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Child Soldiers and Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Programs: The Universalism of Children's Rights vs. Cultural Relativism Debate

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Since the early 1990s, the phenomenon of child soldiering has received an increasing amount of attention as a result of three internationally significant events. First, the signing of the international Convention of the Rights of the Child in 1989-which was subsequently ratified by 191 countries (Fernando, Jude, 2001)-put the rights of children on the international agenda of the United Nations (UN). Second, the end of the Cold War in 1989 brought about an increase of UN peacekeeping missions along with disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programs (DDR) over the course of the following two decades. The combination of global attention on children's rights and to international intervention in civil conflicts led to the third event, which was the 1996 publication of the UN report by Graça Machel titled *The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*. The report estimated that there were approximately 300 000 child soldiers worldwide, a figure first put forth by Rachel Brett and Margaret McCallin (Hart, Jason, 2006). These three events brought the issue of child soldiering to the forefront, and as a result both the international community and academics have been interested in understanding who child soldiers are, what they do and how they are demobilized and reintegrated into civilian life.

In an effort to help practitioners develop and implement better DDR programs, this article identifies the problems and "best practices" of DDR programs put forward in the literature and contextualizes them within the on-going philosophical debate between the proponents of the universalism of children's rights and the proponents of the cultural relativity of childhood and children's rights. By contextualizing the practical within the philosophical, we can see how the current impasse of the philosophical debate and its framing of the practical issues leads to important gaps and blind spots in the research and evaluation of DDR programming.

As the notion of child soldiering and the participation in armed conflict is in direct contradiction to the post-modern Western definition and understanding of childhood (Hart, Jason, 2006), the international community and international human rights groups have declared that child soldering is a grave abuse of children's rights (CAUCS, n.d.). Consequently, the broader issue of child soldiering and the more specific issue of their demobilization and reintegration into civilian life are part of the on-going debate between the proponents of the universalism of children's rights and the proponents of a culturally sensitive understanding of children's rights. The universalist perspective of children's rights believes that "childhood constitutes a coherent group or a state defined by identical needs and desires, regardless of class, ethnic, or racial differences [and is] based on an assumed identity of the biological and physiological attributes of children across the world (Fernando, Jude, 2001, p. 18). Since children across the world are deemed to have the same needs universalists believe that the same support and protection mechanisms can and should be applied

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to children world-wide. As universalists have declared child soldiering an abuse of children's rights and believe that all children require the same protection, the universalist agenda within international organizations and human rights groups is therefore to strictly regulate and punish the use of child soldiers. On the other hand, cultural relativists argue that childhood is "a social construction; its meaning is negotiated between different individuals and groups, often with conflicting interests. Thus, childhood is relative" (Fernando, Jude, 2001, p.18-19). Cultural relativists therefore critique the universalist perspective for ignoring the "social, cultural, and political diversity of the meaning of childhood and hence of children's rights in different cultures" (Fernando, Jude, 2001, p. 18). They advocate for a better understanding of the local conditions and dynamics that define and shape the experience of the child soldier as well as his/her perception of these experiences. Indeed, one of the biggest critiques advanced by the cultural relativists is the fact that the "advocacy agenda has been articulated and pursued not only with little attention to what their humanitarian colleagues in the field know, but also without sufficient analysis of the political, social, economical, and military dynamics of particular conflicts" (Cohn, Ilene, 2004, p. 536).

Consequently, concerning the issue of child soldiers, Alexandre Vautravers (2009) explains that "the International Community must … chose between … pragmatism and cultural relativism, on one side, versus idealist and long-term objectives on the other" (p. 104). These contrasting perspectives not only influence the theoretical framing of this issue but also greatly influence the development and implementation of the DDR programs that are intended to meet the needs of child soldiers.

The universalist vs. cultural relativist debate of children's rights in relation to child soldiers has most recently been brought forward by Ah-Jung Lee (2009) in her publication titled *Understanding and Addressing the Phenomenon of 'Child Soldiers': The Gap between the Global Humanitarian Discourse and the Local Understandings and Experiences of Young People's Military Recruitment*. The author strongly advocates for a more culturally sensitive and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon of child soldiers in order for the international community to appropriately and effectively deal with this issue. This publication is indicative of the type of research dominating the discussion of child soldiers and their reintegration. While the literature on international conventions that regulate the use of child soldiers and the literature on the community level implementation of DDR programs from the international organizations' perspective are thick and rich, the literature presenting the communities' perspective is more limited, while the literature presenting the child soldiers' perspective barely exists.

