

**Child Soldiers: Expanding the Dialogue**  
**Meeting Report**  
**June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2005**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The presence and involvement of children in armed forces or militia is a concern for all those who live in fragile states and those working to bring stability to them. Despite the best efforts of a wide range of actors to address this problem, significant successes have been hard to come by. There is a feeling, however, that greater progress could be made with broader cooperation and a more unified approach. To that end, on June 7, 2005, Search for Common Ground, Lt. General (Ret) Roméo Dallaire and USAID's Displaced Children and Orphans Fund brought together a range of actors who are either directly involved in or interested in child soldier interventions. The meeting sought to facilitate a broader dialogue on the issue than has so far been achieved and to consider possibilities for collaborative efforts. While the term "child soldiers" is used here, it is with the understanding reflected in the 1997 Cape Town Principles including all children below the age of 18 years associated in any way, voluntarily or involuntarily, with fighting forces and is not limited to those engaged in direct combat roles.

This workshop included children's rights advocates, humanitarian organizations, peace and security civilian organizations, government representatives, and military/ex-military personnel.

The specific objectives of the day were:

- To increase the participants' understanding of one another's positions and interests;
- To come to a shared understanding of the gaps in current interventions; and
- To come to a shared understanding of ways in which continued and expanded dialogue can move towards resolution of the child soldier problem.

Thirty invited participants met for a full day at the Brookings Institution in Washington, DC (see accompanying participants list). The process was facilitated by former ambassador George Moose, and Sandra Melone, Executive Director of Search for Common Ground. Key steps in the day's process included:

- Opening remarks from LGen. Roméo Dallaire (Canadian Senator and Research Fellow, Carr Center for Human Rights Policy), Lloyd Feinberg (USAID/Displaced Children and Orphans Fund), and Michael Shipler (Search for Common Ground);
- Brief introductions and comments by all participants;
- A video, "In Their Own Words," in which former child soldiers from Sierra Leone and Liberia expressed their views about children being involved in conflict and their social reintegration;
- Brief presentations by Jo Becker (Human Rights Watch), Sam Barnes (UNDP/BCPR), and Phil Lancaster;
- Plenary discussion;
- Small group discussions on prevention of the recruitment of child soldiers and disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR); and
- Concluding remarks from Ambassador Moose, LGen Dallaire, Lloyd Feinberg, and Michael Shipler.

A wide range of issues were discussed during the course of the meeting, including:

- Children as a “weapons platform” – used by armed groups for military benefits – and the range of options for neutralizing strategic and tactical advantages of the use of children if analyzed from an instrumental perspective;
- Impunity and the increased attention on establishment of international legal standards;
- Challenges of DDR processes in which governments and international organizations stress a security-oriented agenda, failing to invest in long-term community solutions;
- The importance of creating markets for jobs, as well as opportunities for vocational training and education, in both preventing the recruitment of soldiers and providing for their reintegration;
- The need to better understand the requirements for effective interventions to protect the rights of children in environments where the machinery of a state is either unable or unwilling to meet the obligations entailed by rights claims; and
- The need for better understanding of the political and operational ramifications of a rights-based approach and rights language.

Several significant results emerged from the meeting:

- The participants identified a number of gaps in present program approaches – both in activities aimed at preventing the recruitment of soldiers and in reintegrating those who have served;
- There is an acknowledgement that while previous efforts have led to some success, generally information exchange and collaboration among the disparate actors concerned has been lacking;
- There is a need to identify and begin to implement a new set of approaches to preventing the use of children as soldiers; and
- There is a need to more directly engage actors who have not typically been involved in discussions concerning children associated with fighting forces. In addition to the set of humanitarian and human rights actors usually involved, the inherently political, social and economic nature of the problem requires the involvement of a wider set of actors, including members of local communities of faith, national governments, specialists in microeconomic development, communications experts, national and international military personnel, and youth leaders.

## **POINTS DISCUSSED**

The broad range of issues and concerns raised at the meeting indicated that child soldiering is a problem at the intersection of many of the international community’s challenges in the context of modern day warfare. Children are available for recruitment into armed groups as a result of a complex mix of environmental and contextual causes that include: poverty, political and administrative incapacity, children’s special vulnerabilities, political and ideological objectives, economic inequities and dysfunction, and breakdown of traditional culture and norms. Children appear in battle and in support capacities as part of armed conflicts in which the rules of war are neither respected nor followed.

While the phenomenon of child soldiers is usually embedded in particular political contexts in which government legitimacy is challenged, most interventions to address this issue, both prevention as well as release and reintegration, have been launched using humanitarian and/or human rights frameworks and approaches. This often means that the security dimension of such interventions is not or cannot be addressed. For instance, militaries struggle in finding ways to reduce the instrumental advantages that children might provide to armed groups. Additionally, governmental military forces have an interest in addressing this problem, as they struggle with the very painful process of engaging children in combat.

The discussions were rich and varied and, if captured in full, would merit a much longer report. The following are themes that emerged over the course of the day that will frame the dialogue as it moves forward:

#### Addressing the Underlying Conditions

- There are many underlying material and social conditions in societies where the recruitment of children is prevalent. In addition to the breakdown of security, they include a lack of formal structures to facilitate educational and economic opportunities.
  - There remains significant debate about what would be the most appropriate interventions at community levels to prevent the use of children when the formal structures of state weaken to the point that they become vulnerable to conflict in which children may be recruited. Livelihood, economic growth strategies, education, and promoting spiritual/cultural well being of children should be taken into consideration.

