

National Policies to Prevent the Recruitment of Child Soldiers

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This working paper is a product of the Ford Institute's working group, "Child Soldiers Initiative: Building Knowledge about Children and Armed Conflict". The Child Soldiers Initiative is an ongoing network of scholars, policymakers and representatives of civil society engaged in promoting and developing policy proposals addressing the recruitment and reintegration of child soldiers.

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“Armed conflict – increasingly involving child soldiers – and internal displacement call for urgent interventions offering basic education services and medical and psychological care.”¹

Introduction

Child soldiers live in a grim world that largely exists outside of international and national laws. Because the actions required to prevent child soldier recruitment are diverse, prevention policies should include a variety of inter-sectoral and integrated approaches, including especially services for education and training in the broadest and most flexible sense.²

The recruitment of child soldiers has been condemned by the international community through the adoption of several international conventions, protocols and UN resolutions for human rights, fundamental freedoms, and international security, including those for educational and children’s rights. Of special note is the groundbreaking Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child that dealt specifically with child soldiers.³ When the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court entered into force, the basis for criminalizing the recruitment of child soldiers was established.

In addition, there are several other international declarations and agreements that lack the force of law but nonetheless have a certain “normative power.” A number of regional agreements to end the recruitment of child soldiers have also been adopted.⁴ Several international and regional legal and organizational structures have been developed to enforce these instruments. The United Nations child protection activities, led by the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, is particularly notable in this regard, and it has made significant progress in recent years.⁵

The international and regional instruments and the structures that have been developed to enforce them are ably described in other chapters of this volume.⁶ In this chapter, some of the potential options for national policy formulation, implementation and enforcement will be discussed.

As noted by Achvarina and Reich, international norms precluding the recruitment of child soldiers still do not restrain many irregular armed groups and some national militaries of countries with community wars.⁷ Many of these international instruments and procedures are not honored in fragile states and countries that are experiencing violent conflicts. Consequently, it is important to consider options for developing national-level policy and program initiatives tied to the implementation and enforcement of international conventions, laws and protocols. This path is difficult but essential.

It is important to note that although many international specialists argue that policies and plans for socio-economic development cannot be drafted and implemented during conflicts, nonetheless examples of outstanding policy formulation and program development during conflicts do exist within the education sector, as in El Salvador, and through integrated approaches including education, health, nutrition, sanitation and protection for children, as in Colombia.⁸ During the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2000, a participatory process was undertaken to develop a policy for demobilizing and reintegrating child soldiers.⁹ Although not all policy implementation measures could be pursued at the time, Aborsangaya reports that this policy planning process was successful. Stakeholder consultations were undertaken in various areas of the country, and the government formally adopted the policy. Thus, in addition to manifest need, there is precedent for proposing that, to the extent possible,

national policies and policy guidelines in line with international conventions and mandates can be pursued before and during conflicts as well as after them.

Governments usually lead and dominate policy development at the national level but nations with enlightened leaders include civil society and private sector institutions in the policy planning process. However, in fragile states and nations plagued by violent conflicts, government leaders often lack the will, knowledge or power to conduct participatory processes for policy-planning, and because of this they may resort to quick forms of centralized policy planning conducted by small teams buried in ministerial offices. Almost without exception, the central control of policy planning for social policies is ineffectual, and such policies are rarely well implemented or evaluated. This is especially true of centrally planned social policies developed during and soon after violent conflicts.

Achvarina argues that when the leaders of certain nations have not been democratically elected and have been openly condemned by the international community, armed opposition groups within their borders may be more open to following international norms regarding the non-recruitment of child soldiers as they attempt to gain greater international legitimacy.¹⁰ If true, this would appear to encourage efforts to open the way for policy dialogue with such groups. However, in situations rife with banditry, kidnapping and illicit trades,¹¹ it is doubtful that guerrillas, paramilitaries and other irregular groups would be interested in discussing, adopting or following any of these norms. The policy options presented in this chapter are mainly focused on working with existing governments and institutions of civil society, fragile though they may be. As possible, armed opposition groups should be included in policy dialogue. At a minimum, policy approaches for ending the recruitment of children into conflicts

should be thoroughly and repeatedly discussed during Track Two as well as formal negotiations for cease fires and peace agreements.

Child soldiers are recruited from settings with pre-existing institutional realities. Before conflicts begin, many education and health systems are deficient in terms of coverage, structure, financing, contents, methods and quality. Once conflict erupts in a nation, entire education and health systems can fail, as in Liberia and the Central African Republic. In most nations with violence, many schools are destroyed or damaged and teachers may be targeted and persecuted. As a consequence, educational planners remaining in a country with violent conflicts usually feel “shell-shocked” by these events as well as the trauma of losing relatives, their homes and even their communities. In spite of these situations, the bases for participation in policy formulation can be established if timely international support is given in appropriate ways to committed national leaders and planners.¹²

In the author’s experience, committed planners for social development are always found in nations enduring violent conflicts. Valiant people continue to work in spite of chaotic situations and what they perceive to be overwhelming odds of failure. These devoted civil servants should be identified, reinforced and supported. They usually require outside support that can help them keep to a steady course and can bring them new ideas regarding alternative, effective planning approaches and options. They need personal support from specialists who can help them continue to work creatively, especially when they are dealing with traumatic situations.

