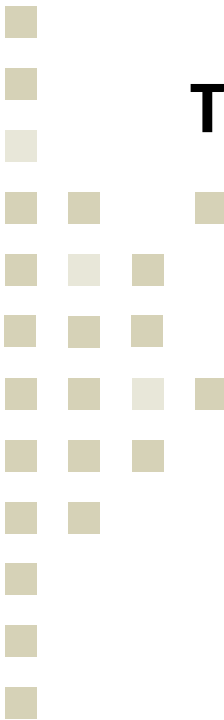




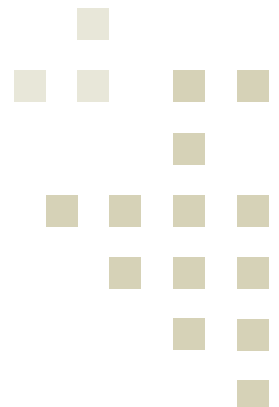
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## **A Childhood Lost? The Challenges of Successful Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration of Child Soldiers: The Case of West Africa**

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# A Childhood Lost?

## The Challenges of Successful Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration of Child Soldiers: The Case of West Africa

**Kirsten Gislesen**

**[Abstract]** Abstract] After a conflict ends, there is a need to disarm, demobilise and reintegrate child soldiers into society. This report examines the challenges of achieving successful disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) of child soldiers, with reference to DDR processes in West Africa, and suggests how such problems can be overcome. The challenges posed by the DDR of child soldiers in West Africa are vast and complex. The disarmament and demobilisation phase involves a dilemma between the need to include as many child soldiers as possible in the DDR process (many whom do not carry weapons), with an often- conflicting need to collect as many weapons as possible. In the reintegration phase of DDR come the challenges of rehabilitating former child soldiers, both physically and psychologically; the difficulties of reuniting child soldiers with their families; and the difficulties of creating viable opportunities for demobilised child soldiers in a post-conflict society.

It is argued that DDR can succeed only if it addresses the needs of all child soldiers, including those who circumvent the official process, child soldiers who demobilise as adults, and girl soldiers. Moreover, DDR has to address the broader regional implications of conflict; it should take local circumstances into consideration; be carried out within the context of wider post-conflict reconstruction and peace-building; and must address the needs of the entire community into which the former child soldier is to be reintegrated.

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## PART I: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

### 1 Chapter 1: Introduction

#### 1.1 Research focus

Thousands of children have been used as soldiers or have served other functions in the fighting forces throughout the conflicts in West Africa. These children often spend many years with the fighting forces – and many have lost their entire childhood as a result.

It is important to disarm, demobilise and reintegrate child soldiers into society after a conflict ends. Failure to do so may lead to the continuation of violence and undermine the wider processes of post-conflict peace-building.

Child soldiers often have serious psychosocial problems which must be addressed if they are to reintegrate successfully into the post-conflict society and contribute positively towards peace and development. If such problems are not dealt with, child ex-combatants may have a destabilising impact on society even many years after a conflict ends. Child ex-combatants require *targeted assistance* in a post-conflict society.

In Sierra Leone, Liberia and Cote d'Ivoire there has been recognition of the need to demobilise and reintegrate child soldiers as a part of the broader peace process. In Sierra Leone and Liberia, separate Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) programmes for child soldiers have been designed and implemented, whereas in Cote d'Ivoire the DDR process is yet to commence. Those who design, manage and implement the DDR of child soldiers face numerous challenges.

This report focuses on these challenges with reference to the DDR programmes in West Africa, and examines how such problems can be overcome. The challenges posed by the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of child soldiers in West Africa are vast and complex. Aspects such as planning and coordination, as well as donor issues, are beyond the scope of this research. This report will argue that disarmament and demobilisation creates a

dilemma: on the one hand, there is the need to include as many child soldiers as possible in the DDR process; on the other, there is the often-conflicting imperative to collect as many weapons as possible. There are also regional implications of the DDR of child soldiers, including cross-border movement if their reintegration fails. The reintegration phase of DDR comprises many aspects, among them: the challenges of rehabilitating former child soldiers, both physically and psychologically; the difficulties of tracing their families and convincing them to accept the children back; and the difficulties of creating viable opportunities for demobilised child soldiers in a post-conflict society.

This report argues that DDR can be successful only if it addresses the needs of those child soldiers who circumvent the official process, the needs of child soldiers who demobilise as adults and the special needs of girl soldiers. Moreover, DDR has to take local circumstances into consideration; it must be carried out within the context of wider post-conflict reconstruction and peace-building, and has to address the needs of the entire community into which the child soldier is to be reintegrated.

It is important to address the DDR of child soldiers, and yet this aspect of post-conflict reconstruction and peace-building has received relatively little attention on the part of the academic community. Most studies of DDR processes have focused solely on adult combatants; thus there seems to be an apparent assumption that it is more important to study and develop DDR programmes for adult combatants than for child soldiers. This report contests this view. Child soldiers have constituted nearly one third of the fighting forces in West Africa, and could become a major source of insecurity if they are not successfully reintegrated into society.

## **1.2 Methodology**

Theoretical discourses on the subject are relatively few. Most of the work in this area has been based on fieldwork research and linked to the programmes of various NGOs. Rachel Brett and Margaret McCallin (2003: 20) emphasise the ‘invisibility’ of child soldiers, which underlines a major problem in researching the subject – the dearth of reliable information about this category of soldiers. Data concerning child soldiers and the DDR of child soldiers are difficult

to come by, and available statistics are based on estimates and consequently often contradictory or unreliable. This report seeks to address this existing knowledge gap.

This report draws on academic literature on DDR processes, West Africa and child soldiers; NGO publications on the topic; and on official documents. Additionally, it relies on interviews with key policy makers and implementers in Sierra Leone, carried out during a research field trip to Freetown in June 2006. Scrutiny of primary and secondary sources has shown that the problems and challenges discussed in this report are widespread enough to have an impact regardless of the exact numbers of children affected by such problems.

The literature on the DDR programme in Cote d'Ivoire is limited, as the DDR process there has only just commenced. In Sierra Leone the DDR process has been concluded, whilst in Liberia the process is still underway. Therefore the range of literature on Sierra Leone is greater. The field trip to Sierra Leone provided me with first-hand insight into the DDR process in the country, as well as access to unpublished documents and assessments, various information brochures, internal discussions drafts, interoffice memoranda, and draft assessment reports. Due to the availability of such extensive material concerning that country, there is an unavoidable bias towards the Sierra Leone DDR process in this report. On the other hand, the Sierra Leonean experiences employed to illustrate the arguments in this report have a bearing on other countries in West Africa as well, as the challenges of the DDR of child soldiers in these countries share many similarities.

### **1.3 Definitions**

#### **Child Soldiers**

Firstly, we need to consider who constitutes a 'child', as the definitions of the terms 'child' and 'childhood' often differ widely between peoples and societies. According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), a child is '*every human being below the age of 18 years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier*' (CRC, 1989, article 1, italics added). The definition used by the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (hereafter the African Charter) is consistent with that of the CRC (African Charter, 1990, article 2).

Whilst the official definition of what constitutes a ‘child’ is fairly straightforward and widely accepted, the definition of a ‘child soldier’ is somewhat more contested. Although the CRC defined a child in general as anyone below the age of 18 years, it left a legal loophole with respect to the minimum recruitment age of children into armed forces. Article 38 of the CRC explicitly lowered the age of a ‘child’ from 18 to 15 with regard to military service – leaving young people between the ages of 15 and 18 vulnerable to recruitment. Increasing consensus that the minimum recruitment age should be higher resulted in provisions in the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, which raised the minimum recruitment age from 15 to 18 years (Optional Protocol, 2001). Like the Optional Protocol, the African Charter states that no child under the age of 18 should be drafted to take part in armed conflicts, thus becoming the first regional treaty to establish 18 as the minimum legal age for all recruitment and participation in warfare. (African Charter, 1990, Article 22)

This report will thus apply the definition in the Optional Protocol, and define a child soldier as any child under the age of 18. As to the role the child must carry out in the fighting forces in order to fall under the definition child ‘soldier’, this report will apply the definition agreed upon in the Cape Town principles,<sup>1</sup> which states that a child soldier is:

Any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers and those accompanying such groups, other than purely as family members. It includes girls recruited for sexual purposes and forced marriage. It does not, therefore, only refer to a child who is carrying or has carried arms.

Thus, for the purpose of this report, a ‘child soldier’ is defined as any person under the age of 18 who is *associated with the fighting forces* in any capacity.<sup>2</sup>

### **Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR)**

Secondly, one needs to understand what is meant by the ‘disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR)’ of combatants. DDR is an integrated process which aims at turning soldiers into citizens.

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<sup>1</sup> An agreement adopted by participants attending a symposium organised by UNICEF in Cape Town in April 1997

<sup>2</sup> The terms ‘child soldier’, ‘children associated with fighting forces’ and ‘child combatant’ will be used interchangeably here.



*Disarmament* is defined as the collection, control and disposal of small arms, ammunition, explosives and light and heavy weapons from combatants (Gleichmann et al., 2004: 15).

*Demobilisation* is defined as the formal disbanding of military formations and the process of releasing combatants from a mobilised state (Berdal, 1996: 39). The purpose of demobilisation is to register, count and monitor the combatants and to prepare them for their discharge with identification documents, while at the same time gathering information necessary for their integration into the community (Gleichmann et al., 2004: 15).

*Reintegration* is a social and economic process with an open time frame, by which ex-combatants acquire civilian status (ibid).



## **2 Background of the West African DDR processes**

### **2.1 The use of child soldiers in West Africa**

Children have been recruited by all fighting forces in the conflicts in West Africa, including government forces. Although the means of their recruitment have differed, child soldiers have served similar roles regardless of what fighting force they were associated with. These roles have included carrying heavy loads, standing guard, acting as messengers, spies or porters, looting, cooking and cleaning. Many children have participated in active combat. In West Africa some of the worst atrocities have been carried out by children. Girls have often been taken as sexual slaves or ‘bush wives’, though boys have also sometimes been forced to provide sexual services.

