

# The disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of child soldiers: social and psychological transformation in Sierra Leone

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*This article gives an overview of the processes of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of child soldiers in Sierra Leone. In contrast to many other situations, in Sierra Leone there has been an effective, integrated response involving a large number of civil society organizations and committees as well as the government. Nine areas of intervention were identified as having contributed to successful family and community reintegration: community sensitization, formal disarmament and demobilization, a period of transition in an Interim Care Centre, tracing and family mediation, family reunification, traditional cleansing and healing ceremonies and religious support, school or skills training, ongoing access to health care for those in school or training, and individual supportive counselling, facilitation and encouragement. Most children who have been demobilized appear to be doing as well as other children in their community.*

**Keywords:** child soldiers, Sierra Leone, reintegration

The people of Sierra Leone suffered more than 10 horrific years of war, and children were both among the principal victims, as well as some of the main perpetrators of violence. This article considers what became of demobilized child soldiers once the fighting stopped in 2001.<sup>1</sup> My personal reflections on what has unfolded for them are framed by a conversation that took place a few years

earlier, in 1998, when the war was going strong with no end in sight. I was in the country's capital, Freetown, to help consider how the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) could respond through its Displaced Children and Orphans Fund (DCOF) to the war's impacts on children. A colleague, Marie de la Soudiere, had just returned from talking with residents of communities heavily affected by the war, and I asked her about the prospects for the children from those communities who had been abducted and turned into fighters to ever go home again. She said that people in those communities, who had seen the atrocities these children had committed, had indicated that they never wanted to see them again, and if they did, they would probably kill them. Then she said that, even so, we had to find a way that those children could go home.<sup>2</sup>

Most of the child soldiers who survived to the end of the war were eventually able to go home, and this article describes the challenges that had to be overcome, and the interventions that made it possible. In the end, 98% of the children demobilized were reunited with one or both parents, older siblings, or relatives (United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2004). Despite this high rate of reunification, some of those who returned home migrated to other areas subsequently rather than reintegrate locally.

This drift to other areas was likely influenced by the desire to find livelihood opportunities, as well as avoiding the hostility, stigma, and discrimination faced in their home communities by those who had been with one of the rebel groups. Also, many girls who had been associated (through abduction or of their own volition) with one of the fighting forces were frequently excluded from the formal demobilization process. The girls received no assistance, at least initially, and found returning home difficult or impossible. So, the results for child soldiers in Sierra Leone have been mixed, including both significant successes as well as failures, and there is much to learn from both.

The information presented is drawn primarily from USAID/DCOF assessment visits to Sierra Leone in 2002 and 2005 in which I participated (Williamson & Cripe, 2002; Williamson, 2005)<sup>3</sup>. The reports on those visits were based on numerous discussions with personnel who had been engaged in planning and implementing demobilization and reintegration services for former child soldiers in the country and included: visits to project sites; interviews with a few former child soldiers; extensive review of documents on the situation; and interventions. This article also presents and draws from some of the findings of an unpublished follow-up study of former child soldiers carried out in Sierra Leone by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) with USAID/DCOF support. Some comparisons are also made with findings of research in Mozambique that has assessed the situation of a group of former child soldiers over 16 years (Boothby, Crawford & Halperin, 2006).

### **The war**

Multiple coups, unrest, economic and social decline, corruption, bad governance, and power grabbing characterized the first three

decades of this West African country's independence. The turbulence escalated in 1991, when a small band calling itself the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) invaded eastern Sierra Leone from Liberia and launched a civil war known globally for its viciousness and brutality. The declared aims of the RUF, which were completely contradicted by their subsequent actions, involved ending corruption and bringing peace to the country.

The RUF's strategy was characterized by abducting children during village raids. Sometimes, these children were forced to commit atrocities against their own family or others in the village to instill in them the sense that they could never return. Many of the girls abducted were abused sexually, with some eventually becoming 'bush wives,' informally attached to a single adult male combatant. Some of the RUF's most brutal acts, like the abductions and the chopping off of hands and arms, were widely covered in the international media.

No one knows with any certainty how many children were abducted during the 12 years of war in Sierra Leone. However, based on information from the government and child protection groups, UNICEF has reported that 8466 children were officially documented as 'missing' between 1991 and 2002; and it believes that girls accounted for over half of this number. In 1999 alone, 4448 children were reported as missing.

The conflict went through various stages, including a coup by the national army, diplomatic and peacekeeping involvement by the Economic Community of West African States and the mobilization of local civil defence forces (CDF). The RUF, the CDF, and the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (formed by coup participants) all made extensive use of child soldiers.<sup>4</sup> A peace agreement was signed in Lomé in 1999, and a peacekeeping operation, the United

Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL), was established. Military intervention in 2000 by the British government finally brought an end to the fighting, and a process of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) was re-started in 2001. Though briefly derailed twice by violence, the disarmament and demobilization stages ended in January 2002.

One analyst has made a persuasive case that underlying the conflict in Sierra Leone was a pattern of control of resources by a few leaders, and the social and economic subversion of youth, as well as their marginalization and alienation from mainstream society and political structures (Richards, 1996). The future stability of Sierra Leone may likely depend on whether the large majority of youth will find access into the nexus of education, skills training, and employment. Young people, whom the author met, consistently stressed how highly these opportunities are valued. Ensuring the access of former child soldiers to these opportunities was a critical part of the reintegration phase of the country's DDR process<sup>5</sup>.

### **The disarmament and demobilization of children in Sierra Leone**

The recruitment of children into governmental armed forces or other armed groups is illegal under international law.<sup>6</sup> Children should not be recruited, and where they have been, they should be demobilized as soon as possible, regardless of whether or not a formal peace agreement has been reached. UNICEF and most child-focused non governmental organizations (NGOs) agreed that DDR for children should be separate from any adult DDR process and tailored to the particular needs of both boys and girls. The demobilization of child soldiers took place in Sierra Leone during various stages

of the war, with UNICEF and other civil society actors negotiating the release of children, and assisting their family and community reintegration whenever they found it possible. The National Committee for Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (NCDDR) reported that a total of 6845 children were demobilized during and after the conflict in Sierra Leone. Of these children, 189 children were demobilized in 1998 primarily through special initiatives, and another 1982 were demobilized between the years 1999 and 2000. From May 2001 through January 2002, 4674 were demobilized through the general DDR process. This article focuses primarily on the activities in 2001 and 2002.