National policy formulation before or during conflicts is fraught with difficulties and high political tensions, often including social, economic, inter-ethnic or religious strife. However, it should not be abandoned as a goal. It is essential that formal and informal policy guidelines or regulations, that are not fully ratified but are followed as though they had the force of law, be

developed to help prevent the recruitment of child soldiers. Policy strategies, guidelines and regulations can have a great effect when they are formulated with the people who will be implementing them. Even if they are not as yet officially approved, they will begin to structure peoples' thoughts and actions during times of fear and major stress. They will give program personnel, communities and parents hope and a way to structure their actions.

In all forms of educational, health and other social policies and guidelines developed in conflict situations, gender dimensions are important, especially but not solely with respect to girls. Gender considerations are of key importance in the shadowy world of child soldier recruitment because usually boys and girls are expected to play very different roles in irregular combat groups, and they are treated very differently. A gender lens should be applied to policy planning to ensure that both boys and girls are protected from recruitment into armed bands. Indeed, relatively little attention has been given to the prevention of the abduction and recruitment of girl child soldiers.¹³¹⁴

Gender differentiation begins before birth because parents and the extended family project their cultural and family values on the expected child. From birth onward, girls from all cultures are treated very differently from boys, and these cultural expectations affect child soldier recruitment and treatment. For these and many other reasons, it is essential to develop policies that will have a gender dimension with respect to the differing roles and needs of boys and girls.

This chapter presents an overview of various policy options for preventing the recruitment of child soldiers before and during conflicts. It does not deal with policies for the demobilization and reintegration of child soldiers, except for a few considerations regarding the prevention of recidivism. Although several of the policy options presented below would be

helpful for all young children and youth affected by war, this discussion will focus mainly on preventing the recruitment of child soldiers.

This chapter discusses policy options for preventing child soldier recruitment at two main points in conflict situations: **precursor situations** and **during conflicts**. In each of these sections, some options for policy formulation and future research will be discussed. Many conflicts lack a declared cease-fire or a specific date for a national peace accord, as was the case in El Salvador and more recently in Nepal. In most countries affected by violence, conflicts drag on for years, often moving from region to region, as in Senegal's Casamance region and Colombia, with children recruited by various types of combatants in different places and at various points in the struggle. At any time before or during a violent conflict, children may be enticed or abducted into groups such as guerrillas, paramilitaries, mercenaries, bandits, kidnappers, suicide murderers, illicit traders or regular military troops. *However, this paper will suggest that child soldier recruitment becomes possible more as a result of antecedent security and social conditions that negatively affect children, families and communities than the actual recruitment efforts of these violent groups.*

Preventing the Recruitment of Child Soldiers: Precursor Situations

Many leaders of humanitarian assistance programs decry the recruitment of children into war, yet they rarely analyze the previous status of such children. From a review of "grey" literature, studies on child soldiers, and direct observation in several nations, it is clear that the great majority of child soldiers have been born into families living in urban and especially rural poverty. Many of them come from a variety of types of "broken homes" or single parent households. Often, their parents or teachers have abused them physically, sexually or

emotionally. Child abuse is highly correlated with wife abuse, and usually these children have seen their mothers abused by their partners. Domestic violence always increases during times of community violence, and both are usually correlated with severe poverty. It appears that most future child soldiers were directly affected by the conflict into which they were later recruited.

In addition to having been previously impacted by domestic and community violence, child soldiers often exhibit high indices of malnutrition, chronic illness, and moderate to severe delays in their cognitive, socio-emotional and physical development. Essentially, they have been subjected to severe deprivation and they have been poorly parented.

As a result of inadequate parenting, domestic violence, a lack of basic community health, nutrition, education, sanitation and protective services for parents and young children, some children run away from home in order to join armed groups that they perceive to be safer and more supportive than their family and community environments.¹⁵ Promises of a better life and an income often entice them into becoming child soldiers. However, if parents were to have an improved income potential and if such children were to receive a better quality of attention from their parents as well as adequate basic health, nutrition and education services, it is doubtful that armed groups could talk children into running away from home and entering their ranks or entice parents into “selling” their children to those groups. Also, well-supported parents would be better able to protect their children and maintain their affection as well as prepare them to resist the offers of armed groups. Of course, the armed abduction of children will nullify such efforts if adequate community, school and home security is not provided through local security networks or police groups.

Many children conscripted into armed groups have never attended primary school. Others who were able to enroll in a school, repeated grades and/or dropped out at an early age.

Such children and youth lack basic literacy, workforce skills and a sense of attachment to their communities and nations, making them highly susceptible of being recruited into armed groups. Essentially, children's school systems in many fragile nations are failing them and failing their communities.

