or young person. This type of analysis is important because it allows us to move away from a reductionist approach resulting in the standard type of individual intervention, such as individual therapy in isolation from the child's social context, to broader approaches which recognize the special characteristics of each child. It also involves a recognition that these characteristics are not necessarily intrinsic to the individual child, but have developed within, and are influenced by, their relationships within the group - which itself functions within a societal context of armed conflict

Using meaning to build a picture of emotional "reality": What it actually means for a child to enlist and become involved in an armed group, and why and how they joined, etc., can vary from child to child. The meaning of these events for the child depends both upon the individual characteristics of the child him or herself, and also how he or she experienced life as part of the group. Together, these will shape how he or she describes or talks about their own identity, their experiences and their views and beliefs about the future. The meaning imparted by the child to their own 'life story' can be used as a framework for understanding what psycho-social impact their experiences have had upon them. Once the child's 'story', or narrative account, of their experiences is understood, then it is possible to join with them in constructing new meanings for parts of the story which cause them distress or prevent them being able to envisage any life other than being part of an armed group.

Reconstructing the child's social fabric: By virtue of being human, each child both belongs to and helps to construct a social network. This network supports the child in a variety of ways. It helps them find people and things they can relate to and to develop the language they use to describe and understand their world. They provide the child with a sense of belonging, as well as powerful cultural imagery of desirable and undesirable roles. In other words, everything which goes to make up his or her social and political identity, and their emotional world. As outlined earlier, when children become armed actors, their social networks and their roles and responsibilities change. Similarly, when they are demobilized, they face further changes in their social fabric as they begin to relate to different people and encounter different norms, beliefs and values, all of which are permanently intertwined. The demands of their new situation, means that their identify must once again change – whereas previously when they joined an armed group they left behind their role as



'son' or 'daughter', now they must leave behind their identity as a 'combatant'. This need for further change means they can end up becoming confused and uncertain about the world they find themselves in, especially if they are approaching or entering adolescence.

PSYCHO-SOCIAL CARE MODEL

Our model of psycho-social assistance rests upon four conceptual pillars, which are described below. However, it should be borne in mind that these components of care do not necessarily follow a particular sequence and some may happen simultaneously.

1. Identification of psycho-social state based on the cause of demobilization:

As mentioned earlier in this paper, the child's psycho-social state can vary according to why they are demobilising:

Demobilization resulting from desertion: In this case, leaving armed life is a voluntary act which means that, at the psycho-social level, the child is disposed to change the life he or she is leading. This means they will be more receptive to the initiatives that are going to be involved in bringing him or her back to civilian life and the possibilities available to them at that stage of their lives. This child's desire to change their life is especially useful as a therapeutic care tool.

Demobilization resulting from capture: This situation can be understood by the child in at least two different ways. Some children will view their capture and demobilisation as a traumatic event that is damaging to his or her life and which, therefore, makes them resistant to change. Others will see it as an unexpected opportunity to change their lives. Whichever way the child sees it, their attitude to demobilization can be addressed in their therapeutic care. Where children did not want to demobilize, then work with them can be directed at helping them to see the traumatic event as an opportunity for change which does not at all invalidate their previous experiences. With children who wished to demobilise, then work with them can aim to empower them to be able to take up the new opportunities for themselves which are now available.

Demobilization resulting from negotiation: When the demobilization of children from armed groups is agreed in the context of a negotiating process, any such agreement should include a process of psycho-social assistance for the children. This should include aspects such as:

- Identifying what the negotiated demobilization means for the boys and girls involved. For instance, did they know about the process, did they agree with it, were they able to express their views about it?
- Their expectations about the changes that will take place following demobilisation. For example, changes that stem from the differences between military and civilian life, including differences in rules and regulations, and the children's future roles and living environments.
- The importance to the child of the social fabric surrounding them in the armed group.



