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Research report

Forum: United Nations International Children's
Emergency Fund (UNICEF)

Issue: Developing strategies for improving reintegration
and preventing the recruitment of child soldiers

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Introduction

In regions plagued by poverty and instability, the recruitment and use of child soldiers is an ongoing crisis. Child soldiers are manipulated, coerced and threatened into joining armed groups and endure severe physical and mental abuse, which affects their mental development as well as their well-being. This issue is especially prevalent in parts of Africa, such as The Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, and Somalia as well as in conflict zones in Asia (Syria) and the Middle East (Yemen).

Furthermore, the recruitment of Child soldiers does not only take place to ensure a greater fighting force. Children are used as informants, looters, messengers, spies, guards and domestic or sexual slaves. There is an estimated amount of 250.000 soldiers in over 20 countries, about 40% of these children are of the female gender. However, 105.000 child soldiers are confirmed by our organization (UNICEF) as recruited and used by armed forces.

Whether or not child soldiers are accepted back into society depends on various factors, including but not limited to their reason for associating with armed actors. Children who attempt to reintegrate are viewed with suspicion or outright rejection. Physiological distress can cause difficulties in processing and verbalizing their experiences. Especially when they fear stigma or how people will react.

To summarize, the recruitment of child soldiers is a violation of human rights but also perpetuates cycles of violence and hinders long-term peace and stability.

Definitions of key terms

Child soldier

- *A child associated with an armed force or armed group" refers to any person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls, used as fighters, cooks, porters, spies or for sexual purposes.*

DDR

- *The formal abbreviation of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration*

Disarmament

- *The reduction or withdrawal of military forces and weapons. The collection, documentation, control, and disposal of small arms, ammunition, explosives, and light and heavy weapons from combatants and often from the civilian population.*

Demobilization

- *The action or process of releasing troops from active service,*

Reintegration

- *The action or process of integrating someone back into society.*

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- The action or process of restoring elements regarded as disparate to unity.

Recruitment

- The action of enlisting new people in the armed forces.
"Methods of military recruitment"
- The increase in a natural population as progeny grows and new members arrive.

Community Reconciliation

- The process of restoring relationships and building trust within communities that have been affected by conflict, particularly where child soldiers have returned to civilian life.

Root Causes

- The fundamental underlying factors that contribute to the recruitment of child soldiers, such as poverty, lack of education, political instability, and social marginalization.

General overview

The recruitment and use of child soldiers remain a pressing issue in conflict zones around the world. Despite international efforts to combat the practice, armed groups continue to exploit children for various purposes. Children are recruited due to poverty, instability, and the breakdown of social structures, with many either forcibly conscripted or joining voluntarily for survival. Presently, many conflicts actively make use of child soldiers. Adding to the countries listed in the introduction, countries such as Ukraine (In the Ukraine-Russian war), Israel and Palestina (in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Gaza), Myanmar (in its civil war) and India and Pakistan (in the Indian-Pakistani conflict) all are confirmed to be, or rumoured to be using children to fight their battles.

International legal frameworks, like the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, aim to prevent the recruitment of child soldiers, but in conflict zones with weak governance and ongoing instability, taking countermeasures is achingly difficult.

Efforts through DDR programs have made advancements in supporting former child soldiers by offering counselling, education and career-based training. Preventing recruitment, however, requires addressing root causes like poverty and instability. International cooperation and more effective enforcement mechanisms are needed to make meaningful and lasting improvements.

Major parties involved

UNICEF

UNICEF plays a vital role in combating the use of child soldiers by supporting DDR programs. It provides education as well as psychological counselling to former child soldiers while advocating for stronger protections and working with the government to prevent future recruitment and exploitation.

African Union (AU)

The AU works to prevent the recruitment of child soldiers by attacking root causes, such as poverty and instability. It does so through implementing regional frameworks and peace initiatives. It collaborates with member states to promote child protection policies and DDR programs.

Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)

ECOWAS combats the use of child soldiers by implementing regional frameworks and peace agreements in the West of Africa. It supports DDR programs, promotes child protection laws and works to prevent recruitment by addressing underlying issues and conflicts in member states.

United Nations Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR)

UNSCR, like 1612 and 1882, address the use of child soldiers by establishing monitoring mechanisms, and plans of action and calling sanctions against violators. These resolutions push governments and armed groups to end the use of child soldiers and ensure their reintegration back into civilian life.

Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

The DRC remains a critical focus in the debate about child soldiers due to ongoing challenges with recruitment, especially by non-state armed groups. The country faces issues, like weak governance, inadequate enforcement of child protection laws and the re-recruitment of demobilized children, extending the cycle of exploitation.

Colombia

Colombia faces great challenges with child soldiers due to decades of armed conflict involving groups such as FARC and paramilitaries. Despite peace agreements and DDR efforts, many children struggle with stigma and the risk of re-recruitment while trying to reintegrate, complicating efforts to break the vicious cycle.

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South Sudan

South Sudan remains deeply affected by the use of child soldiers, with ongoing conflict and instability fueling widespread recruitment by both government forces and rebel groups. Despite many DDR efforts, children face inadequate support and psychological trauma making it utmost challenging for them to reintegrate.

Yemen

Yemen faces a severe child soldier crisis, after having experienced years of civil war and humanitarian disaster, armed groups, including state and non-state actors, regularly recruit children for combat purposes. Despite many international efforts, the lack of stability and widespread poverty keep the vicious cycle of child exploitation alive.

Syria

Being in a constant state of conflict, displacement and instability, Syria is a major focus in the child soldier debate. Extremist groups frequently recruit children keeping them trapped in cycles of violence and exploitation.

Timeline of Key Events

1949	Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocols (1977)
1989	Convention on Rights of the Child (CRC)
2000	Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (OPAC)
2002	Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC)
2005	UNSCR 1612
2009	UNSCR 1882
2014	Children, "Not Soldiers" Campaign

Previous attempts to solve the issue

The recruitment and use of child soldiers have been a critical human rights issue for decades. Numerous efforts have been made to address this problem. These initiatives have focused on creating legal frameworks, preventing the recruitment of child soldiers into armed groups and implementing disarmament and reintegration programs. Despite many successes, challenges remain due to the complexities of modern conflicts.

The Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocols, adopted in 1949, aimed to make a start at solving the problem by prohibiting the recruitment and use of children under 15 years old in hostilities. However, this age limit was later deemed insufficient.

The Convention on Rights of the Child, adopted in 1989, is the most comprehensive treaty on the rights of children. The CRC (as well as the Geneva Conventions) prohibits children under 15 years old from being recruited into armed forces and obligates states to protect children affected by armed conflict. The CRC was a groundbreaking legal framework, yet it proved to be especially hard to enforce due to in compliance in conflict zones.

The Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, adopted in 2000, raised the minimum age for direct participation in hostilities to 18 years old and prohibited recruitment of individuals under 18 into national armed forces. Even though over 170 countries signed the protocol, enforcement of it lacked action. Furthermore, many non-state actors do not comply with international laws making it impossible to put a stop to underage recruitment with one of the OPAC.

The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, adopted in 2002, posed the recruitment of children under 15 as a war crime. This made it the first international treaty that explicitly made the

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use of child soldiers a prosecutable offence. This led to the case of Thomas Lubanga Dyilo, a Congolese warlord convicted in 2012 for enlisting children under 15 in his rebel forces.

United Nations Security Council Resolutions, Resolution 1612, which passed in 2005 established a monitoring and reporting mechanism to track violence against children in armed conflict. It also introduced the position of a UN Special Representative for Children in Armed Conflict.

Later in 2009, **Resolution 1882** Strengthened UNSCR 1612 by calling for targeted sanctions against groups that recruit and use child soldiers.

Furthermore, the African Union (AU) and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) addressed child soldiers in their regional frameworks, but due to a lack of resources and ongoing conflicts implementation is posing great difficulty.

In West African nations such as Liberia, Sierra Leone and Ivory Coast child soldiers were heavily used by both government forces and rebel groups. Especially here comprehensive DDR programs were implemented with international support.

Lastly, **NGOs** such as Human Rights Watch, Save the Children and War Child have campaigned intensively to raise awareness about child soldiers and aimed to end the recruitment of children by government forces by 2016.

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Possible solutions

To combat the recruitment of child soldiers, several key solutions can be implemented. Strengthening legal frameworks is crucial, this includes enforcing international treaties and national laws. Enhanced monitoring and reporting systems are needed to track recruitment practices and ensure timely intervention. Thorough DDR programs should offer education, work-based training and psychological support to help former child soldiers reintegrate. However, for countries not to repeat past mistakes addressing root problems like poverty, lack of education and political instability should be tackled through development programs. Engaging communities is vital for reducing stigma and rebuilding trust, which supports the reintegration of former child soldiers and helps prevent further (re-)recruitment.

Further reading

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