



REINTEGRATION of former child soldiers



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



On 17 April 2018 in Yambio, South Sudan, (right-left) Ganiko, 12 yrs, and Jackson, 13 yrs, stand during a ceremony to release children from the ranks of armed groups and start a process of reintegration. Jackson and Ganiko were best friends when they served together with the armed group.

What is “reintegration”?

“Reintegration” is the reintroduction back into society of children who were formerly associated with armed groups or armed forces in a peaceful and sustainable way. Whether they were active combatants, or scouts, cooks or porters, their experiences leave them traumatized and robbed of a childhood. Reintegration services include prolonged psychosocial support, vocational training, quality education, health care and cater to other vital needs. Reintegration efforts should be supported by long-term, multi-year funding mechanisms.



Why are child-specific reintegration programmes important?

Every year, thousands of children need support for reintegration. In 2017 alone, more than 10,000 children were released from the ranks of armed forces and armed groups in Central African Republic, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Myanmar, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, and elsewhere. Releasing children from the ranks of armed elements is essential, but it is only a first step. Providing children who have been formally released with adequate services, as well as reaching out to those who have escaped or have been informally released, is a huge task. Each child released needs physical and mental health support to overcome the long-term effects of war. They also need access to education or vocational training to learn the skills they need to adapt to civilian life.

The effective reintegration of children formerly associated with armed forces and groups is a complex and long-term undertaking. It is essential not only to help children rebuild their lives, but also to break cycles of violence and ensure long-term peace and security.



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Children released from an armed group in early 2018, in South Sudan, traded military uniforms for t-shirts emphasizing that they are children, not soldiers.



Abel, 13, is from Yambio, South Sudan. He was released from an armed group earlier this year and is now the youngest boy at the UNICEF-supported Tindoka Childcare Centre.

"I have 4 brothers and 5 sisters," Abel says. He and his entire family were captured by armed gunmen, when he was only 9. "I was very scared," he continues with a low hesitant voice, "I never carried a gun but I saw things."

To better help the released children, social workers in the center guide them to take part in activities to help them overcome trauma and to support their reintegration.

"He is intelligent, and the children at the center all respect him, he has authority despite his young age," says Christine Sungerukuari, one of the social workers.

Abel has big dreams for his future: "I want to be governor of Yambio," he says.



What are the consequences of overlooking children's reintegration needs?

Providing reintegration opportunities for children affected by conflict is not only a moral and legal obligation to protect children and put their best interests first, but it is also an important pillar to create sustainable peace. Failing to follow this trauma with healing and helping services will result in negative long-term effects for these children and their communities, and will have broader impacts on economic development and social cohesion. Stigmatization of the returning children may also lead to further exclusion and violence when programmes are not well adapted to the communities, the context and to the children's needs. Without adequate reintegration assistance to help children find ways to become productive members of their communities, these boys and girls may grow up to contribute to the stalling of, or worse, the reversal of peace and development gains in the country.

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On 7 February 2018 in South Sudan, UNICEF staff member, Matthew Dechristofano, speaks with a child associated with an armed group who is about to be released.

What are the guiding principles of reintegration?

There is a comprehensive set of principles to guide the daily work. First, the *best interest of the child*, enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, must be at the heart of any reintegration program. Actions that affect the child should be based on an assessment of whether those actions are in the child's best interests, and not measured solely against security concerns or other political interests. This principle is often overshadowed in complex security or political environments. Another fundamental principle is that children associated with armed forces or armed groups should be *considered primarily as victims*. If they are accused of serious crimes allegedly committed while they were associated with an armed group, wherever possible, alternatives to prosecution and detention should be found in order to facilitate reintegration and avoid further stigmatization. This principle is particularly important to keep in mind in the context of violent extremism.

Another guiding principle is the child's right to life, survival and development. The *right to life, survival and development* is not limited to physical integrity, but includes the need to ensure full and harmonious development, including at the spiritual, moral and social



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“We use this machine to clean and soften surfaces and cut the iron,” says a former child soldier undergoing vocational training supported by UNICEF in Sudan.



Christine Sungerukuari is a social worker at the UNICEF-supported Tindoka Childcare Centre in Yambio, South Sudan. The centre houses children who have been previously released from armed groups and are awaiting reunification with their families. The children take part in activities to help support the reintegration, receive psychosocial support and have a safe place to sleep.

