



Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for
CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT

**Remarks by
Ms. Virginia Gamba,
Special Representative of the Secretary-General
for Children and Armed Conflict**

**Side Event on Reintegration of children formerly associated with
armed groups and armed forces
6 June 2018**

Excellencies, dear colleagues, and welcome to our guest Kabba Williams,

We are holding this meeting to explore how reintegration programs contribute to the well-being of children coming out of armed groups and forces, and to hear more about their impact on their communities. Reintegration is an important step both in protection *and* prevention. By helping these children, we also help ensure they do not return to an armed existence and we help break the cycle of violence that is all too common in conflict situation.

As you know, I am just back from **Myanmar**. There I discussed this issue with our colleagues at UNICEF, who—despite intense challenges in other parts of the country—are doing an amazing job with the children being released by the Tatmadaw army. A large part of my engagement was advocating with the Government to finalize implementation of the Joint Action Plan to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children by the national army. Since 2012, over 800 children and young adults recruited as children have been released from the Tatmadaw. In accordance with the Action Plan, they received reintegration services provided by UNICEF, ILO and NGO partners. They have been provided with education and vocational training to find a place in a society where poverty has been an important driving factor for underage recruitment.

In Myanmar, there are currently 7 non-state parties to conflict listed by the Secretary-General for recruitment and use of children. Boys and girls who escape or are released from these armed groups face an uncertain future, with little or no opportunities to benefit from services to rebuild their lives.

Unfortunately, the challenges faced by the children of Myanmar are not unique. In every country on my agenda, we know of missed opportunities – due to lack of resources, capacity, or access – to help the most vulnerable recover from the trauma of war. These are also missed opportunities to prevent them from falling back into violence.

We all agree on the importance of reintegration, but, in a world faced with multiple and complex crises, we still struggle to find adequate resources for the short- and long-term support of children recovering from the trauma of war.

The mere fact that today's event is **co-sponsored by so many Member States** speaks volumes about our common desire to change this situation.

In a few minutes, you will hear Kabba Williams talk about his personal experience with reintegration programs in Sierra Leone. I know he will speak more

eloquently than any of us could about the importance of providing education and vocational training to learn the skills needed to adapt to civilian life.

I would like to set the stage for him by highlighting other guiding principles for our action.

First and foremost, the best interest of the child must be at the heart of any program established for boys and girls. Working with communities is also key, to overcome stigma and to help children reunite with their families. The provision of physical and mental health support to overcome the long-term effects of war is the cornerstone of these efforts.

The specific needs of girls cannot be overlooked. Too often, they are hidden victims of conflict who suffer stigma, rejection by their families and communities, in addition to psychological and physical consequences of sexual violence and other abuse. Equally, boys may need specialized programs—so our call is for gender-sensitive programming to tailor assistance most appropriately to meet the needs of the children.

Allow me to speak about solutions.

Conflict has evolved—so it is time to reconceptualize reintegration and its role in preventing future conflict. I strongly believe that reintegration support should be fundamental to **emergency, recovery and peacebuilding** efforts. It should also be part of our work to prevent conflict. Currently, despite the best efforts of UNICEF, national authorities, NGOs and others, it is often a very small part in overall recovery efforts, and not at the **core of restabilizing and rebuilding societies** torn apart by war. One recent study by the Clingendael Institute of the Netherlands demonstrated that in the DDR triad, Demobilization and Disarmament received massively more funding than Reintegration. For children, this has particularly dire consequences.

We are all looking towards 2030 and how we can coalesce support around 16 Sustainable Development Goals. The theme of children and their well-being is at the center of many of them. By taking a harder look at the importance of reintegration programs in conflict and post-conflict settings, we will better understand how paying attention to this small but strategic piece of the puzzle will help us reach those Goals. An important element that I will be focusing on in the coming months and years is that of treating children involved as agents of change—Kabba here personifies that ethos and has an inspiring story to tell.

But the reality remains: year in, year out, thousands of boys and girls need support for reintegration in places like the Central African Republic, Somalia, South Sudan, Iraq, and many other challenging environments.

Providing adequate, meaningful and long-term services is a huge task. With resources currently available, this is sometimes a mission impossible. Most importantly, reintegration and rehabilitation efforts must be sustainable through time and cannot depend on just international efforts. Capacity building and resources for national sustainable reintegration and rehabilitation efforts must also be supported sooner rather than later.

Excellencies, colleagues,

Together, we can change that.

To address this problem, my office is working on a collaborative project to support reintegration work in the field and establish a **long-term, multi-year funding mechanism** for the reintegration of children. This will include a specific focus on girls, and enhance existing work in psychosocial and education programming, as well as vocational training. This Global Reintegration Fund for Children is a mechanism that our colleagues at the UN could tap into, but its funding

that would be also available for reintegration work by Member States recovery from conflict, NGOs and regional organizations.

We are working with the World Bank to set up a fund that will be available to support existing programming solutions on reintegration, as well as provide space to explore new innovations that can be accessible to all sectors engaged in this endeavor from UN agencies to national reintegration offices, from NGOs to regional organizations. During the initial 5 years, pilot programs will be identified and run in 2-3 countries on the CAAC agenda. The idea is to use best practices knowledge to create new elements for these programs to meet the needs of children in today's conflicts and to evaluate their impact based on a) sustainability and ownership; and b) non-voluntary re-recruitment for lack of options.

For this, it is fundamental to establish **proof of concept** that programming for these children has to be **longer** than the current norm of six months. It is widely acknowledged that longer programs would be the most beneficial, but we require additional evidence and experience in this regard. With the enormous body of knowledge currently available from UNICEF, War Child and others, combined with new information gleaned from the pilot projects, including application at national level, we may be able to create a new paradigm that the minimum program should

be 3 years or 5 years or longer, and then seek the funding to support them ensuring national ownership and sustainability at the end. This could revolutionize our approach and give child protection actors access to funding to transform the lives of these children. It can also impact on the ground by making reintegration options more desirable to those children still engaged and by providing the assistance needed to ensure no reoccurrence.

Down the road, I would eventually like to establish a roster of child protection specialists ready to be deployed to support these programs when and where they are needed. Child protection officers and advisers are a crucial part of capacity both at emerging actions and in sustainable endeavors, they are often undervalued and under rated – this must stop.

Excellencies, dear Colleagues,

I thank our Member State co-sponsors, especially Poland, and welcome today's discussions. I hope that we will come up with innovative solutions and commitments to use reintegration not only as a tool to rebuild lives, but also to rebuild communities, on a sustainable basis.

Less children should return to a life of violence simply because there is no other option. All children used and abused by, in and for armed conflict should be given a real chance to create their own future.

Thank you.