



Save the Children

Fighting Back

Child and community-led strategies
to avoid children's recruitment into
armed forces and groups in West Africa



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Fighting Back looks at the experiences of children living in conflict situations, and focuses on strategies to prevent the recruitment of children into armed groups. Following interviews and discussion with around 300 children and 200 parents and carers in Ivory Coast, Liberia and Sierra Leone, it highlights a number of preventative strategies used by children, families and communities. These include moving to a safe place and avoiding family separation.

This report reveals the complexity of the issue of children's recruitment into armed forces. It highlights the need for context-specific responses that focus on child protection mechanisms, attitudes towards recruitment, education and poverty alleviation. The research findings will be of interest to governmental, NGO and UN initiatives to prevent child recruitment in West Africa and beyond.

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Save the Children fights for children in the UK and around the world who suffer from poverty, disease, injustice and violence. We work with them to find lifelong answers to the problems they face.

Save the Children UK is a member of the International Save the Children Alliance, the world's leading independent children's rights organisation, with members in 27 countries and operational programmes in more than 100.

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Glossary

Campements	Small farms in the bush in Ivory Coast
CDF	Civil Defence Force – rebel group in Sierra Leone
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
LIMA	Liberian armed group who fought on the government side in Ivory Coast
LPC	Liberian Peace Council – rebel group in Liberia
LURD	Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy – rebel group in Liberia
MODEL	Movement for Democracy in Liberia – rebel group in Liberia
MPIGO	Mouvement Populaire Ivoirien du Grand Ouest – rebel group in Ivory Coast
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NPFL	National Patriotic Front of Liberia – rebel group in Liberia established by Charles Taylor
RUF	Revolutionary United Front – rebel group in Sierra Leone
ULIMO	United Liberia Movement – rebel group in Liberia
UN	United Nations

Executive summary

In recent years, there has been growing concern about the abuse and exploitation of girls and boys who are recruited into armed forces or groups as combatants, or to provide food, shelter and other services to soldiers. While this has led to some research on the methods used to force or encourage children to join, little is known about how children caught up in civil or international conflicts manage to avoid recruitment. For every child who joins, many others from similar communities and socio-economic backgrounds do not take part in the conflict and manage to escape from the fighters. The research presented in this document aims to help fill this knowledge gap by exploring strategies used to prevent child recruitment in three West African countries: Ivory Coast, Liberia and Sierra Leone. Using evidence drawn from 300 children and 200 adults in six communities, it examines community-led strategies to avoid forced, voluntary and re-recruitment.

The research revealed a complex range of strategies used to recruit children, and a wide variety of reasons why children join armed forces or groups; there are no simple solutions to this gross abuse of children's rights. However, findings do suggest four responses that are likely to reduce recruitment:

- ensuring that children remain with their families where possible, and are properly cared for and protected
- addressing attitudes towards recruitment to remove the desire to join
- reducing the household poverty that pushes many children into armed forces or groups
- providing children with alternatives through schooling or skills training.

In making these responses, it is essential to build on successful attempts already made by children and

their families to avoid recruitment. As a first step, it is important to gain a proper understanding of the context in order to determine the relative emphasis to be placed on each of the four responses, and the precise elements of any preventative strategy. During periods of conflict, the research suggests a number of measures to implement this four-pronged approach. For voluntary recruitment, these include:

- Taking immediate action to provide relief to prevent hunger.
- Developing targeted messages that address the specific motivations of children in the community. These may include: the desire for revenge or to protect themselves or family members; a belief that joining the fighting forces or groups will stop external oppressors from threatening the community; a longing for material gain or power; and a lack of understanding of the hardships of war.
- Involving parents, children, community leaders, teachers and the wider community in delivering messages and ensuring that statements about children's recruitment are constantly reiterated.
- Discussing the likely risks associated with awareness-raising campaigns, such as incurring the wrath of the soldiers in the area, and taking necessary steps to minimise these risks.
- Keeping schools open for as long as possible, but regularly re-evaluating the risks to schoolchildren who may be targeted during recruitment drives or become separated from parents in attacks.

For forced recruitment, these measures include:

- Putting mechanisms in place so that any prior knowledge of attacks can be quickly shared with communities, enabling them to plan their departures if necessary. Here, the involvement of community leaders and teachers is key.

- Identifying areas where risks of recruitment are greatest and ensuring that community members are aware of where they can find safety.
- Assisting in the safe and organised movement of populations.
- Ensuring that refugee or Internally Displaced Person (IDP) camps provide safe havens for children and their families who are fleeing to avoid the fighting forces. Governments in particular must fulfil their obligations to provide safety for all children in their country.

It is, of course, also important to make every effort to end conflict as soon as possible, and for governments and the international community to negotiate with armed groups and forces to stop them recruiting children. The research suggests that, in addition to actions taken during a conflict, periods of relative peace and stability should be used to develop longer-term preventative strategies. These include:

- Efforts to enhance household livelihoods so that families are better able to cope in times of crises.
- Investments in education to ensure that all children have access to free schools and/or vocational training, and attempts to enhance the quality of education on offer.
- The development of community- and household-level emergency preparedness plans so that strategies are in place for responding to attacks and safely escaping if necessary. These should involve community leaders, teachers, parents and children themselves.

- Work to encourage the reintegration of boys and girls formerly associated with armed forces or groups, including carefully developed Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) programmes that do not favour ex-child soldiers to the extent that they are resented by others in the community.
- Campaigns to generate a shift in attitudes so that children's recruitment is universally acknowledged as being unacceptable. This may involve changing school curricula, and war crimes trials for those suspected of encouraging the use of child recruits.
- The establishment of community child protection networks involving child and adult community members to monitor and protect children's well-being and help implement the activities described above.

In all of these strategies it is essential to recognise and build on the considerable resourcefulness and resilience displayed by children, parents and communities in their attempts to avoid child recruitment. It is particularly important to acknowledge that boys and girls do not merely passively respond to efforts to turn them into soldiers. The children who participated in this research relied heavily on their own resources to resist the pressure to join the fighters. It is hoped that their strength can be used to inspire governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and United Nations (UN) agencies, in West Africa and beyond, to fulfil their obligations to stop children being drawn into war.

I Introduction

Tens of thousands of children, from at least 60 countries, are estimated to have been recruited into armies, militia and rebel factions between 2001 and 2004 (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2004). These boys and girls either act as combatants or provide food, shelter and other services to soldiers. Concern about their abuse and exploitation has led to research into the reasons behind children's involvement with armed forces or groups. Evidence has shown that some children join voluntarily, for food or friendship, to protect their families or communities, or simply because schools are closed and there is little else for them to do. Others are forced to join, through abductions and threats of violence against them or their parents or siblings. However, less is known about how children caught up in civil or international conflicts manage to avoid recruitment. For every child who joins, many others from similar communities and socio-economic backgrounds do not take part in the conflict and manage to escape the fighters.

The research presented in this document aims to help fill this knowledge gap by exploring the strategies used to prevent child recruitment in three West African countries recently affected by civil war: Ivory Coast, Liberia and Sierra Leone. As recruitment often occurs at the height of conflict, where only minimal external support is available, the research focuses on existing approaches used by children, their families and communities, to reduce the number of boys and girls who join the fighters. It examines voluntary

and forced recruitment, and the re-recruitment of children who have been demobilised or had escaped. It uses evidence from almost 300 children and 200 adults in six communities.

The report is divided into four sections. Following the introduction, the second section of the report provides details of the research methods used and background information on the communities in which data collection took place. The third section presents the research findings, with subsections on each of the key preventative strategies revealed by the research: identifying and moving to a place of greater safety; avoiding family separation; changing attitudes to stop children from wanting to join the fighters; poverty alleviation and household livelihoods; providing alternatives for children through education; reintegrating children formerly associated with the armed forces or groups; and creating peace and reducing the demand for child soldiers. In the concluding section, recommendations are made for actions to prevent children's recruitment. Here, emphasis is placed on the complexity of the problem and the need for context-specific responses that, to varying degrees, focus on child protection mechanisms, attitudes towards recruitment, education, and poverty alleviation. It is hoped that these suggestions will aid governmental, NGO and UN support to community-level attempts to prevent child recruitment in West Africa and beyond.

2 The research methods

The research was conducted by a team of 22 Save the Children staff members, between November 2004 and March 2005. It took place in two communities in Ivory Coast, three in Liberia and one in Sierra Leone. Communities were selected where children's recruitment was known to have been heavy. To gain as broad a range of children's experiences during the fighting as possible, consideration was given to the following:

- which armed forces or groups dominated the area during the conflict
- the extent of voluntary as opposed to forced recruitment, and evidence of re-recruitment
- levels of community support to the armed forces or groups
- the location of the community and access to basic services
- the ethnic and religious background of the community
- levels of displacement during the conflict.

Some details of the six communities visited are provided in Box 1 opposite; owing to the sensitivity of the research topic, it is not felt appropriate to provide their names and exact locations.

