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Mozambique child soldier life outcome study: Lessons learned in rehabilitation and reintegration efforts

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Abstract

As the use of child soldiers continues to proliferate throughout the world, effective psychosocial interventions must be developed and evaluated. Our research shows that former child soldiers who are provided rehabilitative services and accepted back into their families and communities are able to become productive, responsible and caring adults.

In 1988, 39 captured or escaped child soldiers were brought by the Mozambican government to the Lhanguene Rehabilitation Center in Maputo, Mozambique's capital city. Interventions that focused on rehabilitating the children both psychologically and physically were initiated during their 6-month stay at the Lhanguene centre, and reintegration assistance was provided for 2 years thereafter to support their return to families and communities. Our research continued to follow these former child soldiers for 16 years, and focused on their psychological, social and economic functioning. The study included qualitative and quantitative data collection methods to obtain adult well-being outcomes and was also designed to identify interventions that enabled these child soldiers to re-enter civilian life and lead relatively productive lives. Efficacious rehabilitation activities included those that strengthened individuals' coping skills for anticipated trauma and grief, instilled a sense of social responsibility and promoted self-regulation and security (versus survival) seeking behaviour. Activities that supported long term reintegration and self-sufficiency included community acceptance and forgiveness, traditional cleansing and healing rituals, livelihoods and apprenticeships.

Keywords: *Child soldiers, life outcomes, psychosocial, mental health, social functioning, Mozambique*

Introduction

Over the past decade, the number of child soldiers has increased; as small arms and light-weight weapons become more available, children become more easily

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armed, as conflicts continue to simmer in forgotten corners of the post-Cold War world (Machel 2001). An estimated 300,000 boys and girls under the age of 18 years are currently participating in ongoing conflicts in Asia, Africa, Europe, the Americas and the former Soviet Union (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers 2005). Fortunately, the problem of child soldiering has not gone unnoticed, and increased human rights attention to it has led to new international legislation to protect under-aged children against armed recruitment.¹ The protection and welfare of child soldiers is now being included in the international community's peace and security agenda through several Security Council resolutions (United Nations Security Resolutions). These resolutions have led to a range of operational initiatives, including the deployment of child protection professionals in UN peacekeeping missions and the earmarking of tens of millions of dollars from government donors for child soldier prevention, disarmament, demobilization and rehabilitation programmes. In light of these recent developments, it is important to learn more about how children are affected by child soldiering experiences and what kinds of assistance enable their psychological recovery and social-economic reintegration over time.

This article offers findings of our longitudinal study on the life outcomes of Mozambican former child soldiers. Between 1988 and 2004, information was collected on male former child soldiers in Mozambique. Our research began at the Lhanguene Rehabilitation Center in Maputo, continued after these boys from the centre were reintegrated into their families and communities and culminated most recently in 2003–2004 with a study to document how some of these former child soldiers now fare as adults.²

1988–1990 journalistic accounts labelled Mozambique's children as a 'lost generation' and 'future barbarians'. Our research suggests that this is not the case. To the contrary, the majority of this group of former child soldiers that we have followed for the past 16 years have become productive, capable and caring adults. Most have regained a foothold in the economic life of rural Mozambique, are perceived by their spouses to be 'good husbands', are taking active steps to ensure their own children's welfare and are engaged in the collective affairs of their communities. Only a few continued their violent ways, or are so disordered that they have been unable to take hold of their lives.

At the same time, none of these former child soldiers is truly free from their pasts. All continue to struggle with psychological distress linked to their child-soldiering experiences. When troubling memories reappear from the past, these former child soldiers must rely solely on themselves, their families and friends for comfort and support, as there are no mental health professionals where they live. Many have managed to reduce the frequency of post-traumatic distress by identifying situations that have promoted painful thoughts and feelings in the past and avoiding them. They try not to dwell on troubling memories when they do emerge; rather, they consciously think about more positive aspects of their lives, re-engage in day-to-day work activities or seek solace in social activities, religious institutions, prayers and rituals. Wives, for the most part, are aware of their

husbands' struggles. They tend to encourage their husbands not to become overwhelmed by evasive thoughts and feelings, and compensate in other ways when they do become despondent. Extended family members and neighbours also are aware of these tendencies, and typically respond with patience, advice or support.

Our research also identified specific interventions that were important to enabling these former child soldiers' substantial recovery and reintegration. Activities that were identified as important were those that supported and strengthened individuals' coping skills for anticipated trauma and grief, as well as those that supported normative life cycle milestones. Additionally, activities that instilled a sense of social responsibility and promoted safe codes of conduct, self-regulation and security seeking behaviour were helpful. Over and above all this, however, was the need of the former child soldiers to be accepted by their families and communities after the war. Thus, apprenticeships, as well as community sensitization campaigns, community works projects and outward support of traditional community rites were some of the most important activities related to positive life outcomes of most of the former child soldiers.

Background

Mozambique's armed conflict lasted for almost 30 years. In 1964, Frelimo (The Mozambique Liberation Front) launched an armed insurgency for national liberation from the Portuguese colonists. Portugal bitterly resisted liberation efforts, but acquiesced after a 10-year war. In 1975, the minority regimes in South Africa and Rhodesia looked on in alarm when Mozambique declared itself an independent nation. Rhodesia, in particular, viewed this as a threat since it shared its eastern border with Mozambique and feared its own indigenous population would fight similarly for independence (Vines 1991). The Rhodesian secret police organized, trained and armed anti-Frelimo groups and disgruntled ex-Frelimo soldiers into an organization called the Mozambique National Resistance (Renamo) (Hanlon 1984). In 1977, after Mozambique gave sanctuary and support to guerrillas fighting the Rhodesian regime, Renamo infiltrated Mozambique and began its own brutal guerrilla operations.

