

An examination of methods to reintegrate former child soldiers in Liberia

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A major feature of the Liberian conflict was the extensive use of children as soldiers. In 2003, by the end of the conflict, thousands of former child soldiers were in need of urgent economic empowerment, and social and psychological support. This paper examines the various methods employed in providing support for these children by the relevant stakeholders. The study was carried out through field research, conducted in Liberia, which involved direct observation, interviews with various stakeholders and questionnaires administered to former child soldiers. It was found that educational support, skills acquisition and family reunification are the main methods of reintegrating former child soldiers in Liberia. These methods face a number of challenges, such as funding, inadequate infrastructure in the educational sector, weak economic capacity of families to support these children, and ineffective follow up mechanisms by implementing agencies. Therefore it is recommended, among others, that adequate funding of the educational sectors and provision for poor families in the reintegration programme will assist in keeping former child soldiers within their immediate families. Also, specific programmes should be designed to reach out to the children that cannot be absorbed into a family setting.

Keywords: child soldiers, Liberia, reintegration

Introduction

Before 1989, the West African sub-region was relatively peaceful. However, this ended

when the National Patriot Front of Liberia (NPFL) invaded, and plunged Liberia into years of civil conflict. The Liberian civil war, which lasted 14 years, was characterised by heinous activities such as: murder, rape, and forced displacement of innocent people, including women and children.

One of the features of this conflict was the use of children (below 18 years old) as soldiers, by all fighting forces, including the NPFL and the former Government of Liberia (GOL) (Amnesty International, 2004). For example, when advancing on Monrovia in early 2003, rebel forces reportedly forced hundreds of children into service, while at the same time, government militia and paramilitaries (operating in and around the capital) conducted roundups of children at schools, displaced person camps, and from the streets, creating units that were composed primarily of child soldiers (Human Rights Watch, 2004). A report by United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCR, 2003) claimed that one out of every 10 Liberian children may have been recruited into the war. A similar account reported that from 1989 to 1997 between 6000 and 15,000 children are estimated to have been used as child soldiers (Kelly, 1998).

The children who are generally referred to as child soldiers were usually conscripted and adopted, however, others joined voluntarily for reasons of revenge or economic gain

(Sesay & Ismail, 2003). In the course of the child soldiers' engagement and association with fighting forces, many of them acquired negative values and lost touch with society or community norms. It is, therefore, vital that positive action be taken towards supporting these children psychologically, while also instilling accepted society or community norms and values. This can be achieved through a systematic and well-focused reintegration programme, an aspect of Disarmament, Demobilisation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (DDRR), which is an integral part of peace building support activities, especially for ex-soldiers (Awodola, 2010). DDRR serves as a transitional safety net for ex-soldiers, attempting to return to their former lives, or build new ones. Reintegration ensures that former soldiers do not become idle after demobilisation, as this could be a recipe for creating new conflicts (Mutisi, 2010). So, failure to successfully rehabilitate and reintegrate these children could result in serious consequences. For these reasons, for a post conflict country like Liberia to achieve sustainable peace and security, reintegrating former child soldiers back into society became essential.

A Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed in 2003, followed by the deployment of a United Nations Peacekeeping force. This paved the way for the commencement of a DDRR programme in Liberia that included former child soldiers.

While disarmament and demobilisation aimed to cut the ex-soldiers' ties with military life, *esprit de corps* and authority structures among child soldiers sometimes made this difficult, as often former soldiers never completely sever the relationships with their ex-commanders (Lorey, 2001). Reintegration on the other hand, enabled ex-soldiers to strengthen ties with civilian

life, and become productive and accepted members of their local communities (Sany, 2006). It is therefore important that a holistic approach to reintegration is applied in order to reverse the negative behaviour and attitudes of former child soldiers.

To achieve this, the implementing stakeholders used various methods. Some important questions raised at this junction were: how well was the reintegration component of DDRR in Liberia implemented? Did the reintegration programme meet the objectives for which they were carried out? What challenges did the stakeholders face in running these programmes? These are broadly the questions that this paper discusses. The study also focuses on the various methods, used in the reintegration programme, and highlights the challenges and successes of the various methods. Some suggestions are made towards a more effective implementation of future reintegration programmes.