#### Neutralizing Strategic Advantages

- There are a number of military analysts and practitioners who have begun to speak about the use of children as a *doctrine of war* – a set of tools used and shared by armed groups – that has great strategic advantage for militias and state armies. According to this line of reasoning, part of the solution lies in neutralizing the advantages that are drawn by armed groups who use children.
  - Increase the political, operational, and strategic costs of using children so that armed groups would choose not to do so because of associated risks. There are several ways of doing this, including social and political de-legitimization of those groups that use children and indictment of leaders in criminal courts.
  - Make children less accessible or develop means of neutralizing the effectiveness of child soldiers on the battlefield.
  - Create military to military exchanges as a means of persuading commanders to cease using child soldiers.

#### Opportunities to Improve DDR Initiatives

- DDR processes are heavily resourced during the disarmament and demobilization phases but reintegration efforts are typically significantly under-funded, particularly in relation to the challenging social and developmental issues that must be addressed if reintegration is to be effective and future conflict prevented. This results from the various strategic priorities and objectives of the key actors – donors and large peace/security organizations tend to see DDR as an immediate security issue and thus tend to emphasize the

importance of reaching short term objectives without committing themselves to the more difficult long term issue of building the political, social and economic capacity to reintegrate children and adult soldiers and to build and sustain peace.

- There are divergent viewpoints as to the political nature of DDR processes – some believe that all DDR for children should be done entirely separately from adult soldiers.
- Policy differences at the strategic level make it difficult for NGOs and militaries to work together at the tactical and operational levels in the field. These groups need to align their high-level policy objectives in order to cooperate on the ground and accomplish their missions.
- There is an inextricable link between DDR and prevention activities, particularly in volatile regions such as the Mano River Union plus Cote D’Ivoire, which has seen rampant cross-border recruitment and re-recruitment.
- There is a need to work with youth leaders within the ranks and harness the power of their leadership skills as part of both DDR and prevention of recruitment. Furthermore, efforts should be made to bring the policy discussion to the communities that are affected and to encourage broad community participation.
- Access to the nexus of education, training and livelihood opportunities in an environment of adequate security is fundamentally important to successful reintegration, but rarely achieved.

#### Additional Points of Discussion

- Much discussion centered on the agency of the various governmental and social institutions to protect children’s rights. There is a need to work with governments more effectively and to identify key processes through which agency might be stimulated to protect children from recruitment.
- There are important links to conflict transformation work.
  - The ultimate solution to the use of children by militaries and armed groups lies in resolving conflicts so that they don’t escalate to the point of killing.
  - In turn, reducing the use of children can become a mitigating factor in conflict and may even assist in peace building.
  - Community reconciliation processes are vital to reintegrating children back into their civil societies.
- The nature of conflict is rapidly changing. Many actors do not fight by the rules of war and operate outside the reach of any legal system. The classic style of warfare has been abandoned, leading to a major dilemma for powerful state armies, who struggle with the harsh reality of engaging children on the battlefield.
- Gender issues – boys and girls suffer very different fates in situations of war and pose different challenges for the international community. There is a need to recognize the specific challenges faced by girls who have served, which some analyze as more difficult than those faced by boy soldiers, and to find ways to ensure that the many girls forced into conflict in ancillary or support roles are included in DDR programs despite the fact that they have no weapons.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

There was a prevailing sense that an ongoing dialogue of this nature would be useful in bringing the actors represented and additional ones to the table in order to foster increased collaboration. LGen Dallaire stated that the ultimate aim should go well beyond mere coordination and should aim at integrating the efforts of all actors dealing with child soldiers. However, it was also clear that the process would need to be facilitated in a directed way. Few of those present at this meeting – including the organizers – would be eager to participate in yet another round of meetings that achieve little more than words. A range of concrete recommendations emerged from the group:

- Expand the dialogue further to reach out to those key actors who were not in the room. These would include religious and community leaders, microeconomic and communications/media specialists, more military leaders – particularly those from DPKO and non-western militaries who are involved in conflict and DDR programs directly, and young people who are affected by and dealing with this issue;
- Facilitate the discussion in a directed way so as to generate results that will have practical applications;
- Work towards addressing the issue of child soldiering in a specific situation (e.g. Mano River Union plus Cote D'Ivoire or Colombia), focusing resources on the execution of an integrated plan that can achieve meaningful impact and serve as a replicable approach;
- Assure an ongoing focus on gender differences and those issues faced by girls specifically; and
- Tie initiatives more carefully to available evidence as to what is or is not effective in reducing the use of children in combat.

## **NEXT STEPS**

The three convening partners will work to respond to the issues raised and the concrete recommendations that have been made by the conference participants and will develop a project proposal to facilitate further dialogue with an expanded group of people and significantly more focus. The next step will likely be a larger and more in-depth follow-up workshop in Ottawa, likely hosted by LGen Dallaire in the latter part of this year. The expanded group of participants will allow for exploration of a wider range of views and methods to be included in an integrated approach to the problem of child recruitment and abduction. The goal of this workshop will be to develop tools to be used in a unified, fully integrated intervention on the ground. Specific efforts will be made to reach out to armed groups and former military personnel as well as to children and youth, religious leaders and other key actors.

Following the workshop, the coordinators will convene a smaller group of participants to bring the new tools to bear upon a particular context. This on-the-ground initiative would have sufficient research capacity to provide valid feedback and aid in future program development.

## PARTICIPANTS LIST

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Sam Barnes	<i>UNDP, Bureau for Crisis Prevention &amp; Recovery</i>
Dr. Nancy Black	<i>US Army, Walter Reed Army Medical Center</i>
Neil Boothby	<i>Columbia University</i>
Colonel (Ret) Charles Borchini	<i>Center for Emerging Threats and Opportunities, Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory</i>
Mikael Castro	<i>Search for Common Ground</i>
Hon. Roméo Dallaire	<i>Senate of Canada, Carr Center for Human Rights</i>
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