Preventing, Demobilizing, Rehabilitating, and Reintegrating Child Soldiers in African Conflicts

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ABSTRACT

As many as 300,000 children serve as soldiers in conflicts in 33 countries. In many cases, these children are forced into service. This article recommends strategies the international community, including state actors, international organizations, and non-governmental organizations, can implement to reduce the number of child soldiers participating in armed conflicts and reintegrate former child soldiers into their societies.

Ending the conflict in question or preventing the abduction or recruitment of children by armed forces may be the most effective strategies for the international community to reduce the number of children in combat. However, preventative measures are often insufficient. In these cases, the international community should also use a balanced approach of centralized and decentralized (local, community-based) methods to demobilize and rehabilitate identified child soldiers. This article uses the civil conflict in Uganda as a case study, and draws on lessons learned in several other African conflicts.

OVERVIEW

The use of child soldiers in armed forces is widespread, but is an inherently local problem. The purpose of this article is to analyze and recommend strategies the international community, including state actors, international organizations (IOs), and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), can implement to reduce the number of child soldiers participating in armed conflicts and reintegrate former child soldiers into their societies. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) defines a "child soldier" as “any child – boy or girl – under 18 years of age, who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity, including, but not limited to: cooks, porters, messengers, and anyone accompanying such groups other than family members. It includes girls and boys recruited for forced sexual purposes and/or forced marriage. The definition, therefore, does not only refer to a child who is carrying, or has carried, weapons.”

Preventing the abduction or recruitment of children by armed forces may be the most effective strategy to reduce the number of children in combat. However, preventative measures may not be enough in some cases, where the international community must also demobilize and rehabilitate child soldiers. This article recommends new national and community-based strategies that the international community may try in Uganda to prevent recruitment of children by the fighting parties, and demobilize and rehabilitate child soldiers already actively involved in the conflict. These recommendations are based on the experiences of other African countries facing similar problems. This article uses the ongoing conflict in Uganda as a case study, in which the government army, the Ugandan People's Defense Force (UPDF), and the rebel Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) led by Joseph Kony, abduct or recruit child soldiers to send them into combat.

THE PROBLEM IS WIDESPREAD, BUT INHERENTLY LOCAL

The use of child soldiers is a global problem with inherently local challenges. This implies that a combination of large and small scale strategies are required to address it.

Global scope

The international community has generally ignored the use of child soldiers in combat despite their widespread use. Few peace treaties even recognize their existence. Human Rights Watch reports that as many as 300,000 girls and boys between the ages of 8 and 18 serve as child soldiers, either in government forces or armed rebel groups, in 33 countries around the world. These armed forces recruit children for a variety of reasons; children may supplement inadequate numbers of adults in the fighting force, and scared and hungry child soldiers are "more obedient, do not question orders, and are easier to manipulate than adult soldiers." Peter Singer notes that children as young as six are actively participating in over three-quarters of all armed conflicts.

The role of children in warfare has expanded qualitatively as well, from an indirect role in conflicts to direct participation in hostilities. This substantively changes the nature of the problem. Children are taking part in committing the atrocities that their historical counterparts might only have witnessed. Experiencing such violence first-hand "can undermine a child's basic trust in humanity and may create a lifelong inability to develop close, trusting relationships." Children committing these violent acts may be subject to even more profound long-term effects. For example, their physical health may be compromised by injuries or diseases, such as HIV or AIDS, contracted during their service. Children may also experience serious psychological traumas in armed conflicts.

Historically, children have participated in some wars by serving as lookouts, spies, or messengers. However, the usage of light-weight, easy-to-carry weapons in modern warfare enable children to also serve as combatants. As Rosen notes, these weapons require little maintenance or training to use. The problem is not limited to boys; between 1990 and 2003, girls were present in armed forces in 55
Some child soldiers are forced into service, while others join conflicts due to economic or social pressures. In the latter cases, children have few apparent opportunities to make a living outside of roles in conflicts and typically have some ideological or perceived monetary incentive to serve. Armed forces may promise bribes, wages, or social benefits to these children. For example, in Colombia, children joining the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army (FARC-EP), the National Liberation Army of Colombia (UC-ELN), or the United Self Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) in are often bribed or have familial links to the guerrillas or military forces. These children are not coerced into service per se, but they generally come from extremely poor backgrounds, lack basic education, and observe few other economic or social opportunities for themselves.