In addition, as noted in the 2007 EFA Global Monitoring Report:

New forms of war, practised by armies and warlords alike, target children and youth, seeking to turn them into soldiers. As more young people are drawn into long-term conflicts, education offers an increasingly effective way to reduce tensions, and promote tolerance and other values conducive to peace.¹⁶

However, the lack of sufficient, good quality, and culturally and linguistically appropriate education services has been shown to cause or exacerbate many conflicts.¹⁷ For example, the root cause of the revolts of Albanian Kosovars in Kosovo and of the Kurds in four nations has been their inability to obtain or provide culturally appropriate education for their children. All in all, in nations moving toward conflict, school systems that are failing and culturally inappropriate, poor in quality, and do not protect children are major factors in exposing children to the danger of recruitment into armed groups.

In addition to poor quality, the schools in some nations serve as centers for indoctrination for purposes of future recruitment into armed struggles. The methodology of Marxist takeovers included the control of education and communications, as well as the military and finance, because the role of education in forming future cadres was considered to be essential for quashing unacceptable cultural traditions, achieving long-term social control, and conducting advanced social mobilization. More recently, various types of religious groups in many nations have been using schools to try to control youthful minds and prepare the next generation of young fighters for their cause.

Poverty-stricken rural and urban communities rarely have access to comprehensive and integrated services that can include: primary health care services for children and mothers; nutrition education, supplementation and rehabilitation; parenting education and early childhood intervention or preschools; home, community and water sanitation; juridical protection and protective services; workforce training programs; and basic community security services.¹⁸ Instead, these poor communities may only have access to a few inadequate and poorly articulated sectoral services, such as a health post without medicines or a small school without a trained teacher and textbooks. Many parents are unable to meet their children's basic needs for survival and development. Such parents believe that armed groups represent the only way for their children to receive the food, clothing and lodging they need, and as a result, they do not oppose their children's entry into groups.

Some countries have suffered cyclical violence, such as Colombia and certain indigenous regions of Mexico. Due to a lack of reconciliation and conflict resolution especially at local levels, many families, communities and political groups have embarked on vendettas and thrust their children into a culture of violence and reprisal. Whole generations have grown up without knowledge of any way of life except war and vengeance. These children are essentially conscripted from birth into armed bands and their fate is sealed. This is one of the main reasons for existence of over 14,000 child soldiers currently found in Colombia.¹⁹ Some of Colombia's most notorious and cruel guerrilla fighters began as young child soldiers. Trauma healing, conflict resolution, and above all, individual, familial and community reconciliation are essential measures for inhibiting the inter-generational conscription of children into armed groups.

Children and youth are becoming increasingly aware of profound inequities in their societies. Access to mass media and the Internet enable them to see how others live. Perceived

inequities cause depression and fan the insecurities of the young. These inequities often light the wick of anarchy and attract the young to lawless movements that give them hope. It is notable that many young people designated as “international terrorists” were born into middle class homes where they first became aware of socio-economic inequities. Indeed, some relatively well educated yet radicalized parents encourage their children to become engaged in inter-generational battles in order to achieve their vision of better futures, in economic, cultural or religious terms. These “revitalization movements” usually seek to resurrect idealized past cultural glories, and they can serve as frameworks for attracting children to radical activities.

All of the foregoing reasons for the recruitment of child soldiers underline the importance of undertaking bold new policy initiatives at the national level to complement international agreements and conventions that have been drafted to end the use of children as armed combatants. However, relatively few national policies and policy guidelines have been adopted to prevent the recruitment of child soldiers.²⁰ Until a body of national policy instruments and databases is developed along with baseline information on child soldier recruitment, it will be impossible to know if such policies could be effective in ending or reducing recruitment.²¹

The following sections relating to the prevention of the recruitment of child soldiers before conflicts will present some policy approaches as well as topics for research and evaluation to inform policy planning, implementation and evaluation.

Policy Implications for the Prevention of the Recruitment of Child Soldiers Before Conflicts

It is critically important to create, implement and evaluate national policy frameworks and plans for the prevention of the recruitment of child soldiers in fragile states that appear to be moving toward violence. Usually, many signs and warnings of potential unrest can be discerned

in such nations. For many years, some development specialists that work with fragile states have called for policies such as the ones outlined below; however, they have not been successful in developing them because international agencies want to support “sustainable development nations.” Also such policies have been viewed as “development” policies rather than as “violence prevention” policies.

Given the escalation of guerrilla movements, community wars, the worldwide reach of terrorists and the increasing conscription of children as armed combatants, it is imperative that past approaches be reconsidered. The neglect of human rights and development agendas in fragile states must be reassessed. New policies should be developed to prevent specific, high-priority socio-economic situations that can enable and even promote the recruitment of child soldiers.

The following types of policy initiatives could be undertaken rapidly in many fragile states at national and local levels, with technical support from multilateral or bilateral international agencies.