The exact number of children who have been associated with the fighting forces in Sierra Leone is unknown, but it is estimated that there have been as many as 10,000–15,000 child soldiers in the country. (Interview with Donald Robertshaw, 19 June 2006.) The Civil Defence Forces (CDF) and the Kamajors denied that they ever had children in their ranks; however, almost one third of the children who were demobilised after the conflict in Sierra Leone came from the CDF. Unlike the case of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), which was notorious for abducting children, recruitment of children within the CDF was often instigated by their families or community chiefs. The children themselves were often made to believe that fighting to defend their communities was their ‘civic duty’ (TRC report, para. 269).

In Liberia, it is estimated that 21,000 children have been associated with the fighting forces (Coalition, 2004: 76). Many children who had served in the previous Liberian conflict before 1997 and had been demobilised were re-recruited when violence escalated again in 2003. In Cote d’Ivoire it is estimated that between 3,000 and 8,000 children have been associated with the fighting forces (ibid: 58).

In order to understand the challenges posed by the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of child soldiers in West Africa, we also need to examine why children fight.

Many children have been forcibly abducted, whilst others have joined the fighting forces more or less ‘voluntarily’. Richards and McConnan both argue that in Sierra Leone young people volunteered for their own clear and rational reasons (McConnan, 2000; Richards, 1996). Some wanted to avenge the deaths of friends or relatives, whilst others joined for adventure, thrill-seeking, a sense of belonging and peer pressure, or because they viewed the fighting forces as providing attractive benefits. One young member of the RUF proffered her reasons for joining the group simply; ‘they offered me a choice of shoes and dresses. I never had decent shoes before’ (Richards, 1996: 28).

Machel, however, has dismissed this idea of ‘volunteerism’, arguing that when the only options are survival or poverty and death, the choices of the children can hardly be called a ‘free choice’ (Machel, 2001: 11). The reasons why children ‘volunteer’ for war, then, should be seen as firmly situated within the socio-economic contexts within which wars emerge (Twum-Danso, 2003:2). Abdullah and Muana argue that central to an understanding of the war in Sierra Leone is the role of alienated youth, especially ‘lumpen’ youth, for whom combat appears to be a viable survival alternative in a country with high levels of urban unemployment and economic decline (Abdullah and Muana, 1998: 172). Some girls have joined the fighting forces in order to escape maltreatment by their families, the poor economic situation at home or the threat of sexual violence, as becoming a soldier and taking possession of a weapon has been seen as a way of protecting themselves from the ever-present danger of rape.<sup>3</sup> For any DDR programme to be successful, it must address the root causes of why children ‘voluntarily’ join fighting forces.

## **2.2 Background for DDR programmes for child soldiers**

The framework for DDR in Sierra Leone was based on successive peace agreements and UN Security Council resolutions. Although both the Abidjan (1996) and Conakry (1997) peace agreements contained provisions for DDR, they were not implemented as the hostilities continued. The turning point for the DDR process came in mid-1998 following the restoration of the government of President Kabbah. As part of the DDR process, a National Committee on Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (NCDDR) was established, which noted that ‘...the overall goal of the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration exercise is to

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<sup>3</sup> SC-UK, 2005:7. See also Diane Taylor, ‘I wanted to take revenge’, *The Guardian*, 7 July 2006

enable Sierra Leonean combatants to contribute to the national development and reconciliation' (ES-NCDDR, 2000: 11).

The DDR of children was not specified as a separate process until the signing of the Lomé Peace Accord in 1999, which stated that:

The Government shall accord particular attention to the issue of child soldiers. It shall, accordingly, mobilise resources, both within the country and from the International Community ... to address the special needs of these children in the existing disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration processes. (Lomé Peace Accord: Article XXX)

This was highly significant, as it was the first peace agreement to contain special provisions for the DDR of child soldiers. The UN Security Council established UNAMSIL to assist in implementing the Lomé Peace Agreement and the DDR process (UN S/RES/1270, 1999).

In Liberia, a formal DDR programme was established in 1997, but had limited success. A second DDR programme began in December 2003, and after a four-month delay got underway again in April 2004, under UNMIL leadership.<sup>4</sup>

At the time of writing, the planned DDR process in Cote d'Ivoire had only just commenced.<sup>5</sup> The process has been significantly delayed, as it was meant to begin after the signing of the Linas-Marcoussis Agreement in 2003. In 2004, the UN Security Council agreed to send a peacekeeping force to supervise the disarmament and demobilisation of opposition forces (UN S/RES/1528).

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<sup>4</sup> UNMIL was established by the UN Security Council - UN S/RES/1509 (2003)

<sup>5</sup> The operation to dismantle and disarm militias in the west of the country started on 26 July 2006



## **Part II: Challenges to DDR and responses:**

### **Disarmament and Demobilisation**

#### **3 Disarmament and demobilisation**

Disarmament and demobilisation is the first and normally most straightforward part of the DDR process, but often faces a complex range of challenges. Child soldiers have different experiences during conflict and different post-mobilisation needs than adult combatants, and they therefore require a separate DDR programme. In Sierra Leone, this was recognised from the outset, and the NCDDR subsequently gave UNICEF the responsibility for running the programme as well as raising funds for it.

##### **3.1 Disarmament and eligibility for DDR**

Disarmament of combatants is important because it removes a major tool of violence. Incomplete and partial disarmament can have major destabilising consequences and undermine demobilisation and reintegration efforts, as was seen in Liberia in the 1990s. DDR programmes are frequently conceived as opportunities to disarm factions, at the same time as they represent opportunities for the disarmed themselves. One criterion for eligibility for DDR programmes has often been to surrender a weapon. (See Malan, 2000: 12.) However, this policy also creates several problems.

The policy of ‘one man, one weapon’ (in other words, that each combatant must present a weapon in order to be eligible for DDR) as the sole eligibility criterion for DDR led some combatants to construe this to mean a weapons-buy-back programme (Kai-Kai, 2001: 121). Thus, the policy risks creating a business where people distribute and buy new weapons cheaply, and then exchanges them for money at the disarmament site. Equally, it could exacerbate the regional flow of arms if ex-combatants attempt to participate in the DDR programme in the region that offers the best benefits.

The requirement of 'one man, one weapon' has often led to the exclusion of children, especially girls, from such programmes. Girls often did not carry a gun whilst associated with the fighting forces, or their commanders would give their guns to adult non-combatant friends or relatives, in order for them to receive DDR benefits. Policies should therefore be formulated to allow child soldiers to demobilise with or without presenting a weapon. However, these necessary exceptions for child soldiers had the unintended consequence of providing commanders with an opportunity to shift arms from child soldiers to non-combatant elements.

In Sierra Leone and Liberia, this problem was further exacerbated when the idea of group disarmament was introduced to facilitate the inclusion of female combatants and camp followers who did not have access to a gun. The policy of group disarmament meant that the DDR included more than the probable number of combatants. Simultaneously, it left many weapons in circulation, raising serious concerns about the potential for renewed violence. (DPKO, 2003: 25)

Admitting children to the DDR process without requiring them to present a gun was applied in the design of the DDR programmes in Sierra Leone and Liberia, despite potential security implications. It was believed to be the only way to ensure the inclusion of child soldiers in the process. In order to distinguish between child soldiers and children who had been separated from their families or youth who tried to take advantage of DDR benefits, child soldiers had to prove their association with the fighting forces. This included being able to demonstrate knowledge of how to load, cock and fire or dismantle a gun, or providing other forms of evidence of association with the fighting forces (Interview with Caritas Makeni, 22 June 2006; interview with Robertshaw, 19 June 2006).

Girls who had been sexually abused, raped or taken as 'bush wives' by the fighting forces were supposed to be eligible regardless of whether or not they knew how to use a gun. However, girls who had been sexually abused were not likely to declare themselves, in fear of stigmatisation (interview with Edward Juma Abu, CAW, 20 June 2006). Consequently, female child soldiers were often excluded from DDR programmes because they were registered as 'dependants' or 'camp followers' rather than combatants.



### **3.2 Failure of child soldiers to participate in DDR**

Donald Robertshaw, Child Protection Officer at UNICEF, asserts nonetheless that few children were turned away at demobilisation sites because they did not fulfil the eligibility requirements (interview with Robertshaw, 19 June 2006). Rather, the problem appears to have been that many children who would have been eligible for DDR did not come to the demobilisation sites. In Sierra Leone, only 6,845 children went through the DDR process. In Liberia, approximately 10,000 child soldiers have gone through DDR, whereas it is estimated that 21,000 children fought in that country's conflict (Aboagye and Bah, 2004).

The discrepancy between estimated child soldiers and DDR participants was especially notable in the case of girl soldiers. Girls have been associated with all the armed actors in the conflicts in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Cote d'Ivoire (SC-UK, 2005: 7). In fact, girls have constituted a large part of the fighting forces in the conflicts in West Africa; it was estimated that 30% of child soldiers in Sierra Leone and Liberia were girls (Mazurana et al., 2002: 107). However, very few girls go through DDR. In Sierra Leone only 8% of children who went through the DDR process were girls (interview with Robertshaw, 19 June 2006). It is estimated that about 3,000 girls who would have been eligible for the DDR programme did not come forward to be registered (UNICEF, 2005a: 16). Why do child soldiers, especially girl soldiers, not come to the demobilisation sites? In some instances child soldiers misunderstood their eligibility for DDR. Many of them thought that only those over 18, those who presented a gun, or those who had participated in the actual fighting were eligible for DDR. Others misunderstood the definition of a 'child', since many children are considered adults with adult responsibilities before they turn 18, especially girls who have already become mothers.

