THE REINTEGRATION PROCESS FOR CHILD SOLDIERS IN LIBERIA[1]

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The 14-year conflict in Liberia was notorious for the young age of its combatants. In the first part of the conflict – during which Charles Taylor launched his rebellion, which eventually engulfed the country and led to his election as president in 1997 – it is estimated that children under 18 made up approximately 30% of the fighters.[2] During the second phase of the conflict, which officially came to an end in August 2003, there were an estimated 15 000 child soldiers.[3] All three signatories to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement: Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) rebel groups, as well as Taylor's government troops, were guilty of using children as soldiers. Particularly infamous was Taylor's "Small Boys Unit", made up of young boys who were known to call Taylor "*papay*", or father.[4]

Child Soldiers in Liberia

The experience of Liberian child soldiers is similar to that of other child soldiers throughout the world – a life of brutality inflicted upon them, and which they inflict upon others. Separated from their families, many children were treated inhumanely, tortured, beaten and drugged. Many of these young combatants witnessed horrible atrocities

Above: Girl soldiers in Liberia were known for their ferocity.

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Child soldiers in Liberia experienced brutality inflicted upon them, and in turn inflicted brutality upon others.

or participated in them directly, often including cruel initiation rites. Connections with their previous lives and their families were severed, and they were forced to recognise that the rebels were now their family.

Children were recruited into the fighting forces in Liberia in various ways. The most deplorable form of recruitment was simple abduction, which took place when villages or schools came under attack or when children strayed from their village or refugee camp. However, although many children in Liberia were forcibly recruited to fight, a large number of children "volunteered". Reasons for volunteering included hunger, simple survival and the protection of themselves and their families. They may have lost their families in the fighting and saw no other choice for survival other than becoming a soldier. Most disturbing, however, is the fact that many children volunteered to fight because they had been witnesses to atrocities committed in their communities, and had seen their friends and families being killed. These children chose to join a rebel force simply for revenge. Girls were often abducted solely to become the "wives" of the fighters, essentially being forced into sexual slavery. This sexual abuse led to serious health problems among the abused girls, and unwanted pregnancies were prevalent. Such abuse does not mean, however, that girls were not trained to fight. On the contrary, girl soldiers in Liberia were known for their ferocity.

DDR Process

As in many post-conflict countries, a disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) process was implemented in Liberia as the best way to encourage combatants to lay down their arms and return to civilian life. In general, the principles for the reintegration of adult ex-combatants and for child soldiers are very similar; yet, because children have become involved in fighting forces during the crucial years of their psychological and emotional development, they have special needs that should be addressed during their reintegration.

MANY OF THESE YOUNG COMBATANTS WITNESSED HORRIBLE ATROCITIES OR PARTICIPATED IN THEM DIRECTLY, OFTEN INCLUDING CRUEL INITIATION RITES

When the DDR process in Liberia began in earnest in 2004, child soldiers were disarmed with adult combatants, but the reintegration process for children and adults was completely separate. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) organised and oversaw the official process in Liberia for children under 18 years. In total, 11 780 children accessed the various reintegration programmes.[5]

Interim Care Centres

The demobilisation phase of the DDR process in Liberia entailed the childrens' temporary stays at interim care centres (ICCs). These centres acted essentially as temporary camps where the children could live and receive medical and psychological care, away from the threat of fighting or contact with their commanders, until their families could be located and they could be reintegrated back into their communities. It was here that the children were prepared for their actual long-term reintegration. There were seven child protection agencies (CPAs) that were responsible for the implementation of the ICCs; for instance, Don Bosco Homes, Christian Children's Fund and Save the Children. Contracts were given by UNICEF

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Playing football together allowed demobilised children, from opposing fighting factions, to move beyond their conflicts and animosity when they played together as a team.

to those agencies that were most capable of handling the reintegration process – those with the capacity, available staff and prior experience.

A child's average time spent at an ICC was anywhere between four and 12 weeks. The various activities and duties of the children at the ICCs were designed to keep the children occupied throughout the day. The typical daily routine included meals, exercises, prayer time, schooling, rest time, sport activities, and often a film viewing in the evening, if possible.

Most CPA representatives wholeheartedly agreed that recreational activities, particularly football, were an excellent way to help the children find their way back to a normal childhood. Often, children from opposing factions were present at the same ICC, which had the potential to cause serious problems. Placing them on a football team together proved to be the best option to avoid any conflict. After some time, the children were much more concerned about their teams' names and the goals they had scored than in what force they had previously fought. According to a CPA representative from Don Bosco, they realised very quickly that football is a unifying force for the kids, and a great way to heal. The busy schedule and sports activities also proved to be a very good way to deal with children with drug addictions. Essentially, the children were not permitted to lounge around, become bored and think about obtaining drugs. There just wasn't enough time. The specific punishment of not being allowed to play football also seemed to work remarkably well – the children simply did not want to miss out on the day's game.