In an effort to contribute to this debate, the following questions need to be asked: What do the universalists identify as being the main problems and difficulties of current DDR programs for child soldiers? What do the cultural relativists identify as being the main problems and difficulties? What are the common concerns and points of contention? In order to answer these questions, the international definition of a child soldier and a description of DDR programs for child soldiers will be presented, followed by the problems and difficulties of DDR programs identified by the universalists and the cultural relativists, an analysis of these issues, a general critique of the literature, and suggestions for further research.

INTERNATIONAL DEFINITION OF A CHILD SOLDIER

The post-modern Western notion of childhood defines children as weak, vulnerable, irresponsible, and innocent in comparison to adults who are said to be strong, mature, intelligent and responsible for their actions (Rosen, David, 2007; Shepler, Susan, 2005). It is therefore generally agreed upon (from this perspective) that children should not engage in armed conflict. As a result, the debate over the definition of a

child soldier at the international level has revolved primarily around the issue of age, that is, what age distinguishes a child from an adult? The implications of this debate pertain to responsibility and accountability for one's actions, that is, at what age can one demonstrate agency of thought and action and therefore be responsible for those thoughts and actions? By seeking to distinguish children from adults based on agency and responsibility it is assumed that children are not responsible for their thoughts and actions while adults are in full control of the latter and can therefore be held accountable. Consequently, the post-modern Western notion of childhood as a time of innocence, inexperience and vulnerability is transposed to the issue of child soldiers through the development and implementation of international tools that define and regulate the use of child soldiers.

The main organizations involved in the development and adoption of these international tools are the United Nations (UN), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Office of the Special Representative of Children and Armed Conflict (OSRCAC), International non-governmental organizations (INGO), such as Save the Children, and human rights groups, such as the Coalition Against the Use of Child Soldiers (CAUCS). As these organizations are all Western based and apply a rights-based approach to the problem, the post-modern Western notion of a child and of childhood guides the definition and regulation of child soldiers.

Although the 1949 Geneva Conventions were the first international conventions to "specifically provide for children in situations of armed conflict" (Kuper, Jenny, 2000, p. 33), it is the 1977 Additional Protocols I and II that specifically deal with the issue of child soldiers. Protocol Additional I applies to interstate wars and sets the minimum age of participation in armed conflict at fifteen. Although it encourages state parties to prioritize the recruitment of older children first (15 to 18 year olds), it does allow for the "voluntary enrolment" of children under the age of fifteen (Kuper, Jenny, 2000; Rosen, David, 2007, p. 300). As for Protocol Additional II, it applies to intrastate wars and presents a "comprehensive ban on the use of any person under 15 years of age as a child soldier in all civil wars and insurgencies other than wars of national liberation" (Rosen, David, 2007, p. 301). In other words, children under the age of 15 can voluntary participate in interstate conflicts and national liberation wars but cannot participate in intrastate conflicts or civil wars and insurgencies. According to David Rosen (2007), the distinction between the two types of conflicts is a reflection of the signatories of the Protocols which, at the time, included governments that had benefited from the use of child soldiers in their own anti-colonial and national liberation struggles and sought to protect their access to this resource while denying it to potential future insurgencies or civil wars against their own governments.

Twelve years later, the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) became the most comprehensive international convention on children's rights and defined a child as being a person under the age of eighteen. However, for child soldiers, the cut off age of 15 remains, with a comprehensive ban on the voluntary participation of any person under the age of 15, regardless of the type of conflict (CRC 1989 [article 38]; de Berry, Jo, 2001; Francis, David, 2007; Kuper, Jenny, 2000). Although the CRC is internationally lauded as being the most comprehensive tool for the recognition and respect of children's rights and is the most ratified convention in history, many parties involved in the drafting of the Convention, such as UNICEF and a variety of human rights and children's rights groups, strongly advocated for a comprehensive ban of any person under the age of 18, calling for a "straight-18" approach (Lee, Ah-Jung, 2009; Rosen, David, 2007). As a result, the 1997 Cape Town Principles, led by UNICEF, the 1999 African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, the 1999 International Labour Organisation's Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour (which defines child soldiering as one of the worst forms of child labour) and the 2000 Optional Protocol to the CRC on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict set

the age of 18 as the minimum age of participation in armed conflict and do not recognize any voluntary recruitment under the age of eighteen (Francis, David, 2007; Rosen, David, 2007). However, it is important to note that the 1998 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, which defines the recruitment and use of child soldiers as a war crime in both interstate and intrastate wars, uses the age of 15 as the cut-off mark for participation in armed conflict (Cohn, Ilene, 2004; Francis, David, 2007; Kargbo, Franklyn, 2004; Rosen, David, 2007; Singer, Peter, 2004).

