

Introduction to the *Special Section* on former child soldiers' rehabilitation: connecting individual and communal worlds

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Why a *Special Section* on the rehabilitation processes of former child soldiers: children and adolescents in armed conflict

War and armed conflict have had a huge impact on the lives of countless children and young people throughout history, and up to today. During conflict, children and their families are exposed to a series of extreme and potentially traumatising events, such as killings, massacres, rape, torture, forced displacement, uprooting and separation from family members. This *Special Section of Intervention* elaborates the fate of a particular group of children affected by armed conflict: child soldiers (Van de Veer et al., 2006). (See also the *Special Issue of Intervention* on disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) of child soldiers, November 2006 (vol.4, issue 3).

Child soldiers are defined as children, under the age of 18, who take up a variety of roles (such as soldier, spy, sex slave, cook or porter) within armed groups (Vindevogel, Broekaert & Derluyn, 2014). According to UNICEF, it is estimated that some 250,000 children are currently enlisted in more than 30 armed conflicts worldwide, both by state and non-state actors (Unicef, s.d.). Some of these children are forcibly conscripted through abduction or threats of violence to

themselves or families, others are coerced or manipulated into joining, and still others are more subtly compelled by circumstances to enlist, such as economic hardship, lack of education or orphanhood (Derluyn & Broekaert, 2010; Kerig & Wainryb, 2013; Wessells, 2006). However, no matter how they came to join an armed group, they are exposed to, and often (forced to) participate in violent, destructive events and acts (Betancourt et al., 2008; Vindevogel et al., 2014; Vindevogel et al., 2013c).

Being exposed to war and armed conflict, directly or indirectly, can pose serious threats to children's emotional wellbeing. A wide range of studies has documented how war affected children and adolescents in general and certain groups particularly, such as child soldiers or victims of war related sexual violence, can exhibit severe mental health problems, including symptoms of anxiety, depression and posttraumatic stress, as well as various externalising problems (such as drug use or aggressive behaviour) (see e.g., Betancourt et al., 2013; Mels et al., 2010; Okello et al., 2013; Verelst et al., 2014).

Added to this mix, during these often long and recurring periods of war, social networks and communal ties are torn apart, mass displacement and over-arching human rights abuses become the norm, with tensions between civilians, groups and

communities created or induced (Derluyn, Vindevogel & De Haene, 2013). The use of children as soldiers, i.e. as participants in these large scale human right abuses, is another factor contributing to the potential destruction of the social fabric (Vindevogel et al., 2012).

Importantly, the psychological problems cited above are intricately embedded within, and explained by, disrupted social bonds in these children's communal worlds. A recent study by Verelst and colleagues (2014) has shown how the mental health impact of sexual violence on adolescent girls, living in the war torn region of eastern Congo, is largely determined by the negative social reactions experienced by these girls within their communities. Correspondingly, in the case of former child soldiers, there is clear evidence that social adversity often persists long after child soldiers return to their families and communities. They remain, sometimes for years after disarmament, exposed to social processes of discrimination, stigmatisation and exclusion that operate as major determinants of their psychological wellbeing (Betancourt et al., 2010; Vindevogel et al., 2013a).

Often overlooked, research equally documents how these youths, their families and communities show impressive strengths and resources, with a remarkable resilience in the face of extreme events and the continuing challenges they face in the aftermath of conflict. However, this resilience, these strengths and the availability of resources do not imply that psychological and social problems immediately disappear. Rather, the evidence suggests a large scale and long lasting impact of war related events.

A growing body of evidence further indicates how understanding the psychosocial impact of armed conflict on children implies a social and relational perspective that explores the intricate interconnectedness between individual and collective meanings of organised violence. Such a

relational focus involves an emphasis on the intersection of individual and communal processes, in which suffering arise within social contexts, and is at the same time also resolved within social bonds (Derluyn, Vindevogel, & De Haene, 2013; Masten & Narayan, 2012; Mels et al., 2013; Vindevogel, Broekaert & Derluyn, 2013; Williamson, 2006).

Context: reconstructing life in post conflict environments

In the aftermath of conflict, the massive destruction of people's daily lives that occurred puts huge pressures on the reconstruction of overall living conditions and social networks. Equally, the individual psychosocial recovery of civilians and, in particular, of children and adolescents, needs broad attention once the weapons have stopped firing.

In the immediate aftermath, most war zones receive a whole range of humanitarian interventions aimed at alleviating the most urgent needs of affected groups, through the provision of shelter, food, basic medical care and emergency education. More specific interventions are set up for particular groups, such as rehabilitation centres for former child soldiers or specialised medical care for victims of sexual violence.

These interventions are mainly directed at people's basic living needs, and attention from (and presence of) international actors and agencies often significantly decreases once the most urgent needs are covered, and a relatively stable living environment is created. It is, however, precisely in this period that the rebuilding of communities and societies, as well as the individual recovery of affected persons, actually starts. In fact, the impact of daily stressors on psychosocial wellbeing, within the context of the aftermath of armed conflict, may often be stronger than the impact of the original, traumatic wartime events (see e.g., Miller & Rasmussen, 2010; Vindevogel et al., 2013a; Vindevogel et al., 2013b).

Little attention has been given to the rebuilding of this social tissue, yet it is of particular importance in the case of former child soldiers, where the individual reintegration processes and the overall rebuilding of the social tissue is closely connected to the question of how individuals and communities may deal with ongoing feelings of hatred and revenge, often from both sides (Vindevoel et al., 2013). While sensitisation programmes have largely focussed on the fact that these 'soldiers' are children, and should be considered as 'victims', and not as 'agents' or 'perpetrators', this is not always a view shared by communities or affected individuals, leading to prolonged and extended forms of stigmatisation, exclusion, and discrimination of former child soldiers. Remarkably, most rehabilitation programmes directed towards these groups also mainly consider these children as 'victims', and pay little attention to whether they also need to take responsibility for the acts they've committed (Derluyn et al., 2012). As for the *former child soldiers*, formerly abducted children do not often consider themselves as having been *'soldiers'*.

An additional factor at work in this mix is that most programmes are run by international organisations and agencies, with very limited input from local actors and stakeholders. In order to re-connect to a more local context, it is important to consider the importance of historical context and nature of the conflict, the specific local contexts and the role and experience of the relevant actors and local stakeholders (see Villanueva et al., 2013), whereby the voices of child soldiers themselves should not be forgotten (Karki, Kohrt, & Jordans, 2009).

What becomes increasingly evident from studies documenting processes of post conflict reconstruction is the importance of closely embedding support programmes within local social networks. It is here that a relational understanding of the sequelae

of organised violence extends towards an emphasis on interconnecting the rebuilding of individual wellbeing to social reconstruction. Indeed, neglecting the myriad interconnections between individual and social worlds, in supporting reconstruction and healing from organised violence, risks further fragmentation of the social fabric on which healing so strongly depends (Kirmayer, Lemelson & Barad, 2007).

Genesis of this section: learning from others

At this moment, in several parts of the world, existing competencies and knowledge are extensive in this field of rehabilitation and reintegration of former child soldiers and war affected children and adolescents. Yet, few opportunities to share this knowledge seem to exist. In particular, between academic scholars, practitioners and policy makers, few bridges exist to facilitate the exchange of information, experiences and good practices.

With this *Special Section, Intervention* aims to link research findings of individual and social experiences on reintegration of child soldiers to communities with the practice of programmes that address child soldiers. In this section, we build on two international conferences that were organised by the guest editors, together with other academics from four Belgian universities (Ghent University, University of Antwerp, University of Brussels and K.U.Leuven and with the Centre for Children in Vulnerable Situations).