A significant number of children also appear to have been manipulated and deliberately misinformed by their commanders about eligibility for the DDR process. In Sierra Leone, many commanders feared the mandate of the Special Court for Sierra Leone to indict leaders who recruited and used child soldiers, and thus attempted to prevent the children in their ranks from going through DDR, or convinced them to demobilise as adults (SC-UK, 2005: 9). According to Francis Lahai, Child Protection Officer at the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs (MSWGCA), this was especially common amongst the

Kamarjos, who consistently maintained that they had no children in their ranks, due to fear of prosecution for recruiting children. This resulted in cover-up of the use of child soldiers, and has most likely meant that a large number of children associated with the CDF and the Kamarjos did not come forward for DDR. (Interview with Francis Lahai, MSWGCA, 19 June 2006.)

Furthermore, many commanders have prevented girl soldiers from going through DDR for another set of reasons. Girls often serve a dual purpose for commanders as both fighters and sexual slaves, and the commanders have therefore been more reluctant to release girls than boys to the DDR process. Whilst boy combatants are of little value to commanders in the post-war period, girls can be used as domestic workers, sexual slaves, cooks and 'wives' (Twum-Danso, 2003: ch.3). In many instances, commanders who wanted to retain their 'bush wives' and/or sexual slaves have prevented the girls from going through DDR, as they feared they would otherwise be 'lost' to the DDR process (interview with Ken Sesay, MSWGCA, 16 June 2006). Many of the girls have become pregnant or had children by their commanders, and some of these commanders feared they would lose access to their children if the girls went through DDR. In other instances, commanders would take their legal wives or other family members to DDR and leave their 'bush wives' behind.

Several child soldiers have chosen to self-reintegrate, for a variety of different reasons. Some children managed to escape from the fighting forces during the conflict, and were thus not part of the fighting forces when DDR was initiated. Many of these children, and other child soldiers who left the fighting forces when the conflict ended, did not receive information about their eligibility for DDR, or they chose to remain in their communities and not declare themselves as formerly associated with fighting forces. Some girl soldiers were abandoned by the fighting forces when the conflict wound down prior to the formal DDR process. This has particularly been the case with those less militarily active, those who were pregnant and/or with children and those who had been wounded or disabled (SC-UK, 2005: 9). Save the Children notes that in Cote d'Ivoire, many girls returned directly to their communities on the signing of the Linas-Marcoussis peace accord in 2003 (ibid: 12). Since the conflict in Cote d'Ivoire has not been as protracted as it was in Liberia and Sierra Leone, girls there have been associated with fighting forces for a shorter period of time. This means that they are less likely to bear children to their commanders, and more likely to have been able to self-

demobilise into society unnoticed. Thus it seems probable that the families of these girls will be more willing to welcome them back than has been the case in Liberia and Sierra Leone.

Indeed, in Liberia and Sierra Leone many children have feared rejection by their families and stigmatisation by their communities if they participated in the programme, as it would label them as 'ex-combatants'. These children thus have often preferred to self-reintegrate. This has been especially widespread amongst girl soldiers, who feared that they would be labelled as 'used goods' with no prospects of getting married. (See Mazurana et al. 2002: 115.) Their children, usually conceived as a result of rape, have often been branded as 'rebel children' and have been likely to suffer from stigmatisation and rejection similar to that experienced by their teenage mothers. On the other hand, it sometimes – but not always – appears that the girls' fears of being stigmatised have been unsubstantiated (interview with Abu, 20 June 2006).

According to Save the Children, the failure of girls to participate in the DDR programme has been more a problem in Sierra Leone than it was in Liberia. In Sierra Leone most of the women and girls who benefited from the DDR have been the favoured 'wives' and family members of the commanders, rather than frontline girl fighters. In Liberia, however, girl combatants have gone through DDR. Having received proper training, girls were a particularly strong component of the frontline fighters in the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), and thus have shown up as a higher proportion of the demobilisation in former LURD-controlled areas (SC-UK, 2005: 11). Indeed, more than 2,000 girl soldiers have participated in the DDR process in Liberia, where girls soldiers constituted 9% of those demobilised, compared to 2% in Sierra Leone (Aboagye & Bah, 2004: 7).

In addition to the almost 7,000 child soldiers who went through DDR, 5,000 children who did not know how to use a gun went through screening at demobilisation camps, and were labelled 'separated children' rather than 'child soldiers' (interview with Robertshaw, 19 June 2006). These 'separated children' were then reunited with their immediate or extended families, without receiving the benefits accorded to demobilised child soldiers. It seems likely that many camp followers have been reintegrated into society as 'separated children' rather than child soldiers.

### **3.3 Age verification and DDR benefits**

The benefits of the DDR programmes were adapted to the differing needs of adult and child combatants. Adult combatants were provided with transport to their desired location for reintegration and a Transitional Safety Net Allowance (TSA) of \$600, paid in instalments, to ease the transition to civilian life. In Liberia, the NCDDRR decided to include child ex-combatants in its cash allowance programme. In Sierra Leone, child ex-combatants received interim care and basic services up to three months, psychosocial counselling, personal supplies, family tracing and reunification support, rather than cash benefits. Thereafter, assistance consisted of placement in schools, training opportunities and benefits from community reintegration programmes. It was felt that cash benefits for children would be likely to end up in the pockets of their commanders, or would create a perception that using children as combatants could result in a 'reward' (interview with Caritas Makeni, 22 June 2006; UNICEF, 2005a: 11).

The allocation of cash benefits to adults but not to children gave rise to a new set of challenges. Many child ex-combatants were tempted by the instant cash benefits rather than longer-term skills training and education benefits, and consequently posed as adult combatants at demobilisation camps. This problem has been further compounded by commanders demanding that child soldiers lie about their age because they feared prosecution for having recruited and used child soldiers.

Thus, there has been a need for extensive age screening of soldiers at demobilisation camps. Efforts to assess child soldiers' age have been greatly impeded by the lack of birth certificates and national identity cards, since the absence of birth registration is a major problem in West Africa. Age verification had to be carried out by other means, such as dental examinations, physical check-ups, and interviews to establish psychological maturity and verify the child's alleged place and date of birth. Nonetheless, it is often difficult to estimate age by psychological maturity and physical and dental factors, as there can be large individual variations. Moreover, some children were so young at the time of their abduction that they could not recall how old they were. Consequently, many child soldiers are believed to have participated in the adult rather than the child DDR programmes.

The process of demobilisation itself has further exacerbated this problem. In Sierra Leone, it was UNAMSIL who carried out the initial screening, but they lacked the competence to carry out age verification successfully (interview with Caritas Makeni, 22 June 2006). Moreover, some military observers adopted an attitude of military solidarity with the children, and believed that children should receive the same ‘reward’ as adults for handing in their guns (UNICEF, 2005a: 12; interview with Caritas Makeni, 22 June 2006). UNAMSIL observers failed to understand the long-term implications for child soldiers, who as a result did not receive psychosocial support, educational or vocational training, and family tracing and reunification. The sad fact is that UNAMSIL advisers did not do the children any favours by deliberately classifying them as adults. Better training of military observers and personnel is essential, and information about the differences in adult and child DDR and the benefits for either group is crucial. Peacekeeping missions should have a child protection adviser present at all demobilisation sites, and during the screening process the mission should work together with the child protection agencies responsible for the children’s reintegration. This was lacking in both Sierra Leone and Liberia.

### **3.4 Interim Care Centres (ICCs)**

After child soldiers had been demobilised, they were moved to the Interim Care Centre (ICC) closest to their area of reintegration. Here they were provided with health-care services, psychosocial counselling, educational and recreational activities, while family tracing and reunification was carried out. The services provided at the ICCs have been designed to support rapid disarmament and demobilisation and aimed to separate the children from their adult commanders, limit the children’s stay in the demobilisation centres, terminate the child’s identification with his or her fighting group, and initiate the reintegration process as quickly as possible. (ES-NCDDR, 2000:16.)

Interim Care Centres had been established in Sierra Leone in 1993 in response to the demobilisation of children from the Sierra Leone Army (SLA). In Sierra Leone, child soldiers associated with the CDF or the Kamarjos frequently did not go to ICCs, but were reunified more or less immediately with their families, as many had fought side by side with their relatives or close to their communities. In other cases, the move to the ICCs was meant to separate the child soldiers from their commanders in order to sever their ties as fighters and to

avoid further abuse, and to provide reorientation towards a civilian identity. This was seen as an important component in the DDR process. (Malan, 2000: 12) By the end of the DDR programme in 2002, a total of 5,038 demobilised child combatants had been provided with care in an ICC.<sup>6</sup>

The ICCs have suffered from various shortcomings. Although the ICCs were meant to separate adults and children, in practice this was generally not the case. The proximity between the adult and the child camps has been a major problem, and security at the ICCs has often been poor. This has undermined the efforts to separate children from the influence of their fighting groups, leaving them vulnerable to abuse, continued violence and re-recruitment. Girls have been particularly likely to be subject to visits from their former commanders and ‘bush husbands’, causing many to disappear from the centres. (Final evaluation, 2004: 47; interview with Caritas Makeni, 22 June 2006.)

### **3.5 Regional considerations**

The conflicts in West Africa all had strong regional dimensions. This has included cross-border movements of arms and combatants, further exacerbating existing tensions in the region and prolonging existing conflicts. Often combatants have demobilised in one country, only to reappear as combatants in a neighbouring conflict.

There is a danger that a flawed DDR process could release former combatants to other conflicts in the region. When fighting escalated in Liberia in 2002 and 2003, some of the child soldiers came from Sierra Leone. They had either failed to go through DDR or had not been properly reintegrated, and were easily re-recruited due to geographical proximity. (Interview with Lahai, 19 June 2006.) Consequently, the successful reintegration of combatants is essential – not only to ensure national stability and security, but also to ensure regional stability.