Children also join conflicts for more strategic reasons. In the most recent period of the Liberian civil war (2000-2003) children who voluntarily joined the rebel LURD forces did so either to avenge a family member’s death at the hands of the government forces, or to receive protection for themselves and their families against further LURD violence against their communities.

**Local challenges**

The use of child soldiers can have dramatic effects on the fabric of a local community. Children forced into armed service might be stigmatized, and unable to return to their homes or home communities. For example, in some cases documented by Human Rights Watch, children were forced to commit atrocities against their families or neighbors. These children could not, or thought they could not, return to their communities after committing these acts.

Moreover, governments and other organizations rarely provide adequate funding and services for the rehabilitation and reintegration of children into their communities. With low levels of material and human capital, children are typically unable to provide food and shelter for themselves. Former child soldiers often end up on the street, in gangs, or are drawn back into conflicts. While many soldiers do not have access to education or vocational training after the cessation of hostilities, children are particularly affected by the lack of these institutions. It is also difficult for children to find their families without specific family reunification programs, which are rare.

**Phases of demobilization and rehabilitation**

Singer, paraphrasing UNICEF, identifies three overlapping phases of "turning a child soldier back into a child." The first is disarmament and demobilization, which involves identifying child soldiers and taking them physically out of the military environment. The second phase is physical and psychological rehabilitation. Former child soldiers are frequently in poor physical condition and have sustained massive psychological trauma as a result of their military service and age. The third and final phase is reintegration with families and the community. Successful reintegration, Singer argues, must include sustained follow-up support. This refers to programs for building self-capacity and extended counseling. The entire process of demobilization to rehabilitation may take months, if not years, to complete, and will depend on the capacity of the children and the resources with which they are provided.

**USE OF CHILD SOLDIERS IN THE UGANDAN CIVIL WAR**

In the ongoing Ugandan civil war, both the rebel forces and the government continue to abduct and recruit children to serve as soldiers. The Ugandan People’s Defense Force (UPDF), the government army, has been engaged for over 20 years in a civil war with the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), a northern rebel group led by Joseph Kony. The latest temporary ceasefire lapsed March 1, 2007.

**LRA recruitment practices**

The LRA recruits many children, often forcibly, in northern Uganda. This problem has continued to worsen. The LRA abducts children from homes, schools, and off the streets in northern Uganda to fight against the government, or, in the case of many young girls, serve as servants or sex slaves for LRA commanders and their households. According to the UNICEF definition, these girls are considered of child soldiers. Some children are sold to Sudan in exchange for arms, or else executed to “toughen up” other abducted children. Recruited children’s families and neighbors are often murdered to eliminate any incentive for the children to escape the LRA. Sometimes the children themselves are forced to kill their own family members and neighbors, to reinforce the perception that they may never again return to their homes.

Over the past 20 years of civil war, as many as 30,000 northern Ugandan children have been forcibly abducted or coerced by the rebel LRA to serve as soldiers, laborers, and sex slaves. The number of abductions has increased dramatically during the past four years. Children in rural, isolated areas are at higher risk of being kidnapped by the LRA. Up to 40,000 children flee their homes in the countryside every night to sleep in relatively safer more populated areas. For these “night commuters,” densely populated towns are generally safer than the open countryside.

**Government recruitment practices**

The UPDF recruits children who have been rescued from the LRA to send them back to the front on the opposite side. The government army recruits children during the debriefing process for “rescued” children, referring to those who are captured by the UPDF in combat. The debriefing process, which takes about one week, is used by the government forces to gather military information on LRA movements. Former LRA child soldiers are promised salaries, new uniforms, and an alternative to living on the street, all in exchange for joining the UPDF. These children can refuse, of course, but those that do risk incurring insults and reproaches from their would-be recruiters.

In addition to recruiting boys to fight in the army against the LRA, the government also promises salaries to children who join the Local Defense Units, LDUs, or “home guards,” also
fights the LRA with the national government army at the local level. The meager salary promised by the government is enough to convince many children, including former combatants, to help provide security for local villages and towns against LRA attacks. However, it is unclear whether the LDUs are effective at preventing LRA child abductions in northern Uganda.

It is difficult to determine whether Human Rights Watch’s sample of interviews represents systematic recruitment of children by the government, or just inappropriate actions of independent army units. However, the Museveni government has used children as soldiers before. Thousands of children fought with President Museveni when he overthrew the previous head of Uganda, Milton Obote. Museveni’s National Resistance Army (NRA) had few men, and little time to train them, so they used boys and girls as supplemental soldiers.