In 1980, Renamo lost its sponsorship in Rhodesia after the minority regime fell and the country became Zimbabwe. South Africa then intervened and offered its territory as a sanctuary and training ground. With South African support, Renamo returned to Mozambique and continued to wage a guerrilla campaign to undermine both the country's infrastructure and the government's ability to govern by destroying factories, schools, health clinics and stores (Morgan 1990).

Mozambican children in war

Mozambique's conflict had a devastating impact on children. Surveys during this time revealed that a third of Mozambique's children died before they reached the

age of 5 years through starvation, malnutrition and preventable illnesses that paralleled the continuing conflict (UNICEF 1987).

What happened to Mozambican children who did survive beyond the age of 5 years? In 1989, in an effort to answer this question, members of our initial research team interviewed 504 children in 49 districts comprising seven of Mozambique's 10 provinces, covering a broad geographical range from Maputo in the south to Nampula in the north. Mozambican nationals asked a randomly selected sample of 252 boys and 252 girls between the ages of 6 and 15 years of age to describe their war-related experiences in detail. The results were staggering:

- 77% had witnessed murder, often in large numbers,
- 88% had witnessed physical abuse or torture,
- 51% had been physically abused or tortured,
- 63% had witnessed rape or sexual abuse,
- 64% had been abducted from their families,
- 75% of the abducted children were forced to serve as porters or human cargo carriers,
- 28% of the abducted children (all boys) were trained for combat.

In addition to the above statistics, children's descriptive accounts provided considerable insight into how Renamo socialized children into violence. Adults relied on physical abuse and humiliation as the main tools of indoctrination. In the first phase of indoctrination, Renamo members attempted to harden the children emotionally by punishing anyone who offered help or displayed feelings for others, thus conditioning them not to question the group's authority. Children were then encouraged to become abusers themselves. A progressive series of tasks (taking the gun apart and putting it back together, shooting rifles next to their ears to get use to the sound, killing cows) culminated in requests to kill unarmed human beings. Children were expected to assist adult soldiers without question or emotion. Those that resisted were often killed. Those that did well became junior 'chiefs' or garnered other rewards such as extra food or more comfortable housing. Upon reaching the final stages of training, normally after their first murder, Renamo marked the occasion with ceremonies that resembled traditional rites of passage. This process of mimicking traditional ceremonies appeared to be aimed at usurping children's ties to their families, communities and traditional ideas of right and wrong.

Methodology

Research in a war-torn setting is difficult (Jensen 1996). The 39 boy soldiers at the Lhanguene centre were not randomly selected. Rather, they were pulled by the government from detention centres and police stations in southern Mozambique and sent to Maputo, the nation's capital, in part for political reasons. The group of boys ranged in age from 6 to 16. All had been abducted from their homes

and spent between 2 months and 3 years in Renamo base camps. Unfortunately, no girls who had been with Renamo were selected to be in the centre.³ Nonetheless, we found that this group's child soldiering experiences were not unique. Between 1989 and 1990, our initial research team undertook a country-wide survey of 504 war-affected children throughout rural Mozambique. These findings indicate that the Lhanguene child soldiers' experiences were similar to those of other abducted children in Renamo base camps.

Early data collection tools were developed mainly to guide practical interventions. War related experiences (events, severity and duration) were recorded using a Life Events Profile. A Documentation, Tracing and Reunification protocol was developed to record detailed information on separated family members, primary caretakers, circumstances of separation, communities of origin, schools and education attainment, religion and other social ecology data.⁴ A Child Behavior Inventory Form (CBI) evolved through a free listing exercise⁵ with a convenience sample of local men and women in Maputo. This resulted in a cluster of questions designed to assess children's behaviour in three areas: aggression, traumatic symptoms and high-risk to pro-social behaviour⁶ (Bolton and Tang 2002). The CBI also established criteria for the centre's volunteer caretakers to record their observations of peer-to-peer and child-to-adult interactions.⁷ A modified CBI was developed for programme staff to monitor progress after the former child soldiers were reunited with their families and communities. Follow-up assessments of all 39 former child soldiers were conducted in 1988, 1989 and 1990. A number of these visits were video taped.

The 2003–2004 phase of our research located 31 of the 39 Lhanguene boy soldiers.⁸ Two Lhanguene boys had died from HIV-AIDS and six were in South Africa working in situations that did not permit the research team to complete the documentation. While arrangements have been made to finish these interviews when these former child soldiers return to Mozambique, the preliminary adult outcome findings presented here are based on 23 of the original Lhanguene boys. For this phase of the research, a former Lhanguene staff member conducted interviews, while Mondalane University students recorded results. It was impossible to regain access into rural communities or the lives of these former child soldiers without the presence of a known and trusted individual.⁹

We also had to take into account the considerable developments made in the field of mental health since 1988. The Harvard Trauma Questionnaire (HTQ), in particular, has become a 'standard' in the literature on international trauma assessment. Interestingly, many items in the HTQ match a number of the items on the original CBI scale developed out of our 1988 free listing exercise. We decided to adapt the Trauma Symptoms Checklist (TSCL) from the HTQ to assess the adult outcomes of these former child soldiers, recognizing that such scales are still problematic. We assessed content validity of the TSCL by piloting the questionnaire with key informants. As a result of the pretests, several modifications were made, as many nuances in the English language variables proved redundant when translated into local languages. Additionally, the scale

Table I. PTSD over time.