Methodology

Much of the data for this work derived from fieldwork conducted in Liberia in May–July, 2006. A key official in the transitional government in Liberia served as an entry point into Monrovia. He recommended the field assistant, a female and an active participant (ex-soldier) in the war. The field assistant was, in a way, a key informant and through her, other key informants were identified and contact made.

Methods included: unobtrusive observation, in-depth interviews with stakeholders (i.e. school teachers, staff of rehabilitation homes, government officials, etc.) and 12 focus group discussions (FGD) (a total of 96 participants) were conducted among the former child soldiers in the most notorious areas of central Monrovia. The areas covered included: Carey Street, Gurley Street, Randall Street, Centre and Broad Streets,

where many of the former child soldiers resided at the time of this study. Apart from the interviews conducted in the street, other discussions took place at child rehabilitation centres, such as Don Bosco Homes (DBO) and the Children Assistance Programme (CAP), and in schools, as well as in offices. All discussions were documented on audiotapes, which were later transcribed to yield the data for this study, and were supplemented by notes taken by the researcher at the time of the interviews. The length of military service of the children who participated in the FGD varied from nine months to eight years. The youngest was seven at the time of his recruitment. Seventy-nine of the 96 participants, representing approximately three quarters of the group, were recruited when they were less than 15 years old.

Two hundred and fifty survey questionnaires were administered to former child soldiers, more or less randomly selected from the streets, schools and skill acquisition and rehabilitation centres. The researcher, with the help of two assistants and the cooperation of reintegration workers, supervised the administration of the questionnaires.

Out of the twelve weeks of field work in Monrovia, the author spent four weeks at Carey Street, which was regarded as the most notorious area due to the number of former child soldiers that reside there, in order to observe their everyday daily. These observations were recorded in the form of field notes. In addition, both structured and unstructured in-depth interviews were employed with key informants, such as: staff of relevant organisations, teachers and/or residents of Monrovia who understood the reality of the war in Liberia. The interviews were well documented in field notes and audiotapes that were later transcribed by the researcher (Awodola, 2008). These methods were supplemented by secondary

information from books, journals, and internet materials.

The reintegration process in Liberia can be divided into two periods: 1997 and 2003. The first followed the ceasefire agreement of 1997, which can be described as a *'quick and dirty'* approach, due to the lack of an improper planning strategy (Oluwaniyi, 2003). Skill acquisition and education, for example, was probably under-implemented. Family tracing and reunification was left with so few organisations to implement the work, by the time the country relapsed back into conflict in 2000, many of the so called *'reintegrated'* former child soldiers found their way back to various fighting forces.

However, this study has been limited to the second reintegration process that followed the 2003 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, as that is more recent, with its entire components visible and accessible. The category of former child soldiers used in this study was: male children below 18 years old, who participated in the 2000–2003 phase of the Liberian conflict. The exclusion of female child soldiers was due to the fact that they are less visible, as compared to their male counterparts, probably due to the fear of stigmatisation and rejection by their families and the community. While reintegration was carried out in all Liberian counties, this study was limited to the country's capital, Monrovia. The city had, at the time of the study, the largest concentration of former child soldiers. Moreover, the last phase of the war was fought within the city, a factor that accounted for the huge number of children on the streets, the majority of whom were believed to be former child soldiers.

Background to reintegration of child former soldiers in Liberia

At the end of 2003, some 21,000 former child soldiers needed demobilisation (Liberia:

Table 1. Age category of combatants demobilised after 2003 Liberian civil conflict

Age category of child combatants	Number
Boys below 18 years demobilised	8771
Girls below 18 years demobilised	2511
Male adults demobilised	69,281
Female adults demobilised	22,456
Total demobilised	103,019

Table adapted from Williamson & Carter (2005).

National Transitional Government of Liberia, 2004). The number that were officially demobilised provides an insight into the large scale of the problem associated with child soldiering in Liberia (Table 1).