Family Reunification

Individual family tracing began as soon as possible after a child had arrived at the ICC and had been

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Former child soldiers play cards at an interim care centre. Demobilisation entailed the childrens' temporary stays at such centres.

interviewed. In some cases, the children did not initially provide truthful information about themselves and their families. Many children had heard unfounded rumours about what could possibly happen to them if they gave their real names, and therefore gave only their fighting names, or completely fabricated names. In such circumstances, patience proved to be the best policy. As children began to be reunited with their families, those who had lied slowly began to realise that the process was genuine, and they eventually approached their caregivers with their correct personal information.

The process of reuniting a child combatant with his family and community was not always easy. Many children had been responsible for atrocities committed in their communities, and many families were initially very hesitant to welcome them back. For this reason, the CPAs helped to establish a Child Welfare Committee (CWC) in each community. These committees were composed of community leaders – including elders, teachers and pastors or imams – as well as the child's parents. The activities of the CWCs were essential to bring about a peaceful settlement between the community and the child. Many communities simply needed to be informed of what the child had been through, and they were then willing to welcome them home.

The reunification of "officially" demobilised children with their families proved to be a large success in Liberia. The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers quotes a 90% success rate in family reunification.[6] The high success rate was, in large part, due to the involvement of the CWCs, and the continuous dialogues and mediations organised by the CPAs in their counties. In a very small number of cases, the families could not be convinced to accept their children back into the community and other alternatives had to be found, such as foster care for the younger children and "independent living" for the older children, which entailed a CPA paying for a place for the child to live and providing material support.

Education and Skills Training Programmes

Once the demobilised child combatants had been successfully reintegrated into their families or communities, they were given the option of either going to school or taking part in a skills training programme. Younger

children were encouraged to get a formal education, while older children were encouraged to learn a trade that they could market in the future.

The children who chose to go back to school were enabled to do so through the Community Education Investment Programme (CEIP). This programme allowed demobilised children to attend school without paying school fees. In exchange, UNICEF and the CPAs provided learning and educational materials to the schools and communities for the benefit of all children, not just for those associated with the fighting forces. This helped to decrease the stigmatisation associated with being a child soldier dramatically, because all children in the community benefitted from the materials. The CEIP programme also provided psychosocial counselling to the demobilised children throughout the three-year programme, as well as "child protection training" (how to work with children who had been soldiers) for all members of the community who had contact with them. Furthermore, the CPA supplied the community with recreational materials such as sports or music equipment, and organised various activities together with the CWCs to bring the people of the community together, and to encourage the social integration of the demobilised children.

Many demobilised children were either not interested in going back to school for basic education or felt that a skills training programme would better provide them with the opportunity to make money and support themselves and their families. A variety of skills training courses were offered: carpentry, masonry, agriculture, animal husbandry, auto mechanics, electrician training, tailoring, cosmetology, soap-making, tie and dye, and "pastry" (baking). The children were generally allowed to decide which programme they would like to take part in, but vocational counselling was provided to help them decide what would be best for them in their community.

The set-up of the skills training programmes varied slightly between the various CPAs. Some agencies offered in-centre training with their own trainers and found internships for the children after their training was complete, while others contracted local master artisans to train the children. In exchange for the training, the artisan would often be provided with new equipment and/or a stipend, depending on his or her needs. This cooperation with the artisans enabled the children not only to get the valid training that they sought, but also allowed them to experience the daily running of a business first-hand.

When the children had finished with their skills training programme, which normally lasted for a period of nine months, they were each given a toolkit. These toolkits contained everything that was needed to start their own business. For example, a tailoring kit contained a sewing machine, scissors, thread, needles and cloth. These toolkits were considered essential for children to be able to succeed in their business. Problems arose when the distribution of the toolkits was delayed for some reason at the end of the programme. The graduates had been promised the kits and when they didn't arrive on time, this led to some confusion, which at times became violent. Other skills training programmes offered their graduates not only toolkits, but start-up loans when the training was finished. These start-up loans were intended to help the children build a structure to start their own business.

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A child soldier walks to a United Nations disarmament camp in the Liberian city of Buchanan (March 2004).

For older children who wished for the opportunity to access a skills training programme as well as to receive basic education, the possibility was made available to them through an Accelerated Learning Programme (ALP). Supported by UNICEF's education unit, the ALP condensed six years of primary schooling into three years, and was taught either in the afternoons or evenings. This had several advantages for the participants. First, it

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Younger demobilised child combatants were given the opportunity to attend school, while older children had the opportunity to learn a trade and take formal classes.

allowed older children to receive an education at the same time as learning a skill, so that they were not forced to choose between employment and education. Secondly, participants in the ALP were not obliged to share a classroom with younger children, which may have been unpleasant. Instead, the ALP classes were strictly for older children and youth. Many of the CPAs had some form of ALP, which was essential for promoting education for all ex-child combatants, regardless of age.