Another problem has been the cross-border movement of demobilised fighters seeking to benefit from the DDR programme twice. This puts an additional financial and logistic strain on DDR programmes, and could potentially undermine their effectiveness. It is important that

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<sup>6</sup> Of these 4,585 were male and 453 were female; UNICEF, 2005a: 24–25

those designing and implementing DDR programmes coordinate carefully, to avoid a situation where combatants travel to neighbouring countries to exploit the DDR benefits.

Nonetheless, so far the DDR processes in West Africa have been largely national undertakings. This approach has been reinforced by donor policies and NGO implementation, which do not cater for a regional approach to DDR. However, any attempt to successfully disarm, demobilise and reintegrate child soldiers in the region must also address the regional implications. Olonisakin argues that:

Given the direct involvement of Liberians in Cote d'Ivoire, Liberia and Guinea, only a systematic and regional disarmament programme backed by strong peace agreements can provide the basis for regional peace. Simply pushing armed groups back across porous borders each time there is an incursion into a country does not offer a lasting solution. Without such regionalized DDR programmes, the cross-border movement of young fighters without alternative forms of livelihood beyond the use of arms threatens to reverse whatever gains are being made in Sierra Leone and Liberia. (Olonisakin, 2004: 196–197)

The UN Secretary-General has also noted that there can be no regional stability without the successful DDR of combatants, including children, and that cross-border problems cannot be solved at the national level alone, but require a regional approach. (Report of the Secretary-General [...] 12 March 2004).





## **Part III: Challenges to DDR and responses:**

### **Rehabilitation and Reintegration**

The reintegration of former child soldiers is the most complex and most time-consuming part of DDR.<sup>7</sup> And yet, it is only successful reintegration of former ex-combatants that can ensure long-term peace and security. Indeed, as the NCDDR notes:

Socio-economic reintegration of child combatants is the most critical element of the DDR programme. Disarmament and demobilisation of ex-combatants consolidates only short-term security unless followed by socio-economic reintegration of ex-combatants into civilian society to form the basis for long-term peace. (ES-NCDDR, 2000: 11)

The experiences child soldiers have been through will have major consequences for their physical and psychosocial health, and thereby their prospects for successful reintegration. For that reason, the physical and psychosocial rehabilitation of former child soldiers has become a major component in the reintegration programmes in West Africa.

## **4 Physical rehabilitation**

### **4.1 Malnutrition and disease**

In most cases, the physical well-being of child soldiers has been seriously compromised by their experiences with the fighting forces. Many have suffered from inadequate nutrition and health care, and been subject to harsh punishments and training regimes. Malnutrition inhibits natural growth and weakens the children's immune systems, leaving them vulnerable to disease.

Routine health checks and medical treatment have been incorporated in the DDR programmes in the three countries examined here. Medical screening of former child soldiers has revealed the high prevalence of diseases and ailments such as malaria, worm infestation, respiratory tract infections, skin infections, diarrhoea, hepatitis B, non-gonococcal and gonococcal urethritis. The effects of malnutrition and disease have been further compounded by the lack

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<sup>7</sup> The 'R' in DDR often also includes rehabilitation, resettlement, repatriation, and reconciliation

of access to food, clean water and health care, along with generally poor sanitation and lack of shelter (UN A/51/306.Add.1, 1996).

As a result of suffering sexual and physical abuse, girl soldiers have specific physical and psychological post-conflict needs which often differ from those of male combatants. Adolescent girl soldiers frequently suffer from loss of menstruation due to malnutrition and trauma. In a great many cases, girls associated with fighting forces have become pregnant as a result of rape and sexual abuse. They often suffer birth complications, made worse by the widespread practice of female genital mutilation and lack of access to adequate health facilities. Sexual abuse and rape have also led to a high incidence of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV/AIDS. Girls who have been raped or forced into sexual servitude suffer from abdominal pains, cervical tearing, bleeding and infections, which in turn increase the risk of STDs and pelvic inflammatory disease. (Machel, 2001: 56–57) Furthermore, as many infectious diseases can be transmitted to the offspring of the girls during pregnancy, childbirth or breastfeeding, the physical effects of abuse have been passed on to the next generation (Twum-Danso, 2003: ch.3).

## **4.2 Mutilation**

Many child soldiers had been mutilated or suffered from other physical injuries. In Sierra Leone, mutilations have been a common form of abuse inflicted upon child soldiers by fighting forces. For example, the acronyms of the armed factions have been branded or carved on children's bodies, so as to prevent children from escaping. Such marking of child soldiers has posed a major challenge to their post-war reintegration, as the acronym scars serve as a constant reminder to the community that they have belonged to a fighting force. These children have been stigmatised, causing them great long-term shame and fear, and rendering it difficult for them to put the past behind them. As noted in the TRC Report: '...these physical scars hampered reintegration efforts and affected the children psychologically, as it seemed that they had been branded for life' (para. 440). Consequently, a 'scar removal project' was initiated in Sierra Leone as part of the DDR process, using plastic surgery to remove or transform the scars.

### 4.3 Drug addiction and abuse

Another prominent characteristic of the conflicts in West Africa has been the widespread use of drugs by child soldiers. Dependence-inducing substances such as marijuana, cocaine and even gunpowder have often been administered forcefully by commanders through food or through cuts made in their skin. The drugs have been administered to the child soldiers in order to loosen their inhibitions, make them participate in fighting without fear, spur them to commit gross violations of human rights and carry out orders without questioning. To a significant extent, the atrocities committed by child soldiers have been attributed to the influence of these drugs – which in turn means the capacity of children to take responsibility for their acts remains an issue open for debate. (TRC report, paras. 197 and 293.)

Despite the well-documented widespread abuse of dependence-inducing substances, the DDR programmes in Sierra Leone and Liberia have not addressed this aspect sufficiently. None of the programmes examined involved provisions for medical rehabilitation of drug addiction – partly because of the assumption that drug addiction and abuse was a psychosocial problem that could be dealt with in the psychosocial rehabilitation programmes. When interviewed, Ken Sesay, Child Protection Officer at MSWGCA, referred to the hospital for mentally ill and indicated that some child ex-combatants may have ended up there. Indeed, of all the patients admitted to the Kissy Mental Hospital in Freetown during the past ten years, 88% were admitted for drug related problems (TRC report, para. 306). It appears to be a common assumption in Sierra Leone that drug addiction is a mental rather than a physical problem: as one interviewee put it: ‘it is all in the mind’.

It is increasingly clear that the high incidence of drug addiction amongst young Sierra Leoneans has become a major problem for the country. According to the only psychiatrist in Sierra Leone, drug abuse is out of control and has become a medical emergency; many former child soldiers complain of physical symptoms that include malfunction of such vital organs as the brain, heart and central nervous system as a result of drug abuse (TRC report, para. 378). As Bøås and Hatløy point out: ‘...ex-combatants who are dependent on drugs and alcohol may be more resistant to reintegration into society’ (2005: 9). Many former child soldiers who went through DDR have experienced social, physical, psychological and economic problems

as a result of continued drug abuse, and have ended up as street children, resorting to crime in order to finance their drug habit.

## 5 Psychosocial rehabilitation

Child soldiers often become associated with fighting forces at the time in their lives when their identities are being formed, and these are often shaped accordingly. This has led some to argue that child soldiers are incapable of reconciling with a civilian identity and reintegrating into civilian society. A special report published in *Newsweek* in August 1995 titled ‘Boy Soldiers’, states dogmatically:

Even if they survive the rigors of combat, it's often too late to salvage their lives. Unrelenting warfare transforms them into preadolescent sociopaths, fluent in the language of violence but ignorant of the rudiments of living in a civil society.

This sensationalist account ignores that many former child soldiers, despite their experiences, can be rehabilitated if they are provided with targeted psychosocial support. Failure to do so, however, could indeed have profound consequences for both the individual child and for society at large. Traumatized people impede the restoration of ordinary life and jeopardise conflict resolution. (MSF, 2000: 5) Thus, it is essential to deal with the psychosocial needs of child soldiers as part of the DDR process.

The psychosocial consequences will depend on how the child soldier was recruited, his or her status as victim or participant, age at the time of recruitment, the length of time spent with the fighting forces, and whether or not the child soldier volunteered or was forced to fight (Gbla, 2003: 182). Moreover, ‘...the reception or reaction of the family or the community might also affect how an injured combatant copes with a handicap or injury’ (Cohn and Goodwin-Gill, 1994: 137–38). Thus, there is a need to establish the types of trauma suffered by child soldiers.

### 5.1 Trauma

The types of trauma suffered by child soldiers have varied widely. Many have seen family members or close relatives being tortured, mutilated or killed, and their homes and villages destroyed. Some have themselves been victims of abuse, rape, torture and mutilations. In Liberia and Sierra Leone almost all girls associated with the fighting forces have been victims of sexual abuse or rape. A lesser known fact is that some boys have been victim of such abuse

as well. (Interview with Sesay, 16 June 2006; TRC report, para. 364.) The social taboos and stigmas connected to such abuse have further reinforced the trauma experienced by these children. Many of them have been forcibly abducted, their captivity exacerbating the experience of trauma. The sense of trauma is also worsened by the fact that many child soldiers have been administered dependence-inducing substances, further increasing the sense of isolation and oppression many have felt in the captivity of the armed factions. (TRC report, para. 305; Dodge and Raundalen, 1991: 21.) However, it should also be borne in mind that child soldiers have not only been victims of violence – many have been perpetrators. Child soldiers have been traumatised as a result of being forced to kill or mutilate innocent civilians, or to commit atrocities against someone in the family or community – a deliberate strategy used by many rebel groups in the conflicts in West Africa.