As we can see from these international tools, children under the age of 15 or 18 cannot participate in armed conflict, whether voluntarily or forcibly, and a blanket definition of a "child" based strictly on age is applied internationally. It is therefore within this framework that DDR programs are designed for child soldiers.

DDR PROGRAMS FOR CHILD SOLDIERS

DDR programs for ex-combatants play a crucial role in the transition to peace once a peace accord has been signed between the warring parties. The objective of DDR is to enable a safe and peaceful transition from military to civilian life by disarming ex-combatants, demobilizing them and helping them to reintegrate into their communities in order to pursue a civilian life or to integrate them into a new national army or police force (UN DDR Resource Centre, n.d.). The DDR process for child soldiers is different than the process for adult ex-combatants, because, according to the UN DDR Resource Centre, "children cannot be legally recruited, …[and] measures that aim to prevent their recruitment, or that attempt to reintegrate them into their communities, should not be viewed as a routine component of DDR, but as an attempt to prevent or redress a violation of children's human rights" (UN DDR Resource Centre, n.d.). As a result, in order to protect child soldiers' rights and to meet child soldiers' special needs, the World Banks sets the following guidelines for DDR programs: "child soldiers must be separated from military authority and protected through the establishment of special reception centres during demobilization, as long as their stay prior to being reunited with their families and communities is as short as possible" (Knight, Mark, et al., 2004, p. 507). Furthermore, reintegration programs "should emphasize three key components: family reunification, psychological support and education, and economic opportunity" (Knight, Mark, et al., 2004, p. 503).

Child protection personnel, usually directed by UNICEF, will first separate the children from the adults at disarmament and demobilization sites. The objective of the separation is to break up the relationship of authority and the links of control between the child soldiers and their commanders and to ensure that they are offered the reintegration packages developed for children (Williamson, John, 2006). The two main differences between the adult and child reintegration packages are that adults receive a cash allowance on site and very little assistance with longer-term reintegration (Williamson, John, 2006). Children, as per the World Bank guidelines, are reinserted and reintegrated through local Interim Care Centres (ICC) that are set up, paid for and run by INGOs, such as UNICEF and Save the Children, in partnership with local NGOs (Knudsen, Christine, 2004; The Save the Children Fund, 2007; Wessells, Michael, 2004; Williamson, John, 2006). Children will generally spend 2 weeks to 6 months in ICCs and will receive a wide range of services that will vary according to the needs of the children and the means of the NGOs (Boothby, Neil, et al., 2006; The Save the Children Fund, 2007; Wessells, Michael, 2004; Williamson, John, 2006; Zack-Williams, Tunde, 2006). The primary services include food, clothing and medical treatment. Although child soldiers can suffer from a great variety of illnesses, some of the more pressing medical issues they generally face are malnutrition, open or infected wounds, STDs and for some, drug addiction. Once their condition has stabilized, children can then be either slowly reintegrated into a local school or, if they are older and have been out of school for many years,

they can take part in an education program tailored to focus on basic reading, writing and mathematical skills (Boothby, Neil, et al., 2006; The Save the Children Fund, 2007; Wessells, Michael, 2004; Williamson, John, 2006; Zack-Williams, Tunde, 2006). Vocational and skills training programs may also be offered and include vocations such as hairdressing, radio and bicycle repair, carpentry, mechanics and sewing, etc. ICCs also offer psychosocial support activities, which can include art, singing and dancing, sports, play, storytelling, and group discussions (Boothby, Neil, et al., 2006; The Save the Children Fund, 2007; Wessells, Michael, 2004; Williamson, John, 2006; Zack-Williams, Tunde, 2006). Finally, ICCs are responsible for tracing the families and communities of child soldiers and preparing them for the return of the child. Once the family and community have been traced, a small awareness and sensitization campaign will take place in order to inform the family and community on both the types of experiences that the children lived as soldiers and their future needs as they transition to a civilian life (The Save the Children Fund, 2007). These campaigns will also introduce the notion of –and promote– children's rights. In many cultures, traditional cleansing rituals are required in order for the child to be accepted into the community and ICCs will generally pay for, and help organize, these rituals (Williamson, John, 2006). Once a child has been reintegrated into the community, a follow-up service is offered and an ICC staff will visit the family and help them solve the difficulties they may be facing. Some of these difficulties can include aggression and violence on the part of child, symptoms of post-traumatic stress, disobedience, rejection from community activities, etc.