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- Exploring both the individual and collective identity the child has developed while with the armed group.
 - Finding out what ideas and impressions the child has of the support networks such as institutions, family and friends, that may or may not be available to him or her.

Gaining an understanding of these elements provides useful input so that psycho-social care can be provided in a coherent way. It will help the demobilized child learn to see a particular emotional moment differently, and so be less fearful about continuing with the process. It can help the child adopt a more receptive attitude and greater sense of purpose that can be carried over into the next stage of psycho-social assistance.

2. Psycho-social identification based on the relational context:

Our psycho-social assistance model for children who abandon armed life takes shape in practice through making the following 'psychological spaces' available to them:

Space for self-recognition: We create a space for the child's self-recognition by listening and facilitating his or her self expression through talking, drawing, theatre, music, sculpture, etc. In this way, it is possible to identify how the child has understood the meaning of enlistment with the armed group; his or her subsequent demobilization and the impact of demobilisation upon their lives. This helps us gain an understanding what needs to be addressed with each child.

Here it is worth considering to what extent weapons, military life and war-related matters have become symbolic referents for the identity of the children. Together with the children, we look at the feelings of guilt some of them may have for the actions they have undertaken and which, if not examined, could turn into real labels that the children attach to themselves.

Space for validating and acknowledging the child's history before and during association with the armed group: The purpose of this aspect of our work, is to validate the experiences the children have had, and to use their recent history to build a bridge that will connect their lives before and after enlistment. This process seeks to find connections between these two time periods that will enable each child to understand their traumatic experiences as events in time that brought about emotional changes within them, but which need not dictate his or her future.

Space for reflecting on the family referent: The Foundation has adopted a broad definition of the term 'family' and sees it, amongst other things, as transcending blood relationships to include emotional ties established through relationships, as well as shared experiences, imagery and a similar world view.

In the case of demobilized children, it is important to know which family referent has a meaningful bond for them. We need to identify whether or not there is an accessible family context and how family members have dealt with the child's 'recruitment', their time with the armed group, and their demobilization. We need to gain an understanding of whether or not the family have provided emotional support to the child. Finally, we need to learn what understanding and beliefs the children themselves have of how the adults in their lives perceive the child's experience of enlistment and demobilization.



Once these referents have been identified, it is possible to determine who, from the emotional point of view, might be the most appropriate people within that web of emotional ties to provide emotional support and assistance to the child at this time in his or her life.

Space for constructing a social fabric: The child cannot reconstruct the social fabric of their previous life, since he or she is not returning to the old life - inevitably, much will have changed. Neither can they reconstruct the social fabric they experienced within the armed group. However, we believe that at the time of demobilization it is possible to construct a social fabric based on a combination of earlier emotional ties and also the new ties that begin to form at that time. One of the tasks for psycho-social care, therefore, is to foster new relational spaces for the child in which he or she can establish ties of both support and trust that aid his or her inclusion in civilian life. Such spaces might be:

The school environment: Every demobilized boy and girl should be included in a pedagogic space in which the teaching staff adopt, and are trained to take, a psycho-social perspective so that their educational work goes beyond the curriculum and helps in the construction of the child's social fabric. Children can find it hard to recognize the importance of academic study for several reasons. For example, some may have had little opportunity to study before enlisting or were only expected to undergo basic primary education. For others, during their life under arms, education was not valued unless it was useful for the purposes of war or it is undervalued because it does not bring immediate financial rewards. This means we need to provide psycho-social assistance based on an understanding that getting the child into education can only be done by taking into account the specific conditions in each case and neither rushing nor delaying the process.