1. Policies for Integrated Parent Education and Support Systems

It is impossible to eliminate overwhelming poverty rapidly. However, some focused interventions are particularly effective in improving impoverished home settings that can become the “seed bed” for child soldiers and other belligerents.

In particular, policies for developing integrated parent education and support programs can be instituted to strengthen families and improve parenting behaviors in relatively short periods of time.²² Parenting skills and child development can be improved without eliminating poverty, although of course, it is very helpful to improve families’ standards of living as well. In

addition, essential social services should be given priority, especially in regions of fragile states with failing education systems and high levels of poverty, child mortality, famine and chronic diseases. Special attention should be given to the parents of vulnerable children who lack basic services and exhibit ill health, malnutrition, developmental delays, and signs of abuse. These children require early childhood intervention services and enriched education activities in order to help them develop well, be ready for school, and ultimately avoid falling prey to the enticements of armed groups offering a better life.

Guidance for conducting planning processes to design integrated national policies for early childhood development and parenting services is available as an essential step for nations to develop comprehensive early childhood and parenting programs.²³ To assist with this process, international standards for parenting programs have been advanced, with a special focus on vulnerable children.²⁴

2. Multi-Sectoral Policies for Integrated Basic Community Services

In conjunction with integrated parent education and support services, comprehensive community systems are required for ensuring the provision of basic health care and education, nutrition education and supplementation, child development, literacy training, sanitation, workforce skills training, agricultural development, community security, etc. The era of high-cost, specialized sectoral services is waning, and comprehensive, lower-cost and well-coordinated services are increasingly being developed. For this to occur, each fragile nation must undertake a multi-sectoral policy planning process that will give priority to those geographical regions with a high prevalence of under-served families living in poverty. For

policies to be translated effectively into plans and programs, comprehensive situation analyses, mapping and simulation exercises will be required.

3. Comprehensive Education Reform for Improved Access, Equity and Quality

A national policy for educational reform should be developed to improve fragile and failing education systems, with special attention to regions where children could be conscripted into armed groups. Both formal education and non-formal education systems should be addressed through the development of partnerships among institutions of civil society and the public and private sectors. Leaders of indoctrination movements in school and non-formal education settings should be identified and restrained, if not removed, from guiding children's learning. Curriculum, materials, methods and teacher training systems should be revised and changed as rapidly as possible. As specified in the 1960 *UNESCO Convention Against Discrimination in Education* and the *Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education* of 1994, priority attention should be given to safeguarding ethnic and linguistic educational rights, as well as to providing enriched learning opportunities for children with developmental delays and disabilities.

As noted above, nations where the educational rights of populations have been abrogated tend to be places where community wars occur. Parent education provided through early childhood programs and schools should include components on how parents can teach their children to resist the lure of armed groups and on ways for them to build community solidarity to confront and reject the incursions of such groups.²⁵ This type of community resistance in regions of Colombia helped to deter and stop the advance of armed groups that wanted to take control of many rural towns.²⁶

4. Policy for Integrated Educational, Trauma Healing and Protective Services

For children buffeted by domestic, community or inter-generational violence, services that integrate educational, trauma healing and protective activities are required – but seldom made available. Trauma healing services may be provided during or after conflicts, but almost always, they are short-term and not integrated into longer-term education and protective services. Policies for trauma healing can and should be included in policies and plans for education and protective services. They should provide for long-term, community-based trauma healing programs, with a special focus on the prevention of the conscription of children into armed conflict. The training of teachers and community facilitators in methods for conflict resolution, trauma healing and reconciliation should be given top priority, along with some other curricular contents. Protective social services should be made more available, especially for communities, schools and families with children at high risk of being forced or enticed into armed groups. National Trauma Centers for Children Affected by Conflicts, including child soldiers, could be developed along the line of the many national and international Centers for the Victims of Torture.²⁷

5. Pro-Active Community and IDP or Refugee Security Systems and Networks

Policies dealing with governance, community policing, justice systems and camps for IDPs or refugees should include provisions for ensuring greater security, with a special focus on preventing the conscription of child soldiers. Achvarina and Reich posit that the protection of children and youth in refugee camps in Africa explains the lower incidence of child soldiers in certain African countries, such as Senegal, Angola, Mali,

Lesotho and Niger.²⁸ Systems for training teachers, community leaders and organizations in primary security and reciprocal neighborhood protection methods should be developed and supported, and police systems need to be reinforced to support community and neighborhood security efforts.

Above all, emphasis should be given to using and protecting schools and refugee or IDP camps as a “safe spaces” or “child friendly spaces” for children, teachers and parents.²⁹ Building linkages between community and camp security structures and networks in many places would enable shared learning and the reinforcement of primary security measures.

Research Implications

Greatly increased research is urgently required on the early childhoods of child soldiers during pre-conflict period. Both quantitative and qualitative studies should be undertaken. These studies should include parenting behaviors, child health, nutritional and developmental status, accessibility and use of basic services, exposure to traumatic domestic, community or inter-generational violence, preschool experiences (if any), and children’s school histories and achievement. Research should also be undertaken regarding the types, contents and methods of informal, non-formal and formal education received (or not received) by child soldiers before and during their participation in violence. These data should be studied in relation to prevailing types of child soldier recruitment and the degree of security provided children in communities, IDP and refugee camps, schools and play areas.