Question	Percentage of FCSs that responded either 'sometimes' or 'frequently'	
	1988	2003
Recurrent thoughts or memories of the most hurtful or traumatic events	100	70
Feeling as though the traumatic event(s) is happening again	63	39
Recurrent nightmares	52	45
Sudden emotional or physical reaction when re-minded of the most hurtful or traumatic moments	48	50
Inability to remember parts of the most hurtful or traumatic events	61	45
Avoid activities that remind you of the most hurtful or traumatic events	35	78

used from the TSCL matched the range and expression of symptoms documented through the CBI at the Lhanguene centre and in the study of 504 child soldiers in 1989. Specifically, six items were repeated at each interval between 1988 and 2003–2004 (see Table I) and were also mentioned by key informants in free listing exercises.

Focus groups were also conducted with family members, neighbours and village leaders. Conversations centred on the former child soldier and his relationships with his family and the wider community. The research team was interested in understanding how former child soldiers were perceived by others and if their behaviour was in any way atypical of standard norms. Focus groups lasted for about an hour and were audio-taped and translated into English.

Finally, given the nature and circumstances of this research, it was never our intention to 'diagnose' the mental health of these former child soldiers. Rather, our aim was to gain as accurate a picture as possible of how they have adapted over time, paying particular attention to their individual well-being and their roles as husbands, fathers and neighbours.

The Lhanguene boy soldiers

The Lhanguene centre

In 1988, Save the Children began its Children and War Program in Mozambique. The Program's initial focus was on 39 boy soldiers (between 6 and 16 years of age), all of whom had been abducted from their families by Renamo. They were trained to fight and, in many instances, encouraged to kill other human beings. Eventually, these boys escaped or were liberated from rebel strongholds. After brief stays in prisoner of war camps, the government decided to place them in the Lhanguene centre in Maputo, and asked Save the Children to provide psychological and social assistance.

Rehabilitation efforts at the Lhanguene centre focused on four inter-related components that were integrated into all centre activities:

1. *Establish safety and appropriate codes of conduct.* The former soldiers participated with the centre staff in setting acceptable behaviour norms (including rewards and punishments) and a peer-adult monitoring system to ensure a safe and supportive residence.
2. *Re-establish self-regulatory processes.* An assumption was made that problematic behaviour exhibited by former child soldiers was in part the result of previous coping and survival strategies learned during the war. Activities were developed to assist the former child soldiers in developing proper behaviour. These activities ranged from team sports to choreographed dance, music and group art requiring cooperative, synchronized and group-oriented behaviours in order to 'win' or be 'successful'.
3. *Promote security versus survival-seeking appraisal and behaviour.* Initially, the majority of former child soldiers continued to appraise events and human interactions from a survival perspective. Along with the activities package mentioned above, adult-child relations were also seen as a way to promote security-seeking versus survival-seeking appraisal and behaviour by establishing security and trust.
4. *Support meaning-making.* Personal narratives, drawing and child-adult discussions were employed to explore objective and subjective aspects of their child soldiering experiences. Traditional healers and religious leaders also provided ceremonies and services to help the boys come to terms with their past deeds and lost loved ones. Three common themes were integrated and repeated in all activities: renouncement of Renamo, devotion to government and love of family and community.¹⁰

Additionally, a family tracing and reunification programme, community sensitization campaigns, traditional ceremonies and apprenticeships were set up to assist the reintegration of these boys into their communities.

Maputo-based Mozambican government officials believed that the families of these former child soldiers would never accept their return because of the crimes they had committed. As part of their long-term planning, Save the Children staff undertook investigative trips to rural communities to see if these government reports were accurate. They were not. Overwhelmingly, family and community members who had lost their children to Renamo wanted them back. This was also true of community-level political leaders, but less so for senior district and provincial leaders. A family tracing and reunification programme was developed and relatives for all of the Lhanguene boys were eventually located.

The Lhanguene centre and the model of centre-based care have significant limitations. Though the concentration of resources in a centre-based setting assists in the expeditious provision of education, counselling and development of mentor relationships; the eventual closure of the centre rendered the relationships, especially the positive role modelling, built at the centre too short.

Demobilizing the children at the Lhanguene centre prolonged their return to their home communities where critical social learning takes place. As our investigative trips discovered, family and community members who had lost their children to Renamo wanted them back immediately. The first priority should have been to coordinate the boy's safe return home and to engage local leaders, healers and educators in recovery and healing processes.

