

Conflict Prevention and Resolution Forum
Reintegration and Rehabilitation of Child Soldiers: Working to heal the Children of War
April 10, 2007

No one really knows how many children are forced to act as child soldiers in armed conflicts around the world. Some experts estimate 300,000, others 500,000. Anyone can imagine, however, how traumatic and debilitating this experience is for the boy or girl forced to carry arms, and to kill. This month's Conflict Prevention and Resolution Forum (CPRF) focused on the experience of these children as a way of deepening our insight into what can and is being done to heal and rehabilitate former child soldiers, and reconcile and reintegrate them into their communities. Forum participants explored a range of questions and issues, including: What are the principal traumas suffered by child soldiers? Is the trauma different for girls? What are the most promising approaches for healing and reconciliation? What cultural resources are needed? How do reintegration strategies try to reduce the risks to former child soldiers in communities filled with grief and rage? And what are some of the main lessons learned thus far from work being done in the field. The forum panelist included Betty Bigombe, Senior Scholar at the United States Institute of Peace, Michael Wessells, Professor at Columbia University and Randolph-Macon University as well as Senior Advisor at the Christian Children's Fund, and Patrick White, International Relations Officer at the United States Department of Labor. Randolph Carter, Program Manager of the Children and Youth program at Search for Common Ground, facilitated the forum.

Betty Bigombe opened the discussion by recounting many of the reoccurring themes, which she has continued to observe through her work with child soldiers in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Uganda. The first and most important being that these children – whether it be the 300,000 thousand children that UNICEF has determined, or 500,000 children, a number other non-governmental agencies suspect – do not become soldiers by choice. Ms. Bigombe stated that there are numerous reasons and several different scenarios that force children to become combatants, but none of these is because a child chooses to pick up a gun and kill. Most often, life in areas where there is armed combat is very bad; there is usually a stark degree of abject poverty and very little opportunity to make a living, let alone feed one's family. Ms. Bigombe pointed out that when children are hungry and when there is little hope for a future (or even a next meal) they are incredibly susceptible to coercion on the part of militia and they are easy targets for abduction. There are also many hundreds of cases where children are forced to kill a member of their own community or even their own family so as to decimate any sense of home or alliance with their previous life.

Ms. Bigombe explained that these children begin to undergo a transformation – moving from one identity to another. Before their abduction, children identify with their families, tribes, clans and communities. Once a child is forced to become a fighter, a sex slave (or bush wife), a porter and/or a killer, they must make a transition into another reality; they must form a new identity, an identity that enables them to survive in the bush with their captors. The end result of this transition, as illuminated by Ms. Bigombe, is that those who forced the children into servitude become the only known safety – that is,

the children are forced to turn their backs on what was, except their new role, and rely on their abductors for their lives. Ms. Bigombe learned from the many interviews she conducted with ex child soldiers that in addition to being forced to perform atrocities (often it was recounted to her that one either kills or is killed) child soldiers will try and please their commanders by doing a “good job”; this often means robbing, beating and killing others so as to satisfy those who are “taking care” of them and their daily needs. Many child soldiers find that they are rewarded for such displays of loyalty by being made commander themselves – this can mean recognition from superiors and more authority resulting in a steady supply of necessities such as food.

Another set of disturbing themes revealed by Ms. Bigombe is centered in the reality that these child soldiers face once they have been disarmed, demobilized and “reintegrated”. Many children who are reintegrated back into their communities face extreme stigmatization and are the objects of their community’s anger and even fear. It is often reported that when ex child soldiers go back to school that teachers do not know how to deal with them as they can tend to exhibit strange and even violent behavior as a result of the trauma they have experienced. Ms. Bigombe explained that the drop out rate from school for ex child combatant is very high. It is also the case that when these children enter into the work force they are often discriminated against, e.g., if an individual who was abducted and forced into labor and service by a rebel group then tries to become a mechanic or a tailor, people in their community will not patronize their shops or services.

Ms. Bigombe explained that the situation is even worse for the girls that are abducted. They are often forced to be “bush wives” of soldiers, which can lead to pregnancy and sometimes HIV infection as well. Once a girl has been raped in the bush, many societies believe that bad spirits taint them, and in fact girls themselves believe this. Therefore they do not try and go back to school or feel they do not deserve to reintegrate into their former communities.

Finally, Ms. Betty Bigombe gave several suggestions for moving forward, not only with the reintegration and rehabilitation of former child soldiers but also for the prevention of new recruitment or re-recruitment. First and foremost, she stated, there must be total forgiveness given to these children; they must also forgive themselves. Those abducted, forced or coerced into acting as slaves, robbers and killers are not the ones responsible and this must be remembered by all who are engaged in working to end the use of child soldiers. The international community must continue to adhere to the Convention of the Rights of the Child, Amnesty International’s Optional Protocol, the Cape Town Principles, and the Paris Commitments. Ms. Bigombe also called for more extensive training of peacekeeping forces with regards to child soldiers and the protection of all children. Ms Bigombe also clearly called for an international commitment to combat poverty, discourage the sale of light weapons, and a diligence in discouraging war lords and government officials from seeking out ex child soldiers to become mercenaries, body guards and members of alternative militias. One very positive step according to Ms. Bigombe was the arrest of the UPC leader Thomas Lubanga of the

Democratic Republic of the Congo; she believes this sent a strong clear message to other perpetrators.

