Child soldiers – and other children used by armed forces and groups

Policy brief

International law outlaws the recruitment and use of children under 18 years of age in armed conflict. Yet, adults in some countries still use children to fight their wars, often brutalising and exploiting them in the most abhorrent ways. A quarter of a million children – some as young as seven – are being used as fighters or to lay mines, act as spies, carry heavy loads, or even act as suicide bombers. Many are girls, who are raped, enslaved as so-called ‘wives’, as well as being involved in combat and forced to carry out other tasks.

Globally, 250,000 children are estimated to be associated with armed forces and groups. The problem is most acute in Africa (for example, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Uganda), but children are or have been also involved in conflict in some Asian countries (eg, Sri Lanka and Nepal) and in parts of Latin America (Colombia), Europe and the Middle East. The majority of these children are aged between 14 and 18 years, but some are recruited and used from as young as seven.

Because children are targeted for recruitment because they are cheap, easier to control and manipulate, and because they look to adults to protect them. Usually unpaid, they are used to do tasks adults do not want to do and may also be coerced into carrying out grotesque acts of violence. Because they are children, and therefore arouse less suspicion, they can be exploited for purposes such as spying, acting as couriers or carrying out acts of sabotage. Most children are recruited by non-state armed groups, but some governments are also involved, using children directly in national armed forces or indirectly in government-backed militias and armed groups.

All children living in the midst of armed conflict are at risk of recruitment. Sometimes they are forcibly recruited or abducted as a tactical weapon against families and
communities. Some armed forces and groups use violence to force children to join up, but many children volunteer, some for revenge, power or material goods, some through loyalty to a cause, and some for protection and security. For many child recruits, taking their chances with an armed group is preferable to living in poverty or in a camp for refugees or displaced people, where they have no chance of getting an education or of earning a living.

In times of crisis – whether due to conflict, natural disaster or economic hardship – children become more vulnerable to recruitment or re-recruitment into armed forces and groups. Some are particularly at risk, including those who: have been separated from their families; trafficked; live and work on the streets; or who are on the move.

The devastating impact on children

Children recruited into armed groups are killed, maimed, abused and exploited in the most appalling ways. They may be forced to observe or take part in atrocities, including against their own families and communities, and may be profoundly disturbed by what they have experienced. In some conflicts, particularly in West Africa, children have been drugged by their commanders before action. Children who have been recruited have no access to formal education, making it hard for them to find work after the war has ended. Also, it is not uncommon for their families and communities to view them with fear and distrust because of atrocities, even if they were forced to join the armed group.

Girls are often forcibly taken as ‘wives’ or raped repeatedly. Many suffer horrendous injuries and reproductive health problems, including unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections. Approximately 75% of demobilised girls who passed through interim care centres in Liberia reported having suffered some form of sexual abuse or exploitation.3 The nature of their experiences can have a long-lasting psychological impact, made even more difficult by the stigma girls experience when they return to their community, often with children born out of rape or relationships with fighters. The impact on girls can be longer lasting than that on boys, more severe and more difficult to address. Yet they are less likely to be included in demobilisation and reintegration programmes.

Demobilisation and reintegration

International law states that the release of children from an armed group does not have to be dependent on a peace agreement or official demobilisation process. Children should be released even during conflict. However, removing children from armed forces and groups and reintegrating them into their societies can be a complex task. Some demobilised children have become accustomed to ‘living by the gun’ and are re-recruited a second or third time. Others are targeted by their former commanders and put under pressure to return.

Even when finally demobilised, reintegration is often a complex process for all concerned. Children need to catch up on their schooling or do vocational training so that they can support themselves – which also makes them less vulnerable to re-recruitment. Family mediation, community healing and atonement are often needed to achieve long-term, sustainable reintegration. While assistance in many of these reintegration processes can be provided through interim care and specially trained social workers, many children do not access these facilities. Sometimes this is because they are not available, but often it is for fear of being stigmatised.

Although girls make up a significant proportion of children associated with armed forces, their needs often go unrecognised. Armed groups often regard them as wives...
or domestic servants, so do not see them as eligible for release. Girls themselves may not seek to participate in official or available reintegration processes because they are not made aware of them or because they fear being stigmatised.