Family reunification

A family tracing and reunification programme was developed to respond to the needs of children who were separated from their families as a result of the civil war. By the early 1990s, over 2,000 former Mozambican child soldiers were reunited with their families (UNICEF 2005). Procedures developed to identify, document, search and reunite children and families were organized into a six-part process:

1. *Identification.* The tracing and reunification effort began with an active search to identify all children in need of assistance in locating their family members. Procedures were devised to identify and document unaccompanied children in orphanages and other childcare institutions, hospitals and feeding centres, living on the streets in urban areas and with substitute families in refugee camps in neighbouring countries.
2. *Documentation.* Procedures and forms were produced to record biographical information on former child soldiers in need of assistance in locating lost family members.
3. *Tracing.* Active searches for the documented children's lost family members were initiated in various locations, including the child's original communities, *deslocado* centres, towns and other urban locations where people from the children's original communities might have fled, and refugee camps in neighbouring countries. Techniques were outlined for disseminating information on lost children through word-of-mouth and written communications, mass community meetings, poster canvassing and radio, newspaper and television announcements.
4. *Verification.* After a child's relative was identified, procedures were developed to verify whether or not both parties (the child and the relative) wanted to be reunited with one another.
5. *Reunification.* Guidelines were developed for the safe return of the child to the family. At the time of reunification, the family was provided with a 'kit' of basic food staples, farming tools and seeds as well as education and health vouchers to help with the transitional period.
6. *Follow-up.* Home visits by social workers from the National Directorate of Social Action, the nation's child welfare agency. Family members and neighbours also participated in reunification ceremonies.

Between December 1988 and May 1989, all of the Lhanguene boys were reunited with parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles or older siblings. Assessment reports and videotapes of initial reunifications reveal overt and reserved joy and excitement, as well as tears and words of sorrow over time spent apart. Subsequent follow-up visits in 1989 and 1990 found that all of the Lhanguene boys continued to be well received by their relatives. Only one boy required an alternative placement. He was initially returned to an uncle who shortly thereafter went to South Africa to work in the mines. The boy's maternal aunt immediately came forward and took the boy into her family. The following recorded comments are indicative of how these boys viewed family acceptance a year after their reunification:

- 'I was well treated; no one ever said anything bad about my participation in the war'.
- 'I was well received by my family, they made me part of the family and they shared their food with me'.
- 'They were glad to see me because they knew that I had suffered'.
- 'They paid lots of attention to me'.
- 'I was well received, they made a traditional ceremony of welcoming to inform and thank the ancestors for protecting me'.

No negative comments were recorded during 1989–1990.

Lessons learned

The greatest desire of Mozambican former child soldiers was to be reunified with their families. There are basic lessons that can be learned from Mozambique to assist similar programmes in Africa and other countries: reuniting children and families will be a high priority for war-affected communities, but not for government agencies or NGOs, especially in times of war, drought and starvation. Of course, this is due to prioritizing the immediate health needs of the population over reunification. As a result though, no government agency or NGO can be very effective in documentation, tracing and reunification without the active involvement of refugees, internally displaced peoples and local volunteers. Moreover, since lost family members are motivated to find one another, informal networks of people will already be communicating with each other about these matters. It is essential to tap into these networks and support the organic reunification efforts that will exist whenever a child is separated from their family.

Traditional ceremonies

Traditional beliefs play a central role in the lives of rural Mozambicans (Honwana 1998). They are at the core of their culture and the customs carry tremendous significance for the outcome people's lives: whether a person will have good fortune, find a spouse, be able to bear children and so on. Traditional ceremonies

accompany every life stage and are important for the maintenance of family bonds, ancestral relationships and personal strength.

All of the Lhanguene boys went through traditional ceremonies upon return to their villages. In Mozambique, these ceremonies date from pre-colonial times, and are believed to be especially important when events, such as war and population displacement, upset the normal course of life. It is thought that the spirits of the victims of war or those slighted against will bring bad luck or death, not only to the perpetrator but also to members of his extended family or community (Chicuecue 1997). Within this belief system, atrocities committed during the course of a brutal war become imbued with layers of spiritual meaning, necessitating such traditional ceremonies. The traditional ceremonies afford individuals a chance to be 'cleansed' from their acts during the war as well as provided 'protection' for the community from ancestral rebuke that may be brought on because of what the child had done.

2003–2004 interviews found that most former child soldiers believed these ceremonies had helped them return to civilian life. Their comments indicated that these ceremonies focused on a range of reintegration concerns, including repairing social ills, cleansing those that came home 'contaminated' from the atrocities of war and resolving social conflict in cases where normal social roles had been perverted. Not only were these ceremonies important for these former child soldiers as individuals, but they were also reported by the former child soldiers' family members and neighbours to be vital for rebuilding community trust and cohesion. Former child soldiers reported that thanking the ancestors was important for community and family cohesion as ancestors have much power over the events of daily life. Because they were highly mobile during the war, moving from base camp to base camp, their protective spirits might become confused and not know they had returned. Thus, it was important to honour the protection that the spirits provided and let them know that the child had returned safely, ensuring his further protection. As one former child soldier described: 'When something special happens, like in this case my return home, it is necessary to give thanks to the ancestors'.

Cleansing ceremonies were described as 'a door to pass through the house' for the child soldiers returning from the war. They were the first critical step towards psychological recovery. After the ceremonies, people generally reported that they became 'sane' and that their minds were restored to 'this world'. Traditional practices helped to 'clean the souls' of those who have been 'altered from war'. The Lhanguene boys often spoke of traditional ceremonies as allowing them to start new lives and return to 'the group from that side' (Renamo) and 'acquire new values to fulfil the things on this side' (rural communities).