The peace process in Sierra Leone established a crucial precedent regarding child soldiers. The Lomé peace accord was the peace agreement that specified that child combatants would be given particular attention and handled differently than adults in a demobilization and reintegration process. Written guidelines for children's disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration in Sierra Leone were established by the NCDDR (NCDDR Technical Committee, 2000). They were implemented, however, by a variety of actors on the ground, including military observers and the personnel of various national and international child protection NGOs with the support of UNICEF. Various donors supported the child-focused aspects of the DDR, with the largest amount coming from USAID/DCOF, followed by the European Union, and the German National Committee for UNICEF. In May 2001, when demobilization resumed after an interruption by fighting, there was considerable pressure to disarm all combatants as rapidly as possible. Decisions about the specifics of when, where, and how disarmament and demobilization would be

carried out within a specific area were sometimes (of necessity) taken quickly, and child protection NGOs often had to move very quickly in order to be able to play a role in the process. It was sometimes difficult for them to gain access to areas where demobilization was to take place. There were also many logistical constraints, as much of the country's limited infrastructure had been damaged or destroyed by the war.

Despite the specifications in the guidelines regarding how children were to be screened and processed, implementation was at times *ad hoc* and varied considerably in the various sites involved. Although the guidelines provided for particular NGO roles regarding children in the DDR process, in practice, some military observers did not recognize this. One reason was the rotation of peacekeepers, some of which did not have the relevant preparation for the aspects of their job related to demobilizing and separating children. Consequently, after disarmament and demobilization, it was sometimes necessary for UNICEF and child protection NGOs to negotiate the release of children to the organizations designated as responsible for their reintegration.

Demobilized adults were entitled to receive cash stipends and skills training, while children were assisted with family reunification and had a choice between access to education or skills training, but were not eligible for cash payments. This was based on the view that if children were given cash, their commander might easily take it, and that they should instead receive services in-kind (Brooks, 2005). Consequently, it was necessary during disarmament and demobilization both to determine who had actually been associated with a fighting force (and was thus eligible for benefits) and whether youths were above or below the age of 18. Some children, however, resisted this and insisted that

they were adults, and child protection personnel were involved in determining whether and individual was a child or an adult.

Another failing of the process in Sierra Leone was the inconsistent implementation of the guidelines regarding weapons. The guidelines specified that any children who had been associated with a fighting force were to be demobilized and entitled to the assistance for former child soldiers, regardless of whether they had been fighters or ever carried a weapon. Some peacekeepers, however, imposed a weapons tests and required children as well as adults to present a weapon and demonstrate operational familiarity with it. This had the effect of excluding many children from the DDR process, in particular girls, who often had been abducted by the RUF and used to carry loads, do domestic work, and other support tasks. Many girls had been sexually exploited as well.

### **Interim Care Centres**

As soon as children were demobilized, they were physically separated from adult soldiers. Some children, in particular those who had been with the CDF, had not lost contact with their family and were able to return directly to their home. Others were taken to an Interim Care Centre (ICC) managed by one of the child protection NGOs. These were generally located some distance from the demobilization site. A total of 5038 demobilized child soldiers passed through the ICCs before they were closed. An additional 2166 separated children who had not been with one of the fighting forces but who needed tracing assistance also passed through the ICCs before they were closed (UNICEF, 2004). Physically separating child soldiers from commanders and adult members of their group was essential to breaking the links of control.

Once the demobilization process began, ICCs became the primary base for activities to trace surviving family members and help children to begin the transition back to civilian life and childhood. Many children only came to consider family reunification as a possibility after they reached the ICCs, through the work of the NGOs carrying out documentation, tracing, and family reunification. The RUF had sought to instill the feeling in abducted children that they could never go home because of the violence they had been forced to carry out against their families or home communities. This was one way to reduce the likelihood of their trying to escape and to bind them to the insurgent group.

As a matter of policy, the length of stay in an ICC was intended to be limited to no more than six weeks. One concern, based on some of the experience with smaller groups of children who had been released at various times during the war, was that keeping children for too long would habituate them to institutional life and impede subsequent family reunification and community reintegration. Most of the children who could not be reunited within six weeks were placed in foster care (while tracing continued), or, for those who were older, allowed to live in small groups with some supervision.

While relatively brief, the period of transition in an ICC was an important break between years spent with the fighting forces and the return to family and community. Activities focused on a return to normal life, such as a regular schedule, chores, classes, play, artwork, singing and learning culturally appropriate behaviour. Most children passed through the ICCs in under the six-week limit. There was only very limited effort to provide formal Western therapy by one international NGO, which provided services to less than 100 children from 1999 to 2001 at

two ICCs. The consensus among most organizations working with former child soldiers was that such treatment was neither necessary nor appropriate.

### **Reunification and reintegration**

In addition to gender, there were many differences among the children associated with the fighting forces. Not only were some active combatants and others not, many had been abducted, while others were the children of adult combatants. Some were anxious to return home, while others considered that impossible.

Yet, as indicated above, 98% of the children demobilized were reunited with one or both parents or with relatives. This apparent success with reintegration was not achieved easily. Patient sensitization work in communities, tracing and family reunification, mediation with families, traditional cleansing ceremonies, access to formal education and skills training, and supportive attention to the former child soldiers contributed to a remarkable transformation of the children, their families, and their communities. In contrast to earlier hostility toward the return of former RUF child soldiers, during my visit to Sierra Leone in 2002, community members spoke eloquently about their forgiveness for these children because they understood that they had been forced to do what they did. The reintegration work was supported by USAID and other donors; coordinated, monitored, and facilitated by UNICEF, and implemented by national and international NGOs. But the real heroes of the process, the ones who have been on the front line and made it work, have been the Sierra Leonean staff, community leaders, grassroots volunteers, and resilient children.

Reintegration, in terms of social acceptance, was easier for children who were part of the CDF. During the war, most of them remained

in their community, or close by. Other village residents regarded these children as protectors. Ironically, though, a large number of the children who were with the CDF were excluded from the demobilization process, apparently for political reasons. They were, thereby, prevented from taking part in the educational and training opportunities that have been provided to other former child soldiers.