For the purpose of this research, a child is defined as a boy or girl under the age of 18. As exposure to recruitment increases with age (McCallin, 2001), and as conflict had ended several years ago in many of the research locations, the majority of children who took part in the research were aged 12 years or over. In each of the communities that participated in the research, children were selected to take part in group discussions. To ensure that a range of different experiences was explored, boys and girls were chosen from the following categories:

1. Children who had remained with their families throughout the conflict and did not join the armed forces or groups.

2. Children who were separated from their families during the conflict and did not join the armed forces or groups.
3. Children formerly associated with armed groups and forces: children who had fought with one or other of the armed groups or who had 'assisted' the fighters in other ways, ie, by carrying equipment, setting up camps and cooking. These children are also referred to in this report as ex-child soldiers.¹

Table 1 overleaf provides a breakdown of the number of children who took part in the research from each of the three countries.

In addition to the 298 children who took part in the research, 211 parents and carers participated in group discussions. These men and women were divided into two categories:

1. The parents or carers of children who were *not* associated with the armed forces or groups during the conflict
2. The parents or carers of children who *were* associated with the armed forces or groups during the conflict

Table 2 overleaf provides details of the adults who participated in the group discussions.

The children and adults who took part in the group discussions were selected using a range of methods. Initially, community leaders, Save the Children partner agencies and/or members of the child welfare committees established by Save the Children located some of the research participants. These individuals would then be asked to identify others to take part in the research until the target number from each category was reached. The purpose of the research and the absence of any direct material benefits were explained to community leaders and research participants from the start.

Box 1: Background information on the communities which participated in the research

Ivory Coast

Two communities were selected to participate in this research in the west of Ivory Coast. The first community is a substantial village, close to the town of Guiglo, currently under government control, and largely loyal to government forces. It was first captured by the rebel group, the Mouvement Populaire Ivoirien du Grand Ouest (MPIGO), in December 2003. Following this attack, the majority of village members fled. Men and some children from the village joined LIMA, a Liberian-backed militia group, which was supported by government forces. Others travelled to the *campements* (small farms in the bush) to await the re-capture of the village. The rebels were eventually driven from the village in March 2004. Recruitment into the militia was largely, but not exclusively, voluntary, and there was some forced recruitment of children into MPIGO.

The second village is close to the town of Man, in the buffer zone between the government-held south of the country and the rebel-controlled north. This area is currently policed by the French UN-mandated peacekeepers. MPIGO took control of the village in December 2003. Initially, there was little resistance to the rebels from the villagers, and even some support for their attempts to 'liberate' the village from government 'oppression'. However, as the rebels began to abuse their position of power, support declined. Government forces and LIMA attacked the village in April 2004. The majority of the villagers fled, only to return when peacekeepers took control in June of that year. Child recruitment to the rebel forces was sometimes voluntary and sometimes forced. There was limited recruitment to government-backed forces, as most children had left the village by the time they arrived.

Liberia

In Liberia, three communities were selected to participate in the research. The first community is an IDP camp on the outskirts of Monrovia. The majority of the residents originate from the southern counties of Liberia. During the first Liberian conflict in the 1990s,

most had remained in their communities. The area was initially controlled by the rebel group led by Charles Taylor, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), but was frequently attacked by armed groups who opposed his rule. Following Taylor's electoral victory in 1997, the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) rebel group attacked the southern counties in 2000, gradually pushing large numbers of residents towards the IDP camps in Monrovia. In 2002 and early 2003, the camp itself was repeatedly attacked, forcing many of its occupants into the centre of town, only to return when peacekeepers took control. Children's recruitment took place in their home communities, en route to the camps, and in the camp itself. This recruitment was a mixture of forced and voluntary.

The second community selected for the research is an IDP camp located in Bong County in the north-west of Liberia. The majority of the camp residents are from Lofa County, which borders Sierra Leone in the extreme west of the country. Initially, many Lofa residents were in support of the NPFL rebellion, and consequently remained in their communities while Charles Taylor was in control. When power shifted to the United Liberia Movement (ULIMO) and LURD rebel groups – who were the main opposition to Taylor's rule in the area – the local population was targeted and fled to the relative safety of bush hideouts or IDP camps. Initially, child recruitment to Taylor's forces was often voluntary, but as support declined, more children were forcibly recruited by this group. Other factions also used forced recruitment widely.

The final community selected for the research in Liberia is part of the large town of Zwedru, in the east of the country close to the border with Ivory Coast. Here, the majority of the population traditionally supported Charles Taylor's opponents and were consequently targeted by the NPFL, leading to a mass exodus from the area in the early 1990s. In the mid-1990s, the Liberian Peace Council (LPC) rebel group fought back, brutally attacking villages and destroying infrastructure

continued overleaf

Box I *continued*

in the process. During the period of conflict between 2000 and 2003, the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) rebel group was also active in the area. Children’s recruitment to NPFL and LPC was largely forced, as support for these two groups in the area was minimal. Support was higher for MODEL, and as a result some children joined this group voluntarily. Most recently, former child soldiers from the area have also been linked to militia forces in Ivory Coast (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2004; Save the Children, 2004).

Sierra Leone

The research in Sierra Leone took place close to the town of Zimmi, in the south-east of the country.

Zimmi was primarily dominated by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebel group during the war; although at various stages of the ten-year conflict government forces and another rebel faction, the Civil Defence Force (CDF), also controlled the town. The RUF primarily forced children to join, while it appears that voluntary recruitment was more common in the CDF. Owing to the strategic location of Zimmi, and consequent frequent fighting between the RUF, CDF and government forces, there was a great deal of population movement in and out of the town during the war.

Table 1: Children who participated in the research by sex, category and country

	Ivory Coast		Liberia		Sierra Leone		Total
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	
Children who had remained with their families throughout the conflict and did not join the armed forces or groups	21	15	31	33	20	20	140
Children who were separated from their families during the conflict and did not join the armed forces or groups ²	–	–	25	13	9	9	56
Children formerly associated with armed forces or groups	16	14	25	26	11	10	102
Total	37	29	81	72	40	39	298

Table 2: Adults who participated in the group discussions by sex, category and country

	Ivory Coast		Liberia		Sierra Leone		Total
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	
The parents or carers of children who were <i>not</i> associated with the fighting forces or groups during the conflict	18	16	23	21	10	14	102
The parents or carers of children who were associated with the fighting forces or groups during the conflict	16	14	30	32	9	8	109
Total	34	30	53	53	19	22	211

During the group discussions, the researchers used a range of different techniques, including diagrams and role plays. The group discussions were directed by a ‘facilitators’ guide’, which was used in all three countries to enable cross-comparisons of the findings.

Following on from the group discussions, in-depth interviews were conducted with between 10 and 15 of the child participants from each community. Where possible, these children were selected equally from the three categories. Half of the selected children formerly associated with the armed forces or groups were voluntary recruits, and the other half forced recruits. In total, 40 in-depth interviews were carried out with boys and 37 with girls. Efforts were made to speak to the parents or carers of all of the children who took part in the research. Family separation and parents’ busy schedules meant that this was not always possible. A total of 39 in-depth interviews were carried out with parents and carers.

In addition to discussions with children and their parents or carers, interviews were also carried out with other individuals in the selected communities who it was felt would have a particular insight into the reasons behind children’s recruitment. These included community and religious leaders, teachers, and young adults who were children during periods of conflict. In total, 47 such interviews were completed. The in-depth interviews were all guided by a checklist of questions, with the same set of checklists used in

each of the six locations to ensure that findings could be easily compared.

At the end of the data collection process, members of the research team from all three countries gathered together to analyse the findings and develop an outline for this report. A child-friendly version of this outline was shared with research participants from Liberia, and their comments fed into the final report.³

Notes

1 Save the Children UK, along with most international actors, uses the term Children Associated with Armed Forces to mean “any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity including, but not limited to, cooks, porters, messengers, and those accompanying such groups, other than purely as family members. This includes girls recruited for sexual purposes and forced marriage. It does not, therefore, only refer to a child who is carrying or has carried arms.” This is in line with the definition of Child Soldiers agreed at the Cape Town Conference in 1997 and recognises that all children who have been involved with armed groups have a right to be included in demobilisation plans and to benefit from any support, not just those who carried a gun.

2 There are a smaller number of separated children than the other two categories as separation was not common in all of the communities in which the research took place. As a result, it was not always possible to find separated children.

3 It was not possible to share findings with research participants in Sierra Leone and Ivory Coast prior to publication, owing to resource and time constraints.

3 The research findings: How to prevent the recruitment of children into armed forces and groups

Identifying and moving to a place of greater safety

In all six of the communities included in this research, moving away from the fighting to a safer place was one of the most common and successful strategies for preventing the recruitment of girls and boys. This strategy was occasionally used to remove the temptation to join voluntarily, but more often done to avoid forced recruitment:

“My mother didn’t want the fighters to take or rape my sister and I. We were always moving from one place to another. Sometimes we had to walk for many hours.”

(18-year-old woman, who did not join the armed forces or groups, Monrovia, Liberia)

Children were sometimes taken to, or decided to move to, places felt to be safe within the local area. In both Sierra Leone and Liberia, many boys and girls were kept in the home and close to their parents whenever the soldiers were around. In a few villages or towns, churches, mosques, schools, or the compounds of international NGOs were used as temporary sanctuaries. In all three countries, children frequently fled to bush hideouts to avoid recruitment. Time spent in the bush ranged from a few hours to several years. Sometimes children would hide during the day, returning to the village at night for supplies. In the communities visited in Sierra Leone and Liberia, departure to new towns or refugee or IDP camps was a commonly used strategy. Some families and children from Ivory Coast also temporarily fled to larger towns close to their village. Children did not always flee their

communities with their parents. Those who were separated from their families travelled alone or with foster carers. A few children made the decision to leave without their families when the pressure from the armed forces or groups to join became too much. These children displayed considerable initiative and resilience in surviving with little assistance. As illustrated in the case studies in Box 2, the determination of parents, carers and children themselves to stay away from the fighters and avoid forced recruitment often meant moving several times over the period of the war.