'I came back from war and used language of the other side, the language from the war. After the ceremony, I was familiar with the language here. After the ceremonies people in general treated me well—before the ceremonies people treated me badly. When I returned some people didn't talk to me as they thought

I would teach them bad things that were learned there [in the war]. In a progressive way people started to like me more and stopped excluding me’.

Traditional ceremonies also reportedly enabled those returning from war to ‘forget’ their experiences and move on with their lives:

- ‘Yes, it was helpful because today I am leading a normal life.’
- ‘There is a definite difference between before and after the ceremony’.
- ‘The war memories never came back after the ritual.’
- ‘Before there was something missing in my body and in my life, but after, I am ok. I came back to normal life and now I feel like the others’.
- ‘It was helpful because it removed the evil that I was bringing with me. I was able to forget easily all the evils that I had, even though I still dream about it’.

Our follow-up interviews indicated that ‘forgetting’ had more to do with alleviation of feelings of guilt and shame than with not remembering actual events. Cleansing ceremonies thus appeared to foster an experience of being ‘forgiven’, and many former child soldiers spoke of ‘feeling like everyone else’ after completion of these rituals. The transformation of self-image from being a ‘child soldier’ to becoming ‘like everyone else’ was a critical aspect of successful reintegration into rural Mozambican life.

Relatives and neighbours reported that the traditional ceremonies were important because they gave the community a ‘defence’ against problems that returning child soldiers could bring with them. During the war, children were forced to violate social hierarchies, sometimes killing elders and commanding their peers into battle. The righting of these wrongs and the re-establishment of social hierarchies with deceased ancestors was a priority. While social stigma based on one’s participation in the war appeared to be minimal, family and community members still were concerned that the Lhanguene boys might be disruptive due to their previous indoctrination into violence. Other researchers have also found that purification ceremonies create a spirit of communal tranquillity because community members see themselves as being protected and capable of confronting any situation that reintegration might bring about (Mausse 1999).

Sensitization campaigns

In addition to traditional cleansing rituals, our research indicated that community sensitization campaigns also had a positive impact on community acceptance of former child soldiers. Local military, police, teachers and community leaders were targeted and encouraged to support the reintegration of former child soldiers by taking collective responsibility for the fate of the returnees. Community projects, such as reparation of hospitals, water systems and other needs identified by community members, were initiated in these communities as a way of supporting collective child welfare efforts. During the course of our 2003–2004 focus group discussions, community members reported that they remembered government

officials coming and talking to them about the children returning and that it made an impact on them.

- 'I remember the government people coming to tell us that our sons were going to come home and that we should treat them like everyone else. That is what we have done'.
- 'We listened to the advice of the people that came from Maputo. We have accepted these boys and they live with us now. There is no difference'.
- 'The big men came and told us what to expect from our boys. Now we eat what they eat, we live together. We are all the same'.
- 'They are our sons; what they did they were forced to do, so we cannot blame them for such bad things'.

Community acceptance

In 1989 and 1990, all of these former child soldiers reported being accepted by their communities with two exceptions. One boy reported that the community was not happy with his return and accused him of having killed their relatives. 'A few boys called me a *bandito* when I came home, but my family stood for me and soon they stopped saying those things'. A second boy described how his lack of money led to a poor reception by his community. 'People in my community did not pay attention to me when I came back. I don't feel trusted because I am poor and have nothing to give to people when they ask or need things. They just say hello as they pass on the path'. Here, the boy's sense of not being accepted was linked to his economic situation, which he blamed on the years he spent away from money-making activities during the war, rather than his child soldiering experiences. All other boys reported that they were received without problems or discrimination:

- 'I have been well received by the community'.
- 'People came to speak with me and welcome me'.
- 'They received me well because the government brought me and they respected me'.
- 'The community treated me well, they even sacrificed a hen to commemorate my return and inform the spirits of my arrival'.

Our 2003–2004 follow-up research employed a feeling of acceptance scale to which the former child soldiers overwhelmingly reported that they have been accepted by members of their communities. As adults, they largely feel respected by their friends, that their families care for them very much and that their friends look out for them. Indicative comments include:

- 'I can rely on my friends'.
- 'When I need something, I ask my neighbours and friends, and if they can help me, they will'.
- 'If I died tomorrow, I think that people would miss me'.

- ‘Members of my community rely on me and I rely on them. It is how we live here’.

In 2003–2004, many of the Lhanguene boys recalled that the adult caretakers at the Maputo centre helped them to recover their own sense of caring for other human beings. They did this through their concern for the boys’ well-being, including appropriate discipline, and by the consistent modelling of good behaviour. As one former child soldier explained, ‘I overcame the things I lived in the war because I admired how the (Lhanguene) director and others at the centre lived, and I wanted to be like them’. This same modelling was later achieved through community-based apprenticeships.

Apprenticeships

Apprenticeships with local carpenters, masons and other skilled labourers were established for older boys so they could learn basic employment and business skills. Although it was not feasible to take this programme to scale for the larger population of former child soldiers and separated children in the region, our research does indicate that these apprenticeships contributed to the ability of these former child soldiers to increase their earnings in comparison with other off-farm labour options. Additionally, boys that took part in apprenticeships reported that these opportunities gave them important role models and sets of skills to make money, helping them to ease the transition to civilian life and leave behind destructive behaviour patterns.