It was a different story for the children with the RUF. During the war and its immediate aftermath, many communities were not willing to accept children who had been with the RUF. Many of these children had been forced to kill family members or neighbours and had been living in the bush and fighting for five or more years. The RUF convinced the children that, because they had killed, they could never return home again and this became an integral part of turning them into fighters. They also used drugs to reduce inhibitions. Many of the amputations and other atrocities committed during the war were carried out by formerly abducted children, and many community members expressed only hatred and fear of these children and said they never wanted to see them again. Even the NGO personnel of the ICCs were initially targets of community hostility because of the presence in a centre with children who had been with the RUF.

The RUF and other insurgent groups sometimes physically labelled abducted children by carving the initials of the group into their skin – RUF, AFRC, or EX SLA (former members of the Sierra Leonean Army). These letters were cut into various parts of the body, including the forehead, chest, arms, and back both as a means of terrorizing the children and preventing their escape. After the war, child protection agencies identified almost 100 such children. In 2001, USAID/DCOF provided a funding to UNICEF for

a sub-grant to the International Medical Corps for plastic surgery and other medical services to remove these scars or tattoos on the children.

Due largely to the patient sensitization work done by Sierra Leonean personnel of child protection NGOs, the vast majority of the children who had been with the RUF were eventually able to reunite with family members and return to their communities. Much of this work was done prior to the beginning of the formal DDR process. Because there were multiple ceasefire agreements interrupted by fighting, children's disarmament and demobilization was subject to various starts and stops during the war. While child protection staff members were waiting for opportunities to proceed with DDR, some used the time productively in sensitization work in communities that they could access. Community sensitization was one of the main elements that enabled child soldiers to eventually return home. Other measures were individual caring and supportive attention and counselling given to the former child soldiers by child protection NGO personnel. Further key elements included: mediation with families, traditional cleansing ceremonies arranged by communities, and ensuring access to education or training. The combined results of these elements were changes among the children, their families, and their communities. Reintegration has not been successful for all former child soldiers, but what has been accomplished is a remarkable contrast to what seemed possible during the war.

### **The missing girls**

Despite the successful reunification and reintegration of the demobilized children, a serious failing of DDR in Sierra Leone was that a large number of girls who had been associated with the fighting forces did not

come through the process. UNICEF, which played vitally important leadership and advocacy roles throughout the preparation for, implementation of, and follow-up of DDR for children, has said; 'in hindsight, the biggest crack in the DDR system was gender bias, too many girls and young women fell through and never received any benefits' (UNICEF, 2004).

No one can say with certainty how many girls were abducted during Sierra Leone's civil war and how many should have come through the DDR process. UNICEF documented 8466 cases of 'missing' (and presumably abducted) children between 1991 and 2002 and estimated that at least half of them were girls. A total of 6845 children were demobilized through the formal DDR program. Of these demobilized children, 92% were boys and only 8% were girls (UNICEF, 2004).

One study found that 46% of the girls who had been excluded from DDR in Sierra Leone cited not having a weapon as the reason for their exclusion (McKay & Mazurana, 2004). Although the procedures established for the identification and demobilization of child soldiers did not require them to turn in a weapon, in practice, many girls were apparently turned away because they did not have one. In addition to the weapons tests, which were sometimes imposed, other factors also resulted in girls not being demobilized and having no access to reintegration services. Some girls were not allowed by their commanders, or 'bush husbands', to go through DDR. Many kept themselves out of the process out of fear or shame. A study of girl soldiers determined that many of the girls who had been with the CDF were simply not allowed to present themselves for DDR (McKay & Mazurana, 2004).

Of the girls who kept themselves out of the process, some were afraid of the fighters and

took the first opportunity to leave, returning home or just getting away. Some avoided the process because they did not want to be stigmatized by family or community members for having been associated with a rebel group. Some also feared that being identified, as part of a rebel fighting force would lead to prosecution, or other penalties. A consultant for UNICEF, who assessed the situation of young women and girls formerly associated with fighting forces, concluded that fear and shame kept more of them out of the process than the criteria related to weapons (Coulter, 2004).

The majority of young women and girls interviewed by this UNICEF consultant indicated that they either escaped, or otherwise left, the men with whom they had been forced to live during the war. Most had not come to accept these forced relationships and left when they had a chance (Coulter, 2004). However, some of the formerly abducted young women and girls did remain with their 'bush husbands,' either due to affection or simply through an unawareness of better alternatives.

In its 2002 review of USAID support for the reintegration of former child soldiers in Sierra Leone, DCOF identified both successes, primarily with boys, and the problem of girls largely being left out of the DDR process (Williamson & Cripe, 2002). In response, USAID/DCOF provided additional funds to UNICEF and IRC to address the needs of girls and young women who had been abducted as girls, as well as for the continuation of the reintegration assistance that included boys. UNICEF used that funding to initiate 'The Girls Left Behind' project (2004–2004).

Finding these girls after the war ended and they had dispersed, however, was a challenge. Methods that UNICEF's partners used to identify formerly abducted girls in the 'Girls Left Behind' project included

seeking the assistance of local religious and other community leaders and collaboration with women's groups, youth groups, drop-in centres, and community Child Welfare Committees. At least one organization used radio announcements effectively. Once young women and girls had been identified, they often helped identify others within the target group. Video was used to record and exchange messages between formerly abducted girls and their families, and this proved to be an innovative tool to convince these young women that they could return home.

Of the 714 young women and girls included in the Girls Left Behind project, 494 wanted assistance tracing their families, and 424 were ultimately reunited with either immediate or extended family members, though many decided eventually not to remain with them. Some did not remain because they were stigmatized by members of the community due to their former association (though forced in most cases) with a rebel group. A UNICEF report indicated that among girls; 'many testified that although their parents and other immediate family members were happy to receive them, community reactions were not always positive. Many girls were subjected to verbal abuse, beatings and exclusion from community social life' (Whittington, 2005).

