

Selective outrage: the dangers of children's DDR in eastern DRC

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This article offers a critique of the dominant approach to children's disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Drawing on narratives of young people who were formerly associated with armed groups, the article highlights some of the mistaken assumptions of the discourse and practice of children's DDR, and shows how far removed they are from young people's actual experience. I argue that the global outrage against the "child recruitment" phenomenon is dangerously selective, and that it obscures the entrenched structural violence, which deeply and negatively affects the lives of young people in eastern DRC today.

Since the mid-1990s, the use and recruitment of children by armed groups is an issue that has dominated international discourse on children's experience of violent conflict. From the 1996 report by Graça Machel on the impact of conflict on children,¹ to the 1998 adoption of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (Rome Statute) codifying the use and recruitment of children under the age of 15 years as a war crime, to the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict (OPAC), adopted in 2000, global attention has mobilized forcefully behind the "child soldier" phenomenon.

Indeed, the image of a child with a gun might be one of the most potent images of the early twenty-first century. Highlighting the brutality and injustice of contemporary conflict, it disturbs established Western conceptions of childhood as a period of vulnerability and innocence. The image of the "14-year-old boy whose name means innocent in Swahili ... [and who] was forced to commit acts of sexual violence against women" lends itself to an amorphous sense of fear of children who have been injured and socialized to violence—children who have been seized by the irrational savagery of modern warfare.² It is an image which serves as a powerful tool to mobilize media attention and donor funding.

With so much human suffering associated with violent conflict, the power of such imagery begs deeper reflection. Critical research is beginning to emerge on international responses to the child soldier phenomenon, and it would be useful for us to reflect: "In a world where mass child poverty and malnutrition is a reality for hundreds of millions, it is curious how 300,000 child soldiers have gained so much international recognition".³

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By offering perspectives from young people who have grown up in the protracted violence of eastern DRC, this article shows how far removed the dominant approach to children's DDR is from children's realities. Although the children's DDR framework might hopefully be understood as an ameliorative intervention in the terrible suffering of war, I argue that the global moral outrage surrounding the child soldier phenomenon is unjustifiably selective, and that it obscures the much more destructive and deeply entrenched manifestations of structural violence, which pervades life in eastern DRC today.

Such a perspective is based on my professional work as a child protection actor and on my doctoral research exploring young people's experience of violence in eastern DRC. Between 2006 through 2010 I served with the United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC) as a child protection advisor, with the Security Council-mandated Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo and with several NGOs. In 2010 and 2011 I conducted doctoral fieldwork in South Kivu, documenting individual narratives and life histories of 44 young people in three research sites. The data used in my research draws on this ethnographically-based work, as well as on the interviews conducted with more than 300 children previously associated with armed groups in North Kivu and the documentation of approximately 2,000 recruitment experiences in eastern DRC.

Children's DDR in eastern DRC

Children's DDR in the DRC is strongly grounded in the international, normative child rights framework. The DRC government has signed and ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, the Rome Statute, the Convention concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour (ILO Convention 182) and the OPAC. Notably, the case against Ituri militia leader Thomas Lubanga Dyilo—the first case tried at the International Criminal Court—was based on crimes against humanity, on the charges of enlisting and conscripting children under the age of 15. In 2009 the government passed the national Child Protection Code, which includes provisions outlawing the use and recruitment of anyone under the age of 18.

Popular estimates maintain that more than 33,000 children have been recruited and used by armed groups in the DRC since the beginning of the conflict in 1996.⁴ While the use of children was popularized by President Laurent Kabila during the "liberation" wars, local militia and rebel groups have regularly drawn on boys and young men to supplement their troop numbers. Since the first DDR programme for children was initiated in 1999, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) reports the formal demobilization of an estimated 31,200 children.⁵ Eligibility to the programmes is defined according to the Paris Principles:

"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, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities.⁶

The formal process of DDR

According to the national DDR programme for children, the process of separating a child from an armed group begins with their identification.⁷ Upon identification, military commanders are requested to grant access to the presumed child to allow a child protection agent verify their age. If determined to be under the age of 18, the child is then disarmed (if carrying a weapon) and released by his or her commander. The child then begins the formal “demobilization” process, which usually entails a stay at a transit centre (or a host family) for a period of weeks or months. During demobilization children are engaged in social, psychosocial, educative and recreational activities to support their re-adaptation to civilian life. Concurrently, the child’s family is traced, and eventually the child is reunified at home, thus beginning the process of “reintegration”. According to the DDR framework, the child is supported in the reintegration phase through the provision of vocational training, formal education or an income-generating activity.