Stipends

Education stipends (for fees, books and clothes) were offered to the families of the Lhanguene boys specifically for the former child soldiers. The stipends were not deemed to be as helpful as we expected. They tended to cause tensions in several families because they singled out the Lhanguene children for support over the family’s other children. Furthermore, the former child soldiers felt their abduction into Renamo severely disrupted a Mozambican youth’s normative life trajectory. Most of the boys desired to return immediately to the fields to earn money for a ‘wife and family’ instead of returning to school. For example, one former child soldier stated, ‘I think the war was evil. It delayed my life and I needed to make money once I got home’.

Protection

A shortcoming of our programme was the lack of focus on protection measures for the young boys. Continuing protection is vital in such programmes that work with vulnerable children. Developing community structures to help children stay out of armed forces is essential to the community’s future. Some of the boys we interviewed were threatened by Renamo soon after they left the Lhanguene

centre. The government forces found these boys to be experienced combatants and tried to recruit several of them despite their own decree that former Renamo child soldiers were not to be drafted. Community mechanisms should have been established to ensure this government policy was enforced, and economic opportunities need to be offered to former child soldiers as an alternative to military life.

The Lhanguene boy soldiers as adults

Economics

To what extent has this group of former child soldiers been able to overcome the time spent away from fulfilling their normal life milestones and regain a foothold in the normative life cycle of rural Mozambique? Several indicators were employed to explore this question: household income, housing and food security as well as children's health and educational status.

Despite disruptions to their life trajectories, this group of former child soldiers is faring as well as, and often better than, national averages for these socio-economic and child welfare indicators. The national average for household ownership is 91.7%, which matches the average of the former child soldiers, 91%.

While 100% of these former child soldiers are engaged in farming, 63% of them also earn additional income from wage labour endeavours. The national average for off-farm activities of rural inhabitants in Mozambique is estimated at 38% (Amimo et al. 2003). Off-farm wage labour for this population includes working in the mines in South Africa, working as guards, working on local construction projects and doing odd jobs in their communities. Many also are engaged in other informal sector-income activities, including making charcoal, cutting and selling reeds from the river for cash and running small kiosks to sell agricultural produce.

Mozambique is in the midst of a serious food crisis in its rural areas. General estimates suggest a third of the population is classified as chronically food insecure, mostly coming from the south and central regions of Mozambique, where this study took place (WFP 2001). All of these former child soldiers and their families are affected by this crisis. A total of 80% reported that they are not always able to eat or provide their children with balanced meals. A vast majority also said that the adults in their households have reduced portion sizes or skipped meals almost every month during the past year. Despite this food shortage, the weight for height of their children (under 5 years of age) is above the national average. All scored above the median using the WHO/NCHS normalized referenced weight for height scale (WHO 1994). Most of the former child soldiers or their spouses reported their children to be in either good or excellent health. In the context of Mozambique's chronic food shortage, these findings bode quite well for the resiliency of the Lhanguene boys following their harrowing experiences with Renamo.

While the former child soldiers seem to be doing well, all reported that their daily economic situation has been, and continues to be, one of the major obstacles

in their transition to civilian life. Historically in Mozambique, individual welfare has been linked to informal sector enterprise and collective help networks. The extended family normally provides a form of 'social security' to its members that follow longstanding patterns of personal and kinship relationships. Indeed, many former child soldiers indicated that obstacles to reintegration often stemmed from economic difficulties and their inability to be able to help others when asked for money or other necessities. When asked what external assistance could have been provided by the Lhanguene initiative, most reported that they wished they had received a professional skill set that would have made them viable contributors to their family economy. As stated above, apprenticeships were highly successful for the few boys that were able to take part; however, apprenticeships and targeted vocational training are not feasible on a national or regional level. Ultimately, field practitioners must model economic interventions along the lines of the various livelihood or micro-credit programmes in place around the world in order to reach the number of young people that need assistance while remaining cognizant of the limits of local economies.

One of the most devastating legacies of child soldiering was the years of lost economic opportunity that, in turn, made the key life cycle tasks of choosing a wife and building a family difficult. Many of these former child soldiers reported these challenges to be more problematic than the actual experiences of the war.

- 'I had no problems choosing a wife but I have had problems because of a lack of money'.
- 'I had no resources; I had to begin everything from the beginning'.
- 'Those who did not go to the war had the time to earn some money but I had nothing after the war'.

Social indicators

Fears abounded following the war that the former child soldiers would be incapable of caring and providing for their own children. We did not find this to be the case. Indeed, our interviewers specifically pointed out how well the children of the former child soldiers were treated. All of the former child soldiers who were parents spoke, often at length, about their desires for their children to experience a better childhood than they had had. Most, in turn, indicated that the schooling that they had been denied due to their child soldiering experiences was the 'best way' to ensure a 'good future' for their children. Indeed, 75% of this group's school-aged daughters and sons were attending primary school, which is considerably above the national average of 60% (UNICEF 2005).

Almost all of the Lhanguene boys are married and, according to our questionnaire, the overwhelming majority of their spouses perceive them to be 'good husbands'. Wives concurred with the economic hardships in these areas of Mozambique, noting that jobs were scarce for everyone, and indicated that they appreciated their husbands' efforts to earn extra income. They also indicated that this extra income was usually used for food and educational support for their

children. Most wives approved of the roles and commitments their husbands had in their relationships, house maintenance and childcare and support.