The consequences of trauma include feelings of guilt, poor concentration, lack of trust and confidence, persistent nightmares, depression, aggressiveness and violent behaviour. Children who have grown up surrounded by violence, in a culture where they are awarded for being as violent as possible, are likely to develop differently from those spared such violence. Dyregrov et al. note that the experience of trauma, if untreated, may lead to the repetition of violent cycles, as ‘...the propensity of violence is increased in victims of violence’ (2002: 142). Girls who have experienced sexual violence also suffer from shock, shame, and low self-esteem. In many instances, the effects of trauma do not become evident until several months or years later: this is Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), characterised by a re-examining of the traumatic event through intrusive thoughts (Jareg and McCallin, 1993: 14; Gbla, 2003: 180–81). Moreover, those suffering from traumatic stress often have physical complaints, like headache, stomach problems, body pain, dizziness or palpitations (MSF, 2000:14.) These physical ailments result in frequent visits to the health-care facilities, thus exerting further pressure on an already overburdened health system.

## **5.2 Re-establishment of identity**

Many children abducted during the conflicts in West Africa have spent much of their childhood with the fighting forces. A psychosocial consequence of child soldiering has therefore been the loss of opportunity to be a child and enjoy childhood. This onslaught on childhood within the African context has arguably produced a ‘scarred generation’ among

those who would be expected to become the leaders, drivers of economic well-being and the future of the continent (InterAct, 1999).

Not only do many child soldiers lose their childhood, they may also lose their sense of civilian identity. Many of them have been associated with fighting forces throughout the crucial years of their psychological and emotional development. The transition to adulthood becomes extremely difficult when it occurs in the setting of conflict, where the child in transition identifies himself or herself as a fighter. For many child soldiers, the army or armed group will have become their protector and provider, and they in turn will have identified with it. (Brett and McCallin, 1998: 127.) Especially the younger ones, who know of no other identity, may be reluctant to relinquish their identities as soldiers. The transition to a civilian identity has often been particularly hard for CDF or Kamarjos fighters in Sierra Leone: they have traditionally been hunters, so their identification as fighters has had roots in a traditional identity.

Child soldiers have had to work out ways of forging new social identities for themselves in post-conflict Sierra Leone and Liberia. Those who had forged strong identities as fighters often lacked the opportunity to develop other necessary skills. Many child soldiers would resort to violent means of resolving conflict and held norms and values not compatible with civil society. Thus, an important part of the rehabilitation and reintegration process has been to re-establish their civilian identities. Further, child soldiers have needed to be taught to renounce violence and develop skills necessary for civilian life such as decision-making, coping mechanisms and peaceful means of resolving conflict.

Another major challenge is that child soldiers have often assumed adult responsibilities while associated with the fighting forces. For some, this has made the transition to a civilian identity, where they are treated as children, difficult to bear. Children who served as commanders may find it especially difficult to reconcile to a civilian identity in which their former status is no longer recognised. As noted by UNICEF, in West Africa there has been cultural resistance to letting children make decisions about their own lives. Children who have come from wartime commanding positions in the fighting forces will experience it as humiliating to find themselves 'commanded' by 'civilians' in peacetime (UNICEF, 2005a: 22). Many girl soldiers have become mothers during their time with the fighting forces, and have taken on the adult responsibility of looking after and caring for children of their own.

The DDR process has not always recognised their adult responsibilities, and they have been treated as children themselves. Although it obviously is important to help such girls under the provisions of child protection, it is also necessary to incorporate recognition of their adult responsibilities in DDR. Especially the DDR programmes in Liberia and Sierra Leone made little or no provision for the children of girl soldiers. (Interview with Robertshaw, 19 June 2006.)

Furthermore, like their male counterparts, a significant number of girls have participated actively in the conflicts and fought on the front lines. These girls have experienced considerable power and have sometimes participated in abducting or press-ganging other children into armed groups as well as punishing and executing fellow child soldiers. This picture goes against the traditional image of the roles to be played by girls within West African communities, and may adversely affect the reintegration process. Caritas Makeni, a local Catholic NGO in Sierra Leone, found it very difficult to reintegrate such girls, as they were often unwilling to resume traditional gender roles.<sup>8</sup> The ease in which girls have been reintegrated has depended greatly on the status they had enjoyed in the fighting forces.

### **5.3 Response**

The question of how to respond to traumatised child soldiers has posed further challenges. As Dyregrov et al. rightly note, ‘...diagnosing PTSD is almost meaningless in many countries, because individual treatment is not feasible’ (2002: 139). Both Sierra Leone and Liberia have lacked the facilities, resources and trained manpower, especially psychiatrists and trauma healers, to treat traumatised child soldiers (Gbla, 2003: 182). In Sierra Leone, for example, there was only one professionally trained psychiatrist to handle the numerous cases of trauma and post-traumatic stress disorders in the former child soldiers. Moreover, trained counsellors and professionals tend to be situated in the major town or cities, inaccessible to the many child soldiers from rural areas.

In Sierra Leone and Liberia, simple recreational and self-help measures have been adopted, including ways of expression, play, writing, dancing, and other methods that may contribute

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<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, it may not always be desirable for former girl soldiers to resume traditional gender roles, especially in societies where gender equality is lacking.



to the alleviation of distress. Further measures have included individual or family counselling, and training in conflict resolution skills and peace education. Activities such as drama, revival of cultural heritage, and cultural dances have helped in re-establishing children's identities. Reconciliation and peace-building have also been fostered by bringing together various groups in the community. (Interview with David Turner and Francis Reffell, War Child, 20 June 2006.)

#### **5.4 Culturally appropriate intervention**

Western definitions and understanding of distress and trauma, of diagnosis and healing and of childhood differ greatly from those of West African societies. Psychosocial rehabilitation of former child soldiers must take into consideration local approaches, traditional healing mechanisms and socio-cultural, religious and political realities. For example, many people in both Sierra Leone and Liberia, especially in the rural areas where most child soldiers came from, believe that the dead have a role to play in the day-to-day affairs of the living:

People in both countries are influenced in their behaviour by the belief that those who participated in wars, killed, or saw people being killed, are polluted by the spirits of the dead. This is because such people are believed to have displeased and angered the spirits and that if the aggravated spirits are not appeased their wrath will befall both the perpetrators and their communities. This point is very important because unlike modern psychology ... the traditional African post-war trauma healers locate the confused mental state and confusion on both the perpetrators and the community as a whole. It is against this background that the people in both countries strove in varying degrees, to appease the spirits of the dead in order to save both the perpetrators and their communities from the wrath of these spirits, usually through a series of cleansing ceremonies. (Gbla, 2003:187)

Such beliefs and perceptions must be taken into account if the treatment of former child soldiers with post-traumatic stress disorders in Liberia and Sierra is to be successful.

On the other hand, one should not rely entirely on such mechanisms either. Dyregrov et al. rightly point out that this could mean failing to address traditional local taboos such as sexual abuse of girls, and not least that of boys, even when such issues are the main sources of trauma (2002: 138). There is also the danger that the community will expect former child soldiers to become completely 'normal' after undergoing traditional healing ceremonies, thus possibly ignoring the long-term psychosocial needs of the child ex-combatants.

## **5.5 Child soldiers demobilising as adults**

Child soldiers have been given psychosocial support as part of their DDR programme, whereas adult combatants have not received the same kind of targeted long-term psychosocial support. This raises important questions regarding those fighters who were recruited or abducted as children, but had become adults by the time of demobilisation. They have been greatly marginalised in the DDR programmes. Many of them suffered years of abuse or neglect, and went through processes of identity formation while associated with the fighting forces. This in turn means that they lacked many of the life skills necessary for functioning in civil society. As noted, one of the most severe consequences of war on child soldiers is the psychosocial impact of such experiences at the peak of personal development and identity formation.

These young people could have benefited greatly from psychosocial support and family tracing and reunification services. Many needed to learn life skills as well as livelihood skills which would ‘...ensure that they become complete citizens with psychological, intellectual and social skills that allow them to survive in society’ (McIntyre & Thusi, 2003: 75) Indeed, in the absence of psychosocial support for this group of combatants, the psychological consequences of their experiences will influence their personal growth for the rest of their lives. In future DDR programmes, care should be taken to ensure that the experiences of erstwhile child soldiers who demobilise as adults are taken into account. In the words of the UN Secretary-General, ‘...some of the key programmes available to children in the DDR process, particularly psychosocial counselling, family reunification, and educational opportunities, should also be made available to young adults who were recently child soldiers (Report of the Secretary-General [...], 12 March 2004).

## **6 Family Tracing, Reunification and Reintegration (FTRR)**

### **6.1 Importance of family tracing**

A major component in the reintegration programmes in West Africa has been family tracing, reunification and reintegration (FTRR). Family reunification has been considered a precondition for successfully reintegrating former child soldiers into society, and child protection agencies have been convinced that children's best prospects for sustainable care lie with their families (UNICEF, 2005a: 36). According to Dodge and Raundalen:

returning home to families and communities seems to be the main prescription issued in rehabilitation programmes, as there is a belief that re-attachment to families will assist in the rehabilitation and reintegration of a child into civil society. After all, it is believed that the initial separation from family at the inception of violence is at the heart of the 'trauma' suffered by a child soldier. (1991:21)

Furthermore, the importance of reunifying the child soldier with its family is enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child:

...the family, as the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members and particularly children, should be afforded the necessary protection and assistance so that it can fully assume its responsibilities within the community. (CRC Preamble)

The family is considered the best place for the child to receive nurture, care and support, and thus an essential element in children's reintegration. Very often, the best psychosocial support a child can get comes from his or her parents, and family reunification can be essential in the process of re-establishing a sense of normality in lives of child ex-combatants. Consequently, family tracing and reunification activities remain vital when dealing with the psychological healing of child soldiers.