Study results should be used to tailor national policies to fit the socio-cultural and economic realities of children affected by war, with a special focus on those who are enticed or abducted into armed groups.

In addition, case studies should be conducted on integrated early childhood development programs and their results in violence zones where children have been conscripted into armed groups with the intention of discovering whether or not such programs are successful in curtailing conflict and conscription. For example, a case study on a preschool program in camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Ambon, Indonesia describes a compelling approach that reduced violence and intolerance in children and at familial, community and inter-religious group levels.³⁰

Once policies are in place for preventing the recruitment of child soldiers in precursor situations, policy evaluations should be undertaken to assess their effectiveness and revise the strategies and programs used in order to improve their impacts.

Preventing the Recruitment and Re-recruitment of Child Soldiers during Conflicts

During conflicts, many nations cease to provide basic health, nutrition, education, sanitation, protection and economic development services in violence zones. Some countries with conflicts have always lacked an adequate infrastructure of social and economic services.

In addition, as a result of conflicts, disease, malnutrition, unschooled children and youth, and heaps of garbage abound in violence zones the world over. However, it has been demonstrated that impressive programs can be developed and maintained, even in situations filled with chaos.³¹ Nonetheless, some places are too dangerous for any service provision apart from highly protected humanitarian assistance teams.

Many techniques for the maintenance of program services during conflict have been developed in countries such as Algeria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, Eritrea, and Senegal. Virtual learning centers, community outreach programs, early childhood and parenting

services, and many other types of programs have functioned successfully during conflicts, and they have helped not only resident populations but also IDPs, street children, orphans, and refugees from other nations.

Local, regional or national governments sometimes conduct these programs; however, they are usually run by organizations of civil society, including national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community development organizations, universities, institutes and religious groups.³² Partnerships between civil society and government are critically important in such settings. Maintaining a nation's infrastructure of civil society institutions will help ensure the provision of services that can help to prevent the recruitment of children into armed conflict. During conflicts, national civil society organizations should be strengthened and united, as possible, with governmental policy planning efforts to assist all children who are negatively affected by conflicts and trauma.

During conflicts, educational programs and especially schools and preschools can serve as "safe places," often providing the only secure places for children. Many writers have noted this attribute of the school as a safe place.^{33 34} However, schools are not always safe places. When child soldiers are abducted or recruited from their schools or homes, usually national, regional and local governments take little note of their disappearance. Often they do not put protective and police services into place to guard the children. National database systems for recording the recruitment and disappearance of children rarely exist. Those few database systems that have been developed by international agencies for use in conflict situations, such as the databases of the International Organization for Migration, usually lack adequate data points dealing with the recruitment and status of child soldiers as well as other variables that would be useful in designing action plans. Databases for the prevention of child soldier recruitment should

help nations design policies and programs for finding conscripted and abducted children, mounting efforts to rescue them, ensuring accountability, and evaluating service provision.

Systems should be developed for protecting places where armed groups capture children, such as schools, homes, community play areas and IDP and refugee camps. Although they are of prime importance, programs for child security are rarely available in violence zones. Rather, priority is given to protecting police stations, businesses and public buildings rather than young children. During conflicts, outreach services are required to train communities about how to protect their children.

In some circumstances, abducted or “run-away” children could be quickly rescued or enticed out of the armed groups they join. However, few systems for the rapid demobilization of child soldiers have been developed during conflicts. Although communications media to encourage defections have targeted adults, few have been used to encourage children to flee. Perhaps leaders of demilitarization efforts believe that children are so affected by the “Stockholm Syndrome” that they will not dare to escape. Most who work in demilitarization programs place priority on adult men and women as their primary targets.

Demobilization programs during conflicts represent opportunities for encouraging young children to defect. It is important that demobilization programs for child soldiers provide enriched educational contents, conflict resolution, trauma healing, and reconciliation with family and friends as well as with former “enemies.” However, indoctrination can occur during such programs for ex-child soldiers, and vigilance is required to ensure a balanced curriculum is provided, including academic subjects, skills training and citizenship education in order to prevent cyclical violence. As noted before, special attention should be given to the different needs of ex- girl and boy fighters.

As adult men and women leave armed groups, they are usually given some form of program for reinsertion into society. However, the young children of ex-combatants who have been heavily impacted by community, and often, domestic violence are rarely given services. Many of the children of ex-guerrillas and others have already served as child soldiers, and if they do not receive appropriate education, trauma healing, conflict resolution and reconciliation services, they could return to the conflict as full-fledged child soldiers.