Monetary Payments

Certainly the biggest problem that arose during the DDR process for child soldiers was the distribution of the transitional safety-net allowance (TSA). This US$300 was given to all ex-combatants – adults and children. Most CPAs were strictly opposed to the children receiving this TSA, and voiced their concern to the United Nations. US$300 is almost $20 000 (Liberian), which is more than an average Liberian's income for two full years. Giving a small child this money was seen as rewarding the child for what he did, which is not acceptable in Liberian culture. Essentially, giving these children such a large amount of money and sending them back into often very poor communities with broken family structures reversed the traditional roles in the family, by making the parents dependent on the child. This created problems within the family, as the parents became involved in receiving this allowance, which was not intended. The money was intended to be used for the benefit of the child, but sometimes the parents had other ideas for the money. Furthermore, the distribution of this TSA created segregation between those children who had fought and those children who did not. Again, it seemed as if the ex-child combatants were being financially rewarded for their actions, which created resentment and led to further stigmatisation of child combatants. In the end, the concerns of the CPAs went unheeded, as the distribution of the TSA

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was part of the mandate of the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL).

Monthly allowances were *not* provided to the children during their skills training, in this case in accordance with the CPAs wishes, but this proved to be a big challenge nonetheless. The main problem with this arrangement was the dissimilarity to the adult reintegration programmes. Ex-combatants 18 years of age or older who participated in a skills training programme received a monthly allowance of US$30. Any combatant under the age of 18 received no monthly allowance. For obvious reasons, this angered many of the older child combatants, who no longer considered themselves "children". Many of these children were treated as adults and expected to act as adults during the war. For them, to be considered children was both insulting and perplexing. Many of them could not understand why they were not receiving a monthly allowance, while their "adult" friends were.

Conclusion

Judging the success of the reintegration process for child soldiers in Liberia by how well the process followed the specific guidelines and principles set forth for reintegration – specifically The Paris Principles[7] and the Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards[8] – it can be determined that the process was a qualified success. Well-planned, well-implemented and well-intended, the entire process was carried out, by and large, according to international principles, and should be a model for future reintegration projects. If, for some reason, the principles were not followed, there was either a valid, understandable reason for this deviation, considering the circumstances, or the deviation was considered as regrettable by the actors involved, and generally viewed as something that could have been done better.

The success of a reintegration process for former child soldiers, however, cannot be judged solely upon how well the guidelines were followed. This research was limited to the reintegration process itself. There are several factors that such a limited study could not realistically consider. For instance, the high number of children successfully reunified with their families in Liberia only applies to those children who were demobilised through the "official" DDR process. These children were given a demobilisation card, and their information was collected by the CPAs and UNICEF Liberia. All children who chose not to enter the official DDR process – for whatever reason – never received a demobilisation card, and therefore could not access official reintegration benefits. It is unknown exactly how many ex-child combatants fell into this category although, if 15 000 child combatants were estimated in 2003 and 11 780 went through the official DDR process, this means that many children were left out. Therefore, many questions remain. Where are these children? Why did they not go through the DDR process? Could this have been avoided? Were they successfully reunited with their families without assistance? Were they able to access educational programmes or any other benefits?

Nevertheless, the process of reintegration for officially demobilised child soldiers in Liberia was successful for various reasons, and enables us to have a closer look at how such a complex process should best be implemented. The positive aspects of the process are obvious; for example, the extensive community involvement, the comprehensive psychosocial support, and the option of educational and skills training for all demobilised combatants. The creation and development of the CWCs assisted, if not ensured, the successful reunification and reintegration of the children into the communities, and the community dialogues and mediations by CPAs should be emulated in other regions. Moreover, the specific success of the interim care centres in Liberia certainly deserves further examination as a model for future reintegration programmes. However, there were also weaknesses in the system, of which planners of future DDR programmes must be aware and take into consideration, in order to provide proper attention and care to those children who have served with fighting forces.

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Endnotes

1 This article is based on field research conducted in Liberia in 2008 for the author's Masters thesis at the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy, University of Hamburg, Germany.

2 Human Rights Watch (1994) *Easy Prey: Child Soldiers in Liberia*. New York: Human Rights Watch, p. 3.

3 Human Rights Watch (2004) *How to Fight, How to Kill: Child Soldiers in Liberia*. New York: Human Rights Watch, p. 1.

4 Ellis, Stephen (2006) *The Destruction of Liberia and the Religious Dimension of an African Civil War* (2nd edition). New York: New York University Press, p. 79.

5 UNICEF (2005) *Humanitarian Action Donor Update: Liberia*. 9 May 2005. UNICEF, p. 3, Available at: <www.unicef.org/infobycountry/files/Liberia_DU_9May2005.pdf>

6 Landry, Guillaume (2006) *Child Soldiers and Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration in West Africa: A Survey of Programmatic Work on Child Soldiers in Côté d'Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone*. London: Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, p. 10.

7 UNICEF (2007) *The Paris Principles: Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups*, United Nations.

8 UNDDR (2006) *Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards*, United Nations.