The research suggests that leaving the community was often the only way of fully ensuring that children were not forced to join the fighters. As illustrated below in Box 3, the tactics used to make children join were brutal, and those who came into contact with the soldiers often had very little opportunity to escape. Threats or actual violence against children, their parents or other family members were commonly used to make children go with the soldiers in all three countries:

“There is nothing we could have done to stop them [from making me join]. They surrounded everyone, there was terror everywhere. They killed people like chickens, set others on fire and ordered the rest of us to follow them.”

(18-year-old man who was forced to join the RUF aged eight, Zimmi, Sierra Leone)

“The rebels threatened my family, took my cousin by force and killed him cold-bloodedly. My parents got scared and were obliged to let me go with the

Box 2: Fleeing to avoid forced recruitment

Albert⁴ is a 16-year-old boy currently living with his parents in an IDP camp in Bong County, Liberia. He was born in an eastern Liberian village and lived there until fighters reached the area in 1994. He fled along with his family to a nearby town, and shortly after arrival moved on again because of harassment from the fighters. Over the next ten years, Albert and his family moved another six times to escape the fighting. Albert said that his mother always made them move on as soon as there were rumours of attacks, and was motivated by a desire for her children to avoid contact with the fighters. No one from his family joined the armed forces or groups.

Sallymatu is a 16-year-old girl who lives with her mother, three sisters and a brother in Zimmi, Sierra Leone. She was staying with her aunt in the town of Kenema when the area was attacked by the RUF in 1999. They fled to a nearby village where they stayed for a month before returning to Kenema. From Kenema, they travelled to Zimmi and eventually to refugee camps in Liberia where Sallymatu was reunited with her parents. The family returned to Sierra Leone in 2002. Sallymatu's mother feels that their decision to flee was instrumental in preventing any of her children from joining the armed forces or groups.

Josiane is a 17-year-old girl from a community close to Guiglo, Ivory Coast. At the start of the fighting in her area, many of the villagers went into the bush and hid. Josiane travelled along with an elderly couple and ten other children, who all spent around three months living in the bush. During this time, Josiane had to deliver her first child with no medical care. Throughout their time in the bush, they suffered from a lack of food, and several of the younger children died. Josiane returned to the village when news that it had been 'liberated' by militia forces reached them. She describes crying for joy each time she found a friend or relative alive.

Box 3: Tactics used in forced recruitment

Modestine is a teenage girl (exact age unknown) from a village near Man, Ivory Coast. She was in school when the village was attacked by rebel forces. On returning home, Modestine discovered that her parents had already left for the bush. While some of her siblings decided to join their mother and father, Modestine chose to stay in the village to protect their belongings. She eventually fled when rebels tried to force her to join, and threatened to kill her brother when he intervened. Modestine returned to the village a month or so later with her parents, and was forced to join the rebels shortly afterwards. They cut off the tip of her ear lobe and threatened to kill her mother and father when they begged the rebels to leave her alone. Modestine was beaten by the soldiers when her food was not considered tasty enough and, when her family tried to intervene, her father was shot in the legs and her uncle tied up.

rebels... I didn't agree [with this] but I couldn't run away because they had weapons. I was weeping when they took me away."

(Girl, age unknown, forced to join MPIGO, village close to Man, Ivory Coast)

"When we reached a town we would make the boys and girls follow us. We would shoot around them and this made them afraid... They followed us because we had guns."

(Young woman, former fighter with the LPC, describing the methods they used to recruit children, Zwedru, Liberia)

Parents and other community members often felt powerless to act, and any attempt to negotiate with the fighters could risk their lives. In Liberia and Ivory Coast, respondents reported instances of parents being shot when they pleaded with the fighters not to take their children (see Box 3). Girls and boys who attempted to run away could also be killed:

"My family offered money to rebels [to stop them from taking her]. The rebel commander refused to take the money. They threatened to kill my mother if they persisted in trying to keep me. On our way they killed my brother who tried to run away to escape from them."

(Girl, age unknown, forced to join MPIGO, village near Man, Ivory Coast)

The research indicates that hiding within the home or in temporary sanctuaries, or fleeing to the bush or refugee or IDP camps, are not always successful strategies and can lead to considerable problems. As a general rule, risks were greater the closer people remained to the fighters. Participants in Liberia reported sanctuaries, such as churches, being deliberately attacked by fighters. Six of the twelve forced recruits who took part in the in-depth interviews had been captured in their homes when their towns or villages were occupied, and a further two were captured while in bush hideouts. Others told of soldiers tracking those hiding in the bush and punishing them for fleeing by forcing them to join. As illustrated previously in Box 2, children and their

families also suffered considerable hardships in the bush. Many of the research participants reported a lack of clean water, food and medicine, and an increased risk of disease:

"Life was like the days of our ancestors. Hunting and gathering food... It was survival of the fittest. Many people died of pneumonia, dysentery, diarrhoea and many other common sicknesses that could have been cured at home."

(Community leader describing his experiences living in the bush during the war, Bong County, Liberia)

Food supplies from NGOs and UN agencies meant that life in the refugee or IDP camps was usually a little more comfortable. However, in Liberia in particular, these camps were far from secure, and were attacked and deliberately targeted in recruitment drives. During the group discussions in Monrovia, many children described the tactics used by armed forces or groups in the camps, which included false food distributions to lure children away from their parents. The journey to the camps or to safer towns and villages could also be long and arduous. Participants complained of having to walk for many days, often with little food or water, and some spoke of rape and abuse from the armed forces or groups along the way. Mass or chaotic movements of populations also led to children being separated from their parents, which, as described below, significantly increased their risk of recruitment.

The research highlights a number of factors that can minimise the level of risk faced by parents and children in their attempt to flee. Participants from Liberia argued that the provision of regular information about current safe havens would have helped them in their decision-making during the war. In all three countries, those who had listened to warnings of attacks were able to leave in a much more timely and orderly fashion than those who did not, and the risk of family separation was also reduced. Information about attacks came from several sources. Some of the rebel groups in Liberia and Sierra Leone warned of imminent attacks by leafleting

communities, and soldiers, including children themselves, would sometimes sneak back into the village to warn their families. Large population movements, the presence of strangers in the community, and the sound of gunfire also warned people that the fighters were on their way. In the early stages of the wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia, and in the relatively short-lived conflict in Ivory Coast, community members often failed to react to warnings of attacks, or simply did not believe that their communities could be affected by war. Over time, people learnt to read the signs and responded more quickly. However, children who had been forced to join the fighters still complained that their parents did not take warnings of attacks seriously enough, or react quickly enough to escape when attacks happened:

“I would tell my dad that if he hears the rebels coming, he should gather all his children together and run away with them. I would say that any man with self-esteem should take his children and run away.”

(17-year-old girl, forced to join MPIGO, responding to a question about what could be done to avoid recruitment in the future, village near Man, Ivory Coast)

Planning for attacks at the household or community level aided the safe movement of populations. In some cases, families agreed meeting points, packed bags, or even prepared bush hideouts in anticipation of having to leave:

“My father and my uncles built a place deep in the forest for us to hide. They kept food there and some clothes and other things for us to use for cooking while we were hiding in the forest. They always told us that if anything happens, this is where we should go.”

(17-year-old girl who did not join the fighting forces, Bong County, Liberia)

Research participants from Sierra Leone reported community leaders identifying a common hiding place for entire villages, and calling everyone together to explain where they should go in the event of an attack. This strategy enabled children who became separated

from their parents during attacks to be quickly reunited with their families. One of the community leaders in Ivory Coast encouraged members of his community to leave for the *campements* well before the rebel forces attacked. Here, they had access to small shelters next to their farms and a ready supply of food. Teachers sometimes responded to warnings of attacks by closing schools down, and advising children to stay close to their parents. In a few cases in Sierra Leone and Liberia, teachers kept children safe within the school during attacks and made sure that they were reunited with their families afterwards. Save the Children’s experience globally suggests that community-level child protection mechanisms are extremely valuable in ensuring children’s well-being and can be used to help communities prepare children for possible attacks (McCallin, 2001). These groups – usually formed of parents, children, and key adult community members such as chiefs and teachers – monitor and respond to rights abuses.

Unfortunately, teachers and community leaders did not or were not always able to help children reach places of safety. Perhaps fearing for their own lives and the well-being of their families, some teachers fled during attacks, leaving the children in their care to fend for themselves. Community leaders also did not always respond to warnings of attacks, and were sometimes either implicated in the fighting or deliberately targeted and forced to flee before they could assist anyone else. Of course, governments also have a responsibility to protect civilians in their country during times of conflict. While the camps in Sierra Leone appear to have been relatively safe havens, in Liberia not enough was done to ensure security for refugees or internally displaced people.