The above figures refer only to those fighters who were officially demobilised, beginning in mid-2004, by UNICEF and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), and may not reflect the actual composition and characteristics of the fighting forces. Precise figures are very difficult to ascertain because the factions which used child soldiers did not generally keep accurate records of the ages of their personnel. Some even denied having child soldiers in their ranks. By October 2004, more than 10,000 children, including over 2300 girls, had been disarmed and demobilised, and more than 9600 had been reunited with their families (Williamson & Carter, 2005). The challenge remained rehabilitating and reintegrating these children back into a more normal life, in order to prevent them from becoming a threat to security, or returning to the armed forces.

The National Commission on Disarmament, Demobilisation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (NCDDRR) had an obligation to provide a clinical and psychological platform for the ex-soldiers, and other victims of the civil crisis, in order to receive an

education, as well as appropriate treatments for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other mental health challenges. The primary responsibility for the implementation of this DDRR programme fell to the Joint Implementation Unit (JIU), an interdisciplinary and interdepartmental group formed by the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Mission in Liberia, and the NCDDRR.

Reintegration programmes for former child soldiers between the ages of 14 and 18 years old were to be similar to the adult programmes, but with a more child friendly curriculum. Other issues around the reintegration would be addressed through economic reintegration assistance, such as: vocational skills training, small enterprise development, apprenticeship and job placement. Social reintegration would cover: restoration of social capital, individual social adaptation, psychological counselling, and traditional means of reconciliation (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2003).

Methods of reintegration

To achieve the fundamental objectives of the reintegration programme in Liberia, the reintegration process attracted the participation of a range of stakeholders. Local and international NGOs, community-based organisations (CBOs), faith-based organisations (FBOs), government ministries, and the private sector came together under the umbrella of the NCDDRR in a synergistic attempt to achieve success (Awodola, 2009). Such an integrative approach was deliberately designed to utilise available capacity to achieve the objectives of the programme. The methods employed by intervention agencies, as observed during the fieldwork, are discussed below.

Family reunification

Family reunification was one of the approaches used by the NGOs and UNICEF to reconcile and reunify former child soldiers with their families. The significance of the family system, particularly the extended family system in Africa, is well established. In most parts of Africa, the child is seen as belonging to the whole community, therefore, when a child commits grievous crimes, such as those committed by the child ex-soldiers, the family, as well as the community, can provide mental transformation for such a child. Forgiveness from the family and community is a key ingredient in the psychological rehabilitation of these children. Family reunification is, therefore, a way for these children to be accepted back into the family, the extended family and the community.

While the children waited for reunification with their family, they engaged in daily activities, such as cleaning and maintaining their surroundings, acquiring livelihood skills, such as carpentry. Literacy and numeracy education was also offered to allow the children, who have lost many years of education as a result of the conflict, the basic knowledge of how to read and write. Other activities, such as: sports, video, games, drama and dance, music, drawing, and story telling were also part of their daily activities. These activities help the children, not only to interact, but to also create a sense of hope for the future.

The process of reunification usually began while the children were in interim care centres or rehabilitation homes, during which time the family was traced. Once identified, the children were reunited with their families. While the process was going on, education was provided to both families and the community regarding the need to forgive and accept the former child soldiers.

This was done through meetings with community leaders, women's organisations, and CBOs in Monrovia, and other counties. Radio, print media and flyers were also used to communicate this important message to target areas, in both English and local dialects. The children were also offered counselling to enable them put the war experience behind them, and to contribute positively to the development of their communities and the country. While counselling alone may not provide an adequate solution to the problems of former child soldiers, it may offer a window of opportunity to alleviate the immediate psychological problems.

For most of the of 250 former child soldiers, from the author's fieldwork sample in Monrovia, the reunification had failed (see Table 2). Only 8% stated they were living with their immediate families, while 28% said they were living on the streets, and a substantial number of them (32%) said they were living on their own.

During in-depth interviews, informants offered different reasons why some children drifted away from their family placement. Some children had been placed with families that were broken, or only had a single parent.