Patrick White, from the Department of Labor, followed Ms. Bigombe and touched on many of the programs and initiatives that the Department is engaged in to stop child labor and prevent children from being forced into combat. The department, partnering with NGOs like Winnrock International, has twenty-eight projects in sixteen counties. These programs provide education to former child soldiers and other children affected by combat by improving classrooms, conducting teacher training, and improving and updating curricula. The programs also focus on raising awareness of the impact of child labor and the use of child soldiers and work to keep these issues on the national agenda. In addition, the department is committed to combating the recruitment as well as the re-recruitment of children.

Mr. White discussed lessons learned at the department from its involvement with child soldiers and forced child labor. He started by stating that projects meant to combat child labor and forced combat should seek to *not* recreate and reinforce the biases that often bring about conflict in the first place. Projects geared toward the reintegration and economic stability for ex child soldiers should always be linked to the market – that is, projects should not create a surplus of goods or services that will then render them useless. Mr. White also explained that all prevention and reintegration programs and projects must have operational flexibility; the programs and those running them must be ready to change the strategies if they prove ineffective or if the situation changes. Finally, the Department of Labor is dedicated to recognizing that not only child soldiers must be cared for, but that all children in combat areas are subject to great harm and must be protected.

Dr. Michael Wessells was the final panelist to present. He began by explaining that far too often there is focus and dedication on the disarmament and demobilization aspects of traditional DDR, yet not nearly enough on the component of reintegration. In fact, even when agencies and organizations do engage in reintegration it is a process that is one dimensional and very western focused; that is, most processes simply work to “get the children back to the family”, but miss the numerous aspects which too often prevent the children and the families (if the family is still alive and intact) from truly reuniting and healing. This is often caused by the fact that donors give short term funding, enough to get the former child soldiers back to their communities, but true and effective reintegration and rehabilitation is a long term process. Another disturbing fact is that most of the programs focus exclusively on children that have been forced into combat, but like Mr. White pointed out, all children are affected by war, especially girls that are turned into sex slaves and raped – traditional DDR does not address these issues effectively.

According to Dr. Wessells, the component of conflict prevention and resolution is missing from most reintegration processes. Those working in the field must remember that although these children have been forced to adopt new and harmful identities in order to survive in the bush, they are not forever “blood thirsty perpetrators”. In fact, the

evidence shows that children are incredibly resilient and are able to reintegrate into their communities and families, and all are capable of healing. Unfortunately, Dr. Wessells pointed out, most reintegration programs and techniques rely exclusively on a western medical model, which includes the recognition of effects like posttraumatic stress syndrome, but essentially touches only the tip of an enormous iceberg. Dr. Wessells advocates for a much more holistic approach to reintegration and rehabilitation of ex child soldiers, slaves and bush wives, as well as children in wartime. This approach must include the community and encourage community processes. When a child has been forced to act in ways that are unacceptable to his/her community there is a profound community reaction, and there must be a concerted effort on the part of the families and communities to establish the terms for acceptance and rehabilitation of their children.

According to Dr. Wessells, communities have various methods, including community meetings, in which members can voice their pain and also educate each other about the realities of forced abductions and coercions. Traditional methods such as song, drama, proverbs, and stories are all ways that communities have to rehabilitate and heal their children. Communities also rely on restorative justice techniques including community service to reintegrate their youth. Dr. Wessells believes that the efforts made must work to humanize the children who have been made into perpetrators. For example, the process of humanizing these children can happen through community projects that utilize mix teams of children who have been soldiers and those who have not. This cooperation brings about shared outcomes and allows communities to see children giving back to the community even though they were forced to do things that may have severely harmed it at one time.

Like the other panelists, Dr. Wessells agrees that education and livelihood training are both invaluable for the ex child soldier and other children of war. Along with these he believes that trusted mentors from the communities play an important role in re-establishing the children's role and worth. Education, training and guidance from a role model can help children create a new identity, one that incorporates who they have been and what they have experienced. In a sense, these children must develop a new culture – learning the rules and mastering the expectations of their new lives.

Dr. Wessells recounted many of the lessons learned, these include the fact that there must be a separate reintegration process for children; traditional DDR processes will not suffice. Echoing Betty Bigombe, Dr. Wessells insists that the Paris Commitments must be at the forefront and taken seriously. In addition, reintegration methods must take into account the skills children have acquired while serving as soldiers and must build on these skills so as not to demean and undermined the worth of the child. Adding on to what Patrick White said about the need for flexibility of programs, Dr. Wessells stated that funding must also be flexible due to the changing needs of programs. All the panelists agreed that every reintegration program and initiative should include the voices and opinions of those whom the program is working to reintegrate: in other words, ask the children and youth what they need, who they believe they are, and how they think their reintegration process should look. Finally, there is great merit in impact evaluation and ongoing research, which informs practitioners of what is working, what is not, and

what needs more attention. Evaluation can and should include participatory action research, which works to include those who are being affected by the programs.

All three panelists agreed that conflict prevention should be taken very seriously. This includes careful attention to poverty prevention and elimination. As stated by Betty Bigombe, “the fact is that children do not go looking for war”, thus, it is imperative to protect them from the ugly and harmful affects of war. It was also agreed that the desperate situations that cause war and violence, and lead to abductions of children for labor and combat can provide fertile ground for terrorist organization to recruit participants. In order to combat this reality, local NGOs and other organizations must commit to holistic approaches to reintegrating and healing all the children in conflict zones and to recognize that one size does not fit all. Thus, there must be a deep commitment to listening to and for the needs of the group being served and a willingness to be flexible and adapt new and innovative processes in order to best serve these children.