Even if they chose not to stay in their home village, enabling these girls and young women to re-establish connection with their families is likely to prove important in the future in a country where family is the *de facto* social safety net. Now they can go home again, even if they decide not to live there. Also, an important lesson for future DDR processes was that there should be a subsequent means for former child soldiers, in particular girls, to access reintegration services that are not dependent on the willingness of their commanders to present them.<sup>7</sup>

## **Nine critical elements of reintegration**

USAID/DCOF provided funding for the reintegration of child soldiers in Sierra Leone 1998–2004 and made periodic visits to observe activities and provide technical support. The findings below are drawn primarily from DCOF assessments in 2002 and 2005. Nine areas of intervention were identified as having contributed to successful family and community reintegration: community sensitization; formal disarmament and demobilization; a period of transition in an ICC; family tracing, mediation and reunification; traditional cleansing and healing ceremonies, and religious support; school or skills training of adequate quality and duration; ongoing access to health care, particularly for war-related conditions, for those in school or training; individual supportive counselling, encouragement and facilitation; and an effective collaborative approach.

### **Community sensitization**

Atrocities carried out during the war by the RUF were an effective terror tactic. Community members feared and hated them, including the abducted children who had been forced to participate. As stated above, during the war, a common sentiment in communities and among displaced populations was that they never wanted to see these children again, and if they did, they would want to kill them. On the other hand, children who had been part of the CDF, were generally seen to have been protecting their communities and were readily accepted back after the war.

This was the context in which NGOs began to work for family reunification and community reintegration of demobilized child soldiers. Before it was possible to reintegrate children who had been with the RUF or other insurgent groups, careful sensitization work



was needed. During the starts and stops in the DDR process, Sierra Leonean NGO personnel used the delays to do sensitization work in accessible communities. Local chiefs and their counsellors were key initial points of entry into communities. NGO personnel discussed the situation of the former child soldiers with these traditional leaders, stressing that these children had been abducted and forced by adults to become part of the RUF or other groups. Eventually, chiefs allowed them to approach key people in the community, such as civil authorities, religious leaders, heads of male and female initiation societies, teachers, CDF leaders, the community's Mammy Queen (who is an elected role model within the community), youth leaders, medical personnel, and community-based organizations doing development work. These leaders, in turn, influenced other local residents. Once ICCs were established, their staff also went house-to-house in surrounding areas to generate community acceptance of the children. Some centres shared their facilities, such as recreational equipment or a rehabilitated well, with neighbours, which also helped change attitudes.

The community sensitization process that national IRC personnel described to me included a highly participatory, two-day workshop with leaders and influential individuals in each targeted community that they could reach. The focus was on peace building and conflict resolution. Community participants were asked to identify local causes and traditional ways of resolving conflict. They discussed forgiveness and acceptance, and then were asked to develop a role-play of rebels attacking a town, abducting children, giving them drugs, and forcing them to fight. During the debriefing following the role-play, participants were asked what they had seen and experienced in real life.

Typically, this was the point in the workshops when attitudes visibly began to change. The IRC personnel discussed how to help children during a crisis with the participants. They explained the services that children separated from fighting forces would receive. At the end of the workshop, a local Child Protection Committee was formed. In turn, these village-level committees helped organize and conduct similar workshops at the section level, and extend the sensitization process.

Community sensitization opened the door and helped make reintegration possible, but it was not done in all communities. During DCOF's 2005 assessment, it was reported that those who had been reunified with parents or relatives were more likely to remain in the community if it was a community where sensitization work had been done. Similarly, the Mozambique child soldiers' study also found community sensitization to have been a contributing factor that facilitated the reintegration of child soldiers in that country (Boothby et al., 2006).

### **Formal disarmament and demobilization**

Former combatants gathered at designated cantonment sites for disarmament during previously announced dates for formal disarmament and demobilization. The disarmament process included screening to determine whether those present were actually associated with the armed group presenting itself. In some cases, commanders included relatives and others in the hope of obtaining demobilization assistance. Also, some adolescents wanted to be demobilized as adults so they could receive direct cash assistance and claimed to be above the age of 17. Sierra Leonean social workers of child protection NGOs interviewed children and those they suspected were still children. Their

knowledge of history of the conflict enabled them to assess whether a child actually had been in the bush with the armed group. A protocol was developed to guide age assessments. Going through a formal process marking their transition back to civilian life was a significant step toward reintegration for those associated with fighting forces, and in particular, for children. In many respects, successful DDR is a process of identity transformation. It formally recognizes the role that aggressors have played and provides them an opportunity to take up a new role as a civilian. In addition to handing over arms and being screened, often there was a ceremony to mark the transition to civilian life. The demobilization process was an important step in towards reintegration, and was distinct from the following, more lengthy period of weeks in an ICC.

### **A period of transition within an ICC**

The time spent in an ICC provided a crucial opportunity for children to rest – physically, emotionally, psychologically, socially, and spiritually – and reflect on their lives. Most children were gradually able to let down their guard and think about how to rebuild relationships that had been broken, to review the positive things they learned during the separation from families, and reflect on what kind of life they would like to have in the future. The follow-up study described below (See ‘A Reintegration Study’) found that ex-RUF child soldiers who had gone through an ICC before returning home were better adjusted than those who had gone directly home. The psychosocial support provided in the ICCs appears to be important and was oriented toward normalization of daily life and expressive activities. The follow-up study found that the ICCs did make a difference.

However, some girls reported sexual harassment at ICCs, either by male residents or visiting adult combatants. It would be advisable in future DDR operations to establish separate centres for boys and girls, with exceptions made to allow siblings to remain together.

*In the town of Makeni, I met with a young man who had formerly been with one of the fighting forces and asked him about his experience in an ICC following his disarmament and demobilization. His few weeks in the centre, where non-formal classes were part of the program, were his first exposure to education. He described this experience as ‘moving from darkness into the light.’ He had never previously attended school and said that he had not understood what education was before. In the three years after leaving the ICC he had passed the first six primary grades and desperately wants to continue his education.*

### **Family tracing, mediation, and reunification**

When the DDR process began in earnest in May 2001, the need for rapid tracing to locate family members increased dramatically, and the child protection NGOs responded well to the challenge. Tracing and family reunification had been carried out as was possible during the war, and the necessary forms and basic systems had already been developed by the tracing network of NGOs, UNICEF, and the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender, and Children’s Affairs (MSWGCA). Parents and relatives were not necessarily willing to allow children to return immediately. Family mediation was necessary, in many cases, on behalf of the children who had been with the RUF. Providing information about the support that children were entitled to receive, to enable them to return to school or obtain skills training, was also a

part of the process of preparing for a child's return.

Community sensitization, tracing, and family mediation made family reunification and community reintegration possible. Return to the family is probably the single most important aspect of the healing process for former child soldiers, and agencies attempted to do this as quickly as possible. This was also one of the findings of the longitudinal study with former boy soldiers in Mozambique (Boothby et al., 2006). As noted above, 98% of the children demobilized in Sierra Leone were eventually reunited with parents, close family members, or relatives, though some subsequently migrated to other areas.

Additional sensitization and mediation work was often required at the time of reunification and in the days and weeks that followed. In some cases conflicts, occasionally serious, arose and further mediation was necessary. Some of this was done by NGO personnel, but in many cases it was carried out by members of the community's own Child Protection Committee. Such committees were mobilized by members of the National Child Protection Network, which was organized by UNICEF in conjunction with the MSWGCA.

Child protection NGOs made follow-up visits to monitor reunified children, but they were generally unable to do so as often as called for in the standards developed by the Child Protection Network. The dramatic increase in the demands on agency staff members for tracing, transfer of children, reunification, and making foster placements prevented consistent follow-up. The study reported below (See 'A Reintegration Study') found that follow-up visits that were made had a significant, positive influence on children's adjustment. An important lesson for donors and implementing agencies in future DDR processes is that as the process of

tracing and family reunification continues, more agency personnel and transportation capacity are required to continue reuniting children, monitoring their well-being, and intervening where necessary. In Sierra Leone, follow-up was inadequate because inadequate resources were provided, not due to a failure to recognize the need. In future DDR programs, it will be important for implementing organizations to be realistic in their program design and timeline, and for donors to recognize the operational necessity for providing an increasing level of resources to ensure that consistent follow-up can be done.

Community-based reintegration activities organized by Child Welfare Committees and Children Clubs facilitated the reintegration of reunited children within their families, communities, and peer groups. Periodic follow-up visits by NGO social workers focused largely on strengthening the capacities of parents, caregivers, and community members to help returned children to adjust to life in the community and to play normal social roles. Ensuring opportunities for children to return to school or receive skills training was a major factor in successful reintegration. This not only helped children to establish a new identity, it also increased their acceptance by family, community members and peers.

Follow-up visits by child protection NGOs continued until a child was adequately reintegrated and his or her situation was similar to that of other children in the same community. Some children were still receiving monitoring visits when I visited Sierra Leone in 2005. Child Protection Committee criteria indicate that children would be removed from the monitoring caseload if they had been home for more than a year; were in school, skills training, or working; and there were no abuse concerns.

An important lesson from Sierra Leone is that ongoing monitoring should give particular attention to children 'reunited' with extended family members who were not their previous guardians. By 2005, children who were reunited with one or both of their parents tended to be doing well, but many other children who were reunited with extended family members were having problems. Some of them were being treated as domestic servants, which is consistent with traditional patterns of child fostering in the region. Before placing a separated child with an extended family member, careful screening is necessary as well as a public agreement (involving the family and local leaders) that the child will be cared for on a par with other children in the household. A period of regular monitoring is also required.

An important complement to periodic monitoring visits by NGO personnel has been the efforts of Child Protection Committees, through which community members and leaders take responsibility for ongoing monitoring of reunited and other vulnerable children. Much of the effectiveness of reunification and reintegration has been due to the identification, monitoring, and protection roles of community committees.

As indicated above, when it became apparent in 2002 that many girls had been left out of the formal DDR process, USAID/DCOF provided additional funding to enable child protection agencies to identify formerly abducted girls and to assist them with tracing and family reunification.

### **Traditional cleansing and healing ceremonies and religious support**

A number of organizations involved with the reintegration process have stressed the importance of traditional cleansing ceremonies to successful family and community

reintegration. In some cases, child protection NGOs helped communities to obtain the items needed for such ceremonies, but families and communities arranged the rituals themselves. Such ceremonies appear to have increased community acceptance of the children as well as enable the children to feel acceptable. This was confirmed by the study whose findings are reported below in the section, 'A Reintegration Study.' The longitudinal study in Mozambique also found traditional cleansing ceremonies to have been an important factor in the reintegration of former child soldiers there, contributing to their sense of acceptability and 'vital for rebuilding community trust and cohesion' (Boothby et al., 2006).

Traditional cleansing ceremonies, or other healing rituals, have been supported by several organizations as part of their assistance to young women who had suffered rape and other forms of sexual violence. While sensitization had helped community members over time to understand that such violence had not been the 'fault' of the girls, the cleansing ceremonies appear to have played a significant role in their reintegration process. The Christian Children's Fund, for example, has reported assisting 1000 former girl soldiers to reintegrate in Sierra Leone, and that the project supported cleansing ceremonies for many of them, where the girls and communities concerned felt it was important (Shereef, Davidson, Hayes, Kostelny & Wessells, 2005).

Based on reports by agencies working with children and fieldwork (Utas, 2005), it is appropriate to consider that traditional cleansing and religious (both Christian and Muslim) ceremonies can aid the healing of those who have survived violence or abuse. Alcinda Honwana's book, *Child Soldiers in Africa*, provides extensive information on the ways in which traditional cleansing

rituals proved helpful in the reintegration of former child soldiers in Mozambique and Angola (Honwana, 2006). However, it is also necessary to recognize that some traditional practices are harmful. Consequently, it is necessary for an organization to determine what a practice involves before encouraging or supporting its use.

### **School or skills training of adequate quality and duration**

Both 'hardware' and 'software' issues required attention in re-establishing education for children in Sierra Leone. Rehabilitating and building new structures and providing material inputs were important, but teacher training and involving communities in the building, rehabilitation and management of schools was equally, if not more, important to re-establishing and sustaining schools. With support and guidance from UNICEF, three educational programmes were implemented during the DDR:

- *The Rapid Response Education Project* provided six months of preparation to enable children to return to school.
- *The Community Education Investment Program* was designed to enable former child soldiers to return to school. It operated throughout the country, implemented by NGOs and funded by UNICEF. For each demobilized child that a school enrolled the school administration was able to choose one of three kits designed to assist 200 students for a year: (1) learning materials for students (e.g. exercise books, pens, pencils), (2) teaching materials, (e.g. chalk, blackboard paint, pens), or (3) sports and recreational equipment. In return for accepting a former child soldier, teachers, administrators, and fellow students benefited, not just the former child soldier. This facilitated social acceptance in schools and communities. The only

direct assistance provided to former child soldiers was a uniform and book bag, which were seen as necessary to place them on an equal footing with other students.