Space for constructing a social fabric: For the demobilised child, entering their new life is like "arriving in one world from another". For this reason it is extremely important to use methodological tools such as meetings, information sharing, outings and training, sporting and cultural activities that are conducive to dialogue between the children and their new peers. By these means, they can discover what their peers are like and also learn the "informal rules" that operate in their new contexts. They can then gradually start to fit in and, above all, adapt to new forms of relationship that allow them to socialize spontaneously and on an equal basis, thereby helping to construct a social fabric. When providing psycho-social assistance, it is useful to bear in mind the cross-cultural influences on the child so that his or her original cultural identity can be determined. This can be done by using strategies such as memory retrieval, the owning of symbols and rituals, or helping him or her to see cross-cultural identity as a product of the various cultural realities he or she has known, and to give new meaning to those which cause distress or make life difficult at the present time.

3. Essential aspects of psycho-social care:

Our model of care recognises that psycho-social assistance should not be thought of as a series of independent, consecutive stages but rather as a process with its own circular dynamic in which each stage feeds back to and supports the others depending on the specific needs of each child. An analogy would be: "as if dancing in a group but at one's own pace". Given that all aspects of the child's surroundings have emotional implications, it is important to take the following into consideration when developing a psycho-social care strategy:



The place of arrival: Places of arrival for demobilized children should be treated as spaces for socialization and not as spaces for re-education. “Re-education” implies that the types of relationship to be established will seek to make the child BE what someone else wants them to be. In contrast, in this context, “socializing” means acknowledging and validating the life that the child has had, and by starting from there, making it possible for them to make the transition to a type of life that is not preconceived but which is constructed *with the child* on a day-to-day basis.

The atmosphere at the place of arrival: Wherever the demobilized child’s place of arrival – whether an institution, or the child’s family - it would be useful if such spaces were open and encouraged dialogue between the child and others. There should be jointly agreed but clear limits, where the child has the opportunity to establish social relationships beyond those provided by the space itself, and which promote a sense of belonging to a social network meaningful to the child.

Training of the social actors accompanying the process: Given the complexity of the issues surrounding the demobilization of child soldiers, it is advisable for those with overall responsibility for accompanying the child through the psycho-social process, to undergo training both beforehand and whilst doing the work. Such training should include: expressing their own feelings about the work they are going to be doing and encouraging them to think about their own position so that their relationship with the child can be freed of labels or stigma. It should also include subjects such as the psycho-social implications of demobilization and techniques for managing these.

Individual treatment: The process of demobilization from armed groups has emotional implications which, in some cases, need to be addressed at an individual level in therapeutic consultations with the child. In the view of the Foundation, this should move away from the traditional nosological criteria used in psychiatry and psychology and instead focus on empowering the child, give new meaning to their experience and encourage them to use their own emotional and psychological resources.

Therapeutic workshops based on a psycho-social approach: We find an important and effect method of psycho-social intervention to be the use of therapeutic workshops, where children work together in groups run by skilled, and therapeutically trained, facilitators. We believe that it is useful for such workshops to include the following elements: they should be dynamic; they should allow the participants to express themselves; connections should be made between the contributions made by different group members; and there should be space for reflection and the development of group ideas. It will be important to construct with the children the meaning of their previous and current experiences in a way that is useful and helpful for them. This can be made possible through the use of circular, reflexive and strategic questions which enable the children to review and comment on their own experiences, to make new connections between those experiences, to anticipate the future, and to gain an understanding of the perspectives of others. While meeting the expectations of the group, it will be important not to neglect individual children, and the workshops should strive to be conducive to collective and individual emotional recovery.

Meetings with peers: Demobilized children should be able to meet with peers who have lived through similar experiences or other forms of violence. This will help them to share experiences, identify common emotions (to help them not to feel “different”)



and to recognize the strengths and resources of others, so that they can also recognise and make use of their own. Demobilized children should also have the opportunity to meet with peers who have not had those kinds of experiences. The organization of such meetings, in the context of sporting and recreational activities or involvement in community work, etc., helps the child or youngster to mix socially and to feel included and recognized within their immediate environment so that that they do not become socially isolated.