**International law and policy**

The international community first took up the issue of child soldiers in the early 1990s. Since then, a variety of measures have been taken to create a body of law and policy to end children’s involvement in armed conflict. Nearly two-thirds of states are now parties to the core human rights treaty prohibiting children’s participation in armed conflict – the Optional Protocol (to the Geneva Conventions) on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, which came into force in 2002.4

The 1998 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court also prohibits the use of children aged under 15 years in hostilities and provides for its punishment as a war crime. In 2009, a former commander from eastern DRC became the first person to be put on trial at the Court in The Hague for recruiting children. Meanwhile, the Special Court for Sierra Leone has successfully prosecuted a number of former commanders in the 1991–2002 civil war for recruiting child combatants under the age of 15. The recruitment and use of children is also defined as a worst form of child labour in International Labour Organization’s Convention 182, which commits each party to the Convention to secure its elimination as a matter of urgency.

In 2007, at a major international conference in Paris, 58 governments endorsed a specific set of legal and operational principles designed to protect children from being recruited or used in armed conflict. These Paris Commitments, which are complemented by a set of Paris Principles covering prevention and reintegration strategies, have subsequently been endorsed by a further 26 governments.

The UN Security Council has also devoted significant time to this issue, condemning the recruitment and use of children, asking for annual reports from the UN Secretary General on progress in their elimination, and listing armed forces and groups still recruiting children and threatening sanctions against them.5 In 2005, the Security Council mandated the establishment of country-specific Monitoring and Reporting Mechanisms on the recruitment and use of children in armed conflicts (as well as five other gross violations of children’s rights). Reports have a preventative and deterrent effect as well as being a trigger for dialogue and the development of action plans that result in the demobilisation and release of affected children.6 Other measures taken include using child protection advisers in peacekeeping operations.

Although children continue to be recruited and used in armed conflicts in many countries, the measures described above have resulted in the release and demobilisation of thousands of former child combatants. Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programmes have been funded and run by UN agencies, donors and NGOs in several difficult conflict situations. Progress has been achieved, despite significant challenges. However, while a child can be returned to their community relatively quickly, ensuring that they are accepted back by that community and preventing any re-recruitment can be a long-term task.

**What we are calling for**

Prevention is the best protection for children. Creating durable barriers to recruitment requires a concerted approach locally, nationally and internationally to tackle both the immediate and root causes of recruitment, including:

- effective action to end impunity for perpetrators
• the availability of sustainable economic, educational and other positive opportunities for children in conflict-affected areas
• awareness-raising about the risks for all conflict-affected children
• support to community-based protection mechanisms.

Donors, national governments and the international community must ensure that:
• children are demobilised from armed groups and forces at the first available opportunity
• their release is not dependent on a peace process or on adult demobilisation
• children’s demobilisation is prioritised at all times
• resources are provided to facilitate this.

Targeting children formerly associated with armed forces and groups for special support can create resentment and stigma among other members of the community, especially when these children are perceived as dangerous perpetrators of violence.

• Reintegration programmes should be founded on an inclusive community-based approach that supports all children who have been affected by armed conflict, not just those who have been associated with the armed forces.

• Those working with children associated with armed forces and groups should ensure that resources and support are not directed solely at those carrying weapons or otherwise directly involved in hostilities but also reach children carrying out other tasks.

• The extent of girls’ involvement in armed groups and forces should be recognised and protection and support channelled to them, with special attention given to young mothers and their children.

Reintegration is not a short-term activity. This should be recognised in funding mechanisms that:
• provide long-term funding for five years or more, rather than short-term humanitarian aid
• link with peace-building, recovery, reconciliation and reconstruction programmes.

References

1 The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers estimates that between April 2004 and October 2007, children were actively involved in 19 countries or territories. By 2009, the number of countries was estimated to have fallen to 14 because of the end of a number of conflicts. See Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers (2008) Child Soldiers: Global Report and the Coalition’s website at http://www.child-soldiers.org/home
6 Indictments against government and rebel leaders in Sudan and Uganda for war crimes by the International Criminal Court have been influenced by information on recruitment of children collected through the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism.