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### Recommended Citation

Knudsen, Christine (2004) "Demobilization and Reintegration during an Ongoing Conflict," *Cornell International Law Journal*: Vol. 32: Iss. 3, Article 12.  
Available at: <http://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/cilj/vol32/iss3/12>

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# Demobilization and Reintegration During an Ongoing Conflict

Christine Knudsen†

It is problematic to start from the critical assumption that peacekeeping is successful, as the title of this session, *The Problem of Re-Acclimating Child Soldiers into Society Assuming Peacekeeping Is Successful*, encourages us to do. Peacekeeping implies a strong UN presence and a planned demobilization. However, many children leave the armed forces spontaneously while the conflict is ongoing, as the conflict begins to wane, as their circumstances change, or as they find new opportunities. My comments focus primarily on children who spontaneously leave armed forces.

It is also important to remember that by “child soldiers” we mean not only children who have carried arms, but rather, any person under the age of eighteen who is or has been associated with any kind of regular or irregular armed group, including those who serve as porters, spies, cooks, or messengers, and including girls recruited for sexual purposes and many others. To emphasize this point, the term “children associated with fighting forces” is increasingly used to describe the full breadth of the children involved in armed conflicts. This term is more inclusive and more accurately describes what we who work in this field are concerned about. Thus, even if I refer to “child soldiers,” I use it only as a shorthand for “children associated with fighting forces.”

Especially since most formal demobilization programs focus almost exclusively on those children who carried weapons, it is important to remember that children associated with armed forces include those who have served in these groups in a variety of ways. In the Mano River region of Sierra Leone, for example, administrators first screened children based on whether they possessed automatic or semi-automatic weapons, and whether they could assemble, disassemble, or fire such weapons accurately to determine whether the children were eligible for participating in a disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration program (“D.D.R.”). Clearly, a number of young people associated with the fighting forces never carried any weapons whatsoever because they were providing other services the armed forces required. In Sierra Leone, this included most children, and in particular girls who were excluded from demobilization programs and received no support because they did not fit the definition of “child soldiers.”

We should also consider whether it is reasonable to start from the premise that peacekeeping has been completed. Most conflicts never see a

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formal peacekeeping force deployed. Children are associated with fighting forces in almost forty countries around the world, and peacekeeping forces are deployed only in a very small minority of those. Contemplating reintegration after successful peacekeeping also assumes that the specific situation of children in the armed forces is referred to in the formal peace agreements or in a mandate for the D.D.R. operations. However, until just a few years ago, child soldiers had neither been mentioned specifically in peace agreements nor in D.D.R. frameworks. Any efforts to reintegrate the child soldiers were ad hoc. No resources were allocated to reintegrate child soldiers, and their time in the armed forces was never recognized.

The latter can have significant consequences for the child soldiers: For example, in Mozambique, children who had served with the Mozambican National Resistance (RENAMO), or the *Mozambique Liberation Front* ("FRE-LIMO") during the 1980s were required, a few years later, to complete the national compulsory army service because, in contrast to adult soldiers, their fighting experience had never been formally recognized. This was devastating for some former child combatants who had not been able to fully integrate after the fighting and then found themselves back in a military culture.

The presumption of a successful peacekeeping also implies that there is a precise point in time when the conflict ends. Who decides when a conflict was successful and when it is over? Today, most conflicts are chronic. In Liberia, peacekeeping is currently being carried out, but children are not waiting until the completion to demobilize, and they should not have to wait until success has been determined in order to be able to distance themselves from a fighting force. Adult soldiers stay with the fighting forces during the peacekeeping process because they want to ensure that the peace will last before they give up weapons. Also, soldiers want to be included in newly formed armies, police, and other state security bodies. Since children cannot be considered for inclusion in these security bodies, there is no practical reason that they should have to wait for a political framework to distance themselves from the fighting groups.

Yesterday, we touched on the need for a regional approach to demobilization. Yet, we who work in this field, repeatedly see that such a formal recognition does not have a practical impact on the ground. I work with Save the Children in Guinea. Over the years, we have worked with children from Sierra Leone and Liberia who were associated with fighting forces in the region. One former child soldier wanted to return to Sierra Leone but could not because he had spontaneously left the armed group. He had found his way into a refugee camp, but he could not access his demobilization card, which is a critical part of the protection under demobilization programs. He was afraid that if he returned to Sierra Leone without the card, he would not be seen as someone who had demobilized in good faith. In discussing regional approaches to demobilization, we must keep in mind that borders are porous, especially during conflict, and we must consider the young people who spontaneously leave armed group to other countries.

A few months ago, I talked to a boy who had been fighting in Liberia and had left to Sierra Leone and then Guinea. He probably crossed into the Côte d'Ivoire, but we are not sure, because borders do not exist in the jungle. He knew that if he wanted to receive any benefits he would have to return to Liberia, and so he did return. However, he intends to continue fighting in the region if he cannot obtain a sufficient benefits package. He knows what his options were to survive. Not recognizing child soldiers who are outside of the country and who choose to leave the forces puts them at a significant risk and causes regional destabilization. Children choose the most reasonable option for their future from those options available to them. As practitioners, we try to increase the number of practical alternatives for these children to choose from because we believe they should have increased options. We hope this will allow them to make better informed and, hopefully, positive choices.

In order to provide comprehensive support for reintegration of children associated with fighting forces, we have to understand why they join the fighting forces in the first place, why they stay, and what their current situation is. Children are abducted, press-ganged, and taken against their will in any number of ways. Usually these children then are forced to commit atrocities against their families and communities—killing family members, killing others in the community, or inflicting serious harm. In most cases, fighting group members use well-developed strategies to sever the children's ties with their families with the intent to make the children feel isolated from their families and communities and included in the fighting group. Further, these children are usually systematically desensitized to violence. In Mozambique, for example, children stated that they first had a gun fired near their ear, behind them, and were then taught how to handle a gun and shoot a target. They were forced to kill, first animals, later people they knew.

There is also "voluntary involvement" or "voluntary recruitment," which is, in fact, rarely truly voluntary. To understand the social dynamics for reintegration and to reduce the likelihood of recruitment, it is important to first understand why children enter armed groups. Even when children leave a fighting force, they may still be drawn to rejoining the group.

Among the factors that cause children to join are the following four: First, children are more likely to be recruited into an armed force if they are near the conflict. Children usually do not go looking for war in order to fight; rather, conflict invades their lives and threatens to destroy their means of protection and support. Their families suffer desperate economic situations that force them to flee and that deprive them of their livelihood. War becomes normal to these children. They are likely to have witnessed violence, and they probably also know people involved in the fighting forces. Conflict can also be an opportunity for young people to prove themselves by providing for and protecting themselves and their families. Young people may feel very powerful and in control in the chaotic environment surrounding them. When they do not feel they can find protection within their communities or their families, they may seek protection in the

armed group. For a child in a conflict area, joining an armed group may be a logical choice for survival; we strive to provide other options.

Second, children who are separated from their parents or other caregivers are at a higher risk of being recruited into armed forces because they lack the support and guidance and have little help in developing their own identity as an individual in their family and within the community. For children who must survive on their own, joining an armed group may seem to be a sensible option.

Third, children who are marginalized socially or economically, such as street kids, refugees, and internally displaced children, are especially vulnerable because they feel disaffected or powerless. Therefore, they are more likely to believe promises that an armed group will provide for their basic needs such as food, shelter, and the protection they need to survive.

Fourth and last, where the conflict is religious, racial, national, or ethnic, children who belong to the targeted minority group are more easily recruited, both within their family and within their community, because they are more eager to seek revenge against their oppressors.

Knowing what factors put children at risk for recruitment into the fighting forces helps us determine which programs might be most effective for protecting children. For example, because we know that being close to the conflict increases a child's risk of being recruited, we establish refugee and displaced camps far away from the front line of the fighting. We set up peer support networks or foster families for children who are separated from their families to reduce the risk of the children entering the fighting forces.

When children are in the fighting forces, they enter a new stage in their development, take on new roles, forge new identities, and experience having a new kind of power they have not experienced before. We must find out what has happened to them in the fighting forces instead of assuming that we know what has happened because we are almost invariably wrong. It is helpful to take a holistic approach to the needs of children including their basic needs, such as for subsistence, health, protection, education, psychosocial support, community negotiation, and acceptance, and to provide not only targeted support to child soldiers but also help other marginalized children and children in general.