Income-generating skill training: Wherever demobilized children end up, one of their basic needs is to be productive. In other words, they need to have a means of generating income for themselves or their families, something which also services an emotional need. Being able to earn money not only helps them to acquire an identity but also has a number of emotional implications. It enables them to boost their self-esteem, become surer of their own capabilities, be more respected by others and have a greater sense of self-determination, responsibility and security. When all this is looked at in terms of prospects for the future, it helps to give the children a stronger sense that they have a practical skill to offer and the belief that they have control over their own lives which, ultimately, is what the overall interventions for these children should be aiming towards. Such training spaces should reflect the tastes, expectations and abilities of the children while at the same time being practically viable.

Cultural activities: The importance of a cultural space for the children has been described above. Activities such as music, dance and theatre provide the children with opportunities for cultural expression. In the areas in which the Foundation works, these cultural spaces have also proved to be useful generally in preventing children from joining armed groups because such spaces offer them ways of belonging that have nothing to do with the conflict.

Inter-institutional networks: It is important that the psycho-social care of demobilised children is supported by a network of institutions, such as NGOs, the Church, the State, that come together in a coherent and cohesive way to address the children's overall needs. The complexity of providing appropriate psycho-social care for these children challenges such institutions to remove the demarcation lines around their work and become "threads" which, when woven together, support the social network the child requires to return to civilian life. The work done at an inter-institutional level also acts as an emotional support to the child because it means that he or she can believe in an institutional framework. This fosters their trust in social coexistence. Inter-institutional coordination based on trust, affection, clarity, responsibility and participation provides the child with a reality that can shift the beliefs that led to him or her taking up arms. It provides space for reflection, trust, credibility and identification as an active member of society for whom participating in civil society is possible.

4. Sensitization of society as a form of assistance and prevention:

In the opinion of the Foundation, one of the most crucial aspects of psycho-social assistance for demobilised children is sensitising the larger society to its roles and responsibilities in relation to the predicament of these children. In our experience, one point which has come up frequently in individual and group sessions with demobilized children is their view that society does not seem to recognize that it has an obligation and role to play in building a society that is different to the one the children left in order to follow a cause seeking to improve the situation for everyone. Above all, society did not acknowledge the suffering the children had endured, nor



the emotional and family costs of their involvement in the conflict. In any methodological proposal regarding psycho-social support, therefore, sensitization should not only involve communicating, revealing and identifying the psycho-social implications of involvement in the conflict for the children. It should also be geared towards producing a shift in positions and attitudes through which bonds that are conducive to the collective social support of demobilized children can be gradually developed.

It is essential, therefore, that collective responsibility should be assumed not only for the children's involvement in the conflict but also, and more importantly, their demobilization. Children can only be truly demobilized from war through the building of a collective awareness that results in civic action being taken to prevent child recruitment, to demand full respect for the rights of the child, and to help consolidate a peace process.

Further, demobilization cannot take place without there being an agreed general position to remove victim status, labels and stigma from children who have been actively involved in the conflict. What is required is a society that is capable of fostering a social climate in which demobilised children can take their place as citizens in the democratic process. It should also not be forgotten that there are hundreds of children who have been "unofficially" demobilized after being involved as armed actors in the conflict and who, for a variety of reasons, have not been tracked by government or judicial bodies. Children who have demobilized in this way also suffer psycho-social consequences and of course find themselves in a situation that is probably even more complicated because they remain at high risk of again being recruited into an armed group. Work must therefore also be done in this area.

Finally, sensitisation involves the State, in its role as guarantor of the wellbeing of its citizens, accepting responsibility for the psycho-social support of demobilized children and those at risk of recruitment into armed groups. However, it is clear that, as far as resolving the conflict itself is concerned, the State's capabilities are limited and that, as far as providing psycho-social care to children confronting war is concerned, they are virtually non-existent. The work being done by NGOs who are experienced in this area should, therefore, be used by the State as an opportunity to work together with these institutions on developing joint approaches on behalf of children affected by the conflict with both sides contributing and learning from each other.