Academics have recently begun studying the long-term impacts of child soldier DDR programs and identifying "lessons-learned" (Stark, Lindsay, et al., 2008; Wessells, Michael, 2004; ibid, 2006). The great majority of studies were done in Mozambique (Boothby, Neil, et al., 2006; Honwana, Alcinda, 2007), Sierra Leone (Cohn, Ilene, 2004; Kostelny, Kathleen, 2004; Williamson, John, 2006; Zack-Williams,Tunde, 2006) and Uganda (Chrobok, Vera, et al., 2008; McKay, Susan, 2004).

DDR PROGRAMS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF UNIVERSALISTS: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF "BEST PRACTICES"

After the 10th anniversary of the Cape Town Principles in 2007, Lindsay Stark et al. (2008) published a review of the literature on child soldiers critically examining the "best practices" that had evolved over the past 10 years. The authors conclude that there is an important lack of "systematic data" to support many of the "lessons-learned" and "best practices" that are being reported by academics studying DDR programs (Stark, Lindsay, et al., 2008, p. 540). Consequently, the following issues presented are to be reviewed with this caveat in mind.

A variety of studies have concluded that the key to a successful DDR process is family and community acceptance and reconciliation (Stark, Lindsay, et al., 2008) and that successful practices that enhance acceptance and reconciliation are community sensitization (Boothby, Neil, et al., 2006; Stark, Lindsay, et al., 2008; Williamson, John, 2006), traditional cleansing rituals (Boothby, Neil, et al., 2006; Honwana, Alcinda, 2007; Stark, Lindsay, et al., 2008; Wessells, Michael, 2004; Williamson, John, 2006), and psycho-social support that is reflective of local social and cultural practices. Sensitization and awareness campaigns are important in helping local communities better understand the conditions in which child soldiers lived. Because child soldiers are often at the forefront of armed battles taking place in villages – destroying crops, livelihoods and causing massive displacements– local communities can have difficulty understanding the extent to which some child soldiers were themselves brutalized and forced to commit heinous acts of violence and human rights abuses. Sensitization campaigns are therefore a necessary first step towards reconciliation. Once the community better understands the experiences of child soldiers, traditional cleansing rituals can help child soldiers reconnect with their

communities. By symbolically cleansing past violent actions, such rituals can help child soldiers break away from their past and take on a new civilian identity by helping them to reconnect emotionally and culturally with their local community. This is especially important for child soldiers who identified their armed group as their family.

Another successful practice identified by academics and practitioners are the educational opportunities that are generally offered with DDR programs. However, further research has found that although the majority of children greatly benefit from access to education, some former child soldiers are not interested in continuing their education (Boothby, Neil, et al., 2006). Since child soldiers are being reintegrated into an economically strained and uncertain post-conflict society, many prefer not go to school but to start working immediately in order to survive. This is mostly the case for older children who have spent the majority of their lives with an armed group and who, as a result, are used to working and taking care of themselves. Although vocational training programs are an interesting option for these older children who want to work, research has found that in order to be successful, training programs must be based on a local market analysis that determines if the local post-conflict economy can absorb and sustain these new economic activities (Cohn, Ilene 2004; Stark, Lindsay, et al., 2008; Williamson, John, 2006). If not, there is a serious risk of further disillusionment and an attraction to lucrative criminal activities.

Another successful practice that is currently being critically re-examined is the use of ICCs. Although they are generally found to be a practical way of offering a variety of services to child soldiers and to monitor and support their reintegration into what is very often a fragile and shaken post-conflict community, some authors argue that the use of these centres can lead to dependence on the services offered if there is not enough funding to properly support longer term reintegration efforts (Cohn, Ilen, 2004; Stark, Lindsay, et al., 2008; Wessells, Michael, 2004). Furthermore, by identifying these children as ex-soldiers and by offering much needed services to only one fragment of the local population, ICCs can inadvertently create dangerous social tensions. Indeed, one of the main problems identified in the literature is the overwhelming amount of attention and support given to child soldiers to the detriment of other children who have also suffered throughout the conflict (Wessells, Michael, 2004).Many of these children struggling to survive in a post-conflict setting are in need of the same services offered to child soldiers: health, family tracing (as a result of displacement), access to education and vocational training, and psycho-social support. Labelling child soldiers and supporting them in isolation from the other children in a setting where the majority of children are in need of the same services can lead not only to stigmatization and jealously, which are counterproductive to reintegration, but can also lead to an increase in the recruitment of child soldiers as more children seek to have access to the services offered by the DDR programs (Boyden, Jo, 2003; Stark, Lindsay, et al., 2008;The Save the Children Fund, 2007;Wessells, Michael, 2004).