To prevent a return to fighting, they require complete education and training services similar to those given to ex-child soldiers and appropriate to their levels of development. They also need special security because sometimes they are hunted down as renegades. All of these children of ex-combatants suffer from major trauma, and although some may appear to be resilient, the negative impact of their experiences will rise to the surface at many points during ensuing years, often when they and others least expect it. For these reasons, it is critically important that these children receive long-term trauma healing services, skills in conflict resolution, and to the extent possible, acceptance within their families and local society. Often these children are rejected by the local populace, which fears them and does not want their children studying and playing with them. When this occurs, community education is required to prepare parents and others to accept ex-child soldiers and the children of ex-combatants.

Policy Implications during Conflicts

As noted before, many international specialists continue to believe that during conflicts it is close to impossible to develop policies or policy guidelines to deal with human rights and development issues. In most conflict situations, either formal or informal policies could be developed to guide warring parties in some places or phases of a conflict. Because conflict

phases can present different types of problems and opportunities for planning and implementing policies, guidelines and activities, it is important to carefully assess each country situation.

Special attention should be given to inter-institutional coordination in all aspects of policy development and application during conflicts. Coordination between NGOs and with governments has been neglected and often rejected as an option in many conflicts. The competition for contracts from international organizations has exacerbated this situation. To develop and implement effective policies and policy guidelines, coordination systems will be essential.

Since most child soldiers are recruited after conflicts have begun, to the extent possible during conflicts, effective national and local level policies or policy guidelines should be developed in the areas listed below.

1. Policies and Measures to Maintain and Develop Essential Basic Services

To prevent the recruitment of children during conflicts, it is necessary to maintain essential social services as a framework for action and as deterrents to armed groups seeking to entice or force children into their webs. Existing national development policies that support the development of social services should be maintained and improved to the extent possible. Emphasis should be given to helping social sectors work together to conduct integrated and culturally appropriate services especially for health, nutrition, education, sanitation, juridical protection, workforce skills and community security. Special attention should be given to maintaining the nations' structure of institutions of civil society as a bridge to post-conflict national development.³⁵

To forestall the recruitment of child soldiers, priority should be given to establishing or expanding community and family-based education and support services, especially in locations with many IDP or refugee families.³⁶ Over time, prolonged displacement and suffering in camps with few, inadequate or no services for education, health, training and employment can lead traumatized children and youth to seek “a way out.” When they feel this way, they can be easily enticed into armed groups.

To achieve this true “safety net” of basic services, it will be essential to forge partnerships with national NGOs and other institutions of civil society. This can be complicated when some of these institutions pertain to the “opposition” but new groups virtually always rise to the fore in conflict situations.

2. Policy to Create a System to Monitor, Track, Prevent and Rescue Child Soldiers

In addition to general international statistical databases on child soldiers, national and sub-national policy guidelines and plans should be established for developing, coordinating and maintaining systems to monitor the recruitment and status of child soldiers. On the basis of data gathered, plans should be prepared to protect children and prevent the further recruitment of children in affected regions.

Recruiters of child soldiers, their methods and results should be found and monitored, with an eye not only to understanding their *modus operandi* but also to capturing and branding them as “legal transgressors,” convicting them in a court of law, and seizing their bank accounts and other resources, thereby ending their impunity and preventing the continuation of their recruitment practices.³⁷ Over time, these measures should result in setting examples for other recruiters who think they may be able to operate with impunity.

Policies should also call for situation analyses and the development of databases that would help security teams find, rescue and reintegrate child soldiers into society as well as prevent further recruitment and recidivism.

3. Preparing for Education Policy Reform, with a Focus on Child Soldiers

Experience has shown that nations with failing education systems rarely reform them thoroughly until a catastrophe hits in the form of a conflict, such as in Sierra Leone, or a natural disaster, as was the case in Nicaragua. In countries with conflicts, major education policy reforms with new objectives, strategies and programs are always required in order to improve quality, equity and coverage, help restore normalcy, and ensure young children will be productively engaged in school, well protected, and not easily conscripted into armed groups.³⁸

In addition, research has revealed that education reforms can and should be initiated during a conflict. For example, El Salvador began its successful and highly participatory educational reform well before its war ended in 1992.³⁹ As soon as the peace accords were signed, the nation was ready to accelerate its highly participatory educational reform process. Research has demonstrated that nations have a “window of opportunity” of approximately 18 to 24 months after a conflict ends to reform their education systems.⁴⁰ If an educational reform is delayed beyond 24 months, countries tend to return to old, counterproductive approaches and procedures, and it will require many years for reform to be undertaken. In the meantime, social problems linked to education will grow and fester, often leading to yet more social problems, as was the case in Lao PDR and Viet Nam that waited over a generation to begin their educational reforms.^{41 42}

4. Community Security

Nations should develop policies for establishing community security plans that will help them protect children in their schools, homes and community play areas – essentially wherever they tend to be captured by armed bands. The policy for community security should prioritize support for communities in or near violence zones. In addition, training should be given to parents, teachers, sports leaders and others on how to protect children and help them protect themselves should they come under attack when no adults are present.