### **6.2 Difficulties of tracing families**

Tracing the families of former child soldiers has posed various challenges. Many former child soldiers in Liberia and Sierra Leone had no recollection of whom their families were or where they came from, especially if they had been abducted at a very young age and had spent many

years with the fighting forces (Novicki, 2000: 10). This problem was further complicated by the fact that many children could no longer speak their native language. They had often been taken to areas far from their place of origin – a common strategy of the RUF in Sierra Leone to further limit children's opportunities to escape to their families and home community. This was less of a problem for child soldiers associated with the CDF and Kamarjos in Sierra Leone, as they had usually fought in their home communities. It is also likely to pose less of a problem in the DDR process in Cote d'Ivoire, where child soldiers have not travelled the distances seen in Liberia and Sierra Leone, and where the conflict has been of shorter duration.

Another major challenge to FTRR has been that, as a result of the conflict, many families have been forced to flee their homes, or they have been killed during the conflict. In other instances, the lack of access to certain parts of the country has made family tracing very difficult, or the areas which child soldiers were to be reintegrated into were still affected by the conflict and deemed too insecure for family reunification, due to the risk of re-recruitment. This is especially a problem with child DDR, as child soldiers more often than adult combatants are demobilised whilst the conflict is still ongoing.

### **6.3 Rejection**

Even when families have been traced, many hurdles remain before successful reunification can be achieved. Often, it has been a major challenge to convince families to accept the return of their children. Many families and communities have rejected former child soldiers on grounds of the atrocities they committed during the war – often atrocities within the local communities. This was employed as a deliberate strategy on the part of rebel groups such as the RUF in Sierra Leone, in order to ensure that the children would not have a family to return to if they escaped, thereby providing a major disincentive for them to do so. Once the war was over and the child soldiers had been demobilised, this also meant that many families did not want them back. "The fact that local communities would not accept the return of ex-combatants was the most difficult aspect of DDR, according to Mohamed Lebbie of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ) (interview with Mohamed Lebbie, 14 June 2006)."

Girls abducted by armed groups and sexually abused during conflict are especially liable to be rejected by their families and communities. The fact that they had been forcibly abducted, sexually abused and raped against their will and often severely traumatised as a result appears to be immaterial. Families have tended to reject their daughters because they had been 'tainted' by their abusers and had thus lost all prospects of marriage. (See Twum-Danso, 2003, ch.3.) Due to the stigmatisation that girls could encounter upon return, the World Rehabilitation Fund (2002) found that reintegrating girl soldiers was an even more massive challenge than reintegrating child soldiers who had committed atrocities against their families and communities. With nowhere to turn, these girls are frequently forced into prostitution.

Due to the widespread poverty in many parts of West Africa, families and communities have often lacked the means to take on more children. This has particularly been the case when a child could not be reunified with the parents, but went to live with extended family. (SC-UK, 2004.) To prevent families from rejecting children on financial grounds, a budget of \$100 per year for a total of three years after demobilisation was to be made available to every family in Sierra Leone to which a demobilised child ex-combatant returned. Half of this sum was earmarked for the costs of educational or skills training, or in support of income-generating activities or small business ventures. The remaining \$50 was paid after 12 months through regional reintegration offices. (ES-NCDDR, 2000: 19.)

Such financial support for families accepting former child soldiers is important, as a failure of children to be reintegrated with their families might undermine the entire DDR process. In many circumstances it would mean that they would be deprived of an opportunity to participate in reintegration programmes, most of which were community-based. Moreover, the rejection of former child soldiers by their families and communities could leave them vulnerable to re-recruitment, or force them to turn to violent crime and/or a life on the streets. This in turn could have a generally destabilising effect on post-conflict society, in addition to the implications for the individuals concerned.

#### **6.4 Challenges of family reunification**

Some child soldiers have been reluctant to go back to their families. The reason for this has often been that they had committed atrocities against their families or in their communities,

and now feared stigmatisation and lack of acceptance upon return. On the other hand, some children had ‘voluntarily’ joined the fighting forces for reasons such as neglect or abuse, and this has also made them reluctant to return.

The willingness of child soldiers to be reunified with their families has depended on various factors. These include: how long the child had been away from the family (children are more likely to seek reunification the shorter the time they have been away); the circumstances around their recruitment (the more involuntary, the more likely they are to return); the role they played during the war (children are often less likely to seek return if they have committed atrocities in their communities); and the closeness of the family member to whom they are to return (more likely to want to return if their parents are still alive).

Girl soldiers have often been more reluctant or entirely unwilling to return to their families, especially in the case of girls who became pregnant and/or gave birth whilst associated with the fighting forces. Some have feared rejection and stigmatisation by their families and communities. The psyche of girl combatants is further assaulted by stigmatisation and taunts (e.g. they are referred to as ‘used goods’ that have lost their ‘taste’). Their children, born as a result of rape, are often branded as ‘children of hate’ or ‘children of bad memories’ and suffer from stigmatisation and rejection similar to that experienced by their teenage mothers (Mazurana et al., 2002:115). In general, however, the main problem has been more that the girls themselves have not wanted to go back because of *fear of stigmatisation*, rather than the families and communities actually rejecting them, although this has also been a challenge (mentioned in interviews with Abu; Sesay).

There have also been other reasons why girls have not wanted to return to their families. According to traditional values and norms, a girl takes on adult responsibilities when she has a child or children of her own. Thus, neither the girl soldier nor the parents would think it appropriate for her to be reunified as a ‘child’ – she ought to establish a home for herself and her children. In other instances, the girl feared that her family did not have the means to care for her and her child, and therefore felt she would be better off on her own. Finally, in some cases, the girl soldiers have chosen to stay with their ‘bush husbands’ or former commanders. Many had children with these ‘bush husbands’, and decided to stay with them – either to establish a family, or because they thought their ‘bush husbands’ would ensure their protection and support them financially. Although some were coerced into remaining, others

had formed strong bonds with their commanders and claimed to be in love with their captors. (Twum-Danso, 2003: ch.3.)

Child soldiers who were reluctant or unwilling to return to their families or communities often gave false information to tracing agents, further complicating the task of reunification and reintegration. The local NGO Children Associated with the War (CAW) reported that they sought to overcome this problem by promoting greater trust between the children and the care-givers. Once the families had been located, they would arrange 'family days' where children could come together with their families prior to reintegration. (Interview with Abu, 20 June 2006.)

The problems of tracing families meant that alternative care structures had to be developed. More than one fourth – 27% – of the former child soldiers who went through ICCs went into alternative care (UNICEF, 2005a: 31). For most of them, alternative care was merely a temporary arrangement while their families were being located and agreed to take them back. However, UNICEF warned of the danger that, once children are placed in alternative care, efforts to trace the families might lessen and children could end up staying too long (ibid). For some former child soldiers, alternative care became a permanent solution, either because their families could not be found or because they did not want their children back (interview with Sesay, 16 June 2006). Another question was how much support –material, financial and social – to invest in alternative care placements. This varied significantly according to which NGO administered the programme. It was necessary to balance the pressing need to recruit foster families with the risk of recruiting foster families interested only in the perceived benefits, rather than those with a genuine commitment to the children. (UNICEF, 2005a: 31.)

## **6.5 Street children**

If family reunification or foster care is not successful, former child soldiers may end up living on the streets. Several interviewees reported that there had been an increase in street children after the conflict in Sierra Leone had ended, although no reliable data exist (interview with Mohamed Kanneh and Bashim Rogers, NACWAC, 21 June 2006). Moreover, many more children might live officially with their families but spend much of their time on the streets, frequently engaging in minor commercial activities and petty crime. (TRC report, para. 409.)

Although it is likely that the majority of today's street children were orphaned or separated during the war, many of them are also former child soldiers who failed to reintegrate into society. The risk of former child soldiers ending up as street children is particularly high if advocacy and sensitisation efforts fail, and the children are rejected by their families or communities. Moreover, as noted above, many former child soldiers had run away from home because of abuse or maltreatment. Especially children living with their extended families often felt mistreated, excluded or taken advantage of. (SC-UK, 2004.)

Many of those who end up on the streets may also have left home in order to seek income-generating opportunities, as the skills training they had been provided with frequently proved unsuited to the economic realities of their home communities. Others have come to the cities in order to obtain narcotics – as discussed in section 4.3 above, the lack of measures to deal with rising drug addiction has been a major weakness of the DDR programmes.

This has not only been a post-conflict problem. Many of the former child soldiers who end up on the streets may well have been street children prior to their association with fighting forces. The very reasons why they become soldiers might be the same reasons that prompted them to run away in the first place. According to Zack-Williams, street children provide a major recruiting ground for rebel forces using child soldiers, because '...youthful combatants with ruptured support systems make loyal fighters with no social responsibilities' (2006: 125).

It can be very difficult to reintegrate this category of former child soldiers successfully. For one thing, locating their families may prove impossible. If the families are found, children might not want to return, simply because the DDR and family reunification programmes fail to address the deeper reasons why they became street children. If a caring family environment is not established for these children, many are likely to return to the streets, where they could end up engaging in criminal activities and thus becoming a source of post-conflict insecurity.

## **6.6 Sensitisation**

In order to facilitate the return of children, and to avoid rejection by families or communities, extensive sensitisation efforts have proven necessary in conjunction with DDR. These sensitisation campaigns have been designed to promote peace and reconciliation education,



and to help to correct family or community prejudices and misconceptions about the former child soldiers. Sensitisation has been carried out through advocacy talks with stakeholders in the community, group discussions and community workshops, and national radio and panel discussions. (Interview with Lahai, 19 June 2006.) In Sierra Leone, a culturally relevant community sensitisation campaign has been developed, making extensive use of electronic media as well as traditional reconciliation mechanisms and structures (ES-NCDDR, 2000: 25).