Table 2 Residence status of ex-combatants respondents

Place of residence	Number	%
Welfare home	15	6
Street	70	28
Foster parent	12	4.8
Immediate family	20	8
Family friend	10	4
Friends	38	15.2
On my own	82	32.4
Others	3	1.2
TOTAL	250	100

Source: Author's fieldwork (2006).

Others were placed with relatives who had no economic capacity to support them. Providing appropriate family settings for many former child soldiers may be next to impossible. Many of those who migrated to Monrovia, in search of better economic opportunities, were unwilling to go back to their families, and either lived on their own or with friends. Children in this category considered themselves to be adults. Additionally, some children lost all family members in the fighting, while others were unable to locate theirs. These situations prevented the kind of family reunification vital to psychosocial support and community acceptance.

Educational support for Liberian child former soldiers

Psychosocial support through education was another method used in the reintegration of former child soldiers. The objective was to improve the knowledge and values of the children, as well as provide future employment. Educational support for ex-soldiers, it was hoped would transform their sense of self-identity, and make them more amenable to positive social behaviours. Also, the process involved in educational training has the additional benefit of mentally stabilising the ex-soldiers through repeated interaction with teachers and fellow students or trainees, as they begin to see and adopt new ways of behaviour. Equally, educational support also has the additional benefit of providing economic security for the families of former child soldiers.

The educational support programme was initiated against the backdrop of a collapsed educational system. Over 70% of demobilised former child soldiers indicated a preference for formal education (UNDP, 2005). Indeed, it was noted that former child soldiers in Liberia placed an especially high value on education, as it *enhances future*

employment prospects, seen as intrinsically valuable, and being a student alters the way that one is regarded by community members and enhances acceptance' (Williamson & Carter, 2005).

UNICEF estimated that about 7000 former child soldiers were identified for its Community Education Investment Programme (CEIP). This component of the child reintegration programme focused on placing former child soldiers into standard elementary education, and provided material support to these schools.¹ The curriculum included science and art subjects, interspersed with activities such as: football, bike riding, drama and video, in order to make learning more attractive.

The NCDDRR, in collaboration with NGOs placed a high priority on educational support for these children. Don Bosco Homes also played an exceptional role by placing the children mainly in private institutions run by religious groups, or organised by the private sector, and located in Monrovia or its extended environs. The support provided to the students covered registration and tuition fees, books and study materials, uniforms and subsistence allowances. The educational support to the children covered an initial period of one year, and subsequent support was based on student performance and availability of resources. The educational support lasted for a maximum of three years. The placement of former child soldiers in formal education was, however, not automatic, as ex-combatants were required to make a choice of schools and meet the minimum requirements for admission into such schools. In order to ensure that the children attended school regularly, there was in place, an extensive tracking system to ascertain that they had at least 75% attendance. On the basis of this participation, tracking the payment of subsistence allowances was made.

Challenges

In the interviews with various stakeholders, it was clear that the issue of duration of the educational support, the payment of allowances as well as the enrolment in the schools were key challenges. For instance, in the FGD held with former child soldiers attending school, most of them found the duration of the support too short. They could not imagine what would become of them after spending three years in school. Richard, who was 12 years old when he was conscripted, had this to say about the education support:

*'I am going to school through the reintegration programme. When we started, they were giving us \$30, but they reduced it to \$15 and it wasn't what they told us. So that is trying to bring conflict in the programme. After three years, there would not be any allowance or assistance for us. I love education. I want to go to higher institution where I will be well taught. I want to graduate from high school to be a good person in the future.'*²

In the meantime, many former child soldiers were not as lucky as Richard to be in school. Other respondents, such as school heads and rehabilitation home officials, shared the view of the former child soldiers on the limited duration of the educational support, and were worried over what fate would befall the children after three years of assistance. They emphasised the importance of education in achieving sustainable peace and development in Liberia.

The mode in which educational support was offered to the child ex-combatants undermined the effectiveness and sustainability of the programme. Children were not housed; many lived alone. The number of them that claimed to be living on the streets is alarming. With a majority let loose to be

on their own after school hours, how much impact the hours spent in school can make on their readjustment process is in doubt. The inability to monitor what the children do during the rest of the day is a major weakness of the programme.

Skill acquisition training

Skill acquisition training is often linked with a psychosocial component because the task of establishing a new identity for the former child soldiers will depend on the engagement in productive activities and new learning opportunities. Child soldiers were often dependent on the use of arms for extortion as the basis of a daily living. It is only when their orientation changes that we can expect them to acquire a new sense of self worth. In other words, with skill acquisition, the former child soldiers will gradually develop more positive values.

According to the Strategic and Operational Framework of Reintegration support for Children Associated with the Fighting Forces (CAFF), these children would go through programmes similar to those developed for adults (UNDP, 2003). Therefore, the programme aimed also to assist former child soldiers to acquire skills to make them economically self-sufficient. Such skills included: carpentry, soap making, shoe making, baking, cosmetology, mechanics, agriculture, and so on. The time frame of the programme was usually between six and nine months. Subsistence allowances were paid, but the children had to have an attendance rate of at least 75% to qualify for this payment. Upon completion of the training, the children were given start up tools and assistance to establish small businesses.

In interviews, the former child soldiers believed their lives were meaningful when they were in the training centre, but on leaving the centre at the end of each day, they

were once again confronted with the harsh realities of life. This was especially true in regard to food and shelter. These children considered their placement in jobs and in schools, after the initial rehabilitation process, as desirable, but lamented the apparent lack of financial assistance afterwards. The centre staff involved in the programme identified inadequate funding as the greatest challenge they faced. In most cases, the organisation only functioned within the limits of the funds it received from international donor agencies.

In-depth interviews conducted with former child soldiers, who had been trained, revealed that a majority of them were not practicing the vocation they had learnt. Instead, many of them confirmed selling the tools given to them at the various training centres, immediately after leaving. In these cases, the skills had not translated into better livelihoods, or income generating opportunities. A key informant provided further insight into the attitude of the children:

I must tell you, most of these children are big now. Many of them were not convinced to go to school. Those who received training for work like carpentry, engineering, soap making, etc., they get a few tools and were told to go and work. How do you think that can be possible? Somebody who was used to making a lot of money from the way they used guns to harass people to collect thousands of dollars from them. . . . I think what they (JIU) should have done, after giving them tools to work with, was to put in place a mechanism that will monitor them, that will check on them, know where they are and encourage them to apply the tools. There has never been any follow up.³³

It is important to note that mere training and provision of start-up tools to the former child

soldiers does not amount to reintegration. Some of the former child soldiers reported having families and that even with the tools, there was no way they could meet their financial commitments to those families.

Challenges

Methods of economic reintegration for these children were not well researched before being adopted, and skill acquisition centres were not built with a sound knowledge of the socio-economic reality in Liberia. Little consideration was given to the societal needs, or the size of the economy. For example, effort is not always made to match the supply of a skill, with the demand for it. In Liberia, the economy is struggling to develop, and the earning power of most people remains low. Newly trained former child soldiers may find it very difficult to garner enough patronage for their skills, and therefore, the expected transition back to a more normal life could be hindered. In addition, when former child soldiers are trained and empowered, mostly to the exclusion of their peers and the rest of the community, envy and jealousy may arise. This might also result in creating enmity in the light of the atrocities committed against the community, by these former child soldiers. As Wessells (2009) noted, a viable reintegration programme is one that involves both communal and individual change. Both the children and local communities should be involved in the planning and implementation of all aspect of reintegration programmes. (Jareg, 2005)

Traditional healing and cleansing ceremony

Traditional healing ceremonies have been lauded as an effective and integral aspect of psychosocial healing and reintegration for children associated with the fighting forces (Stark, 2006; Boothby, Crawford, &

Halperin, 2006; Verhey, 2001; Honwana, 1997). Such ceremonies appear to both increase community acceptance of these children, as well as enabling the children to feel accepted (Williamson, 2006). This method also assisted the former child soldiers to overcome the traumatic experiences associated with the grave crimes committed, such as: the murder of a member of a particular community, or family. The belief is that by having the child ex-soldiers undergo such a ceremony they will be forgiven by the gods of the land. Once former child soldiers feel that the community they had wronged has forgiven them, it helps them to achieve mental stability. In the case of this study, only a few former child soldiers admitted to having undergone such a ceremony. In the survey questionnaire administered to the child ex-soldiers in Monrovia, only 45 of the 250 participants, representing 18%, claimed to have undergone traditional cleansing and healing ceremonies. It is possible that many more former child soldiers may have participated in traditional cleansing, but as this research was primarily located in Monrovia, it did not cover the rural communities where such ceremonies are usually performed, and traditional religion practices and beliefs are stronger. In Monrovia, Christianity and Islamic practices have significantly eroded traditional practices.

Discussion

The 2003 reintegration programme for former child soldiers was believed to be better planned and coordinated than the programme that began in 1997. It borrowed from other reintegration experiences in Africa. For example, a large number of organisations embarked on a serious sensitisation programme based on the need for families and communities to accept former child soldiers back. This may be responsible

for the relatively successful tracing and reunifying. An earlier study reported that 99% of the formally demobilised children were reunited with family members or relatives. However, some of those reunited subsequently migrated to other areas. This change was likely to have been influenced by the desire to find better livelihood opportunities (Williamson & Carter, 2005). Interviews conducted in 2006, with the staff of Don Bosco Homes, indicated that about 75% of the children returned home to their parents. However, they also acknowledged with frustration the growing population of children on the streets of Monrovia. Although reintegrating children within the family and community setting is the most appropriate means of achieving the reintegration of these former child soldiers, many children in Monrovia have become street children. They have lost touch with their families and communities. The family tracing and unification programme was hindered by a weak family system, and dysfunctional communities that were the result of 14 years of civil war. As a result of the war, families and communities also required psychosocial support. Additionally, the socio-economic state of post-war Liberia made the re-socialisation process of former child soldiers within a family setting extremely difficult. The level of poverty also had a direct impact on the reintegration of children with families whose members left to seek improved livelihoods outside their communities. Additionally, child soldier orphans presented a special challenge to the Liberian government and other stakeholders in the reintegration programme. Educational support provided for former child soldiers in Liberia could, to some extent, be considered successful in terms the number of children who were enrolled in school, with the support provided to cover

registration fees, books, subsistence allowances, uniform and other related materials. The follow up strategy to ensure that the children regularly attended school (on which the payment of subsistence allowance was based), encouraged the children to be more committed and punctual. The school curriculum made learning attractive, as it was interspersed with activities like football, video and bike riding. This encouraged regular interaction of former child soldiers with other children and their teachers, and may have also helped in reducing the trauma of war and enable them to adopt a more positive attitude towards life. Interviews with school heads indicated that there was considerable reduction of fear, aggressive behaviour, anxiety, depression and hyperactivity. However, the three-year educational support, provided as part of the reintegration programme, was insufficient to see a child through elementary and secondary school. Also, the condition of the educational infrastructure was poor and the numbers of functioning schools were low. Schools also lacked the necessary tools and materials to impart knowledge to the children. Infrastructural decay put the government at the mercy of private sector operators in providing education to the children, which led to former child soldiers being placed primarily in private/mission schools. The funding necessary for infrastructural improvement is still out of reach of the Liberian government.

Skills acquisition, considered a viable approach towards economic empowerment, attained some measure of success. NGOs assisted the children in acquiring the necessary skills. One of the general views expressed by the children trained was that their lives appeared to be more meaningful following the reintegration programme. The organisation also assisted those children, who

wanted to be on their own, to establish small businesses (Awodola, 2009). However, many of those who completed training at vocational centres and were given start-up tools, sold them and returned to the streets. Therefore, it is important that these programmes adequately address the concerns of the ex-soldiers in a holistic manner, so that problems such as the sale of start-up kits could be controlled through an effective follow-up mechanism.

Corruption and insufficient funding are additional problems. According to some informants, many public officials were perceived by the masses as benefiting hugely from the reintegration programme, at the expense of the children. The dismissal of the head of NCDDRR on allegations of corruption confirmed the truth of this perception.⁴ Welfare organisations also explained that inadequate funding has been a constraint in the course of discharging their mandate; whatever progress they recorded is in proportion to funds that were available.

Limitation of the study

Having discussed the successes and challenges of the methods employed in the reintegration of former child soldiers in Liberia, there are some limitations that need to be taken into consideration for future studies in this area.

Part of the data for this study were elicited using a survey questionnaire with former child soldiers. Cross-sectional research with questionnaires has disadvantages, because it limits the response options of the participants. The data were triangulated with qualitative techniques, such as in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, which helped to improve the validity and reliability of data.

Female child soldiers also constitute a category of demobilised soldiers, as they were recruited just as their male peers, and faced the same consequences of armed conflict. However, their case should constitute a subject for a more specific study, as this study focused only on male child soldiers, as they are more visible in the conflict and more often found in the reintegration programme.

It seems that the issue of jealousy between the 'normal' children and the former soldiers would also likely have an impact on the success of the reintegration programme. Even though, this is not the focus of the study, observing the relationship between the former child soldiers and the other children indicated that the special support offered to former child soldiers was perceived as an indication that they have been rewarded for the atrocities they committed during the war against the general population.

Also, this research did not address the motivation behind the conscription of children as soldiers, nor did it focus on the relationship between former child soldiers and their previous commanders.

This study also did not systematically consider the living condition of the children before conscription, or the family situation after the war, both of which could have an important bearing on the responses of the children to the reintegration processes. For instance, children who lost their parent(s) during the war will probably fare worse in adjustment, compared to those who found their parent(s) alive.

Conclusion

Based on the interviews conducted with relevant stakeholders, the success of the family reunification in Liberia was measured primarily in terms of the number of children that were reunified with their

families or relations. Unfortunately, many if not all of the families were economically incapacitated, partly accounting for why many of the children drifted away from their families. Economic assistance to poor families, and the inclusion of communities within the framework of reintegration, will assist in keeping former child soldiers within their immediate family and community.

Also, given that many Liberian former child soldiers live on streets in the city of Monrovia, a separate programme should be specifically designed to create a community of former child soldiers, and to target them for an economic empowerment programme. In this way, a group of former child soldiers could be trained with relevant skills, and at the same time assisted to form a small scale business enterprise around their chosen skills.

Limitation of the educational support to these children, in terms of the short duration of the support, is an indication of the lack of appreciation of the magnitude of the change education could make in the life of former child soldiers. Secondly, focusing on these ex-combatants, to the exclusion of 'normal' children, amounts to insensitivity to the educational needs of the society on the part of the programme providers. For the programme to be sustainable and beneficial to the people of Liberia, it should target all children, regardless of whether they were former soldiers, or not.

The main challenge of the skill acquisition programme was that many of the beneficiaries resorted to selling the start-up tools, after graduation from the training school. A proper monitoring mechanism to follow-up these children would have probably minimised this practice. The economic empowerment of former child soldiers, almost to the exclusion of their peers, will tend to elicit envy and jealousy, creating a

condition of enmity in the light of the atrocities committed against the community by these children when soldiers. In the author's view, a viable reintegration programme is the one that enhances community cohesion and participation, by a broad spectrum of community members, within communal life as well as positive individual change. Also, the type of skills the children acquire should be relevant to addressing the perceived needs of the community in which the children operate or live.

Finally, the Liberia reintegration programme involved a combination of strategies implemented by national and international agencies. Although, many important challenges were faced by these agencies, a significant achievement is recorded in terms of restoring Liberia to the path of peace. Nevertheless, it is important that future reintegration programmes in (post)conflict societies receive further funding and technical support from international agencies.

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¹ Interview with Head of Child Protection Officers with UNICEF, UNICEF Office, Monrovia, Liberia, 2006 on 16th June 2006.

² Interview with Richard Jack at the Focus Group Discussion, at DBH, Sinkor Street, Monrovia, Liberia. on 27th June 2006.

³ Interview with Bill Jackloh, a public analyst and commentator at Carey Street, Monrovia, Liberia on 18th June 2006.

⁴ Interview with Johnson Doe, Broad Street, Monrovia, Liberia on 23rd June 2006.

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