5. Use of Media to Prevent the Recruitment of Child Soldiers

A social communications policy should be developed in each country experiencing the recruitment of child soldiers to encourage all citizens to help with efforts to resist and stop recruitment. A public information campaign that presents key elements of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and international decisions of the International Criminal court should be combined with information on implementing legislation and policies in each nation.⁴³ This type of activity could be initiated during the precursor phase but it is hard to attract media attention to this matter until actual recruitment of child soldiers occurs within a nation. Public information campaigns are essential in nations once violence has begun.

Some nations, such as Colombia, have made extensive use of media messages (especially radio), pamphlets and commonly used items such as matchbooks to encourage adult guerrillas and paramilitaries to leave armed brigades. This approach has been very effective. Media usage has been instrumental in demobilization in Colombia, where over 32,000 paramilitaries and a large number of guerrillas defected during 2005 – 2006. The use of radio and visual print media could be considered for reaching child soldiers, many of whom are likely to be illiterate. If

children and youth can be enticed into leaving soon after they enter armed groups, then this “late prevention” work should help to keep them from becoming further radicalized and traumatized. Given children’s fears, in some situations it may be necessary to place individuals “behind the lines” to contact child soldiers, convince them to leave, and help them reach safety.

Media should also be used to help prepare the civilian population regarding ways to receive ex-child soldiers in a positive manner rather than reject them, as often happens.

6. Demobilization Policy for Child Soldiers Combined with the Prevention of Re-recruitment

Demobilized child soldiers always require comprehensive programs with psychosocial rehabilitation, learning and support for reintegration into their families and society. If these programs are successful, then recidivism will be low. If they are not effective, then child soldiers tend to return to their former group or enter other rebel groups, bandit groups, mercenary bands, youth gangs or networks running illicit trades. Once they become dedicated to a life of violence and crime it is very difficult to convince them to return to civilian life or enter rehabilitation programs.

Significant attention has been given to developing policies and plans for demobilizing and reintegrating child soldiers.⁴⁴ However, little attention has been paid to including in them components for the prevention of the re-recruitment of child soldiers. These policies should give priority to reviewing and improving services for rapid demobilization and for reintegration services. Attention should be given to ensuring they are comprehensive, culturally appropriate, and attentive to the needs of ex-child soldiers.

7. Special Focus on the Children of Ex-combatants

As noted in the introduction to this section, some child soldiers are the children of adult combatants. The children of guerrillas and other fighters who are not yet engaged in violence are at very high risk of becoming child soldiers. However, when these children's mother or father demobilizes, the children are usually overlooked. They are the most forgotten children in war and the ones national programs for demobilization least like to serve. Their parents are usually deeply depressed, worried and disoriented, and this situation has an additional negative impact on children. Carpenter discusses the need to address the special needs of child soldiers who are young mothers and their children born into violent situations. Carpenter also notes the various types of interventions such children and their parents require.⁴⁵

Each nation with community wars and child soldiers should give priority to developing policy guidelines, plans and programs for the reintegration of the children of ex-combatants, emphasizing long-term trauma healing, conflict resolution, reconciliation, academic study, workforce skills, preparation for citizenship, and participation in democratic governance processes.⁴⁶

8. Policy for Long-Term Support

Many nations have looked for "quick fixes" to the "child soldier problem." However, long-term follow-up and continued support services will be required to ensure ex-child soldiers and the children of ex-combatants are well integrated into society, receive nurturing care from their own or new families, continue their education and training, are provided trauma-healing services as needed, and are given security, especially from those who may wish to harm them. Also, the families and schools who receive them may need protection, monitoring to prevent the possible occurrence of indoctrination, and continued support services. Workforce training

systems will be required with follow-up to ensure ex-child soldiers receive training and become gainfully employed or develop small businesses.⁴⁷

Research implications

It is essential that rapid mapping exercises and assessments be undertaken regarding the provision and quality of basic and integrated services given during conflicts, with an eye to evaluating service impact on the prevention of the recruitment of child soldiers and to identifying un-served high-risk populations.

Data gleaned through the development of systems for monitoring the recruitment and status of child soldiers should be analyzed carefully, with the goal of helping nations prevent further recruitment and building protective policies that are increasingly effective over time. Situation analyses on child soldier recruitment will be essential as well as studies on shorter and longer-term policy results.

Studies on the short- and long-term results of programs for demobilized child soldiers are urgently needed with a special focus on the reasons for recidivism. In addition to assessing the reasons why some child soldiers return to conflicts, become bandits, join youth gangs, work in illicit trades or become international mercenaries, it will be important to identify why and how some of them reintegrate well. Ultimately, a combination of ethnographic research, comparative case studies, statistical analyses, and evaluation research projects will be needed to inform future policy planning activities to prevent the recruitment of child soldiers.

Conclusion

A wide array of studies, policies, plans and programs will be required to prevent armed groups from abducting children and to keep children from voluntarily joining armed groups. Several policies working in tandem will be required in each national setting.