Avoiding separation or providing alternative care

The research suggests that parents play a pivotal role in preventing children from joining the fighting forces. During the group discussions, children and adults in all three countries identified parents as the most

important force in ensuring that children were not recruited:

“They gave birth to us, and they are the ones taking care of us. If we go and join the fighting forces and we are killed, our parents feel the pain the most.”

(14-year-old boy, ex-soldier, explaining why he feels parents play a significant role in preventing recruitment, Monrovia, Liberia)

Children who were separated from their parents, especially those living on the streets and without alternative care, were identified by many of the research participants as being vulnerable to recruitment. During the in-depth interviews, around one-third⁵ of the ex-soldiers said that they had joined shortly after they had become separated from their parents. The story of one of these children is recorded below in Box 4.

Parents played a key role in preventing recruitment in a number of ways. As illustrated above, parents often took children to safer places. Mothers and fathers with some experience of the tactics used by the fighting forces were able to advise their children on how to avoid forced recruitment. Although a risky strategy, some parents did successfully manage to negotiate with fighters to release their sons and daughters. Mothers and fathers commonly prevented voluntary recruitment by talking to their children about the risks

of war, keeping them busy with school or work, and providing them with enough food to eat (see below for further details). Showing love and care was also seen as an important means of encouraging children to stay with the family, with family breakdown or conflict identified as the catalyst for recruitment in some cases:

“My father lives in one village and my mother in another, they are no longer living together. If my parents had been together, they wouldn’t have left me to come to the village by myself and be captured by the rebels.”

(17-year-old girl, forced to join MPIGO, village near Guiglo, Ivory Coast)

This evidence suggests that attempts to reduce the recruitment of children should include efforts to avoid separation and ensure proper family care. The experiences of separated children included in this research, and Save the Children’s work elsewhere in the world (Uppard, Petty and Tamplin, 1998), reveal a number of ways to reduce the chances of children being separated. These include:

- Ensuring that families agree a meeting place in case they get separated during attacks.
- Giving children the opportunity to attend schools close to their homes so that they can return to their parents easily in times of attack.
- Providing practical information about ways to prevent separation, such as not giving children

Box 4: Separation leading to recruitment

Mariama is a 22-year-old woman currently living in Zimmi town, Sierra Leone. In 1994, aged 12, Mariama and her family fled to a nearby village when Zimmi was attacked. When this village was also targeted, she became separated from her parents as they all ran into the bush to hide. Mariama returned to the village to look for her parents and was captured by the RUF. She spent two years with the fighting forces before managing to escape during a battle. She then travelled into Liberia and began the long search for her family. She initially went to the Liberian town of Gbarnga, where she had heard her elder sister was living, and then back to Zimmi when she heard news of her mother. En route, she was temporarily held captive by the CDF, who knew that she had previously fought with the RUF. She was eventually reunited with her father in 1997, though was thrown out of the family home when she became pregnant.

heavy loads to carry which could slow them down, and asking older children to hold the hands of younger children.

- Making sure that relief workers do not inadvertently encourage separations by, for example, providing care for separated children that far exceeds that which parents and carers are able to offer.
- Putting proper mechanisms in place to care for children while parents are being medically treated.
- Encouraging families and communities to teach children their full names and addresses.

Efforts should, of course, be made to reunite separated children with their families as quickly as possible, and where this is not possible, to provide them with suitable alternative care. For children who have been separated from their parents, the research suggests that institutional care should be used as a last resort only. In fact, participants from Liberia reported orphanages being deliberately targeted by recruiters. Save the Children's experiences globally also suggest that institutions rarely provide high quality care, and are often a source of abusive practices (Save the Children 2003). Foster or extended family care offers a much better long-term solution, and the research shows that in some cases, such carers are able to fulfil similar functions to mothers and fathers in preventing the recruitment of children. Separated children who had not joined up had usually managed to find foster carers who looked after them well.

Evidence suggests that whether children are in foster care or remain with their parents, their well-being during and after periods of conflict should be carefully monitored. Children who remain with their parents are not automatically immune to recruitment, and parents do not always attempt to prevent their children from joining fighting forces. In all three countries, a minority of parents were reported as having either done little to stop their children leaving, or actively encouraged recruitment. In one of the Ivorian villages visited, some fathers in particular seemed to feel that children joining the fighting forces was an unpleasant but perhaps necessary/inevitable part of the war.

“When the loyalists came, we didn't do anything special. We let our children join because it was to liberate the village.”

(Father of a boy who joined the militia forces, village near Guiglo, Ivory Coast)

Research recently completed by Save the Children in Sierra Leone (Delap, 2004) highlights the discrimination that many children living with the extended family or carers face. These children were often given less food and treated as inferior by their carers. The child welfare committees, mentioned previously, are one of the mechanisms for helping to reduce the neglect or abuse of children once back in their communities and living with parents or carers.

Changing attitudes to stop children wanting to join the fighters

While some children in Ivory Coast, Liberia and Sierra Leone had little choice in their recruitment, many others played a more active role in deciding whether or not they would take part in the fighting. In trying to stop such voluntary recruitment, it is first important to understand why some girls and boys choose to join fighting forces. Some motivations relate to the absence of sufficient income, or the lack of alternative activities such as school, recreation or skills training. These require practical interventions to support income-generation or provide educational and other facilities for children, and are discussed in the following two sections. Other incentives relate more closely to the beliefs or views of children and those around them, necessitating strategies to alter attitudes. It is these issues that are the focus of this section.

Developing messages: which motivations to address

The research suggests four key factors that influence a child's decision about whether to become part of an armed force or group. Firstly, children often join because they are angry with the way they or their

families have been treated by the soldiers, and either want to stop this abuse or exact revenge. This reason was repeatedly mentioned during the group discussions in all three countries by both male and female participants. Ex-child soldiers also cited this as a motivation for joining, during the in-depth interviews. Children, boys in particular, spoke of the need to avenge the abuse and humiliation they themselves suffered, as well as that of other family members or people in the community, at the hands of the armed forces or groups. The death of parents was particularly likely to act as a catalyst for choosing to join:

“Because the rebels killed your parents... It burns up your heart.”

(16-year-old girl, ex-soldier, village near Guiglo, Ivory Coast)

Both girls and boys spoke of joining an armed group as a means to stop the theft of property and food, and harassment experienced by themselves and their family members:

“I decided to join because of how my family members and other women were treated by the fighters... Raping women was the most common activity of the fighters and because I didn't want to get raped, I joined.”

(20-year-old woman who voluntarily joined LURD as a child, Monrovia, Liberia)

“If you had a gun, your friend will not come to your house and humiliate and harass your family. You can also defend them.”

(16-year-old boy who did not join the armed forces or groups, on why children in his area did join, Zimmi, Sierra Leone)

“They said that they had come to protect us. They offered us drinks and distributed money to people. But as time went on, the rebels became more and more demanding. They started to maltreat people when these people wouldn't fulfil their needs, which were becoming more and more numerous and hard to cover... I joined because they had started to

maltreat my family... Because when you've joined, the rebels can't maltreat your family anymore.”

(20-year-old man who voluntarily joined MPIGO aged 17, village near Man, Ivory Coast)

Findings on the level of harassment faced by some children highlight the extremely thin dividing line between forced and voluntary recruitment. Clearly, children who had to join in order to stop constant physical and psychological abuse were not fully free to make decisions about their future.

Secondly, a child's decision about whether to join or not is influenced by their beliefs about the morality of the war being fought. Many children chose not to join because of a strong sense that the conflict, because it affected their community, was wrong. Boys and girls from all three countries spoke of the death of innocent citizens, the destruction and theft of property, and the harm done to the future of their community.

“All of the so-called advantages are only evil. For example, they [the fighting forces] did not work, rather they forced civilians young and old to work for them. They thought they were chiefs. They looted people's properties and left them with broken hearts. I think this war is bad.”

(17-year-old girl, explaining why she did not join the armed forces or groups, Zimmi, Sierra Leone)

“My man, if I die, let me die, but I cannot hold a gun and harass people, taking their money. I cannot do it.”

(13-year-old boy, explaining why he did not join the armed forces or groups, Monrovia, Liberia)

“It [war] was not good. It delayed us, all the activities were stuck, what they did was useless. I am the eldest son, my family relies on me, I could not join.”

(20-year-old man who did not join the fighting forces, village near Man, Ivory Coast)

Many children based these beliefs on first-hand experience of conflict and on having witnessed the death of their parents and others in the community.

Conversely, other children join because of the desire to ‘protect’ or ‘liberate’ their communities from an outside force perceived to be threatening their way of life. This motivation primarily applied to boys, and was only relevant in some communities during certain periods of conflict. In Liberia, such ideological concerns were most commonly mentioned regarding boys’ recruitment to MODEL in Zwedru. Some adults also reported children joining Charles Taylor’s NPFL rebel force in the early 1990s in the belief that it would lead to improvements for their communities. In Sierra Leone, a few of the children from Zimmi talked of boys joining the CDF to free their communities from the repressive actions of the RUF. Indeed, many participants maintained the CDF’s cause was sufficiently popular for them to rely almost exclusively on voluntary recruitment. In Ivory Coast, participants reported that children living in one of the villages selected for the research initially joined rebel forces believing they had come to protect the village. As the behaviour of the rebels deteriorated, disillusionment set in, and the fighters had to rely more on forced recruitment. Large sections of the male population of the other village visited had joined a militia group to repel the rebels who had occupied the area. Boys and young men reportedly formed a substantial part of this group:

“All of the youth here fought to defend the village.”
(Teacher from a village close to the town of Guiglo, Ivory Coast)

Both child and adult support of a particular fighting group is closely linked to ethnic allegiances and cultural beliefs. Charms and initiation ceremonies were commonly used by some fighting forces to maximise a sense of belonging to a particular group, and to give children the illusion that they were protected from harm. For example, CDF forces in Sierra Leone could be readily identified by the large amount of charms hanging around their necks and from their clothes. These were said to make their owners immune to bullets. Children were also attracted to CDF by the ceremonies, singing and dancing that surrounded the group. In Ivory Coast,

there were reports of magic potions that made children ‘invisible’ to their opponents. In Liberia, a couple of ex-child soldiers said that fighters from some groups ate human hearts, which made them strong and protected them from death.