A third critical issue is the lack of research on the DDR process for girls and on the experience of girl soldiers in general. In some cases, girls may not be identified as soldiers by the fighting forces and therefore are not brought to participate in the DDR process. More research is needed on how to best identify these girls and how to reintegrate them into society. However, since being identified as a girl soldier in some contexts can lead to social stigmatization, exclusion and threats to their physical safety, some girls purposely avoid a formalized DDR process that would identify them as former soldiers (Kostelny, Kathleen, 2004; McKay, Susan, 2004). As a result, many girls ‘spontaneously demobilize’ and ‘anonymously’ reintegrate into their communities (Kostelny, Kathleen, 2004; McKay, Susan, 2004). Although the anonymity might benefit them in some ways, it also makes it much more difficult to identify their needs and to provide them with support, especially medical attention

(as many suffer from STDs, infections and fistulas), and education and income generating opportunities. Furthermore, girls who have had children have more difficulty spontaneously demobilizing and anonymously reintegrating into their communities as they must identify the father of their children, thereby linking them to the fighting group (Kostelny, Kathleen, 2004; McKay, Susan, 2004). Consequently, some of these girls choose to stay in the fighting group as they know that reintegration into their community would be extremely difficult and threaten their survival (Kostelny, Kathleen, 2004; McKay, Susan, 2004).There is therefore a need for further research on how to appropriately reach out to these girls and provide them with the DDR services.

Finally, it has been argued that DDR programs need to take into account the difficulties inherent in a post-conflict setting, how these difficulties impact the reintegration of child soldiers, and the role of reintegration as part of larger peace building efforts. (Stark, Lindsay, et al., 2008). As Michael Wessells (2004) further explains:

> Families were dispersed, most people were displaced, schools were closed, and livelihoods were disrupted. What does reintegration mean in this context? We have to think about transforming an entire system rather than plugging people back into what is there. We must create community structures and processes that embody nonviolent values, further economic stabilization, create new opportunities, build the capacity of government and civil authorities, provide services, and develop social capital at all levels. (p. 523-524)

DDR PROGRAMS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE CULTURAL RELATIVISTS

Cultural relativists challenge the three tenets of the post-modern Western notion of childhood and children's rights within the context of child soldiers: 1) the use of age to differentiate children from adults, 2) the fundamental belief that children should not engage in armed conflict and 3) the vulnerability and lack of agency of children. It is through the critique of these three tenets that cultural relativists challenge DDR programs for child soldiers.

The use of age to differentiate children from adults is often irrelevant to the social-cultural context in which child soldiers live, regardless of whether or not the government of the country has ratified the CRC. In many non-Western countries rituals, initiations, marriage and childbearing are used as indicators of adulthood, rather than age (Francis, David, 2007; Gallagher, Michael, 2002; Lee, Ah-Jung, 2009). This has a direct impact on DDR programs which seek to isolate child soldiers from adult soldiers based strictly on age, as some child soldiers may not identify themselves as children and some communities into which they are being reintegrated may also not identify them as children (Francis, David, 2007; Lee, Ah-Jung, 2009). This is especially true for child soldiers who are married or have had children themselves during the conflict and would prefer to have access to the adult DDR packages rather than the child DDR packages in order to support their family. Neil Boothby et al. (2006) have reported incidences where some children "resisted this and insisted that they were adults" (p.188) and where some adolescents "wanted to be demobilized as adults so they could receive direct cash assistance and claimed to be above the age of 17" (p. 193).

As for the fundamental belief that children should not engage in armed conflict, cultural relativists provide a variety of examples of cultures and societies where engaging in armed conflict can either be a rite of transition to adulthood (Gallagher, Michael, 2002) or can be promoted and supported by the local community (Lee, Ah-Jung, 2009).Others argue that, in a context of a civil conflict, many children and youth voluntarily join armed groups out of concern for their social well-being and security. For example, Jo de Berry (2001) details the experience of young boys and men in Teso, Uganda and the reasons why they join the UPA:

> The Karamojong raiding saw the number of cattle in Teso fall from about 1 million to just 10,000 by 1991. This was a loss with deep emotional resonance for it represented the loss of wealth, security, and a future. The loss of cattle proved one of the main rallying cries for the UPA military leadership as they sought recruits. It was a lament keenly felt by young boys and men who know that without cattle they could not hope for marriage, a properly established home, rightfully held children, and the full requirements of what it is to be a mature man in Teso social life. They joined the UPA in anger and rebellion against their loss. They thus fought in the context of the state's failure to protect them from cattle raiding and in the context of how that loss felt to them in terms of their understanding of how maturity and masculinity is constituted in their society. (p. 101)