Some of the concerns particular to child soldiers are poor nutrition, poor hygiene, physical and sexual abuse, and drug addiction. Often young women have had multiple pregnancies without medical assistance. Children are often given drugs like cocaine, or in Guinea, "brown-brown"—a heroine derivative—to make them feel invincible. Rape and sexual violence become more common in many conflict areas. Sexually transmitted infections, including Human Immunodeficiency Virus ("HIV") infections, rise precipitously during conflict, especially among groups like child soldiers in which individuals engage in high-risk practices. It is important not only to take these health needs into consideration, but also to allow young people to determine what their needs are and to allow them to choose how they want to access support services.

The physical, biological, and social needs of young people are very different from those of adults. The difference does not become apparent until one sits and talks to young people. Protection is important to help children regain a sense of dignity, but we must also focus on strengthening their positive coping skills where we are not able to protect them. Sometimes, very simple solutions can help solve complicated, interwoven problems. For example, in Guinea, a sixteen-year-old girl had escaped from the group Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy ("LURD"), where she had been raped several times. She had made a conscious decision that she no longer wanted to be associated with armed forces and fled to a refugee camp in neighboring Guinea, where, unfortunately, she was raped again. She was in need of protection, food, and a legal identity in the camps, but she could not obtain any of these things without a ration card, and she could not obtain such a ration card without registering as a dependent of an adult. She had to choose between having sex with a man who promised he would include her as a dependent on his ration card in exchange—with no guarantee that he would actually give her food afterwards—or she could go back the jungle and fight with people who had promised her a better life if she returned with them. Luckily, we were able to talk to her and obtain a ration card for her after talking to the UN Refugee Agency, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees ("U.N.H.C.R."), saving her the dilemma of choosing between sexual exploitation and fighting in the jungle. We were able to meet her basic needs and give her the opportunity to consider what her next step should be.

Save the Children often works with security forces, including gendarmes, military soldiers and commanders, and police officers, in camps and in the countryside, educating them on the rights of children, the risks that children face, and teaching them how they can help to keep children safe. Such incentives have significantly decreased threats to children's safety.

The following observations illustrate why education of security forces is integral to successful reintegration efforts. Many demobilized child soldiers, particularly male ones, spend much of their time associating with soldiers at checkpoints because they feel most comfortable in a militarized environment. This is the atmosphere they are used to, so they try to fit in. When child soldiers spend most of their time with soldiers, this leads to very high rates of re-recruitment. Additionally, some soldiers humiliate child soldiers so much that the children are inspired to seek revenge. In Guinea, for example, we were in the process of moving refugees from one camp to another because we were trying to move them further away from frontline fighting. The Guinean security forces pulled men and boys out of the ranks and stripsearched them, in broad view of everyone else present, searching for tattoos that would identify the refugees as rebel fighters. Refugees bearing rebel tattoos or markings were jailed. The process was very embarrassing to the men and boys and created a desire on the part of the searched to seek revenge. When we are able to monitor such situations,

give the necessary training to the security forces that come in contact with child soldiers, and ensure that these children do not spend most of their time associating with military and other security personnel, we are able to effect significant positive changes.

Children affected by war need basic security and the means to meet their basic needs far more than psychological counseling and psychiatric care. This is because psychological counseling and psychiatric care are not helpful for most child soldiers; they will recover on their own, though the healing process may take a long time. Our job is to determine their usual ways of coping with extreme stresses and to support and strengthen any positive coping mechanisms. Children tend to process traumatic events in many short bouts spread out over a long period of time rather than dwelling on issues without interruption. Therefore, normal activities like clubs, school, sports and play are important, not just because they allow for socialization, but also because they give children the respite they need from processing the negative experiences they had during their association with the armed forces and the effects thereof.