When considering the ideological motivations behind children joining armed forces or groups, it is again important to emphasise that the distinction between forced and voluntary recruitment is sometimes blurred. In cases where there is community support for children’s recruitment, they may be put under considerable pressure to join.

Thirdly, children join because it gives them an opportunity to loot or use the power or freedom associated with life in the fighting forces to engage in activities that they would not otherwise be allowed to do. Soldiers would sometimes flaunt their looted possessions or make promises to children about the riches they would receive, to encourage boys and girls to join. During the group discussion, adults and children commonly spoke of boys and girls joining so that they could steal new clothes or electrical equipment. Participants often made a clear distinction between joining for these ‘material things’ and joining because of hunger and the need to get food in order to survive. It was reported that many children felt jealous when they saw what their peers had bought back from the fighting front and wanted to get some of these ‘non-essential’ items for themselves. Boys were also accused of joining in order to ‘get’ (rape) women.

“I saw my friends with lots of outfits and I had only two.”

(13-year-old boy who did not join the armed forces or groups, on why other children join, Zwedru, Liberia)

“You see your friends of the same age driving a car and having two or more wives, and also commanding big people to do their things.”

(Father whose children did not join the armed forces or groups, on why other children join, Zimmi, Sierra Leone)

“They wanted to have many wives and free sex.”

(16-year-old boy who did not join the armed forces or groups, on why other children join, Zimmi, Sierra Leone)

“They thought that there was some benefit to joining this crazy war. They saw some of their friends in it and they were not wise enough to weigh up some of the good and bad sides of the war. They saw that their friends can have sex with any female, young or old, and that they could get anything they wanted just by using a gun.”

(Community leader, Bong County, Liberia)

Both boy and girl soldiers were believed to enjoy the position of power which having a gun gave them. Males in some communities were said to have the added impetus of using their weapons to prove and display their masculinity and fearlessness:

“Only those who were afraid stayed, those who were self-confident left [to join the militia]... If your heart is beating and you are not scared, that is God urging you on.”

(18-year-old man, ex-child soldier, village near Guiglo, Ivory Coast)

Following the end of the conflict, many community members feared that children who had got used to getting whatever they wanted through being part of the fighting forces would re-join if they had the opportunity:

“Yes, that happened [children re-joining the fighting forces], because most of them used their guns to get money, women, etc. Because they are used to getting things for free through their guns, when they hear about the fighting somewhere, they will be happy to go.”

(Teacher, Monrovia, Liberia)

It should be noted that although participants spoke of children in general joining to loot or commit crimes, very few ex-soldiers would actually admit to this as a personal motivation for joining. This could be because of the stigma attached to such reasons, or because those not associated with the fighting

forces over-played the significance of power and non-essential material incentives.

Finally, some children join to gain new experiences or because they believe that being with the fighters will give them an opportunity to have fun, make friends or even fall in love. Although not mentioned by many participants, a few boys and girls did admit to joining for the excitement of life in the fighting forces. Some adults also believed that this was a key motivation, with many blaming the glorified portrayal of war in films and TV shows.

“The children got involved for fun and to show off. I’d say that they wanted to play heroes. They’re keen on challenges and violent games. They like being in the company of great combatants and to achieve fame.”

(Community leader, village close to Guiglo, Ivory Coast)

Participants from all three countries described some girls in their communities joining because they had ‘fallen in love with a commander’. However, the girls themselves more commonly spoke of abusive, often non-consensual relationships with male fighters.

The belief that life in the fighting forces would be a pleasurable experience was often attributed to ignorance on the part of children. Some participants argued that had children known what war was going to be like, they would not have chosen to go. Indeed, the vast majority of ex-soldiers who participated in the research spoke of extreme hardships and abuse in the fighting forces, and those who had chosen to join were often deeply disillusioned. Many gave the realisation of the realities of war as a reason why they would not re-join:

“I will not go back because the first time, God spared my life. Maybe the next time I will die. There is nothing good in war for children. Some go back to their families crippled or half crazy because of the drugs they used. I will not go back and I don’t want to be part of it again.”

(12-year-old girl, voluntarily joined MODEL, Zwedru, Liberia)

Many children did not need to actually spend time with the armed forces or groups to realise that it is not a pleasurable experience. A significant proportion of the children who did not join said they were fearful of death, hardship and abuse from the soldiers.

“I remember the first time people were killed in my presence. It was my first time to see people killed by a gun. Human blood is very fearful.”

(Boy, age unknown, explaining why he did not join, Zimmi Town, Sierra Leone)

“I think it’s bad for children to fight war because sometimes you will die or become disabled.”

(17-year-old girl, explaining why she did not join the armed forces or groups, Monrovia, Liberia)

It should be noted that although many voluntary recruits had negative experiences during the war, their treatment was often better than those who were forced to join. Most voluntary recruits could highlight some benefits from their life with the fighting forces, usually in the form of material gain.

The research indicates that it is not always necessary or advisable to give equal weight to all four of these factors when delivering messages on children’s recruitment. What motivates children to join clearly varies between communities and different groups of children, as well as over time, and messages should be tailored accordingly. For example, children in Ivory Coast, where war is a relatively new phenomenon, may require greater education about the hardships of life in the fighting forces than those in Liberia or Sierra Leone, who will often have experienced, witnessed or heard testimony of these problems themselves. Messages to children in CDF-controlled areas of Sierra Leone would have needed to focus much more on ideological and cultural motivations than in areas controlled by the RUF. Former voluntary recruits may need more persuasion to forget about the benefits of being part of the fighting forces than forced recruits. Discussions with boys need to be more focused on issues of power, masculinity and forgiveness than those with girls.

Who should deliver messages?

The research suggests that parents and carers have the strongest influence on children’s attitudes towards the armed forces or groups. The majority of the boys and girls interviewed who did not join the fighters said that parents or carers advising them not to join had played a central role in their decision. Many parents we spoke to also claimed that their guidance had stopped children’s voluntary recruitment. Mothers, fathers and other carers offered a range of arguments to dissuade their children, which often addressed the motivations described above. Many emphasised the immoral nature of war, and told their sons and daughters that it was wrong to be part of the killing of innocent people. Some used religious doctrine to back up these arguments. Parents called on children to forget short-term material gain, and think carefully about their lives. A number talked of the risks to children’s current or future well-being, claiming that if they joined, they could die, face abuse by the fighters, fall behind at school, and damage their reputation in the community. A few parents went as far as threatening to disown children if they joined, and some spoke of the personal grief they would suffer if their children died. Mothers and fathers also made an effort to make their children feel wanted, telling them that they were needed at home to help the family.

“Tell your child that you love them and that they are important and that you will do your best to support them, and that they should not be part of the war because it is a dangerous thing. Explain the danger and impact of war so that the child can make an informed choice.”

(Mother of three children who did not join the armed forces or groups, advising other parents on what to say to their children during war, Bong County, Liberia).

Children themselves can also deliver messages effectively to other children about recruitment. During the research, boys and girls spoke of their peers encouraging recruitment more often than discouraging it. The influence of friends and siblings was repeatedly given as a reason for children joining. Ex-soldiers spoke of other children highlighting the

benefits of war, and putting them under considerable pressure to join:

“Friends encouraged me to join... I saw that they could get food. They told me not to be afraid because they knew I was afraid of joining.”

(12-year-old girl who voluntarily joined MODEL, Zwedru, Liberia)

However, a few children did speak of the positive influence of peers, claiming that they had either been dissuaded from joining by their siblings or friends, or that they had learnt a lot from listening to the negative experience of ex-soldiers. As is shown below, some children showed remarkable strength in resisting the pressure put on them by their peers.

In addition to parents and children, members of the wider community can also play a role in shaping children’s beliefs about recruitment. General levels of community support for the armed forces or groups can determine children’s beliefs about the morality of the war. As demonstrated in Box 5, in some places village chiefs and religious leaders reportedly persuaded children that joining the armed forces or groups was not a good idea. In a few schools, teachers also delivered messages about the dangers of recruitment. Many participants felt that such individuals were highly influential and, if encouraged, could play a stronger role in preventing recruitment in the future:

“Let children be taught [in school] about the danger and negative impact of war on the lives of children,

the family, the community and the country. If children are sensitised about these things from a very early age, they will not be moved [to join] by what they see and experience during war. They would already have had all the good ideas passed on to them in school, and as a result they would know what options they had to make the best decision for themselves.”