- 'I am happy with my husband. Even though he was in the war, he is just like everyone else'.
- 'My husband helps me with the children. When I ask for money, he gives it to me if he has any. He doesn't spend it on drinking like some other husbands'.
- 'He often looks for work. Usually, he does not find any, but when he does it helps us a lot'.
- 'I can't complain. I am fortunate'.
- 'He is a good man. He is kind to me and takes good care of our daughters'.

Often we hear that children who have been abused become abusers themselves. How is it, then, that children who were so brutalized have been able to overcome their hardships and demonstrate altruistic attitudes and behaviour with their spouses and children? When asked where and how they learned to be good parents and partners, former child soldiers reported that they learned this behaviour from their families and communities after they returned home from the war. Most young men reported the importance of having strong role models in their lives, others who could advise them through hardships and teach them appropriate behaviour. Indeed, the comparative few former child soldiers who were deemed to be socially dysfunctional during in our 2003–2004 research phase reported that they had few if any people to advise or support them. The reestablishment of relationships with positive adult role models facilitated former child soldier's transitions from survival seeking behaviour to security seeking behaviour and mitigated the cycle of violence. Furthermore, most former child soldiers reported wanting more for their children, including opportunities for education and employment that they had not had.

Psychological well-being

While our research indicates that most of these former child soldiers have made significant progress in returning to civilian life, none of them are truly free from their violent pasts. All of them experienced recurrent thoughts or memories of traumatic events while at the Lhanguene centre, and all still do so 16 years later. While psychological distress symptoms persist, the number of former child soldiers experiencing them as adults is considerably less than those who experienced them as children. Six common elements in the 1988 and 2003 assessments are presented in Table I.

Two variables appear to be associated with decreases in psychological distress over time: the individual's use of cognitive strategies and avoidance to manage their symptoms and duration of time as a child soldier. As shown in Table 1, five symptoms decreased in frequency over time, while one, avoidance activities, increased over the course of the past 16 years. This rise in avoidance activities, when further explored in interviews, proved to be adaptive, as these former child

soldiers were actively managing their symptoms more consciously and effectively. Moreover, those who reported using avoidance as a coping mechanism have fewer and severe symptoms than those that do not employ these same strategies.

Avoidance, as described by the former child soldiers, included actively identifying social situations, physical locations or activities that had triggered an emergence of post-traumatic stress symptoms in the past, and making efforts to avoid them in the future. One of the strongest traumatic re-experience triggers was physical location: some former child soldiers are now avoiding places where they witnessed or participated in violent and inhumane events. For one former child soldier, it was a large tree in his village where Renamo guerrillas killed his father and abducted him. For another, it was a village footpath where, as a 12-year-old boy, he came across a row of decapitated heads impaled on poles. Four former child soldiers cited social drinking with other male companions as a traumatic re-experience trigger. Boisterous drinking rekindled memories of rowdy, drug and alcohol induced Renamo base camp experiences. All four of these former child soldiers now actively avoid social drinking. Two young men reported that they no longer slaughter animals because this routine chore 'reminds me of the war'. Their wives now assume this function. Several found they could no longer use machetes or other farming tools, as they had been used as instruments of torture and death during Renamo's reign of terror.

Secondly, the severity of post-traumatic stress symptoms is reduced by conscious efforts to not dwell on troubling thoughts and feelings when they emerge. Former child soldiers with lower distress frequency and severity outcomes described a kind of cognitive 'change of menu' strategy to ward off painful thoughts and memories:

- 'Thinking about what I did in the war is wasting time because it [the war] helped nothing'.
- 'When I start to think about the war, I go to church and read the bible. I keep reading until the bad thoughts disappear'.
- 'I try to think about the present and the future, not the past'.
- 'When bad thoughts enter my mind, I replace them as quickly as possible with better ones.'
- 'I think about my children or my wife'.

Conversely, former child soldiers with higher frequency and severity tendencies do not actively use avoidance or employ other identifiable cognitive coping strategies. Instead, when confronted with painful memories, they tend to become consumed by them, often withdrawing from daily activities and routines. The following comments are indicative of these less adaptive tendencies:

(Wife): 'Sometimes he is fine and sometimes he is not. I can tell when things are bad for him because he stops working and spends time alone. Sometimes he tells me about what's bothering him, but most of the time he does not. I try to do my best to help him forget, like doing more work and selling things (normally the husband's responsibility) so when he returns from his bad thoughts things will be in order. Eventually, he goes to work, forgets and gets better'.

(Mother): 'He will suddenly get irritated and then very quiet. He'll go into the house and refuse to leave. We all know that his mind is back in the past. I tell everyone that we must be patient with him, but sometimes this is difficult. We all know he has suffered. We talk to him about the war, how it is over and how he must also get over it. We try to do this with a good attitude and patience. Sometimes he threatens us when we talk to him this way, but so far nothing bad has happened. We will continue live as we have and accept him as part of the family. He can change, it is just a matter of perseverance'.

A second variable is the time that was spent child soldiering. Former child soldiers who spent 6 months or less as a child soldier exhibited less severe symptoms and behavioural problems at the Lhanguene centre than those who spent a year or longer with the guerrilla group. This trend continues into adulthood: adults who spent 6 months or less as a child soldier experience psychological distress less often and less severely than those who spent a year or longer. Three former child soldiers who continue to suffer significantly psychological distress and are socially ill-adapted as young men were with Renamo for 2 years or longer. Two were youth leaders and one was only 6 years old when abducted. All three were deemed to be 'troubled boys' while at the centre and continue to be so as adults.

