Participatory Research with Former Child Soldiers in Eastern Congo

Washington Network on Children and Armed Conflict

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Six Days Ago

You will see a child go to school in the morning, be Raia Mutomboke at night. Everyone is Raia because they are the population. Almost all children are Raia. They are fully involved in combat.

There are children near the haute plateau who are leaving right now. There are street children, children who hang out begging these are the ones who are most likely to go along. If an armed group went by now, they would leave with them. We did a contagion plan in the province because of M23 and FARDC. There was a high risk of recruitment.
Project Background

- Project Partners: Graade, ETN, Ajedika, ACIAR, PREV-HIA, Caritas Bunia, ECI, HHI

- Sites: Six communities in eastern DRC, in the provinces of North Kivu, South Kivu and the district of Ituri in Orientale Province (2 community-based organization (CBO) partners in each province)

- Goal: To use lessons learned from past reintegration processes to improve future reintegration programming for former underage combatants and teenagers at risk of joining (or re-joining) armed groups
Project Background

• Approach:
  • Community-based participatory action research (PAR) approach; partner organizations collaboratively designed research and chose from a “menu” of methods
  
  • Triangulate information by applying a range of methods and speaking with many different groups affected by the reintegration process
Methods

- Phase 1: Visual Methods
  - PhotoVoice
  - Body Mapping
- Phase 2: Focus groups
- Phase 3: Key informant interviews with programmers and policy makers to inform recommendations, Mobile Museum
Results and Recommendations
Role of *Kadogo* “The little ones”

- *Kadogo*, or literally “the small ones,” is the name given to young recruits in armed groups. They face the worst jobs, the severest punishments, the smallest rewards and hold the least power. “They tell us the training has not yet started, you are not Kurutu [ranked soldiers], you are not soldiers, you are not people. You are nothing,” explained a male participant from Kalehe.
Long-term impact on social interactions

• Being associated with armed groups has profound and long-term sequelae. Reintegration programs must not only provide material assistance, but must also impart basic skills related to conflict negotiation, communication, and basic stress reduction skills.

• Need skills to negotiate job prospects and consistently pursue education opportunities that will ultimately assist them in generating sustainable income.

• Combatants who generally had no decision making power and no experience of working cooperatively in armed groups are not able to reintegrate seamlessly into communities, which have different sets of social standards.
Recommendation

• **Provide holistic programming:** Programming for the reintegration of former child soldiers should be holistic and not solely address one aspect of the reintegration process. Programming should include professional skills training, informal education, mental health and/or psychosocial support mechanisms linked with community engagement throughout the process. Thorough and close case management of individual beneficiaries is vital to the success of reintegration programming and funding should provide support to ensure case management is a key, integral component of programming.
Psychosocial Issues

• Participants describe a range of mental health symptoms and noted that they felt that they often lacked the communication and social skills to seek the social support they need.

• These programs must provide ex-child soldiers with a basic level of understanding of their own mental health in order that they can recognize symptoms of possible problems.
“The [soldiers] were mistreated and the problems they underwent are hidden in their heart until now. They are unable to cooperate with other community members because they have gone through various problems. Now they are trying, little by little, to cooperate with society members, but it is coming little by little.”

- Community Leader in Mahagi
Recommendation

- **Improve access to basic mental health services:** Once in an armed group, child soldiers were relegated to the lowest rank and suffered emotional, physical, sexual and psychological abuse. Upon reintegration, not only does a former soldier have to deal with these severe psychological affects of the abuse, they must find their purpose and worth in society. Mental health services were virtually non-existent and psychosocial programming was found to be limited based on short-term programming and the lack of professional capacity of implementing staff.
Community members expressed a mix of sympathy and distrust of reintegrating soldiers. They often see these individuals as volatile – bringing behavior typical to armed groups into their already fragile societies, which further destabilizes them more. Community members state that soldiers need psychological services as well as material assistance in order to be able to fully reintegrate.

Soldiers were aware of the mistrust they face from communities – stating that they feel beleaguered by the stigma of being a soldier.

Becoming a participating member of the community – either through employment or education – was listed as of practical importance, and also as a way to re-build a sense of dignity, agency and social belonging.
“What I can say concerning children soldiers is that they are considered as time bombs. …As they know to manipulate a gun, they create a gang, and therefore, there is a great rate of hooliganism downtown, there also street children who are now numerous in the city, then everybody, those who were in military life and those who were not, are altogether in insecurity. The rate of insecurity is increased.”

- Community Leader in Goma

“We were considered as thieves, stupid, drunkards, hemp smokers, etc. We found ourselves much demoralized.”

- Male former child soldier in Kalehe
Acceptance

• Despite the manifold challenges of returning to one’s community, some participants also talked about feeling accepted and welcomed back into their communities.

  “In order for someone to think of themself like other people, it requires many sensitization sessions. And for people to consider us like normal people, it is through efforts from other people.”