(Community leader, Bong County, Liberia)

The research suggests that the strength of community influence on children can vary, and is likely to be strongest in areas where there has been only short-lived disruption to community structures. Chiefs and other community leaders were given far greater significance by participants in Ivory Coast than by those in Sierra Leone or Liberia. This is perhaps because of the relatively short period of conflict in Ivory Coast and the lack of long-term, widespread population relocation in the areas visited. Community structures to protect children and deliver messages about recruitment could be strengthened by the development of child protection groups involving parents, community leaders, teachers and children.

Many of those who took part in the research argued that governments, NGOs and the international community have a role to play in delivering messages about children’s recruitment. By developing and enacting laws about recruitment, and by using war crimes trials to punish those who use and abuse child soldiers, child and adult research participants felt that national and international governments would deliver

Box 5: The role of community leaders in delivering messages about children’s recruitment

Kadiatu is a 17-year-old girl currently living in an IDP camp in Bong County, Liberia. She describes community elders in her village calling a meeting to inform boys and girls of the dangers of war. The village chief organised announcements to be made around the community to let everyone know that forced recruitment would not be tolerated and that all parents should advise children not to join. He also spoke to children directly about how joining the fighters helped to destroy their community and their country, leaving the ‘victors’ with nothing to come back to. Kadiatu said that his words were instrumental in persuading her and many of her friends not to join.

Box 6: Resisting the temptation to join

Musa is a 17-year-old boy who was living in Zimmi, Sierra Leone, when it was taken over by the RUF. Schools were closed down and civilians harassed. Over the two years that Musa remained in the town with the RUF, frequent attempts were made to persuade him to join. One friend in particular would often speak to him about becoming part of the Small Boys Unit of the RUF. At one point, Musa almost gave in. He told his parents of his decision and they strongly advised him not to join. Musa's father said that he did not want to lose his only son, and that he would miss out on his education if he left to be with the fighters. He also promised to enrol Musa in school as soon as the schools opened. When Musa's parents found out about the attempts to recruit him, they began taking him out of the town to farm, not letting him return until the evening. His father kept him by his side constantly, and tried to never give fighters the opportunities to talk to him.

strong messages about the recruitment of children into fighting forces. Unfortunately, evidence from both Liberia and Ivory Coast suggests that governments did not do nearly enough to stop children joining the fighting during the war. In Liberia, participants argued that far from calling for an end to children's recruitment, forces backed by Charles Taylor's government were largely responsible for making children join:

"The government did not do anything. They were the main group trying to recruit children. The government did more harm than good."

(19-year-old woman who did not join the armed forces or groups, Monrovia, Liberia)

In Ivory Coast, children and adults spoke of the support government soldiers gave to militia groups, many of whom contained children. This is backed up by recent research which claims that the Ivorian Government backed Liberian militia fighting in western Ivory Coast, who also used child soldiers (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2004).

NGO awareness-raising campaigns at the community level were only described as having had some effect on children's recruitment in one community in Bong County, Liberia. However, elsewhere, many participants argued that NGOs could play a stronger role in changing attitudes in the future. The evidence

presented above suggests that any such campaigns must work closely with parents, community and religious leaders, and teachers, as well as directly with children themselves.

How should messages be delivered?

The research highlights the importance of constantly reinforcing messages to children about their recruitment. The vast majority of girls and boys selected for interview who did not join had been approached at least once during the conflict by members of the armed forces or groups. Many, hungry and tired of the constant harassment, were tempted to join, and showed considerable resilience in not doing so. As the example provided in Box 6 demonstrates, their conviction sometimes relied on almost daily parental advice and guidance.

The findings show that any attempts to change attitudes must be long term, and preferably started in peacetime before conflict begins or re-emerges. During periods of fighting, population movement and frequent attacks can make widespread awareness-raising problematic. As demonstrated above, those who try and dissuade children from joining can also face the wrath of the fighters. Building notions of child rights, peace education and ideals of citizenship into school curricula can offer one way forward for a widespread and long-term shift in attitudes. During

conflict, awareness-raising work in secure IDP or refugee camps can be safe, and help to reach many of those most vulnerable to recruitment.

Despite some of the challenges associated with changing attitudes to children's recruitment, the participants provided considerable grounds for optimism for the future. In the communities visited in Liberia and Sierra Leone in particular, there were widespread and well thought-out views expressed by all sections of the population about why children should not join armed forces or groups. These could be built on in any future awareness campaigns.

“Children are exposed to great danger. They can lose their lives or be crippled by just being part of a war that they have no business being part of.”

(Community leader, Bong County, Liberia)

“Big people always start wars that children know nothing about. Then they always put children in the middle of the war.”

(15-year-old girl who did not join the armed forces or groups, Monrovia, Liberia)

“Children are coming back from hell. I can't see any good side to joining.”

(Community leader, village near Man, Ivory Coast)

“Children should not fight war. They should stay with their mothers. They are not entitled to war.”

(16-year-old boy who did not join the armed forces or groups, village near Guiglo, Ivory Coast)

Of course, given the stated purpose of the research and the stigma attached to ex-soldiers in many communities, these views could partially reflect an unwillingness to admit to supporting child recruitment. However, the views were often expressed so vehemently and in such detail that it is hard to believe that the majority of participants were not expressing their true, current opinions. As is shown above, in some places in Ivory Coast, research participants held a different view, perceiving children's recruitment as an unpleasant, but inevitable part of the war.

Reducing poverty through improving household livelihoods

The research shows that poverty is a key determinant of both voluntary and forced recruitment. Having sufficient food to eat, or being able to provide for parents and siblings was consistently described by participants as one of the few benefits of having joined the fighters. As stated above and illustrated in Box 7, some boys and girls felt considerable responsibility for their own or household well-being and chose to join because they or their families did not have enough to eat. This reason was mentioned in most of the group discussions held in all three countries, and by around half of the ex-soldiers interviewed:

“Finding food was a problem... So I told my mother that I will go round to see the fighters. They had food because their girlfriends were cooking for them every day. That was how I started bringing water and washing dishes and helping their girls to cook and wash clothes.”

(17-year-old girl who voluntarily joined ULIMO, Bong County, Liberia)

A small number of the participants interviewed said that parents providing food for children was a key reason for girls and boys choosing not to join. The fact that this strategy was mentioned in only a few cases is probably more an indication of the problems families faced in getting enough food during the war than the lack of importance of this issue.

Some participants argued that not having enough to eat or lacking opportunities to earn a sufficient income increased the risk of re-recruitment. In a few cases, the payments or skills training offered as part of the DDR programme in Sierra Leone and Liberia were seen to increase children's ability to survive without having to resort to becoming fighters. However, many argued that children who had been demobilised, especially those given large cash payments in Liberia, were not able to use the DDR package for long-term improvements in livelihoods. Some even stated that DDR payments could act as an incentive for future re-recruitment:

Box 7: Poverty pushing children into the fighting forces

Michael is now 21 years old and lives in an IDP camp in Monrovia. When he was nine or ten years old, both of his parents died. He initially survived by begging on the streets with his older sister. One day, while he was out playing with friends, Michael's sister was abducted by LURD forces. After 'hours crying', he decided he could not survive without his sister's help and joined LURD in order to get food. Michael was just 12 years old. He found life with LURD hard. Although he always had enough to eat and could spend time with his sister, he often had to walk long distances, and was forced to go to the front when the older soldiers were too afraid to do so. He watched many of his friends die. When the hardships of war became too much, Michael and his sister used the opportunity of a ceasefire to escape from LURD. Michael feels now that the only way to prevent his recruitment would have been for another family to offer to take care of him and his sister:

Samuel is a 17-year-old boy from a village near Guiglo, Ivory Coast. Following the attack on the village by rebel forces, Samuel fled into the bush with a cousin. Finding it hard to survive, he returned to the village and joined the LIMA militia group a month later. Hunger and the ready supply of food that LIMA had through looting were prime motivations for joining. His decision was also influenced by a need for self-protection:

"I had to be with them to prevent them [LIMA] from attacking me."

Although Samuel enjoyed being with his friends and always having enough to eat, he found life carrying luggage and washing clothes for LIMA soldiers hard. He was persuaded to leave after only a month by an aunt who now takes care of him.

"Children will re-join because most that fought the war and killed innocent people got paid by the UN... That will encourage children to join armed groups in the future."

(16-year-old girl who did not join the armed forces or groups, Monrovia, Liberia)

DDR payments can also lead to considerable resentment against those who receive them, as other children who did not take part in the fighting but suffered its consequences are left out (Delap, 2004). This can reduce acceptance of ex-soldiers by the community, which, as shown below, increases the likelihood of re-recruitment.

As well as influencing the decision to join, income levels can also affect forced recruitment. A few children described parents paying the soldiers to stop them from taking children away:

"I was in the camp when one of the government officers ordered his men to catch me and put me in the pick-up truck because the government forces needed more manpower. My father came and started crying, asking him to leave me because I was sick. He asked for some money from my father which my father didn't have, but still he was able to pay some of the amount and I was released."

(18-year-old man who did not join the armed forces or groups, Monrovia, Liberia)

"Some parents gave them money. When you didn't have money they'd kill you and take your child."