Although this example clearly demonstrates strong social, cultural and economic factors that led to children taking up arms, the author warns against simply interpreting this example to mean that "being a child fighter had cultural backing" (p. 101). Instead, the author argues that "it is more helpful to see taking up arms and participating in hostilities as embedded in the social relations and priorities of a particular time and place" (p. 101). Furthermore, many child soldiers also join in search of the power, authority and regular income that a gun can provide in the chaos of a civil conflict (Badjoko, Lucien, et al., 2005; Beah, Ishmael, 2007; Lee, Ah-Jung, 2009). Under these circumstances, some children may not wish to demobilize as their engagement with the armed group has brought them social prestige, safety, authority or income (Badjoko, Lucien, et al., 2005; Beah, Ishmael, 2007; Wessells, Michael, 2000). As a result, some do not wish to return to a subservient role in society (Lee, Ah-Jung, 2009). This is especially the case for girl child soldiers who were successful commanders and held important positions of authority (Stark, Lindsay, et al., 2008). Consequently, DDR programs that are mandated to demobilize and reintegrate every child may be forcing some to do so against their will. Also, by making it illegal for children to be part of armed forces, child soldiers are not allowed to become part of the new army or police force, thereby taking away what is very often their only marketable skill in a strained post-conflict economy. Many, in fact, become mercenaries and fight in other regional wars (Lee, Ah-Jung, 2009), thereby contributing to the destabilization of other countries and regions. By not reintegrating these youth in the national army or forces, peace building efforts in the region may be seriously compromised.

The final critique made by the cultural relativists is that the universalist perspective does not recognize the agency of children and youth in a conflict and post-conflict setting, thereby ensuring that child soldiers cannot be held accountable for their crimes and cannot be punished. This perspective has a direct impact on DDR programs as they seek to promote reconciliation and reintegration. Indeed, many communities want to hold child soldiers accountable for their crimes and believe that rights must be counterbalanced with responsibilities (Shepler, Susan, 2005).

An example from Sierra Leone demonstrates how communities can attribute agency and responsibility to child soldiers while DDR programs promote a different perspective. Following the Lomé peace agreement, a separate DDR process was established for child soldiers. Although this was greatly promoted by the international community, what actually occurred on the ground indicates the extent to which local communities attributed agency to the child soldiers. Child soldiers who had fought with the Civil Defence Forces were hailed as heroes and not innocent victims manipulated by adults into fighting for their country. As a result, they were accepted by and reintegrated into the communities and many did not receive DDR benefits as they were not deemed to be 'in need of help' by the local community. However, the reintegration of the rebel fighters from Revolutionary United Front (RUF) proved to be much more difficult. The communities did not wish to reintegrate them as they considered them to be the instigators of violence and civil unrest. As a result, INGOs who distributed DDR benefits took a more 'hands on' approach and implemented more activities in order to encourage the communities to accept and reintegrate the RUF fighters (Williamson, John, 2006). They engaged in community sensitization campaigns to encourage communities to reconcile with and reintegrate

these fighters, often using economic incentives in the form of funding for community schools while promoting the right to reintegration and the notion of victimhood over agency and responsibility (Shepler, Susan, 2005). Although it could be argued that this was the adult communities' perspective and may not accurately represent the lived experiences of child soldiers– as many children were indeed abducted and forced into fighting and committing gross human rights abuses against their will– there is evidence of manipulation of the child soldier and children's rights discourse by child soldiers themselves, which strongly reflects agency and responsibility:

> Among their friends and fellow soldiers, they try to maintain the status that being part of the fighting gives them. They wear combat clothes and sunglasses and brag about firing rocket-propelled grenade launchers. With NGOs they adopt the persona of the traumatized innocent, usually requesting aid in furthering their education. With community members and in school they act like normal kids, never mentioning the past. Thus their "reintegration" is achieved in social practice across a variety of contexts using a variety of strategically adopted identities. (Shepler, Susan, 2005, p. 199)

Although many children and youth were forced and manipulated while others were not, this citation demonstrates the extent to which it is extremely difficult to draw the line between what is considered manipulated behaviour and what is considered 'free will' as children navigate through their various social environments and adapt accordingly, whether it be as part of an armed group, at home with their families or in their communities. Whether the acts of violence were the result of manipulation, agency, or more realistically, a mix of both, the situation in Sierra Leone demonstrates how the issue of victimhood promoted by the universalist perspective is one of great contention for the local communities who have suffered tremendously and are, in some ways forced to reintegrate child soldiers in order to have access to much needed funding.