In 2009, the conference "*Rehabilitation, Reintegration and Reconciliation of War-Affected Children*" (<http://www.ua.ac.be/main.aspx?c=.RRWAC>) was held in Brussels. Scholars, policy makers and practitioners, from the world over, came together to discuss the theme of war affected children from the perspective of three connected, and yet distinct, disciplines: children's rights, psychosocial wellbeing and transitional justice. Beyond an increased understanding of the

added value and the unique contribution of each discipline to the particular field of rehabilitation, reconciliation and reintegration processes, the conference also showed the potential for mutual enrichment and cross-fertilisation between the various disciplines, for example when addressing the victim/perpetrator dichotomy and dilemma.

In 2013, a follow-up conference was organised in Kampala, by the same organisations and WarChild in Uganda: "*Children and youth affected by armed conflict: Where to go from here?*" (www.kampala2013.ugent.be). More than 150 academics, practitioners and policy makers globally, including a large representation from Southern countries, attended this conference, shared their experiences and knowledge, and discussed the way forward in the field of rehabilitation and reintegration processes of children and adolescents affected by armed conflicts. The extensive and interdisciplinary dialogue on both scientific fora, as well as within the pages of *Intervention*, continues to invite further reflection.

Focus of this *Special Section*

Although participants of both conferences were invited to contribute to this *Special Section*, we have also included papers from authors who did not participate in either conference, but all focussed on long term reintegration processes of former child soldiers. The five papers in this *Special Section* inform our knowledge extensively on: the heterogeneous impact of having been a child soldier on children's wellbeing; the importance of considering the specific context in which recruitment and conscription of children happens; and the need to explicitly locate rehabilitation and reintegration processes into the social fabric.

Myriam Denov and Ines Marchand discuss the experience of demobilised youth in Colombia, particularly addressing to what extent the realities of forced migration and displacement shape and inform their reintegration experiences. Most of the former child soldiers are unable to reintegrate back into their own communities due to the risk to their families for attack. Their

About the conferences: their recommendations

Given that both conferences aimed to bring together scholars, practitioners and policy makers from of different fields and areas, the organisers also wanted to create a series of recommendations that can act as leading guidelines in the field. While for the Brussels conference, these recommendations were mainly discussed by the organising committee, the Kampala recommendations were designed through an intensive consultation process with involved stakeholders, key actors, presenters and the public during the conference.

The Brussels recommendations (<http://www.ua.ac.be/main.aspx?c=.RRWAC>) plead for:

- a broadened attention beyond disarmament and demobilisation, and beyond child soldiers;
- a move towards long term interventions implemented in a comprehensive way (including reintegration, rehabilitation and reconciliation);
- attention to be given to local realities, capacities and resilience, as well as for the diversity within the group of war affected children, and insist on a rights based approach of accountability and prevention;
- attention also given to closing two gaps: one between theory, policy and implementation, and one between humanitarian interventions and development cooperation and aid.

The Brussels conference also resulted in a conference report, and in a book (*Re-Member. Rehabilitation, reintegration and reconciliation of war-affected children*) (Derluyn, Mels, Parmentier & Vandenhole, 2012) (see also book review, Angucia, 2013). This book aimed to bring together perspectives on war affected children out of the three disciplines: children's rights, psychosocial wellbeing and transitional justice, through the input of experiences, knowledge and practices from a range of global experts. A follow-up seminar on legal frameworks focused on the way different international law regimes approach the issue of child soldiers (Vandenhole, Parmentier & Derluyn 2011).

