Lost Generations: Consequences of and Responses to Child Soldier Recruitment

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Despite being strictly prohibited in international humanitarian law, child soldiering remains a serious global problem. How effective has the international community's response to this phenomenon been?

Constituting one of the most egregious child rights violations, many children are currently actively involved in violent conflict as members of armed organizations, states and non-state actors. They can be found on every continent, but sub-Saharan Africa is the epicenter of the phenomenon. These recruited children perform a range of different tasks; they participate in combat, lay mines and explosives, are scouting, spying, and acting as decoys, couriers or guards. Others are used for logistics and supporting functions such as cooking and cleaning.

The 1977 Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions were the first international treaties to try and tackle the problem of child soldiering. They prohibit the recruitment and participation in hostilities of children under the age of 15. The 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, which has achieved almost universal ratification, also included the 15 age limit. An optional protocol to this Convention, in May 2000, lifted the age to 18. It insisted that armed groups should not use children under 18 in any circumstances and called on states to criminalize such practices. However, although the use of children by armed groups is prohibited and defined as a war crime, child soldiering remains a pressing global issue.

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The most commonly cited figure for the number of children involved in conflicts is 300,000. This estimate is, however, not necessarily the most accurate one as information on child soldier usage is difficult to obtain. Children are often employed in remote conflict zones away from public view and the media, no record is kept of their number and ages, and those who employ them often deny their existence or claim that these were isolated cases. Besides, they often 'vanish' after the conflict ends; they are rarely as visible among the demobilised troops as they were among the combatants at the height of hostilities.

The number of children active in armed groups is clearly nominal when compared to the millions of children who do not participate directly as soldiers but are profoundly affected by war. Nonetheless, this group is a tangible, visible, and dramatic example of the deprivation of the human rights of children. It has been empirical proven that using children as active participants in armed conflict has severe consequences not only for the child and their family, but also for society in general. For instance, at a recent Paris conference on child soldiering, the keynote speaker, the former French foreign minister Philippe Douste-Blazy, warned that the use of child soldiers is "a time bomb that threatens stability and growth in Africa and beyond." They are "lost children," he argued, "lost for peace and lost for the development of their countries". Also, a New York Times editorial stated: "They are walking ghosts, damaged, uneducated pariahs." Ultimately, if subscribing to these statements, child soldiering may be thought to contribute to the well-known 'conflict trap', i.e. they might increase the likelihood that conflict recurs.

There are at least two avenues that link former child soldiers to conflict recurrence. First, it is argued that former child soldiers have often limited skills

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besides killing and being able to fieldstrip weapons after the conflict has ceased. This is primarily due to the fact that they experience little to no education while being in the bush. This lack of education impedes their labour market success: they earn less and are less likely to be engaged in skilled work in comparison to those that were not recruited by armed groups. This may significantly raise the willingness to rejoin armed groups again, which might assure them of at least the basic necessities, such as food and perhaps even a bit of money.

Second, although child soldiers are far from the only ones who are affected as a result of their experiences in war, they suffer the most and have the least capacity to recover. Typically former child soldiers have witnessed, experienced and/or perpetrated shocking and disturbing violent actions during their time with the armed group. This can create great difficulties both for the children and their interface with society. It can lead to both physical symptoms, such as headaches, stomach pains, sleep disorders, and mental symptoms, like depression, anxiety, and extreme levels of pessimism.

One of the most worrying symptoms connected to children's war participation is a supposed increase in the child's level of aggression. Due to the fact that they often do not have the capacities and experiences to disengage themselves from these violent and aggressive behavioral norms established during their time in the armed groups, difficulties arise when peace is restored. For instance, they often display on-going aggressiveness within their families and communities: they also often use physical violence to resolve conflicts, reflecting an absence of adequate social skills.

These skills are not easily acquired by former child soldiers since they often encounter broken families once they are back that could have provided a better

regulation of the use of violence. Hence, some scholars have argued that the phenomenon of child soldiers feeds upon itself: each round of fighting creates a new cohort, traumatized by the war and bereft of economical skills, who then become a potential pool and catalyst for the next spate of violence. Or as Wessellsdescribes it: “A society that mobilizes and trains its young for war weaves violence into the fabric of life, increasing the likelihood that violence and war will be its future. Children who have been robbed of education and taught to kill often contribute to further militarization, lawlessness, and violence”.

International response

The response of the international community to counter child recruitment falls usually in two categories: (1) punishing perpetrators by ‘naming and shaming’ practices and by prosecution; and (2) mitigating some of the damage done to children once they leave the armed group by implementing child-centred Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration(DDR) programs.

Concerning the ‘naming and shaming’ policies, the United Nations often publishes reports mentioning particular governments and non-state actors that use children. Some have argued that this has an effect, especially on governments, although there is little empirical evidence to back this up. The largest degree of child recruitment is, however, carried out by non-state actors and it seems that media exposure, public pressure, and pressure of international organizations and governments have little to no effect, with perhaps the exception of rebel groups who strive for secession.

Besides ‘naming and shaming’ campaigns, the international community has also started to shift its focus to the criminalization of child soldier

recruitment. Thomas Lubanga Dyilo, a warlord from the Democratic Republic of the Congo who led the Union of Congolese Patriots, was the first rebel leader convicted by the International Criminal Court for the use of children in military operations. More recently, Charles Taylor, the former president of Liberia, was found guilty of conscripting and enlisting children. It is, however, unclear whether this criminalization has a deterrent effect on child soldier recruitment.

Once children are out of the armed groups, the international community attempts to mitigate the damage done to them and the potential consequences for society by implementing DDR programs. Initially children were often excluded from these programs, as it was argued that they did not pose a post-conflict threat. Moreover, since children cannot be legally recruited, child-centered DDR program elements were not viewed as a routine component of peacemaking. Fortunately, this has changed in recent times, and most DDR programs now have their own imperatives focused on rehabilitating former child soldiers. Usually these programs consist of three components.

First, former child soldiers are gathered at pick-up points, moved to disarmaments sites, and, whenever necessary, disarmed. During the demobilization part of the program, eligibility for the DDR program is determined through a screening process in which they receive identity and discharge documents. Reintegration is the third component of the DDR program, which starts at care centers – transit facilities which help prepare former child soldiers for going home and give non-governmental organizations time for the preparation of families and communities to receive the children. During their time at the center, emphasis is placed on educational activities, recreational activities, psychological support and counselling, and several different life skills trainings. Once the parents or extended family members are

traced, the children will be taken home to their family and will join an appropriate educational program.

The effectiveness of these programs in reducing recidivism and establishing post-conflict stability is, however, not always affirmed. Some scholars conclude that these programs are generally inefficient at disarming ex-combatants, reducing the likelihood of recidivism, and addressing their economic and security concerns. This lack of supporting evidence might be due to conceptual and operational problems with defining the outcome of these programs (and how to measure this), and a lack of information on the existing DDR programs (money, personnel, mission statements, etc.). But it might also be due to the content of these programs and how they approach child soldiering. Many of these child-centered DDR programs, for instance, are put in place under enormous time pressure, are often disconnected from the perception of local communities, and are based on a one approach fits all children principle. Consequently, some scholars have called for more flexibility within these programs to enhance is effectiveness. Only then can efforts to promote social reconstruction bear its fruits.

Child soldiers in Ethiopia. Image by Vittorio Bianchi via Flickr.

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