- *Complementary Rapid Response for Primary Schools* was a 'catch-up' program for adolescents with little or no education who wanted to go to school. It enabled participants to complete six years of primary education in three years and met some of the unique needs of adolescents who had lost several years of schooling due to the war.

*In Kenema District in 2002 the DCOF team met with a 16 year old boy who had recently been reunified with his family after spending five years 'in the bush'. He decided to return to school rather than enter a skills training program because he was eager to learn. Some of his friends had chosen skills training over school, but he recognized that they could not read instructions, which made it difficult for them to master their vocation and earn a living. He felt that there would be time later to learn a skill, but it was important to first to learn the basics. He was in Class 4 and had been elected class prefect. His favourite subjects were science and English, and he said that he would like to be a doctor when he is older, so he can help people in his country.*

Demobilized child soldiers who were 15 years of age and over had the option to choose skills training instead of going to school. Agricultural assistance packages were another option that some chose. Skills' training was often preferred by those who either felt too old to return to school, or the more urgent priority of generating an income. Apprenticeships were the primary method used to provide skills training to demobilized child soldiers in Sierra Leone.

The skills training component in Sierra Leone helped channel former child combatants in productive, normalizing activities

that helped them readjust to civilian and community life. Each child who opted for skills training was assigned to a master tradesperson. Popular skills areas included: tailoring, tie-dying cloth, hairdressing, and carpentry. Some apprentices lived with the artisan and his or her family. The World Bank has reported that for demobilized soldiers, apprenticeship training and micro-enterprise support are most likely to be effective in leading to employment than centre-based vocational training (World Bank, 2002). However, after the completion of apprenticeships in Sierra Leone, little support was provided with finding jobs or initiating micro-enterprise activities other than the provision of tools. This is probably a significant shortcoming.

Also, more young people were trained in some skills than it appeared local economies could absorb. Little or no market analysis was done to determine which skills offered the best prospects for employment in different parts of the country. While vocational training programs may meet short-term needs to keep adolescents active in productive activities, they are not a guarantee of longer-term productive employment. Any selection of skill areas for training should be based on a market analysis carried out by an experienced researcher. It is also important for a reunited adolescent's family to be part of the process of deciding what type of skills training she or he should select because they will have a better understanding of what skills have local economic potential, and because they have a stake in the adolescent becoming an economically productive part of the family. Yet another issue is that training in a technical skill often was not, itself, sufficient. Literacy and numeracy training should have been available as well, for those in apprenticeships, as these are basic skills applicable in all areas of work.

Another lesson learned in Sierra Leone was that apprenticeship training requires careful planning; a structured curriculum for the achievement of specific, measured levels of key skills over a specific period of time; and monitoring of the progress and safety of trainees. Skills training courses should be of an adequate duration and intensity to enable trainees to learn and use marketable skills. Also, an agency responsible for a training program should work with graduates to help them secure both a safe place to live and to engage in an economic activity after the completion of training. Of the respondents in study primarily of adult combatants demobilized in Sierra Leone, 54 percent said that more support should have been provided in finding jobs after apprenticeships and 47 percent recommended a longer period of training (Humphreys & Weinstein, 2004).

Both school and skills training were seen as important by former child soldiers participants, in part because they were seen as enhancing their future employment prospects, but equally important was their visible participation in structured learning helped alter the way that they were regarded by community members. Studying to prepare for the future enhanced their acceptance because community members could see that they had made a transition from being a child soldier and were working actively toward becoming a productive member of the community. Participation in education or training appeared to be an important aspect of the process of identity transformation begun during disarmament and demobilization.

*A young woman with whom I met also in Makeni was a trainee in a skills training program for Caritas Makeni. She had formerly been associated with one of the fighting forces. She was wearing a pink and black uniform that all the trainees in the same program were wearing. It was significantly*

*important to her that other people in her community could see from her uniform that she was in a training program and that this showed she wanted to play a positive role in her community.*

Whether Sierra Leone remains at peace may well depend on ensuring ongoing opportunities for education, training, and employment opportunities for youth. From the community to the ambassadorial level, those with whom I met in 2005 consistently expressed this concern. Likewise, participants in the study cited above, of primarily adult ex-combatants, said that education was the top priority for the government of Sierra Leone to address (Humphreys & Weinstein, 2004).

A finding of the study in Mozambique, however, provides a significant counterpoint. Access to education was *not* an important issue for most of the child soldiers included in that longitudinal study. Their priority was to engage ‘immediately in farming and other income-earning opportunities to enable them to earn money for a ‘wife and family’ instead of returning to school’ (Boothby et al., 2006). A lesson to be drawn from this difference is that careful situation analysis, including consultation with the target group, is essential to planning an effective reintegration.

### **Ongoing access to health care, particularly for war-related conditions, for those in school or training**

Health services were an obvious priority in the ICCs, with some demobilized child soldiers having lived for years in the bush, been wounded, or subjected to repeated sexual abuse and exploitation. The infants or young children of female students or trainees often had acute health problems as well. Frequently, health issues could not be adequately resolved during the weeks in an

ICC. Providing access to health services beyond those that might or, more likely, might not be available in a village, was important for the subsequent period of education or training. Some organizations did not make adequate provision for access to health services.

### **Individual supportive counselling, encouragement, and facilitation**

A UNICEF consultant who evaluated the USAID/DCOF-funded services for the ‘Girls Left Behind’ project reported that 35% of the participants interviewed said that the things that they most appreciated about the project were the counselling, friendships and encouragement they received (Whittington, 2005). Supportive counselling was important during the difficult transition in the ICCs, when making good choices about what skill training to select, when facing hostility within the community, or when struggling to generate income with the skills learned.