The Kampala Recommendations on the Recovery and Reintegration of Children and Youth Affected by Armed Conflict (www.kampala2013.ugent.be) stipulate that:

- 'reintegration is a long-term, communal and societal process that entails finding a role, finding respect and reducing stigma for children affected by and associated with fighting forces or groups. It is also transformational; representing a move away from a culture of militarisation, discrimination or social injustice';
- donor agencies and civil society are requested to consider the necessity of long term and sustainable interventions for reintegration when supporting or implementing reintegration projects;
- participation of both children and their wider contexts (family, communities) in the planning and execution of support initiatives is important, which also relates to the need of considering local realities and capacities.
- reintegration processes need to be community led, whereby existing structures and local practices are used, and where sufficient attention is paid towards economic issues and long term engagement of donors and agencies.

Furthermore, the Kampala recommendations also largely engage with the theme of transitional justice, using it as an overall umbrella and including support and care structures for war affected youths. This is an interesting consideration, as it means that caring for war affected children, including former child soldiers, is considered '*doing right*' in addressing the harm caused to these affected children and adolescents, a sort of '*duty*'. At the same time, attention should also include '*accountability*', whereby children and young people are encouraged to take responsibility for their actions, in a safe and appropriate manner. As the conference concluded; '*in balancing such accountability and reintegration, the focus should be on restorative, rather than punitive, justice*'.

For the Kampala conference, the full papers of accepted presentations are published on the website (given above).

study indicates that despite the challenges, these former child soldiers have been able to lead productive lives through commitment to education, employment and peer support.

Jonna Both and Ria Reis explored the long term impact of having been a child soldier in Yumbe, Uganda. Ten years after the return of these children, they still express serious

grievances towards organisations who once promised support, but have not lived up to their promises. Both and Reis stress the importance of taking the historical, cultural and political contexts into account when understanding the experiences of former child soldiers, and thereby, emphasise how a purely individualising and psychologising approach fails to do justice to the

multi-layered lived experience of forced conscription.

Ramesh Prasad Adhikari and colleagues also examine the long term impact through exploring the mental health supportive, protective and risk factors among former child soldiers in Nepal, through a longitudinal study. Findings show that inter-caste marriage, low caste and far western geographic regions were associated with greater mental health problems. Strong social support is essential, as rehabilitation packages alone may be insufficient to improve mental health.

Although the focus is on child soldiers, *Margaret Angucia* explains why formerly abducted children and their communities in northern Uganda reject the categorisation of soldiers and prefer to be regarded as war affected youth. At the same time, Angucia warns that another categorisation may influence or undermine the effectiveness of targeted intervention programmes.

Abosede Omowumi Babatunde discusses the role of DDR of former child soldiers when they return to society. She stresses the crucial role and effectiveness of traditional cultural practices in the reintegration of child soldiers in post conflict Liberia and Burundi, such as ritual and cleansing ceremonies, in addressing psychosocial problems and should be considered as essential components of reintegration.

Conclusion

The contributions of this *Special Section of Intervention*, as well as the Brussels and Kampala recommendations, emphasise the statement of Derluyn et al., (2013) that we should evolve towards a relational approach to humanitarian interventions in conflict and post conflict contexts, given the myriad interconnections between individual and social worlds in shaping the impact and healing of armed conflict. They cite three particular strategies, which can be considered when taking this relational

approach, as the starting point of humanitarian responses towards war, organised violence and collective trauma and, in particular, towards rehabilitation and reintegration process of former child soldiers (Derluyn et al., 2013): First, healing needs to be located within a social context, which includes the acknowledgement of the far reaching and long term disruption of communities, a focus on reconciliation processes, and a systemic approach to mental health care. Second, efforts are needed to prevent the reification of social isolation. Third, the long lasting complexity of reconstruction, in the wake of violence, needs to be acknowledged. As this *Special Section* extensively documents, understanding and supporting psychosocial wellbeing of individuals and their communities requires a long term engagement with the intricate connections between individual and social experiences of armed conflict and its aftermath, and an explicit focus on locating mental health processes within its dynamic social fabric. Through this *Special Section* in *Intervention*, we hope to reach not only people interested in the field, but also policy makers, programme designers and people working with the child soldiers, their families and communities around the globe.

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