Conclusions

Most of these former child soldiers emerged from violent childhoods to become trusted and productive adult members of their communities and nation. Their life stories underscore human resiliency as a dynamic process involving active quests to derive existential 'meaning' from violent events, to be 'cleansed' from their pasts and 'forgiven' for their wrongdoings, to regain their 'true' identity by 'being like everyone else' and to find their place in community by helping others. Family and community acceptance and spiritual and religious beliefs and practices (so entwined with individual well-being in rural Mozambique) are at the core of this resiliency as well.

A number of interventions aided these former child soldiers' transitions into society. Most of these young men described the time they spent with adult caretakers and other former child soldiers at the Lhanguene centre positively. In addition to the healing that took place through attachments with positive adult caretakers, programme efforts to promote safe codes of conduct, self-regulation and security-seeking behaviour also appear to have engendered a sense of social responsibility among these former child soldiers that is evident today.

We cannot, however, conclude that a centre-based programme is the most effective way to provide these restorative and healing elements. Indeed, most of what took place at the Lhanguene centre could have been provided by leaders, healers and educators in the boys' home communities. One of the advantages of a decentralized approach is that important attachments can continue for longer periods of time. It is also more cost effective and capable of reaching larger numbers of former child soldiers throughout the country. One of the main challenges of decentralizing the intervention is to maintain quality of training, supervision and support.

Traditional cleansing ceremonies also played key reconciliation roles. They helped to repair relationships with their families and communities to re-align the boys' well-being with the spirit world. The rituals enabled these boys to feel 'like everyone else' and deepened their sense of acceptance. This, in turn, ameliorated degrees of guilt and shame over past misdeeds, and also represented a form of protection for community members who worried about what these boys might do once they came home. Numerous community members recalled the government-led sensitization campaigns organized 16 years earlier. They, too, helped to foster community acceptance and forgiveness.

Other forms of assistance that supported normative life cycle milestones (including employment, housing, farming and marriage) were essential. Apprenticeships, income generation projects and the provision of seeds and tools were cited as positive forms of support. An insufficient focus on livelihood support was identified as a major programmatic shortcoming.

In contrast, the educational stipends did not lead to the expected outcome and caused tension in the former child soldiers' families as it singled-out one sibling over another. Most of these former child soldiers were not motivated to stay in school, but instead felt compelled to earn money, find a wife and build a house. Education stipends, initially perceived to be critically linked to child development and child rights, were ineffective in this situation.

Overall understanding the normative life cycle of rural Mozambicans, including key developmental milestones and how the social systems that support them have been affected (and may be assisted to become re-aligned), emerged as a pragmatic framework for assessing, designing and evaluating this child soldier reintegration programme. The use of representative focus groups to determine local concepts of individual well-being and social functioning also proved to be critical design and evaluation approaches to child soldier programming.

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Notes

¹ The United Nations' General Assembly adopted an Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child establishing 18 years as the minimum age for participation of children in conflict. The Rome Statutes for the International Criminal Court, ILO and African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child also have addressed child soldiering. For further information see Human Rights Watch webpage on the International Legal Standards Governing Child Soldiers <http://hrw.org/campaigns/crp/int-law.htm>

² For the purposes of this study, we refer to a 'child soldier' as any person under the age of 18 years who was in Renamo base camps regardless of their particular role as porters, servants or combatants.

³ Girls who spent time with Renamo have been included in: *Where are the Girls?* (McKay and Mazurana 2004).

⁴ The DTR Protocol was used to document over 25,000 separated children nationwide, including former child soldiers (Boothby 1993).

⁵ Free listing is a systematic data collection method where an informant lists all the different linguistic connotations of some category (for example, all of the different categories of depression). This method is used as a preliminary exploration to determine the cultural relevance and definition of a term.

⁶ The convenience sample, while conducted in Maputo included many *deslocados* from rural communities. Travel to more rural areas was not feasible due to the insecurity in the region.

⁷ Like initial findings at the Maputo centre, other studies of children affected by armed conflict found that the nature of war-related experiences differs from child to child (Freud and Burlingham 1943, Ressler et al. 1988, Macksoud and Aber 1996, Mollica et al. 2002). Recent research, for example, found that children who believed that they lost a father who was fighting a 'holy war' experienced his death differently than children in the same situation who lost a parent to random violence spilling into their community (Punamaki and Suleiman 1990, Macksoud and Aber 1996). Similarly, older children (formal operational thinking) interpreted politically motivated violence differently than young children.

⁸ Most of the Lhanguene boys maintained contact with one another, and this was one of the principle means of locating them in 2003–2004. Contact with extended family members and neighbours were a second source. In addition, we used radio and newspaper announcements. The locations of seven former Lhanguene boys are unknown.

⁹ We originally planned to interview a group of non-Lhanguene former child soldiers as a control group; however, data collection proved to be unreliable as many of these former child soldiers would not fully answer questions posed to them by 'strangers'.

¹⁰ The Ministry of Education was formally responsible for the Lhanguene centre. It was at their request that devotion to the government was included in these routines.

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