**DEMOBILIZATION AND REHABILITATION STRATEGIES USED IN UGANDA**

The Ugandan government works with NGOs and international organizations, including the UN, to provide psychological counseling programs for demobilized child soldiers, trace the children’s families, and reintegrate the children into their families and communities. These measures have had mixed success.

**Centralized approach: national government strategies**

Children who have been released, have been “rescued,” or have escaped from the LRA are usually brought to the nearest army detachment, and eventually sent to the army’s Child Protection Unit (CPU), where they are debriefed. From the CPU, these children are taken to one of the NGO rehabilitation centers located in various cities.

This centralized approach assumes that the trauma experienced by child soldiers requires specialized, individual care in a specific setting before they are reunited with their families. This approach focuses on providing medical care to the children, tracing their families, and getting them to participate in “psychosocial” programs before being reintegrated into their communities.

The centralized approach also assumes, perhaps dangerously, that the government has the best interests of the children in mind. Since the government is an active participant in an ongoing civil war, it is difficult to determine whether it can be trusted to help members on the opposite side of the conflict. Nonetheless, Uganda’s status as a sovereign nation gives the government an effective monopoly on centralized rehabilitation programs. Foreign interventions would be doomed to failure without cooperation or at least the consent of the government.

**Community-based approach: international organizations and NGO strategies**

Once the children are taken to an IO or NGO program center, these organizations then attempt to find the families of the children, and reintegrate the former child soldiers into their communities. Community-based approaches to rehabilitation and reintegration take more cultural and social factors into account. However, these localized centers face serious funding and human resource constraints.

The UN and many NGOs favor community-based approaches, which argue that the centralized approach ignores children’s cultures and inherent adaptability. Centralized strategies can be insensitive to cultural differences. Joan Giller, a doctor who visited Uganda to supervise psychological counseling for victims of war and torture, found that many of the potential program beneficiaries saw the therapies as distinctly Western and rejected those counseling programs in favor of more practical, and culturally-neutral, financial and material transfers.

Cultural and social factors, such as focusing on family reintegration and avoiding isolation or stigmatization, are important to the community-based approach. Proponents of these methods argue that it is dangerous to make the trauma the center of the children’s experience. Children may be more resilient to their trauma if they are older, have role models who provide strategies for coping with the trauma, and have the support and encouragement of their communities.

However, funding to support these rehabilitation centers and programs is often very constrained, particularly given the broad scope of the problem. This limits the efficacy of these programs. For example, World Vision’s child soldier rehabilitation centers in northern Uganda often maintain six times their capacity of children cycling through the program. Facing this overflow, NGOs might not be able to provide the attention or resources the children require.

**STRATEGIES USED IN SIMILAR COUNTRY CASES**

Many of the strategies used in other conflicts involving child soldiers are similar to those used by the international community in Uganda; however, there are subtle differences in the contexts of these cases that may affect the general applicability of these options to Uganda.

**Preventing recruitment**

The international community has tried and failed to prevent the recruitment of child soldiers world-wide but particularly in African nations. This might be because international laws are difficult to enforce, especially in civil wars where distinctions are blurred between combatants and civilian non-combatants. In addition, it is difficult to objectively identify who is a child in these conflicts. In many African nations – Honwana uses the examples of Angola and Mozambique – boys and girls often assume adult roles in society in times of peace and war.

Local figures, including parents and community members, have had mixed success in preventing recruitment. Often they lack the resources or capacity to prevent their children from being taken away to serve in an armed force. In other cases, they were simply ignorant of their rights. National governments have generally not been helpful in these circumstances, presumably because they are typically actively
involved in the conflict and are dedicating resources to fighting.

**Demobilizing, rehabilitating, and reintegrating**

Honwana provides examples of centralized demobilization and rehabilitation programs from Mozambique and Angola. She specifically cites the creation of a centralized treatment center as one of Mozambique’s failures. As part of the ‘healing’ process, former child soldiers were socially isolated in the Lhanguene center, and forced to discuss with counselors atrocities they committed or witnessed during the war. Honwana argued that the program failed, as children were unable or unwilling to complete the program. Margaret McCallin found similar results in her UN study on the impact of conflict on children. McCallin found that a focus on mental health might divert attention and resources away from more pressing concerns about reintegrating former child soldiers into civil society.