It is a very important element to help families prepare and help communities prepare to accept children back, even when it is spontaneously. In Liberia in September, I was meeting with families in one village who had refused to allow their children, who were associated with armed forces, to return to live with them because they had heard that there would soon be peace and they wanted to leave. When the three boys returned to their village from the conflict, they were rejected and sent away. Luckily, these boys found some of our colleagues, explained the situation to them, and requested help. Instead of immediately taking them to a center or care facility, we first went back to the community where the boys were from, because we had worked there for a number of years and some of the citizens knew and trusted us. We discovered that the citizens of the community were scared, not only because they had seen what these children had done when they were taken away several years ago, but also because they did not know how to support them and were concerned about their own lack of capacity to deal with this extremely difficult situation. We worked with the children to help them understand what steps would be taken as well as with the community to help them understand what kinds of reactions the boys might exhibit and how they could cope with that. After taking those measures, the boys began to alternate between going back to their town for a short while and then returning to where they were staying. In such situations, young people slowly return to their homes and renew their ties to the community where they originally lived.

The last element I would like to propose as an element in a holistic reintegration effort is education. We know it is by far one of the most effective reintegration tools. Many of the children join armed groups because they have no alternative means of securing a livelihood. Children often prefer to engage in positive activities when enabled to do so. A number of these children have what has been termed "terminal thinking," meaning that they have been in their situation for so long that they cannot

imagine living differently. If one asks them what they will do next year, they cannot answer because they simply cannot conceptualize it. It is important to help these children by giving them examples of what goals they might choose to pursue.

Education, however, does not necessarily mean school. Many children may not want to go back to school because they do not perceive it as appropriate to their age. There are a number of alternative educational activities, such as teaching basic reading, writing, and math, that can be integrated into vocational training or skills training. When young women are attending such training with children, day care for the children should be part of the program. In short, aid workers must adapt themselves to the needs of the young people they are trying to assist because these young people know what they need and will explain exactly what that is when asked.

One of the challenges with setting up skills training programs is that too often, aid workers are outsiders, yet assume that they know what is necessary and assume that skills training is busy work. It is very easy to set up carpentry, shoe making, soap making, tie dying, and handicraft training programs, but it is important to keep in mind that while these skills are often in demand prior to the inception of the training program, the market for those skills can also become saturated very quickly. In Guinea, for example, child soldiers stated that the main skill they needed to learn in order to make a living was to speak French, the official language in Guinea, which they did not because they came from Liberia and Sierra Leone. Not being able to speak French made it very difficult for these young people to find employment. In addition, they wanted to acquire business skills, such as budgeting, setting up filing systems, inventory record-keeping, and other basic skills which are easily transferred to a broad variety of businesses and allow them to remain flexible as to where they work.

After having discussed six elements necessary to a holistic reintegration program, I would like to briefly discuss child soldiers' assets and resources, a topic that is frequently ignored. It is important to remember that child soldiers that we deal with are survivors—they have developed strengths and capabilities to cope with extreme situations, leadership skills, communication skills, strategic thinking, and many other skills that are useful in non-conflict life. The majority of child soldiers see themselves as survivors, as strong and powerful, not as victims. The challenge is to channel these abilities in a positive direction, and peer support groups, youth clubs, adult mentoring, and youth-led activities have been very effective in this regard.

Finally, as I had mentioned briefly earlier, it is important to balance the targeted support for child soldiers with support of all children afflicted by the conflict even though they may not have been associated with armed forces. Two-tenths of a percent, less than one percent, of all children in the world is associated with fighting forces. Even in Liberia, where one third to one half of the total armed forces are estimated to be under the age of eighteen, that still represents only two percent of the entire youth popula-

tion. Much of the funding available to help children affected by conflicts is focused on child soldiers, but I argue that more should be invested in addressing broader children's issues, from education and the provision of basic services, to family unity and reunification. Such programs can prevent recruitment and re-recruitment, and can ensure social reintegration and long-term recovery. Unfortunately, these programs are severely underfunded. For example, the UN has a mechanism called the Consolidated Appeals Process, by which all the UN agencies gather their assessed needs and programs that they would like to propose for an emergency situation to which they're going to respond. These Consolidated Appeals are notoriously underfunded. They've been funded globally at about seventy percent of need, but children's programs have only been funded at forty percent of need. Thus, there is both absolute under-funding of the process as well as relative under-funding of children's programs' needs assessments. More funding is devoted to projects aiming at developing large-scale infrastructure, than to goals like education for children. This undermines the long-term recovery of an entire country and an entire population, not just the recovery of child soldiers.