MOVING THE DEBATE FORWARD

As the arguments presented from both perspectives demonstrate, DDR programs are faced with complex social, cultural, and practical difficulties that range from developing the 'right formula of services' for child soldiers, to identifying who is a child soldier in need of support and who is not. However, the debate over, and criticism of, DDR aid provided to child soldiers is currently set up as an impasse between those who advocate for universal rights-based programming and those who criticise the very foundations and assumptions of that programming. Although universalists and cultural relativists both want to serve the best interests of the child, their perspectives are dichotomized. Consequently, we are left with the following fundamental questions: Who is a child soldier? Who is in need of DDR support? And what should DDR programming for child soldiers be comprised of?

In an effort to move the debate forward, Jason Hart (2006) proposes a revision of our understanding of the universal rights-based approach:

> At the conceptual level, there is a need to move beyond sterile debate around universalism versus cultural relativism in order to engage more fully with the realities of children's lives, which are inevitably shaped by ideas, practices, and power relations that are both local and global. It is essential to recognize that the vision of childhood manifest in the CRC may have only limited relevance for children who lack the social, economic, and political wherewithal to actualize this vision. Instead, they are faced with a set of realities that humanitarians, working in narrow accordance with a "rights-based approach", are currently ill-equipped to comprehend, let alone address. (p. 223)

Indeed, it is a serious problem if the rights-based approach set up to protect and defend against various abuses is actually an obstacle to the proper understanding of the nature and circumstances of these abuses, and therefore an obstacle to the development and implementation of a proper solution or protection mechanism. As a result, DDR programs need to engage in a more cultural relativist approach, not simply to justify or explain why children are fighting, as the debate very often reverts to, but to properly understand the local conditions and factors that will determine what is considered to be a successful demobilization and reintegration

according to the child and to the local community. However, as the international community may have difficulty properly understanding the local cultural and social dynamics that shape the DDR of child soldiers, more effort should also be directed towards preventing the global conditions that greatly influence armed conflicts to begin with, and this is where the international community can play a concrete role, rather than re-hashing what can sometimes be a philosophical debate:

> Through regulation, fighting organized crime and trafficking, partnership, nation-building assistance, and development, we must make the world safer and more responsible. (Vautravers, Alexandre, 2009, p. 107)

There is a strong need to refocus on the actual causes of the fighting in order to better understand how to demobilize and reintegrate child soldiers. Although, as the cultural relativists have argued and demonstrated, children and youth may want to engage in armed conflict and fight for a certain cause and be supported by their families and communities for doing so, this may not be their priority:

> If one talks with young people who are struggling to earn a living, who do not have a positive role in society, who wonder whether they will ever be able to marry, or whether they will be attacked by their communities [all reasons generally recognized as leading towards voluntary recruitment in armed conflict], one learns that the current living conditions pose the greatest stresses. (Wessells, Michael, 2004, p. 517)

Indeed, the example of the young Ugandan fighters described above (de Berry, Jo, 2001) illustrates this point. The youth wanted to fight for their cause and the community supported them and was proud of them for defending their cause. However, their priority was not whether they should engage in armed combat or not, their priority was to regain access to their cattle in order to be able to make a living and to be socially respected. In other words, from the perspective of the youth who voluntarily join armed groups, the problem is not whether they should engage in armed combat prior to a certain age or whether local social and cultural factors justify or not their engagement in armed conflict, the problem for them lies in the very reasons that drive the conflict in the first place. We must remember that the number one cause of child soldiers is conflict. Although the cultural relativists have brought forward an important perspective on this issue, by focusing entirely on the local and cultural point of view the focus shifts away from the actual causes of the conflict, which represents the major concern for the youth involved in the conflict. Consequently, a better understanding of these causes, along with their local and global influences, is necessary for the DDR of child soldiers and in the end will go a long way in promoting and respecting their fundamental human rights.

In order for a more complete picture of a complex reality to emerge, experts from various fields must come together, which is presently not the case:

> The [rights-based] movement does not seem to be building bridges to the political scientists, the economists, the bankers, and the corporate actors, who either have influence in or understanding of what is driving a particular conflict or a particular warring party. (Cohn, Ilene, 2004, p. 537)

Indeed, the success of a DDR program for child soldiers will be determined by its understanding of, respect for, and adaptability to local factors and conditions. In order to reach out to the experts, local and global, who have a better understanding of the complexity of the local dynamics of a conflict and the people affected, Jude Fernando (2001) believes that:

