

Event on the Reintegration of Children Formerly Associated with Armed Groups and Armed Forces

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Introduction

- Thank you, Ambassador. I would like to thank the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict and her team, UNICEF and co-hosting Governments for organizing this important discussion today.
- I'm honored to participate on this distinguished panel and to have the opportunity to hear and learn from the firsthand experiences shared by Mr. Williams and the national experiences shared by the Permanent Representatives of Sierra Leone and Liberia.

Background

- I would like to focus my remarks today on the situation of girls who have been associated with armed groups, the challenges they face when they return home and what they have articulated as priorities for reintegration programs.
- I will highlight the findings and conclusions from a research study that Child Soldiers International undertook in 2016 in the eastern DRC.
- We spoke with 150 girls who were formerly associated with armed groups as well as 170 key DDR actors including family members, representatives from the local child protection networks, teachers and school principals, religious leaders, local authorities, civil society organizations, international NGOs, the UN and ICRC.
- We wanted to understand the extent to which girls had been reached by DDR programs and the appropriateness of the support received, where it was offered, from the point of view of girls themselves.
- Our findings indicated that the DDR programs lacked specific provisions for girls and fell short in meeting their needs.

Figures

- We lack definitive figures on the number of girls who have been, or still are, associated with armed groups in the DRC.
- The UN Mission, MONUSCO, estimates that girls represent between 30 to 40 percent of all children associated with armed groups in the DRC.
- However, girls account for only 7 percent of all children demobilized through the official DDR process.
- Representatives from local child protection networks told us: *'We have given up on the girls'* and *'people come here to talk about DDR, but it's only about the boys.'*
- Why do we see a lack of attention to girls?
 - o They are perceived as less threatening than boys, who are assumed to have been fighters and therefore more prone to violence.
 - o Girls endure a heavier burden of stigma because they are perceived to have been sexually abused. Even local child protection actors whose role it was to sensitize communities and who understood that girls coming out of armed groups were victims deserving of sympathy and support, acknowledged they

were uncomfortable with the fact that these girls “had known men” and admitted to feelings of mistrust.

- The research also highlighted that DDR actors and local child protection actors simply did not know how to support girls beyond providing tailoring or hair-braiding classes.
- The majority of the girls interviewed had not been demobilized through the official process but had escaped from armed groups.
- More than one-third said they did not receive any form of DDR assistance. This is particularly worrying because the girls who took part in the study were introduced to the research team by DDR providers.
- Those who received assistance said it was ad hoc at best and was neither tailored to the context nor took into account their stated needs.
- By far the greatest source of distress for the girls, and their primary concern, was the rejection they experienced from their family and community when they returned home.
- After their traumatic experiences while associated with armed groups, they were not welcomed with open arms but were met with blame, suspicion, discrimination, humiliation, and outright rejection.
- The girls discussed at length that they had **lost their social value** because of their association with armed groups and the sexual abuse they suffered.
- This resulted in isolation and emotional suffering beyond what they experienced during their association with armed groups.
- The rejection and isolation caused many girls to rejoin; the fear of rejection deterred girls from leaving armed groups even when the opportunity presented itself.

The girls told us how they could regain their lost social value, which are important and necessary steps to prioritize in reintegration programs:

1. **The first is education:** which is a fundamental right that can also serve as a powerful element in promoting social acceptance of formerly associated children while strengthening their own sense of wellbeing. It is important however that teachers and students are sensitized to avoid perpetuating stigmatization, isolation and discrimination at school.
 2. **Socio-economic reintegration:** efforts should be made to strengthen existing activities and capacities before introducing new ones, which is more likely to be sustainable in the long term. The girls said that receiving farming tools, seeds and livestock would be the most useful form of support as it served to strengthen both the girl’ and families’ existing capacities.
- Much emphasis is placed on the socio-economic aspects of reintegration programs** but
- a. What can end up happening is that reintegration actors pre-determine what activities they provide without consulting the girls and communities and without an understanding of what is needed or contextually appropriate.

- b. In some communities, income generating activities had been introduced without market studies to determine their viability and were unsuccessful.
 - c. Reintegration programs must also be mindful about promoting the inclusion of girls in existing activities rather than 'marking out' formerly associated girls with specific training in a trade or other types of assistance.
 - d. Including formerly associated children in activities that benefit all children in the community also prevents the creation of services exclusively for formerly associated children, which can create resentment and tensions within communities.
 - e. It is especially important that girls are consulted and given the opportunity to fulfil their aspirations. In some cases, girls were only offered the option of a single trade (such as tailoring) when they preferred to return to school.
 - f. Due to insufficient budgets, there is limited or inconsistent support to build the required capacity and skills to establish themselves in a profession, another reason why it's important to build on existing capacities. Or support and training come 2-3 years later due to lack of funding.
3. **The need to talk about their experience and be heard:** the emphasis of reintegration programs has traditionally been placed on assisting girls with income-generation activities or vocational training. While this is important, regular emotional support has largely been missing as a core element of DDR assistance to girls though it was expressed as an overwhelming desire. The girls expressed that they want someone to regularly talk to, to share their experiences and be listened to in compassionate manner without judgement.
4. **Social inclusion:** The wider community plays an important role in the psychosocial recovery of girls and they have a responsibility to promote the acceptance of girls. It is important to work with communities to prepare for the return of children before their release. This should involve respected community and religious leaders to sensitize the community and encourage them to welcome the children returning home. Where possible, children in armed groups should be made aware that communities are ready to receive them, which may help them overcome their fear of returning.

Once they return, girls should be invited and encouraged to participate in existing social activities, such as youth clubs, church or sports activities. When respected and influential members of the community show an interest and give support to the girls, it has an influence on how families and communities view the children.

Lastly, I do want to echo the importance of funding for effective and sustainable reintegration programs which cannot be overstated: DDR actors we spoke with told us that funding for child DDR had either stopped or was so low they could only reach a fraction of children formerly associated with armed groups in their areas.

- Immediate support is crucial, but too often, reintegration activities do not begin until substantial budgets are secured for large-scale activities. However, we must not forget and promote the low-cost and practical steps communities can take to facilitate the social inclusion and acceptance of children to support the reintegration process.
- Going back to my earlier example, strengthening existing economic activities, by providing basic tools and seeds to support family incomes through farming is also more cost effective than introducing training programs that are not matched to the context.
- Active listening and dialogue are key to this process but are often overlooked. A very modest budget can enable training in supportive listening skills among community members to facilitate this.

In conclusion, some key principles we must keep in our minds:

1. **Family and community acceptance:** is the most important factor for the successful reintegration of girls and should be at the center of reintegration programs.
2. **Child participation:** the girls themselves must define their individual aspirations and be fully involved in developing the strategies to realize them, together with their families and communities.
3. **A tailored approach:** reintegration programs must be tailored to the local context and the individual needs of children based on their full participation in the process. There is no single model or formula for success.
4. And more generally, I would like to conclude by saying **a child is a child first and foremost and their best interests must be the primary consideration at all times** even if they have been associated with an armed group, and whether or not the armed group is labelled as so-called violent extremists. The psychosocial impacts of association are complex and children should not be reduced to labels such as “terrorist”, “extremist” or even “child soldier” which risks narrowing responses and undermining the success of reintegration efforts.

Thank you.