The Problem of Re-Acclimating Child Soldiers into Society Assuming Peacekeeping Is Successful - Question & (and) Answer Session

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The Problem of Re-Acclimating Child Soldiers into Society Assuming Peacekeeping Is Successful

Question & Answer Session

From the floor: Is there an economy for child soldiers to return to after you educate them? It seems that you encourage them to return to their home villages and assure them that there will be an opportunity for them to earn a living there, but was the lack of a viable alternative source of income not one of the very reasons that the soldier joined the armed forces in the first place?

Dr. Wessells: It varies from area to area. For example, in Angola, even though the country was horribly crippled by war, it is wealthy in many ways, and there were many areas that were not affected much by the war. Sometimes it is possible for young people to resettle in an area that is more economically stable and that provides suitable alternatives. On the other hand, in Liberia and Congo, the situation is very challenging. This is the issue of reintegration readiness: Reintegration into what? Is there an economy? Are there stable communities? Is there anything resembling law and order that could provide protection? Is there anything resembling education that provides children with options? I do not think we have addressed this issue very well.

I have no intention of casting stones on others. In partnership with the United Nations Children's Fund ("UNICEF") the Christian Children's Fund ("CCF") has created interim care centers in many parts of Liberia. We manage approximately six of them in the area of Tubmanburg, Liberia. These care centers offer young people the temporary space they need to decide what their next step should be. However, it worries me that these interim care centers may be set up shortsightedly without much consideration given to reintegration. What is going to happen to the young people after they leave these care centers?

On the one hand, it is true that young people are incredibly resilient: They will form communities and create innovative options adults will not have thought of, but on the other hand, it is specious to discuss Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration ("D.D.R.") programs as if they were generic. It is not as neat and clean as going into the postconflict zone and setting up a D.D.R. program. We must keep this in mind in this discussion.

From the floor: Is there not a conflict between professing to avoid Western psychology in designing programs to help the children, while at
the same time following a Western model in creating job opportunities for children by developing an economy?

Ms. Kostelny: I do not promote capitalism as such. Rather, it is the young people who are more interested in doing business in urban centers than in returning to the villages. The goal in helping young people return to their communities is not to help them stay there permanently, but rather to assist them in returning temporarily to facilitate the rebuilding of family contacts and reconciliation with the community.

These young adults are very entrepreneurial. They will find a way to earn a livelihood, whether legally or illegally. I do not attempt to make decisions as to where the young people should go or what goals they should pursue. They know better than I where it is safe, where their set of skills is in demand, and where their friends will be. Some young people I know formed a music band in a refugee camp and started getting engagements in the next town. We probably would not have thought of that as a job opportunity, but they were a very good rap band and it worked for them.

Here is another example of entrepreneurship: We discovered this when the local police and the refugee camp leaders in a camp asked us to investigate what the teenagers in the camp were doing when they left the camp daily in trucks. The police and camp leaders perceived this behavior as suspicious. We found out that they were in fact selling their rations of canned fish in the next village because nobody in the camp liked canned fish, while the village residents liked it very much.

In short, it is the young people's search for a way to make a living—not us promoting capitalism—that leads to these kinds of arrangements. Many of these young people have a very clear instinct as to how they can make a living and build their future. We can only help them lay the groundwork so that they can continue in a positive way. Part of this is helping them go back to their villages. There is no need, however, for us to tell them how to change their lives because they do that by themselves.

From the floor: First, do you find reinsertion programs helpful? Second, do D.D.R. programs sometimes also cause harm?

Dr. Wessells: Regarding reinsertion programs, in Sierra Leone, I talked with a number of young men who said that they initially had demanded reinsertion kits because they did not even have clothes on their backs and felt that without proper clothing they could not return to their communities with dignity. The problem was that once they obtained a reinsertion kit and went to their villages with proper clothes, they became the victims of jealousy because they were better off than the very people they had attacked when they were a part of the armed forces. They were stigmatized, not because they were former child soldiers, but because they were better off than their victims. This demonstrates once again that a singular focus on child soldiers and measures such as reinsertion kits and monetary packages are potentially damaging to reintegration.

Ms. Knudsen: Regarding D.D.R. programs, in Sierra Leone, there were girls who had developed normal and acceptable relationships while they
were associated with the armed forces. In the D.D.R. process, these girls were separated from their husbands. Thus, instead of supporting a positive relationship where there was a strong bond, the D.D.R. effort actually hindered it. Relationships that are mutually agreeable should be recognized in these kinds of programs.

From the floor: Which organizations work with the peacekeepers in a conflict area—whether with the UN or with UNICEF? Can you give an example of a team of organizations that work together in a particularly effective manner to solve many problems in a certain region?

Dr. Wessells: The effectiveness of the collaboration between organizations usually varies with the personalities of the individuals involved more so than with the identity of the organization in my experience. Regardless of which organizations are involved, coordination between government, peacekeepers, local military commanders, UN agencies, nongovernmental organizations ("NGOs"), and donors is key. An inclusive process is prerequisite to making progress.

Another issue is that the technicalities of a D.D.R. program are often settled by a group of experts that operates outside of the public eye and that does not have much contact with those affected by the D.D.R. program. Thus, it is important that children be represented and included in the process and that there be a coordinated, integrated planning and implementation process. Finally, we must prevent local politics from co-opting the integrated process by, for example, emphasizing demobilization over reintegration.

From the floor: What is the function of role models in the reintegra
tion of child soldiers?

Ms. Kostelny: There is little research on the efficacy of role models in this field, so we draw heavily on research conducted in the United States and in Europe on the use of role models in working with gang members and other troubled youth. Thus, Save the Children facilitates role model programs both in our programs in urban centers as well as in our international work, and we find that role models have a positive impact in both settings. This is not surprising, since in the United States many urban centers look and feel like war zones to the young people involved.

Mentoring is critical because it helps establish positive role models for young people. It is especially powerful when we can match child soldiers with mentors who are somewhat older, who have gone through the D.D.R. process, and who have found a positive alternative to working with armed forces, but it can even be helpful if a ten-year-old can find a fifteen-year-old with similar experiences to talk to.

These may be structured programs or informal exchanges. Sometimes, child soldiers find mentors through formal programs we organize, but more often individuals sharing a similar background recognize this and begin to share their experiences without any encouragement from outside.

Finding mentors for child soldiers in refugee camps is more difficult: Those who have overcome the negative effects of having served in armed forces as child soldiers tend to disconnect from other child soldiers they
met in the refugee camps and tend to be reluctant to discuss their experiences. This is reinforced by culture and social identity needs in some parts of the world.