> What is required today is a constructive dialogue on the issue of childhood and children's rights that does not fall into the twin traps of relativism and universalism, that does not ignore the heterogeneity of children's lives or obscure the commonality of ways in which economic and political forces in an increasingly unstable and polarized world have affected the lives and experiences of these children. (p. 20)

Finally, child soldiers themselves need to be consulted during the development phase of the DDR program, and not simply presented with a pre-determined menu of options. As the research from both perspectives demonstrated above, there is very

little information on the opinions of child soldiers themselves. In the citation provided by Neil Boothby et al. (2006), which reports the universalist observation of child soldiers claiming to be older than 17 years old and requesting the cash handouts rather than the child soldier package, the authors do not provide any information as to why this might be. Also, with the citation provided by Susan Shepler (2005) regarding the cultural relativist observation about child soldiers adapting their behaviour to their context, that is behaving as 'soldiers' with their ex-child soldier friends, behaving as 'normal' children in school and behaving as 'victims in need of help' with NGOs, the author does not provide any information from the children themselves that might help to explain and better understand this behaviour observation and how it might impact DDR programs. As the experiences of child soldiers can vary tremendously from one child to the next, DDR programs need to be more sensitive to this complexity. However, in order to do so, much more research highlighting the perspective of child soldiers themselves is needed. Unfortunately, this may be extremely difficult to do in a post-conflict setting that is in the midst of a complex and shifting redefinition of its social fabric, social roles and local power dynamics, with some parties vying for change and others vying to maintain the status quo. It is therefore extremely important for DDR program implementers and children's rights advocates to understand the extent to which their own programming is a form of social engineering, and that it represents but one factor in a complex and multi-faceted transition period where there is a lot at stake, for the community and for the child soldiers themselves.

CONCLUSION

By contextualizing a review of the literature on DDR programs for child soldiers within the framework of the philosophical debate taking place between the universal rights-based approach and the cultural relativist approach to humanitarian and development work, gaps in the current research can be identified. The universal rights-based approach to demobilization and reintegration fails to take into account important social, cultural and personal influences that lead children to participate in armed conflicts in the first place and which greatly influence if, how and when the children will seek to disarm and reintegrate into civilian life. On the other hand, the cultural relativists narrow focus on the social and cultural factors that impact children's participation in armed conflict fails to recognize the important socio-economic causes of the conflict, which in return greatly shape the environment into which child soldiers are to be reintegrated.

As child soldiers are affected by global and local influences, both as soldiers and as individuals transitioning to a new civilian life, there is an important need to move away from the current impasse of the two dichotomized perspectives. In order to do so, both sides need to shift their focus and adapt to the local environment. This can be done by having experts from different disciplines come together and paint a more realistic picture of the conflict situation and provide a better understanding of the complex causes of conflict as well as the dynamics of reconstruction of post-conflict societies. Finally, more research on the perspective of the child soldiers themselves is needed in order to better understand how ex-child soldiers navigate through the post-conflict society and how they would like to be reintegrated.

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3 Comments

1. Ruairi

   POSTED AUGUST 25, 2010 AT 5:03 AM | PERMALINK

   A really interesting overview of a very complex subject. I wonder if you detected a difference in how local organisations approached DDR work and how INGOs worked? Might local groups be better placed to bridge the gap between the 2 perspectives (rights-based and cultural relativist)?

2. Ruairi

POSTED AUGUST 25, 2010 AT 5:12 AM | PERMALINK

(Apologies if this is a double-post, my first attempt seemed to disappear)

This is a great summary of a very complex issue for DDR programmes. I'd like to ask if you detected a difference between locally led DDR programmes, and those implemented by INGOs. Is it possible that local organisations might be well placed to reconcile the rights-based and cultural-relativist approaches?

3. Lysanne

POSTED AUGUST 27, 2010 AT 8:46 AM | PERMALINK

To Ruairi:

This is an excellent question and one that needs to be further researched. Unfortunately, the documents, reports and academic articles that I was able to obtain to research this article did not provide detailed information on the local organisations implementing DDR programmes. INGOs working with local NGOs to provide services and programming do not provide information on their local partner organisations in their official reports and documentation but present results and their official discourse. As for academics who have studied programs on site, they are normally given access to programs by larger INGOs and rarely mention the local partner. What is needed is to study and interview the local staff of the local NGOs implementing the programming in order to get a better understanding of how they interpret the child rights discourse, what are their short-term and long-term objectives (in other words, what do they consider as being a successful reintegration), what are their daily difficulties and barriers, and what would their ideal program look like. This would provide a good indication of how the rights-based ideals are defined, interpreted, adapted and concretely implemented on a daily basis in a particular local cultural context.

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