### **An effective collaborative approach**

The groundwork for the effective demobilization, reunification, and reintegration work done in Sierra Leone was laid over a period of years. UNICEF provided critically important leadership regarding child protection. It helped the Government to play its roles more effectively and to develop coordination and standards of good practice among the many local, national, and international NGOs involved in the identification and care of separated children, tracing, family reunification, demobilization of child soldiers, and community reintegration.

A striking aspect of the response to separated children and demobilized child soldiers in Sierra Leone, in contrast to many other conflict-affected countries, has been the effective, integrated system of child protection

services involving a large number of civil society organizations and committees as well as the government. Geographic responsibility for tracing and family reunification was divided among selected NGOs. Requests to trace parents or relatives were sent by the organization responsible for the area where a child was to the one responsible for the area where family members were thought to reside. UNICEF assisted the MSWGCA to convene a Child Protection Committee (which eventually became an ongoing Child Protection Network) involving national and international NGOs concerned with child protection. The Network developed guidelines for the care and protection of children in ICCs. UNICEF, as part of the National Commission for DDR, helped develop guidelines for the way children were to be treated during the DDR process.

The guidelines encouraged protection of all vulnerable children, including combatants, street children, and separated children. They also recognized the particular risks faced by girls. They identified family reunification as the principal factor in the social reintegration of child soldiers, but they also recognized that simply tracing family members and sending children home would not be enough. In acknowledging that some children had participated in attacks or committed atrocities against their home villages, they highlighted that special efforts would be required to facilitate their acceptance. These efforts might include community sensitization and mediation by advocates for the children, and the involvement of traditional and religious leaders. It also cited the socioeconomic distress of many communities and families as a barrier to family reunification and reintegration.

### **Some key lessons**

The demobilization process in Sierra Leone has yielded important lessons that other

countries embarking on disarmament and demobilization should consider:

- Child soldiers can be combatants or non-combatants, as well as both boys and girls. Ceasefire and peace agreements, as well as DDR procedures must reflect this.
- Ongoing communication among key actors and child-focused advocacy is essential throughout a DDR process.
- The training of peacekeepers or military observers must include specific attention to procedures and considerations regarding children.
- Girls and young women associated with fighting forces are at high risk of being excluded from a DDR process and specific attention should be given to ensuring their inclusion when the process is planned and implemented.
- It is important to recognize and give humanitarian attention to young adults (male and female) who were abducted or otherwise forced as children to become part of a combatant group.
- After a DDR process, there should be a way for former child soldiers, in particular girls, to access reintegration services that is not dependent on action being taken by their former commanders.
- Contingencies will arise during the course of a DDR process, and procedures and training should allow for on-the-ground decision making in keeping with key child protection and human rights principles. The standing of UNICEF and designated child protection NGOs should be recognized as parties to such decision-making.
- Cultural and other constraints affect recognition by child soldiers that family reunification may be an option, as well as their receptivity to consider it. Active communication efforts are needed to address these issues. Video and tape-recorded messages from former child



soldiers who have successfully returned to their home can be a useful tool in this process.

- Before 'reuniting' a separated child with an extended family member, careful screening is necessary, also a public agreement is required that the child will be cared for on a par with other children in the household, and careful follow-up monitoring is necessary.
- Thorough situation analysis, including consultation with the target group, is essential to planning effective reintegration services.
- Selection and planning for any skills training and livelihood support activities must be informed by a technically sound market analysis.
- Apprenticeship training requires careful planning; a structured curriculum for the achievement of specific, measured levels of key skills over a specific period of time; and monitoring of the progress and safety of trainees.
- Personnel and transportation capacity must increase during the process of tracing and family reunification to permit adequate follow-up visits for monitoring and, as necessary, intervention.
- Rather than prescribe specific child protection actions to a community, it is best to raise questions for its members to consider. For example: 'What can we do to help children who have been abducted and involved in fighting to assist them settle back into the community?' 'What can we do to protect our children in a time of crisis?'

### **A reintegration study**

USAID/DCOF provided funding for longitudinal research in Sierra Leone to assess the psychosocial adjustment and social reintegration of young people who had been

associated with the RUF (Betancourt, Pochan, & de la Soudière, 2005).<sup>8</sup> The study compared children who had come through one of the ICCs, in 2001 or 2002, run by IRC with children who had been with the RUF but who had returned home on their own accord without receiving special assistance. The findings of this unpublished study suggest that the services provided by the ICCs, as well as traditional cleansing ceremonies, facilitated reintegration. They also suggest lower rates of depression and anxiety among children who had reunited with one or both parents.

Baseline information was collected in 2002 from 260 children who had been with the RUF and come through an ICC. The children's caregivers were also interviewed. A comparison sample was collected in 2003 of 135 children and youth, formerly with the RUF, who had returned home directly. No difference was found in exposure to violence between the former RUF children who had come through an ICC and those who went directly home. Those who carried out the research gave careful attention to conducting the study in keeping with ethical standards regarding research with children.

Data collected from these children included demographic information, exposure to war-related violence, family separation, social support, and psychosocial adjustment. The latter was based on standardized measures that had been adapted through an extensive process involving Sierra Leonean children, adults, educators and child-care specialists.<sup>9</sup> In 2002, the average age of the children was 15.1 years, and 78% of them had become part of the RUF at age 12 or less.

The follow-up study was done in 2004. This produced data from 140 children (81% male, 19% female) who had received assistance through ICCs and participated in the baseline study. In the comparison group, who

had returned home directly, interviews were completed for 129 children (49% male, 51% female). Adjustments were made for gender and age when comparisons were made. In addition to repeating the collection of information gathered during the baseline study, information on exposure to violence was collected in greater depth, as well as more data on mental distress, services received, participation in traditional cleansing, and the communities in which children were living.<sup>10</sup>

*Findings.* Among those who had come through the ICCs (the intervention group), no changes in psychosocial wellbeing were identified when 2002 and 2004 data were compared, which was taken as an indication of stability. With adjustments made for gender and age, those in the intervention group had significantly lower scores for hostility and depression, and higher pro-social scores than those who returned home directly from the RUF.

There was no significant difference between the intervention and comparison groups regarding participation in a traditional cleansing ceremony. However, those who had taken part in such a ceremony had significantly higher scores for family acceptance, pro-social behaviour and confidence, than those who had not.