- Female former child soldier in Kalehe
Recommendation

• **Promote Community involvement in Reintegration**: The community plays an integral role in ensuring the successful reintegration of former combatants across the board.

• **Provide reintegration services both for the child and his or her family**: Families were described as a key influencing forced on the reintegration of former child soldiers. Mediation, education and skills building should occur at the family level.
Local capacity to undertake sustained programming

• Former soldiers and community members noted that reintegration programming was inadequate, fleeting and fragmented. A number of participants spoke of the importance of improving this programming by having NGOs take a long-term approach to sustained reintegration assistance and more effectively incorporating local community input into their programs.
“It is not enough for helping someone and it is not adequate to the present reality. You distribute electric machines and an engine in remote quarters such as Luvunge and the like where there is no fuel… Do you see, many reinsertion programs failed their mission?”

- Community Leader in Uvira
Recommendation

- **Build capacity of local organizations:** As Congolese organizations were contracted to implement short-term reintegration programming and were required to reintegrate a specified number of former child soldiers in a restricted time period, the quality of services tended to be compromised for the sake of quantity. In addition, local organizations did not always have access to the professional skills required for technical interventions such as mental health and vocational training based on market analyses.

- **Coordinate funding mechanisms:** Programming is often short, fragmented and does not allow for long-term follow up and case management.
Re-Enrolling – Cycles of Violence

- Participants in the research described the cyclical nature of conflict, noting that former child soldiers often returned to armed groups with new indications of insecurity. Without a foundation of peace and stability, DRR efforts will remain a “revolving door” for combatants.
“You live in difficult conditions, difficulties in eating. Yourself, you have no job, you start envying people’s belongings. You remember that in military life, you were looting civilians, and you could have something to eat. Now, you regret the causes which pushed you to leave military life.”

– Male former child soldier in Uvira

“For instance me if out of my struggles, I still not succeed, and the war break, I will go back in the army and begin my job of as a woman soldier.”

– Female former child soldier in Nizi
Recommendation

• **Undertake Security Sector Reform:** The continued proliferation of an alphabet soup of armed groups in the eastern region of the country continues to pose a great risk to communities and the potential for underage recruitment is still very tangible.

• **Identify the gendered risk factors for enrollment in armed groups, and provide programs for vulnerable populations as preventative measure:** Participants in the research describe the reasons they were vulnerable to enrollment in armed groups – these reasons varied for boys and girls.
Visual Methodologies
This PhotoVoice project allows former underage combatants to chronicle their own stories. Through the narrative images and their captions, we learn about the lives of former underage combatants before, during and after life in an armed group. These photographs show the viewer how these children process their own experiences, which issues are most important to them, and their sources of vulnerability and resilience.
Ex-child soldiers who were not reintegrated because they sold their reinsertion kits and these kits weren’t enough for two people.
This photo reminds me of the great joy of the family members when the child came back to their family and their community.
I am sad because I was not welcomed by one of my sisters.
This photo shows the condition of this tree which is comparable to the lives of children who were associated with armed groups who are left without support, abandoned by their communities like this tree which is in the process of disappearing.
Body Mapping

- A technique that depicts the effects of a disease, profession, or phenomenon on the human body
- Visual representations of emotions, memories, and identities, physical and psychological effects
- Participants discuss and collectively mark their observations on the body outline
- Creates “map” of the seen and unseen factors individuals confront as they attempt to rebuild their lives after war
Body Mapping

• Participants in this process discussed the physical and emotional experiences of conflict and reintegration, and collectively marked their observations on the body outline. This process empowers communities to self-define their individual and social experiences.

• Three dominant themes emerged from both the visual and written information: mental health issues, physical issues and social issues.
“Her eyes have seen bad things: people dying and being raped. Her nose has smelt the dead people and her ears have heard the bullets crackle and the large missiles of war. Her mouth has eaten bad food but does not talk.”
A former child soldier is portrayed on a chair and much larger in size than other children below, showing how former soldiers can intimidate other children when they return to their communities.
The hand of a child soldier is shown holding different kinds of traditional crops, such as manioc. A gun firing from the child’s shoulder onto the food illustrates the cycle between violence and access to food.
Results and Recommendations

Findings from this work emphasize the complicated nature of reintegration programming in a context of decades-long conflict. Research participants eloquently described the dynamics at play in their communities. While problems and challenges are manifold, participants also identified ways to improve reintegration programming and policy related to underage combatants in eastern DRC.

Community members and former soldiers spoke of the importance of building participatory and context-appropriate reintegration programs. These programs should equip former soldiers not only with training and marketable professional skills, but should also impart basic and critical skills to both former soldiers and their families that encourage community reconstruction, including communication, coping with stress and conflict. At its best, this process can be seen as an opportunity to help communities collectively heal and critically examine the ways they choose to rebuild...
Thank you!

“When a child goes to military life here in Africa, it means you have lost him, because we consider military life as a place of hooligans…but when he comes back home, you try to treat him as a human being. He can be a man in future.”

- Community Leader in Goma