However, in his evaluation of the same Lhanguene Center in Mozambique, psychologist Neil Boothby is much more positive. Boothby agrees that the Lhanguene Center served mainly as a political tool (to publicize the atrocities committed by the rebel group, Renamo) and had negative side effects, such as reinforcing the idea that children would not be welcomed back to their families or communities. Despite the challenges though, he found that the centralized family tracing and reunification program was very successful, and all of the boys’ families were eventually located.

Specific programs that were technically ‘centralized’ successfully took advantage of social factors that eased the reintegrative process. By working with community leaders Save the Children, an NGO, government social workers successfully funded and implemented long-term programs, including apprenticeships and reconciliation projects, to rehabilitate the former child soldiers.

Centralized methods can be viewed in stark contrast to the indigenous rehabilitation methods Honwana also documents, which focus on reuniting children with their families and leaving the past behind them. Moreover, trauma centers focus on the children as individuals, whereas community-based methods focus on the broader social environment. In Angola, Honwana writes, children faced general problems in the reintegration phase that were created by the lack of resources and institutions. Former child soldiers were given a care package with some clothing, currency, and food, but upon arriving back in their communities were unable to resume life where they had left off years before. Lacking educational or vocational training programs and other resources, many children ended up on the streets or in occupations comparable to slavery. In Sierra Leone, for example, former child soldiers were sent to work in the diamond mines for little or no pay because they had no other economic opportunities after the war.

**CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:**

**NEW STRATEGIES FOR UGANDA**

Actions taken by the national government, foreign states, IOs, and NGOs in Uganda are an admirable beginning but have not gone far enough to address the problem of child soldiers used by both sides in the current civil war. Countries similar to Uganda, such as Angola, Mozambique, and Sierra Leone, have used different strategies to address the problem with mixed results. Lessons learned from these country cases are applicable in Uganda.

The international community can implement a combination of several strategies to address the problem of child soldiers, specifically focusing on their use in the Ugandan civil war. Recommended strategies are based on lessons learned from the experiences of countries facing similar problems.

1. **End the conflict.** The international community should focus on ending the conflict to decrease demand for child soldiers, preventing recruitment to limit their supply, and demobilizing and rehabilitating identified child soldiers. This would be the most effective strategy for reducing the use of child soldiers. The process of demobilizing and rehabilitating child soldiers should begin with the end of the conflict in which they are participating. However, this might be infeasible in Uganda, where the civil war has endured for decades.

2. **Prevent recruitment.** If ending the conflict is not possible, as it might be in the Ugandan case, then the international community should support national and community efforts to try to prevent abduction and recruitment of child soldiers by the LRA or UPDF. This may involve, for example, monitoring rural areas or towns to make these areas safer for children; however, this is clearly a short-term strategy. Long-term policies should aim to improve economic opportunities in northern Uganda, to offer communities more constructive alternatives to fighting.

3. **Improve identification methodology.** It is also difficult to identify child soldiers among members of armed forces. Using an age threshold is a positive first step, but should take social and cultural values into account so it will not be an arbitrary cut-off. In addition, the identification and demobilization of girls accompanying armed forces presents special challenges, since girls may serve as sex slaves, servants, or soldiers. Some girls may have become pregnant and borne children of their own during their time with the armed forces. Each of these roles carries specific social stigmas that these girls must engage during the rehabilitation process.

4. **Demobilize, rehabilitate, and reintegrate.** When child soldiers are identified, the international community can use centralized and decentralized (local, community-based) methods to demobilize, rehabilitate, and reintegrate them. There is no one right way to rehabilitate or reintegrate demobilized children, but the international community can most effectively implement a bottom-up approach to this process. International organizations, states, and international NGOs should focus on providing community and family members with the resources and assistance they need to successfully reunite and reintegrate former child-soldiers with their communities. This is an important part of the rehabilitation process, since it is often difficult for a child to
deal with emotional issues of abuse before they even know where or with whom they will be living.\textsuperscript{57} It is particularly important to build the capacities of recipients, since without any complementary technical assistance the effectiveness of financial aid will probably be low.

5. Provide resources for education and training. Finally, international actors should help provide sustained financial resources and technical assistance to institutionalize formal and informal educational and vocational training programs for demobilized child soldiers. With broader missions beyond just formal education, schools can also serve as bases for local interventions by becoming centers to mobilize community members and resources.\textsuperscript{58} These programs can build capacity for former child soldiers to better take advantage of long-term economic, political, and social opportunities following the reintegration process. Even if these opportunities do not exist at present, which might be the case in northern Uganda, strategies to accumulate human capital should aim to improve the overall development conditions of the region in the long-term.

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ENDNOTES

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