(17-year-old girl, forced to join MPIGO, village close to Guiglo, Ivory Coast)

Some children were caught by soldiers when they went out to look for food or to work to provide an income

for their families. A few boys and girls said that they managed to avoid being forced to join because they didn't need to look for food, or because their parents or younger siblings went and got food for them. Younger children were used in this way, as they are less strong and not as sexually mature as their older siblings, and therefore not so attractive to the fighters. Richer families were described as having more choices about where they or their children went, with many of the more wealthy sections of society choosing to leave the country altogether to avoid the fighting.

Some families, particularly those who managed to reach IDP or refugee camps, received food relief and livelihood support from UN agencies and NGOs. Although this help was rarely mentioned as a reason why children did not join the armed forces or groups, it was perceived by participants as being extremely important and beneficial to general family well-being. Of course, security can mean that it is not always feasible to provide widespread relief to conflict-affected areas. This suggests that longer-term support is needed to ensure that families are better prepared and able to cope with crises. In developing such strategies, it is important to recognise that children from richer families may still be vulnerable to recruitment and require assistance. The life histories of children involved in the interviews show how the status of such households can dramatically change during the war, as families are forced to flee, leaving behind land and property. Powerful families, such as those of village chiefs, can also be specific targets of the fighters. Research participants in Liberia and Sierra Leone argued that some children from wealthier households joined to protect their land or homes:

"Some whose families were rich also joined to save family wealth."

(15-year-old boy, ex-soldier,
Zimmi, Sierra Leone)

Providing alternatives for children: school and skills training

The research suggests that the provision of good quality and free education for children can play a major role in preventing their recruitment (see also McCallin, 2001). Participants from all three countries argued that sending children to school or for skills training, or talking to them about the importance of considering their education, could stop them from joining the armed forces or groups:

"I had my children go to school and I used to talk to them all the time about the importance of education. They promised me that they were not going to join and they did not join."

(Housewife and mother of several children
who did not join the fighting forces,
Monrovia, Liberia)

Children who did not join were often motivated by a desire to go to school, and both ex-soldiers and other children saw missing out on education as a major disadvantage of life as a soldier. Some participants argued that a lack of access to education did or could cause re-recruitment. A number of ex-soldiers stated that the prospect of going to school or learning a trade was one of the key factors that stopped them from wanting to re-join the fighting forces:

"You cannot be fighting and at the same time be in school."

(17-year-old boy, forced to join the RUF,
on why he would not re-join the armed
forces or groups, Zimmi, Sierra Leone)

"What I want to do is forget the way they killed and molested people in my presence, and the bad things that I did... I want to learn a trade or go to school and forget about the war."

(14-year-old boy, forced to join MPIGO, on
why he would not re-join the armed forces
or groups, village near Man, Ivory Coast)

“I did not get any benefit when I was forced to join. My time was wasted. I did not get to go to school. Therefore, no matter how bad my situation gets, I must advance myself to become one of Liberia’s leaders.”

(24-year-old woman who was forced to join the NPFL aged ten, on why she would not re-join the fighters, Monrovia, Liberia)

Education was seen as stopping children from becoming involved in the fighting in a number of ways. Many believe that having access to school or skills training could reduce the boredom and ‘idleness’ that encourage children to seek a more ‘exciting’ life with the fighting forces. It was argued that education teaches children the difference between right and wrong, keeps their minds off the fighting, and gives them hope and belief in a better future. As stated above, in the six communities visited for this research, it is widely believed that teachers have the potential to alter attitudes, dissuading children from wanting to join. Some argued that skills training could teach children the value of work and stop them thinking that the best way to earn a living is through the looting carried out by the fighting forces. Education can also enable boys and girls to more carefully consider the choices they have before them, and give them the confidence to say no to those trying to recruit them:

“When we learn, nobody will fool us. If I knew books, I would not have sat down in the bush and fired guns at people.”

(17-year-old boy who voluntarily joined the government forces, Bong County, Liberia)

Many of those who took part in the research believe that for education to act as a truly effective preventative strategy, it needs to be absolutely free. Parents and carers are often unable to pay for school fees, books, uniforms, or other costs, especially when resources are stretched during war. The importance of free education is reflected in calls for greater investment in schooling from the research participants in all three countries. This was the area where both children and adults most commonly argued that

governments should prioritise their resource allocations to stop future recruitment. NGOs and UN agencies were also seen as having a role to play here. Overall, the vast majority of participants who spoke about the importance of education felt that not enough was being done to help send children to school. For example, in Liberia it was commonly stated that teachers are paid too little and too infrequently to be able to work regularly in school. In Ivory Coast, one teacher argued strongly that investments in education had decreased since the start of the war:

“Prior to the war we received sports and games kits... We don’t even have chalk in the schools today, let alone money and equipment. We could have done something relevant for children in this community, but now there is a big gap between the community and the teaching staff.”

(Teacher, village near Guiglo, Ivory Coast)

The content of education should also be carefully considered. For example, some children felt they had now missed out on so many years of schooling that they were too old to attend regular classes and should instead be offered vocational training. Such vocational training has been provided as part of the DDR package in Sierra Leone. However, as with DDR payments, previous Save the Children research suggests that providing skills training only to ex-soldiers can lead to resentment from those not receiving this benefit (Delap, 2004). It is also important to make sure that the skills children gain are relevant to their communities, and that adequate support is provided after their training to ensure that skills learnt can be put into use effectively.

It should be noted that for most of the time during the war, many of the boys and girls interviewed for this research were not able to go to school or receive skills training, as they were either fleeing from their community or the schools had been closed. For these children it was the knowledge that joining the armed forces or groups would reduce their chances of getting an education in the future, rather than actually being in school at the present time, that prevented their

recruitment. But research participants also stated that education was not the only alternative activity that could stop children joining the fighting forces. Parents sent some of those children who were not in school to work to keep them busy and away from the fighters. Participants also argued that recreational facilities could be used as an alternative way to keep children occupied and stop them considering a life with the soldiers.

Using education or work as a way of preventing children's recruitment is not without its risks. As shown above, if children are in school during attacks, it can lead to long-term separation from their parents. Two of the ex-soldiers interviewed reported being captured and forcibly recruited on their way to or from school. Adults and children from Sierra Leone and all three communities in Liberia stated that armed forces or groups deliberately targeted schools in their recruitment drives. Children were also caught on their way to and from the fields where they worked, and many forms of work can be exploitative and harmful to children's well-being. As stated above, efforts in families and schools to prepare for attacks can reduce the risk of separation. At times when attacks are known to be imminent, schools were often closed, and this may be a necessary temporary arrangement. In this situation it may be possible to establish smaller schools in locations close to children's homes. In one Liberian community, participants managed to persuade the fighting forces to stop recruitment in and around the school. However, the risk associated with negotiating with the fighting forces suggests that this strategy should be employed with extreme caution.

Welcoming back children formerly associated with the fighting forces

Although very few of the ex-child soldiers who participated in the research admitted that they would join again if conflict re-started, there is a widespread perception among participants that re-recruitment remains a significant risk. All of the preventative strategies outlined above were seen to be relevant to re-recruitment, as well as first-time recruitment.

In addition, adults and children who took part in the research argued that it is important to ensure that ex-soldiers are welcomed back home and feel part of their families and communities. Many child and adult participants believed that a lack of acceptance by the community could push some children back into the fighting forces. A number of ex-soldiers cited receiving a positive reception by their families, friends or communities as a reason for not re-joining:

"Life was very hard for me in the fighting forces... I was not free to move around freely. Now I can move around freely and play with my friends and family again. I feel good about being back."

(15-year-old girl, forced to join LURD, on why she would not re-join the armed forces or groups, Monrovia, Liberia)

Ex-soldiers who are rejected by the community may be called names, accused of committing atrocities during the war, or denied the opportunity to play with other children. In some instances, teachers, parents and carers may discriminate against children formerly associated with the armed forces or groups. Comments from participants in all six of the communities visited suggest that, while some are willing to accept ex-soldiers back, there is a significant risk of rejection. The treatment of girl and boy ex-soldiers varies according to community attitudes towards the war, the precise role that children played in the war, and their attitudes and behaviour after the war. For example, having a child fathered by a fighter can lead to mixed reactions towards the young mother. In Ivory Coast it was observed that girls who had had children fathered by men from groups supported by the community were treated well and were proud of their babies. Girls who had babies fathered by men from groups opposed by the community showed more nervousness about motherhood and were discriminated against by their peers. These attitudes applied regardless of whether the pregnancy had been the result of rape or not.

Those who were known to or believed to have committed atrocities, or who behaved arrogantly once back in the community, were not readily accepted:

“They say that we should forgive and forget. We can forgive, but we can’t forget. If we consider what that person has done to us, we will not forget it. The ex-soldiers have problems: no respect for anyone, abuse at random and they don’t want anyone to be rude to them... They are hard to deal with, do not take instruction, and are rude.”

(Teacher, Monrovia, Liberia)

Where communities opposed the goals or methods used by the fighters, children who were forced to join were more likely to be welcomed back by the community than those who joined voluntarily:

“That child [who chose to join the rebels] himself knows that he can’t dare to come back. His place is no more in the village. It is over for him. He is rejected by the whole community. There is no point in debating this; it is settled once and for all.”

(Community leader, village near Guiglo, Ivory Coast)

However, where there is support for the fighters, home-coming voluntary recruits may be treated like heroes, possibly encouraging them to re-join in the future.