“We have different activities for the children at the center, we play educational games with them, we have counseling sessions, we offer health screening,” says Christine. “Many of these children have committed terrible acts but all of them were forced to do these things. We must remember that they are innocent. They are our children, and we must forgive them.”

levels, where education plays a key role. States must also ensure respect for the rights of all children within their jurisdiction – including non-national children – regardless of race, sex, age, religion, ethnicity, opinions, disability or any other status of the child, or of the child’s parents or legal guardians.

What are the key components of effective reintegration?

Psychosocial Support and Mental Health

Former child soldiers experience extreme trauma that can make it difficult to go back to their communities to begin or resume their education. In addition, they are often stigmatized for their former role, which can carry over and affect them in civilian life. As a result, many have a hard time finding their

place in society once their ordeal is over. The end of conflict does not necessarily give closure to children for whom experiencing violence has been the norm. Children who have been recruited and used carry the scars of conflict and effective reintegration is vital so that they can live full lives and contribute to a peaceful society.

Educational and vocational opportunities

Children are often released in communities still affected by conflict, and where services were scarce at best before conflict began. War often means that schools are closed, the economy has collapsed and psychosocial expertise is non-existent. Offering former child soldiers a viable alternative to bearing a weapon may be the most important aspect of reintegration. Educational and vocational opportunities may give boys and girls hope that they can once again become integral and valued members of their communities.

Equally important is the need to engage with and adequately support and prepare the communities for receiving children separated from armed groups. Beyond the practical challenge of

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In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Gabrielle (name changed) was associated with an armed group and witnessed extreme violence during battles. She is now recovering at a reintegration centre in Kananga. On the picture, she wrote that the thing she desires the most is access to education.

locating the families and communities of the children, successful reintegration must also address the challenge of reconciling children and their communities, especially when children may have committed atrocities.

Gender-sensitive programming

Girls have vulnerabilities unique to their gender and status in society and suffer specific consequences to rape and sexual violence such as pregnancy and pregnancy related complications, stigma and rejection by families and communities. Girls themselves are sometimes reluctant to join reintegration programmes, because they fear the rejection by their families and communities, especially when bringing a child home with them. Their needs, including education and vocational training, must be specially targeted in reintegration programming.

Photo: credit: © UNICEF/Moad Sokhin



Rukaiya, who is around 18 years old, escaped from Boko Haram in July 2017 and joined family members in a camp in northeast Nigeria. She believes she is about four months pregnant. Rukaiya was abducted and forced to marry a Boko Haram member. She had a first child, a girl who is now one-year old that she left behind with her father.

“I don’t think of my daughter, I was taken away from my parents too,” she says.



Jeanne, 13, inside a building at the Centre de Transit et d'Orientation (CTO), a UNICEF-supported reintegration centre for children associated with armed groups, in Kananga, Kasai region, Democratic Republic of the Congo.

UNICEF provides girls held by Boko Haram, like Rukaiya, with social and economic reintegration assistance, including psychosocial support. They also work with families and communities to fight stigma and foster acceptance of children victims of unspeakable violence.

Reintegration, a long-term undertaking

The international community's call to separate and reintegrate child soldiers into society must go hand-in-

hand with providing the necessary financial resources for the appropriate amount of time. Response to emergency funding requests are generally quick, but the reintegration of children often falls into the void between short-term emergency assistance and long-term development assistance. It is essential that resources for reintegration be sufficient and focused on sustainability to prevent re-recruitment back into armed groups or forces, and to complete the cycle of healing these children desperately need. Reintegration programming must be placed at the heart of peacebuilding and conflict prevention efforts by establishing long-term, multi-year funding mechanisms for the reintegration of children. While the cost of separation and reintegration may seem considerable, it is

a very small investment to ensure a better future for children left unprotected during conflict and for the communities that they return to.

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Boys attend a mathematics lesson at the Centre de Transit et d'Orientation (CTO), a UNICEF-supported reintegration centre for children associated with armed groups in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.



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Girls play football during afternoon activities at the Centre de Transit et d'Orientation (CTO), in Kananga, Kasai region Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sunday 21 January 2018.

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