Two top priorities for policy planning emerge from a review of the literature on child soldiers, human security, education in conflict situations, and ex-combatant demobilization and reintegration:

1. **Integrated policies and programs for parent education and support, child development and child and family security** are essential for preventing the deprivation that can result in children becoming attracted to and conscripted or abducted into the ranks of child soldiers. These policies and programs can also help to stop cyclical violence and reduce poverty, abandonment, and the lack of services that help create conflicts.
2. **Youth policies and programs** can provide educational opportunities, skills and citizenship training through formal, non-formal or informal activities. If they are well structured and non-doctrinaire, they will help stop recruitment and recidivism of child soldiers as well as end the cycle of violence.
3. **Protective and security services** need to be organized and instituted in communities, neighborhoods, schools, play areas, and camps for IDPs and refugees.

Ultimately, given that over 70 million children lack access to basic education, and yet more children live in severe poverty, it is amazing that there are not many more child soldiers in the world. To prevent an increase in the number of children whose only recourse is violence, it is essential that policies be developed and implemented that will give children a fair start in life.

Notes

¹ Burnett, N, 2007 EFA Global Monitoring Report, p. 7.

² In this paper, “education” will include not only *formal schooling* but also *non-formal education* and *informal learning*. Non-formal education is defined as structured and organized learning that mainly occurs in non-school settings, such as adult literacy sessions in homes and tribal “schools.” Informal education includes culturally prescribed, fortuitous and flexible learning experiences, such as apprenticeships, youth groups, military demonstrations and traditional teaching stories. Estrada Armas noted that in Guatemala, male Quiche speaking Indians who joined guerrilla and military groups gained Spanish language and literacy skills. (Estrada Armas, 2005.)

³ International Criminal Court, 2002.

⁴ Singer, P., 2004, p. 569.

⁵ Chikuhwa, 2007.

⁶ Bergsmo, M., 2007.

⁷ Achvarin, V and S. Reich, 2006

⁸ Vargas-Barón, E. and H. Bernal Alarcón, 2005.

⁹ Aborsangaya, O., 2000.

¹⁰ Achvarina, V., 2007.

¹¹ Examples of illicit trades include arms, natural resources (such as diamonds, uranium and gold), drugs, sex workers, and human trafficking.

¹² Guzman, J.L., 2005.

¹³ Verhey, B., 2001.

¹⁴ Carpenter, C., 2007.

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- ¹⁵ Aborsangaya, O., 2000. Examples are provided in the Democratic Republic of Congo regarding “push out” circumstances leading children to flee home communities to become child soldiers.
- ¹⁶ Burnett, N. 2006, page 74.
- ¹⁷ Vargas-Barón, E., 2005.
- ¹⁸ For a valuable discussion on protection, security networks, and the importance of integrated services, see McClure, M. and G. Retamal, 2007.
- ¹⁹ Kelso, C., 2004, p. 113.
- ²⁰ Achvarina, V. and S. Reich, 2006, p. 130.
- ²¹ Lischer, S., 2007.
- ²² Burnett, N., 2006.
- ²³ Vargas-Barón, E. 2005 – 2006.
- ²⁴ Vargas-Barón, E. 2007.
- ²⁵ Ospina Serna, H. and S. Alvarado Salgado, 2001.
- ²⁶ Personal communication of Hernando Bernal Alarcón with reference to parent and community resistance in towns of the Department of Boyacá in Colombia.
- ²⁷ Recommendation of Dr. Beverly Zweiben, formerly responsible for Multilateral Human Rights Affairs in the Bureau of International Organizations, U.S. Department of State.
- ²⁸ Achvarina, V. and S. Reich, 2006, p. 138, p. 148.
- ²⁹ McClure, M. and G. Retamal, 2007. See sections on UNICEF’s program for Child Friendly Spaces.
- ³⁰ Tualeka, B. et al, 2005.
- ³¹ Vargas-Barón, E. and H. Bernal Alarcón, 2005.

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- ³² Chickering, L. et al, 2006.
- ³³ Aguilar, P. and G. Retamal, 1998.
- ³⁴ Machel, G., 1996.
- ³⁵ Chickering, L. et al, 2006.
- ³⁶ McClure, M and G. Retamal, 2007.
- ³⁷ Singer, P, 2004.
- ³⁸ Vargas-Barón, E. and H. Bernal Alarcón, 2005.
- ³⁹ Guzmán, J. L, 2005.
- ⁴⁰ Vargas-Barón, E. and M. McClure, 2001
- ⁴¹ Lachanthaboun, S. et al, 2005.
- ⁴² Thomas, A., 2005.
- ⁴³ This is the strong recommendation of Michael Southwick, former Ambassador and former U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, who assisted with the negotiation of the Optional Protocol.
- ⁴⁴ For example, Verhey, B., 2001.
- ⁴⁵ Carpenter, 2007.
- ⁴⁶ Universidad de Ibagué y Universidad del Rosario, 2006.
- ⁴⁷ Guzmán de Luna, E., 2005