The sensitisation campaign aimed to get across the message that it was not the children who had planned the war: they had been exploited by adults, often forcefully abducted and drugged. Such sensitisation has helped the local communities to understand that child combatants have suffered human rights abuses, and that they should not be held responsible for the atrocities they committed under the control of others. Accepting the return of the children and helping them develop a civilian identity portrayed as a way to promote and ensure peace. It has also been made clear that rejecting them could lead to the continuation of conflict. Since most people in Sierra Leone want peace, this has proved to be a successful strategy. (Interview with Caritas Makeni, 22 June 2006.)

Attitudes towards reunification have changed considerably after the war ended (noted in interviews with Lahai and with Lebbie; see also UNICEF, 2005a:7). While the end of the war removed the fear and suspicion many families and communities held against former child soldiers, it is also likely that the sensitisation campaigns have contributed significantly towards greater acceptance. In Sierra Leone most families and communities eventually agreed to the return of former child soldiers, but only after the comprehensive sensitisation and advocacy campaign had been carried out, and in many circumstances only on the condition that children would undergo local traditional cleansing or purification ceremonies and also attend community reintegration programmes. Most children who had been placed in ICCs were also eventually reunified with their families.

## **6.7 Reconciliation versus retribution**

Traditional healing and reconciliation mechanisms have been used to aid the reintegration of child soldiers in both Liberia and Sierra Leone. This has involved incorporating traditional

values and aspects of local belief systems or religious rituals held to rid the former child soldiers of evil, and sacrifice rituals to appease the ancestors. Such measures have been implemented by traditional rulers, such as community chiefs or local elders, as part of the reintegration component of the child soldier DDR programme. These traditional cleansing ceremonies have greatly facilitated the acceptance and reintegration of child soldiers, and have helped to alleviate ex-combatants' fears of acts of revenge.

In addition to the traditional reconciliation mechanisms, a National Truth and Reconciliation Commission and a Special Court were also established in Sierra Leone, intended to achieve reconciliation by establishing a historical record of the truth. The rationale was that establishing the truth would aid in re-establishing trust amongst people, which in turn would facilitate reconciliation. This national reconciliation process greatly aided DDR in Sierra Leone by promoting the idea of forgiveness for the atrocities committed by children.

The Special Court for Sierra Leone was established by the UN Security Council in 2000 as a war crimes tribunal (UN S/RES/1315, 2000). This led to fears amongst many former child combatants that the Court would become a mechanism of retribution for the atrocities committed by many of them. However, the Statutes of the Special Court specify that children will not be punished or imprisoned for crimes committed before the age of 18, although they may be held accountable and sentenced to undergo rehabilitation or other similar programmes. Moreover, the Court has no jurisdiction over any person who was under the age of 15 at the time 'of alleged commission of the crime' (Art. 7). Cohn notes that the decision not to imprison child soldiers charged with having committed atrocities is important, because '...a process of juvenile accountability without punitive prison sentences can help to provide some rehabilitation for the victims of human rights abuses, and encourage communities to reintegrate the children who victimised them' (Cohn, 2001: 14).

Amnesty from prosecution and/or protection from retribution for acts committed during hostilities is a need felt by many if not all children being demobilised (Malan, 2000: 10). UNICEF advocates that '...peace accords should make provisions that provide amnesty for children recruited to fighting forces, regardless of acts they have committed. Those who recruit and use children for military purposes should be held responsible' (2005a: 4). In Sierra Leone, this was largely the case when the UN Security Council established that the Court should try only those who bear 'the greatest responsibility' (UN S/RES/1315, 2000). Child

soldiers are unlikely to have held ‘the greatest responsibility’ and are consequently unlikely to face trial. This is significant, as abuses perpetrated by child soldiers require rehabilitative responses, as opposed to retributive measures, in order to aid their reintegration (Cohn and Goodwin-Gill, 1994: 137). By treating the recruitment and use of child soldiers as a war crime and prosecuting those responsible, while not sentencing child soldiers who committed atrocities, the Court has indirectly labelled child soldiers as victims of the war, rather than perpetrators.



## **7 Community-based reintegration**

### **7.1 Building local capacity & existing support structures**

The communities that receive former child soldiers have often lacked the capacity to welcome and assimilate these children. Individual reintegration programmes should therefore also be matched with community-based reintegration and development programmes which benefit not only the former child soldier, but also the community at large.

Focusing solely on the needs of the child soldiers involves the risk of marginalising or stigmatising them, thereby adversely affecting their chances of successful reintegration. Targeted reinsertion benefits have sometimes been perceived as rewarding the perpetrators of violence rather than as an investment in peace and reconciliation, and have led to increased tensions between host communities and ex-combatants. There needs to be a balance between benefits for child ex-combatants and benefits to the receiving communities, in order to foster reconciliation and reintegration.

In Sierra Leone, the government tried to overcome this challenge through parallel community development programmes. The core elements of the community-based reintegration programme were the provision of opportunities for education or skills training, and the building of local capacities – measures which benefited the entire community. This meant that child soldiers sensed that they were able to bring something back to the family and community other than shame and fear of alienation.

Community-based reintegration programmes have also helped to create and rebuild local capacity, existing support structures and national institutions that are vital to ensure the long-term reintegration of child soldiers. As Berdal (1996: 75) points out, once international commitment has been scaled down or withdrawn altogether, these local capacities and national institutions can mitigate conflicts and grievances without the risk of renewed violence. As part of the DDR process in Sierra Leone, Child Welfare Committees (CWCs) and Children's Councils have been set up. CWCs have sought to monitor and address child protection issues, and involved teachers, police officers, local chiefs, and representatives from youth organisations. The Children's Councils were set up as a place where children could

come together and discuss their problems and the challenges facing them, and where they could learn about their rights. Both these structures have supported the child ex-combatants in their communities by helping to incorporate them into the local society rather than being set apart. (UNICEF, 2005a: 36–37.) The building of local capacities is also essential to ensure that child ex-combatants receive sufficient follow-up after their initial reintegration. Family reunification alone is not enough to ensure the successful reintegration of child soldiers, which is a long-term process.

## **7.2 Education**

A major component of the child DDR programmes has been to provide demobilised child soldiers with access to education. Most child soldiers had received little or no education throughout their association with fighting forces, and thus would be placed in classes with younger children upon reintegration. Many felt ashamed to start in classes with children much younger than themselves and feared they would be stigmatised as a result. In order to enable demobilised child soldiers to enrol in school and yet prevent such stigmatisation, a Community Rapid Education Programme (CREP) was introduced in Sierra Leone for children who had not received education during the war. The programme involved a special version of the national primary school curriculum to accelerate the learning process, compressing the six-year curriculum into three years. CREP was intended to enable the target group of children aged 10 to 14 to advance more quickly towards educational levels consistent with their ages, so children of 10 years and above were given priority in the programme (mentioned in interview with Robertshaw, 19 June 2006). An important aspect of the CREP has been that it was also open for other groups of war-affected children, such as displaced children, since many of these children had had no opportunity to attend school during the war.

The lack of formal education amongst former child soldiers was not only a reflection of their wartime experiences – many had never gone to school before. Prior to the war, illiteracy was high in Sierra Leone and many children had no access to primary education. In 1990, only 12% of the girls and 22% of the boys of school age were enrolled in schools (TRC report, para. 26). Formal education was therefore an attractive benefit for demobilised child soldiers, especially the younger ones, many of whom expressed the desire to go to school as the most attractive outcome of the DDR programme (interview with Robertshaw, 19 June 2006; TRC

report, para. 457). During the war, many child soldiers, especially those associated with the RUF, had been told they were fighting for the right to education.

The fact that school attendance had been very low prior to the war also meant that educational infrastructure was weak or lacking in many parts of Sierra Leone, a problem further exacerbated by wartime destruction. In Sierra Leone, the RUF targeted property as well as civilians, and burnt many schools and colleges. (Twum-Danso, 2003, part 2.) Consequently, there has been the need to rehabilitate the educational infrastructure from the battering it suffered during the war. The lack of qualified teachers has posed an additional challenge to the post-war educational system. Teacher distribution was very uneven; many teachers had left the country during the war, and the remaining ones were often untrained and unqualified, and living mainly in or near urban areas. (TRC report, paragraph 442.)

Another obstacle has been that teachers and parents often objected to having former child soldiers enrol in their schools, as they feared a disruptive effect on other children. Moreover, DDR programmes in West Africa in the 1990s had supported demobilised children's access to schools by paying their school fees, uniforms and materials. This had created significant resentment amongst other children, who felt that child ex-combatants were being rewarded for their role in the war, and gave the impression that it was beneficial to become a child soldier.

In the later stages of the Sierra Leone DDR programme, policy-makers attempted to overcome this problem by designing a programme which enabled child soldiers to return to school, but in a manner beneficial to the entire community. The Community Education Investment Programme (CEIP) was intended to facilitate child soldier reintegration while minimising stigmatisation for the ex-combatant children by assisting the communities as a whole. The CEIP programme covered the school fees for demobilised child soldiers and provided a standard package of material assistance in support of education efforts to schools that accepted demobilised child soldiers. This created a major incentive for schools and communities to accept such children, and it gave to former child soldiers the feeling that they were bringing something positive back to their families and communities. Eventually the CEIP was also expanded to include 10% other groups of children, which further helped to prevent resentment and stigmatisation of child soldiers. As noted in UNICEF's report on lesson learnt: 'a strategy that links demobilised children to education and builds the capacity of schools in the country is effective for both increasing the institutional capacity of education

in a post-conflict country and reducing the stigma attached to former child combatants' (UNICEF, 2005a: 39).

### **7.3 Skills training**

Many former child soldiers have either been too impatient to go through formal education, as they wanted a more immediate source of income, or they have been too old to enrol in the primary education programmes. However, most child soldiers have had few transferable skills following demobilisation, as the skills gained from their time with the fighting forces have little value in post-conflict society. As a result, they have been unable to find employment, and this has often constituted a major barrier to their post-war reintegration. Viable economic opportunities for ex-combatants are a key to their successful reintegration, and consequently to long-term stability in the post-conflict society. Without a source of income or employment, ex-combatants are liable to return to fighting forces or to engage in violent crime.