Follow-up visits in the community by an NGO were significantly more frequent among former RUF children who had come through an ICC, than among those who had gone directly home. Significantly, visits by an NGO were associated with higher community acceptance, wellbeing, and lower post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) scores. Also, the presence of services by an NGO in the community was associated with lower scores for hostility, depression and PTSD, and higher scores for confidence and pro-social behaviour.

Living with one or both parents was associated with greater family acceptance and lower scores of both depression and anxiety. Community acceptance was also associated with lower depression and anxiety scores. No differences in family or community acceptance were found, however, between the intervention group and those who went home directly. Family acceptance was associated with higher pro-social and confidence scores. Those who reported experiencing discrimination within their community had higher scores for hostility, anxiety, and depression.

### **The core of reintegration: psychological and social transformation**

Given the horrendous experiences of child soldiers, prior to the DDR process it would have been easy to assume that their childhood had been lost forever and that reintegration into their families and communities would be impossible. However, what has happened suggests a more hopeful story. Most children who have been demobilized appear to be doing as well as other children in their community, whether they are living with their immediate family, extended family, in foster care, or in supervised independent living. Most were able to return to school, or learn a trade.

The reintegration of former child soldiers into families and communities has essentially been a process of psychological and social transformation. Children who had been instrumentalized and committed atrocities with the RUF had come to see themselves as members of that group who could never go home again. For them to be able to do so required a transformation of their identity from being a child soldier into being an acceptable member of a community. They had to come to see themselves differently.

Their families and communities also had to see them differently, which helped establish and reinforce their own changed identity. The longitudinal study in Mozambique made a similar observation: ‘the transformation of self-image from being a ‘child soldier’ to becoming ‘like everyone else’ was a critical aspect of successful reintegration’ (Boothby et al., 2006).

As this article suggests, many factors contributed to these psychological and social transformations. Some young people did leave again for the city streets, economic opportunities, or simply to get away from what they found to be an unacceptable situation. However, even in these cases, they have re-established links to their families. Seen from the perspective that prevailed during the war, it is remarkable that the majority of former child soldiers in Sierra Leone have been reintegrated back into their families and communities.

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- <sup>3</sup> The primary focus of the 2002 and 2005 DCOF visits to Sierra Leone was demobilization, and many of the children with whom we talked were former soldiers. However, in keeping with the standard DCOF approach, we did not ask them to talk about their experiences during the war. To have done so in a short interview and without provision for follow up support would have been potentially harmful to the children and, therefore, unethical. Instead we focused on their experiences during and after the disarmament and demobilization process.
- <sup>4</sup> The term, 'child soldier' is used in this article in keeping with the definition included in the Cape Town Principles: 'any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers, and those accompanying such groups, other than purely as family members. It includes girls recruited for sexual purposes and forced marriage. It does not, therefore, only refer to a child who is carrying or has carried arms.' 'Cape Town Annotated Principles and Best Practice on the Prevention of Recruitment of Children into the Armed Forces and Demobilization and Social Reintegration of Child Soldiers in Africa,' adopted by the participants in a symposium convened by UNICEF, Cape Town, 30 April 1997.
- <sup>5</sup> Despite the country's significant natural resources and excellent agricultural potential most of the approximately five million Sierra Leoneans live in poverty. The country's under-five mortality rate is the worst in the world, male adult literacy is only 40% and female literacy is 21%, the gross national income per capita is only \$200. The primary school attendance ratio is 43% for boys and 39% for girls (UNICEF, 2005).
- <sup>6</sup> While there are some differences among them regarding the age below which children cannot be recruited, international legal instruments that make provisions against the recruitment of children include the 1977 Protocols of the Geneva Conventions, the 1989 Convention on the Rights

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<sup>1</sup> The author's views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.

<sup>2</sup> At the time of this conversation, Marie de la Soudière was doing a consultancy for UNICEF. She became the Director of Children Affected by Armed Conflict Unit of the International Rescue Committee and in that capacity helped to shape a number of the interventions described in this article.

of the Child, the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Statute of the International Criminal Court, and the International Labor Organization's Convention 182.

<sup>7</sup> There are inherent tensions underlying policy and field decision about who is screened in or out of a DDR process, and it is important to recognize these. Humanitarian actors tend to view the process primarily from a human rights, human needs, and/or fairness perspective. Peacekeeping forces are likely to see the issue primarily in terms of getting arms out of the hands of as many combatants as quickly as possible in order to stop the conflict and secure the peace. Also, donor governments and organizations have legitimate concerns that the process be as effective as possible in screening out civilians who may try to pose as fighters to gain access to the assistance. In Liberia, for example, the number of adults who came through its DDR process far exceeded the previously estimated number of members of the combatant groups. Failure to do effective screening so can overwhelm available resources.

It should, therefore, be recognized when planning and implementing a DDR process that there are competing perspectives and values and that there is inherent tension among them. While there are no simple solutions for reconciling these differences, an essential step is to acknowledge that they exist, and throughout the planning and implementation stages to seek continually to keep them in balance.

<sup>8</sup> The full study report is available on the DCOF Web site: <http://www.usaid.gov/our.work/humanitarian.assistance/the.funds/>

<sup>9</sup> This adapted scale was originally developed by Colin MacMullin and Maryanne Loughry. Its

use was reported in 'Investigating Psychosocial Adjustment of Former Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone and Uganda,' *Journal of Refugee Studies* (2004) 17(4): 460-472.

<sup>10</sup> The additional instruments used in the 2004 follow-up study included the Child War Trauma Questionnaire, which was reported on in M.S. Macksoud & J.L.Aber (1996). 'The war experiences and psychosocial development of children in Lebanon.' *Child Development*, 67: 70-88 as well as a reduced version of the PTSD-RI. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Reaction Index Revision (PTSD-RI) (Pynoos, R. S., Rodrigues, N., Steinberg, A. S., Stauber, M., and Frederick, C. UCLA PTSD Index for DSM-IV child version. Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Psychiatry/Trauma Service; 1998.) and The Hopkins Symptom Checklist/SF-25 (Derogatis, L. R., Lipman, R. S., Rickels, K., Uhlenhuth, E. H. and Covi, L. The Hopkins Symptom Checklist (HSCL): a self-report symptom inventory. *Behavioral Science*. 1974; Jan; 19(1):1-15.

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