This research, together with research previously conducted by Save the Children (Delap, 2004), suggests several elements to a successful strategy to ensure that ex-soldiers are fully accepted back into their communities:

- Offer mediation between returning soldiers and their families and communities.
- Ensure that other boys and girls who have suffered similar deprivations to children who have been through a DDR programme receive comparable benefits in order to reduce resentment against ex-soldiers. This includes giving all children, not just ex-soldiers, the opportunity to attend school or skills training.
- Engage a range of stakeholders in supporting children’s reintegration, including parents, teachers, community leaders and children themselves.
- Establish and support community child protection mechanisms, such as the child welfare committees

described earlier, to monitor the progress of ex-child soldiers and aid their reintegration.

- Make special efforts to assist ex-child soldiers who are also young mothers, or who are not living with their biological parents.

Creating peace and reducing the demand for child soldiers

Theoretically, one of the most effective ways to stop the recruitment of boys and girls is to dissuade fighting forces and groups from using children. However, there are considerable challenges associated with this strategy. In both Sierra Leone and Liberia, children were deliberately targeted by recruiters. Charles Taylor’s forces and the RUF even contained sections called Small Boys Units primarily consisting of children. Unfortunately, it was not possible to interview former commanders of these or other armed forces or groups as part of the research. As a result, it is hard to ascertain exactly why children were so desired. Other research points to children’s willingness to follow orders, as well as their adventurousness, ability to learn quickly and relative physical weakness, which all combine to make forced recruitment easier (McCallin, 2001). Participants from Sierra Leone and Liberia noted a rise in attempts at recruitment following large battles, which led to many deaths and therefore a need for more soldiers. Children who leave the fighting forces may also be seen as being disloyal to the cause and forced to return, or may be valued by former commanders and encouraged to come back:

“I fought for some time and decided to leave and forget about the fighting. I was sitting one day and the friends I had fought with came round and began to ill-treat me and take all my belongings.”

(14-year-boy, ex-soldier, explaining why children re-join the armed forces or groups, Monrovia, Liberia)

The research suggests that in most cases, direct negotiation between community members and the armed forces or groups is not an effective or advisable

Box 8: Negotiating with the fighting forces

Peter is a 17-year-old boy currently living in an IDP camp in Bong County, Liberia. In his village the community organised a group of men who were given responsibility for negotiating with the armed forces or groups. If armed men came to the village to request food, members of the committee would go from house to house gathering 'donations'. These items were given to the soldiers in return for a promise not to harass the civilians or force children to join. This strategy mainly worked. On one occasion, the fighters took the food and still demanded some boys to take away with them. While the other members of the committee continued talking to the fighters, one member went to warn the boys in the village to run away and hide. Towards the end of the war, the fighters' demands increased, and villagers ran out of food. At this point they were no longer able to prevent children being forced to join the armed forces or groups.

way to prevent recruitment. This strategy did work in a couple of communities (see Box 8 for an example). However, as noted above, there are considerable risks associated with trying to dissuade the fighters from taking children, and such attempts can even lead to death in some instances. This highlights the importance of NGOs, governments and UN agencies working together to remind all armed forces and groups of their responsibilities under international human rights and humanitarian law not to recruit children. As stated above, many of those who took part in this research argued that war crimes trials for those who encouraged children's recruitment deliver clear messages about the negative consequences of using child soldiers:

"I would like all the warlords to be brought to justice for bringing war and turning children's heads around to behaviours that are not acceptable in society."

(24-year-old woman, forced to join NPLF aged ten, Monrovia, Liberia)

Of course, as argued by a number of the research participants, the most certain way of preventing the recruitment of children is to stop civil or international conflict from occurring:

"If these people had not brought war, children would not have joined the fighting forces."

(Mother of three children who did not join the armed forces or groups, Monrovia, Liberia)

It is beyond the scope of this research to suggest definitive strategies for creating peace in the three countries visited. However, the research does suggest that children and other community members often have a good understanding of the nature, causes and effects of violent conflict, and should therefore be included in any attempts to create peace and prevent further fighting.

Notes

4 All names have been changed to protect the identities of the research participants.

5 This may actually be an under-representation of the true extent of separation prior to recruitment. As children living in relatively established communities were focused on, there may be a bias in the sample. If ex-soldiers living on the streets or in residential care had been focused on, a larger proportion of the sample may have been separated prior to their recruitment.

4 Conclusion and recommendations

The boys and girls who participated in this research have clearly been through horrific experiences during the conflicts in Ivory Coast, Liberia and Sierra Leone. Children formerly associated with fighters were physically, psychologically, and sexually abused and had to endure extreme hardships, as well as risking death or injury on a daily basis. Their stories provide extra impetus to efforts to prevent the future recruitment of all those under 18 into armed forces or groups. While the research offers no simple solutions to this complex problem, it does highlight four main determinants of children's recruitment, which should be considered in any strategies designed to stop children from joining. Firstly, children join because they are not being properly cared for, often due to separation from parents or carers and the lack of alternative mechanisms to protect them. Secondly, the beliefs of children and those around them about the costs and benefits of being part of the armed forces or groups shape decisions about recruitment. Thirdly, hunger pushes girls and boys into the armed forces or groups, and poverty reduces the ability of children and their families to escape forced recruitment. Finally, education can provide children with an alternative to joining armed forces or groups, and give them the knowledge, confidence, and reasoning and negotiation skills they need to make informed choices about their lives.

To address children's recruitment, it is first important to gain an understanding of the context to determine the relative emphasis to be placed on each of the four factors, and the precise elements of any preventative strategy. Here it is necessary to examine the extent of forced and voluntary recruitment, the tactics used to make children join, and the motivations behind girls' and boys' decisions to join armed forces or groups. The research suggests that this will vary considerably depending on: which fighting forces or groups

dominate a particular area; the extent of community support for the soldiers; levels of poverty; access to education; and the harassment and abuse that children and their families have been subjected to at the hands of the fighters. The determinants of children's recruitment may change over time, as knowledge of the impacts of war increases and support for the armed forces or groups declines. Motivations are also likely to vary by sex, with, for example, boys more frequently joining for revenge or ideological reasons than girls.

During periods of conflict, the research suggests a number of actions to help address the four main determinants of children's recruitment. For voluntary recruitment, these include:

- Taking immediate action to provide relief to prevent hunger.
- Developing targeted messages that address the specific motivations of children in the community. These may include: the desire for revenge or to protect themselves or family members; a belief that joining the fighting forces or groups will stop external oppressors from threatening the community; a longing for material gain or power; and a lack of understanding of the hardships of war.
- Involving parents, children, community leaders, teachers and the wider community in delivering messages and ensuring that statements about children's recruitment are constantly reiterated.
- Keeping schools open for as long as possible, but regularly re-evaluating the risks to schoolchildren, who may be targeted during recruitment drives or become separated from parents in attacks.
- Discussing the likely risks associated with awareness-raising campaigns, such as incurring the wrath of the soldiers in the area, and taking necessary steps to minimise these risks.

For forced recruitment, actions to address children's recruitment include:

- Putting mechanisms in place so that any prior knowledge of attacks can be quickly shared with communities, enabling them to plan their departures if necessary. Here, the involvement of community leaders and teachers is key.
- Identifying areas where risks of recruitment are greatest and ensuring that community members are aware of where they can find safety.
- Assisting in the safe and organised movement of populations.
- Ensuring that refugee or IDP camps provide safe havens for children and their families who are fleeing to avoid the fighting forces. Governments in particular must fulfil their obligations to provide places of safety for all children in their country.

To help end both voluntary and forced recruitment, all efforts should be made to prevent children from being separated from their parents during conflict. Children who have already been separated must be reunited with their families as quickly as possible, or be provided with suitable alternative care. It is, of course, also important to make every effort to end conflict as soon as possible, and for governments and the international community to negotiate with armed groups or forces to stop them recruiting children.

The research suggests that, in addition to these actions during times of conflict, periods of relative peace and stability should be used to develop longer-term preventative strategies. These include:

- Efforts to enhance household livelihoods so that families are better able to cope in times of crises.
- Investments in education to ensure that all children have access to free schools and/or vocational training, and attempts to enhance the quality of education on offer.

- The development of community- and household-level emergency preparedness plans so that strategies are in place for responding to attacks and safely escaping if necessary. These should involve community leaders, teachers, parents and children themselves.
- Work to encourage the reintegration of boys and girls formerly associated with armed forces or groups, including carefully developed DDR programmes that do not favour ex-child soldiers to the extent that they are resented by others in the community.
- Campaigns to generate a shift in attitudes so that children's recruitment is universally acknowledged as being unacceptable. This may involve changing school curricula, and war crimes trials for those suspected of encouraging the use of child recruits.
- The establishment of community child protection networks involving child and adult community members to monitor and protect children's well-being and help implement the strategies described above.

In all of these strategies, it is essential to recognise and build on the considerable resourcefulness and resilience displayed by children, parents and communities in their attempts to avoid child recruitment. It is particularly important to acknowledge that boys and girls do not merely passively respond to efforts to make them become soldiers. The children who participated in this research relied heavily on their own resources to resist the pressure to join the fighters. It is hoped that their strength can be used to inspire governments, NGOs and UN agencies, in West Africa and beyond, to fulfil their obligations to stop children being drawn into war.

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