Skills training programmes have been developed as an alternative DDR benefit to former child soldiers. In Sierra Leone, the Training and Employment Programme (TEP) developed for child ex-combatants aged 15 and above had provided skills training opportunities for 2,658 former child soldiers by the time the programme came to an end in 2003 (TRC report, para. 465). The TEP involved a nine-month skills training programme supplemented with the payment of an allowance to every participant. Upon completion, each trainee was supplied with a start-up kit to facilitate his or her reintegration into society. Besides the TEP programme, many donor agencies and NGOs have also been involved in providing skills training for former child soldiers, either by running programmes of their own or by serving as implementing partners for projects led by NCDDR and UNICEF. However, child protection agencies have had little technical experience in delivering practical training or reading the market to assess how sustainable a particular skill would be (UNICEF, 2005: 38–39). Skills training and job-creation programmes could benefit from closer co-ordination with the adult component of DDR, in order to maximise the expertise and effectiveness of such programmes.

The programmes in Sierra Leone and Liberia had several major weaknesses. The training was too short to adequately teach the ex-combatant a transferable skill. Most donors assumed that



6 or 9 months would be enough for learning a new skill – and this proved to be a highly flawed conception. Many children and youth who had completed skills training as part of DDR have found themselves unable to compete with others at the end of their programme. Ex-combatants with limited skills training have been unattractive job seekers in competition with the many other young unemployed people in post-war society. Hence, DDR should aim to include apprentice programmes where employers are provided with tools as an incentive for hiring former child soldiers. This would ensure the child soldier of training as well as employment once the skills training has been completed.

The DDR programmes in Sierra Leone and Liberia suffered from a lack of foresight in linking demobilised child soldiers with activities which would be relevant to their community of reintegration. In Sierra Leone, 70% of the total population is dependent on semi-subsistence agriculture, and the majority of child soldiers came from rural areas (Peters, 2006: 128). Nonetheless, very few child ex-combatants have been provided with or have chosen agriculture as a reintegration opportunity, partly because the agricultural package was regarded by ex-combatants to be of lower value than the vocational training package (Final evaluation, 2004: 61). However, many of the skills taught, such as mechanics and driving, would be useful only in an urban environment. Moreover, villages have not been able to provide sustained occupation for 10 carpenters and 10 auto-repair specialists, and some attractive new technologies have not proven sustainable, due to the cost or unavailability of raw materials, or lack of market demand for that particular product. Consequently, many child soldiers could not or did not reintegrate successfully into their societies because of the skills they had learned.



## PART IV

### 8 Conclusion

Failure to disarm, demobilise, rehabilitate and reintegrate child soldiers into society may have destabilising implications and undermine post-conflict peace-building. A key lesson from West African peace processes in the 1990s is that incomplete disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) of combatants jeopardises post-conflict reconstruction and increases the chances of renewed violence. Successful DDR of child soldiers is essential to ensure long-term peace and security – and yet, the topic has received relatively little attention from the academic community.

The successful DDR of child soldiers is not an easy task. Experiences from West Africa have shown that the DDR process poses a wide range of challenges. Such challenges include the difficulties of ensuring that all child soldiers participate; the problems of rehabilitating former child soldiers; the difficulties of tracing their families and convincing them to accept the children back; the difficulties in creating viable opportunities for demobilised child soldiers in a post-conflict society; and the wider regional implications.

With the disarmament and demobilisation phase comes a dilemma – between the need to include as many child soldiers as possible (and thus let them participate in the DDR process without requiring that they present a weapon), and the need to collect as many weapons as possible. A common eligibility requirement in many DDR programmes has been that combatants have to hand in a weapon in order to qualify; however, this often led to the exclusion of children, especially girls, from such programmes. Policies should be formulated to allow child soldiers to demobilise with or without presenting a weapon.

Many child soldiers, especially girls, never come to the demobilisation sites, but choose to self-reintegrate into society. This involves a potential threat to long-term security and stability, as these children may be suffering from pervasive psychosocial and physical problems which will go untreated. Moreover, they might have great difficulties finding viable economic opportunities in post-conflict society, which in turn increases their chances of being re-recruited or turning to violent crime or prostitution. This also highlights the problem of

those combatants who are recruited as children, but had become adults by the time of demobilisation. Having undergone the processes of identity formation while associated with the fighting forces, these young people have unique psychosocial needs which have largely been ignored, and this in turn impedes their reintegration into society. Thus, efforts must be made to increase the participation of girl soldiers in DDR programmes; further, it is crucial that the programmes address the needs of those children who fail to participate and the needs of child soldiers who have become adults by the time of demobilisation.

Disarmament removes the child soldiers' tools for violence, whilst demobilisation releases combatants from a mobilised state. However, this process can succeed only if children are provided with reintegration and rehabilitation assistance to help them through the transition from soldier to civilian. The physical and psychosocial rehabilitation of child soldiers is a long-term process which requires continuous follow-up visits, in order for them to reconcile with a civilian identity and contribute effectively in post-conflict society.

Failure to address the psychosocial impact of conflict on child soldiers could have profound consequences for both the individual child and for society at large. Traumatised people impede the restoration of ordinary life and jeopardise conflict resolution. It is essential that the psychosocial needs of child soldiers be addressed as part of the DDR process. West African countries have suffered from a lack of adequate health infrastructure to tackle this problem. On the other hand, the DDR processes in Sierra Leone and Liberia have shown that, in the absence of professional help, simple recreational and self-help measures can be effective in dealing with trauma. Recreational and cultural activities have not only helped in re-establishing the children's civilian identities, but also fostered reconciliation and peace-building by bringing together various groups in the community. A further point: the psychosocial rehabilitation of former child soldiers should pay heed to local approaches and traditional healing mechanisms, as Western definitions and understandings of distress and trauma, of diagnosis and healing, and of childhood differ greatly from those of West African societies.

Family tracing and reunification is an important component of the DDR programme. The family is considered the best place for the child to receive support and care and re-establish a sense of normalcy. It is, however, often very difficult to trace families and even more so to convince them to accept the return of their children, who may have committed atrocities

against their families and communities during the conflict. Sensitisation campaigns and national reconciliation initiatives greatly aid the process of family reunification, by helping communities to understand that child soldiers are victims as well as perpetrators and that they should not be held accountable for atrocities committed while under the control of others. The traditional healing and reconciliation mechanisms employed to aid the reintegration of child soldiers in both Liberia and Sierra Leone have greatly facilitated the acceptance and reintegration of child soldiers, and helped alleviate ex-combatants' fears of acts of revenge.

Successful reunification does not necessarily ensure successful reintegration. The reintegration of child ex-combatants is a long-term process. Many NGO rehabilitation and reintegration programmes have often been too brief to have an impact, or failed to provide effective follow-up. Many former child soldiers who were labelled 'successfully reintegrated' are believed to have left their homes after the follow-up visits ended – sometimes to seek employment or opportunities in the towns and cities, sometimes ending up as street children or forced into prostitution. Children living on the streets without support structures around them are vulnerable to further abuse and may easily turn to violent crime, thereby becoming a major destabilising factor in a post-conflict environment, a factor that could undermine the peace-building process. DDR should aim to enhance and build upon local capacities and national institutions, as these are best suited to ensure long-term successful reintegration, especially after international NGOs have ended their programmes.

Another major obstacle to the reintegration of former child soldiers is that the benefits they receive may create resentment in the community, further stigmatising them and adversely affecting their chances of successful reintegration. In order to prevent such resentment and alienation, the needs of other groups of marginalised children and youth should also be addressed parallel to and in conjunction with DDR.

The DDR process can be successful only if it is carried out within the broader framework of peace-building and post-conflict development of society at large. Educational programmes and vocational training can be effective only if adapted to local circumstances and the socio-economic realities of the post-conflict society. The DDR of child soldiers will have limited effect if the process is not accompanied by parallel efforts to enhance development and build a peaceful society.

Finally, we should bear in mind that a failed DDR process could pose a threat to regional as well as national security and stability. DDR must also tackle the broader regional aspects of cross-border movements of combatants, re-recruitment and weapons proliferation. Unless these wider-ranging regional implications of conflict are addressed, and without a regional approach to DDR, the process is unlikely to prove successful in the long term.

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(The views of the individuals interviewed do not necessarily represent the official positions of their institutions)

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Agure, Martin, Family Tracing Delegate, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Freetown, 22.06.06

Burelli, Andrea, COOPI, Freetown, 23.06.06

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Conteh, Abu J, Child Protection Officer, Caritas Makeni, Freetown, 22.06.06

Conteh, Rosaline A, Health Coordinator, Caritas Makeni, Freetown, 22.06.06

Fofamah, Michael, Youth Programme Manager, Caritas Makeni, Freetown, 22.06.06

Kanneh, Mohamed S., Deputy Executive Secretary, National Commission for War-affected Children (NaCWAC), Freetown, 21.06.06

Lahai, Francis, Child Protection Officer, MSWGCA, Freetown, 19.06.06

Lebbie, Mohamed, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ); Freetown, 14.06.06

Perez, Virginia, Save the Children, Freetown, 22.06.06

Reffell, Francis, Project Coordinator, War Child Holland, Freetown, 20.06.06

Robertshaw, Donald, Child Protection Officer, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Freetown, 19.06.06

Rogers, Bashim, National Commission for War-affected Children (NaCWAC), Freetown, 21.06.06

Sesay, Ken, Child Protection Officer, Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs (MSWGCA); Freetown, 16.06.06

Sinnah, Joseph S., International Rescue Committee, Freetown, 21.06.06

Staff at Murray Town Amputee and War Wounded Camp (Handicap International rehabilitation centre for amputees); Freetown, 19.06.06

Stoll, Philip, Communication Delegate, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC),  
Freetown, 22.06.06

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