In reality, however, such a clear progression through the phases of children’s DDR is rarely achieved. The complexity and recurrence of violence in eastern DRC requires that any external intervention be aware of and responsive to the social, economic and historical rootedness of the conflict, yet child protection actors rarely have sufficient capacity, time or donor funding for the nuanced, long-term commitment demanded. Consequently, children’s DDR programmes have often been little more than expensive logistical exercises, which ignore the conditions of entrenched poverty and extremely limited choices that lay the foundations of the child recruitment phenomenon. From this perspective the next section looks at the disconnect of two of the dominant assumptions of children’s DDR approaches from children’s lives through narratives of two young people formerly associated with armed groups.

Countering the dominant assumptions of forced recruitment and victimhood

Voluntary recruitment

As one small contribution to broad United Nations efforts to hold perpetrators of child recruitment to account, one of my tasks in 2009 was to compile a database documenting the names of commanders reportedly recruiting children. In this process I documented nearly 2,000 child recruitment experiences in North Kivu alone. Of these, a total of 928 had been described—by the children themselves—as having been “voluntary”. The fact that nearly half of the cases I examined were described as voluntary counters the dominant assumption which draws much legitimacy from the premise of nefarious commanders and helpless children.

Clearly, notions of “voluntary” are problematic in a context of ongoing conflict, and indeed, young people are often left to choose the least worst of a series of bleak possibilities. However, that so many children were able to express their “tactical agency”⁸ makes it clear that there is much more to understanding why young people become involved in armed groups.

A young man recounted his story, a narrative which offers rich insights into how children’s agency can allow them to navigate the extreme complexity of active conflict. He had first been recruited by the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo–Zaire (AFDL) in 1996, when he was seven, and spoke of his first association with the rebel movement:

In 1996 the war came to [my town]. My family fled to Bukavu, where we stayed for three months. When we returned [home], we didn’t know who was in charge, though Mzee [Laurent] Kabila was leading recruitment efforts. I was forced to join the AFDL with all the other boys I grew up with. We were taken to the Plains of Ruzizi and trained for five months in how to use guns. After the training we were given arms and uniforms and started fighting.

By the time Mzee Kabila took Kinshasa, my battalion had returned to [the base near the airport]. When the RCD [Rassemblement congolais pour la démocratie] entered Bukavu in 1998, they took over our base and killed all but six of the AFDL officers. The soldiers who remained were forced to carry the bodies . . . to be burnt with benzene. These soldiers were then shot and killed. Other soldiers who had gone to the police seeking refuge were also shot and killed.

Six of us managed to survive and we escaped. Two of us hid with our commander. Two weeks later Bukavu was taken by the RCD, so we began our journey on foot to Goma, where we stayed with the family of our commander. He negotiated for us to be integrated into the RCD.

There are many ways in which this young man’s narrative could be analysed, but what especially struck me at the time was the way in which he spoke of his AFDL commander. His commander was his protector, the one who assured his safety, provided him with shelter and food during their escape from the advancing RCD forces, and ensured his safe transfer to RCD command.

His narrative expressed his understanding of the political violence in which he was engaged, yet this was apparently not very exceptional to him—he was merely doing what “all of the boys” he had grown up with were doing. However, his engagement with the conflict eventually took on a new meaning, becoming deeply personal:

One day I was given some days of leave to visit home. Once there I went to visit my grandfather in the nearby village. When I returned home late that day, I found that the RCD had surrounded my house. They were accusing people of

being Mayi-Mayi [local defence militia] sympathisers. I saw my father as he was being beaten by the soldiers. He was beaten to death.

Unable to stop the killing of his father by members of his own army, he was able to express his agency by taking another kind of action: "To take vengeance for my father's death, I decided to leave the RCD and to join the Mayi-Mayi". He explained the details of his time with the Mayi-Mayi and then described how in 2002 he was identified by an international child protection organization and thus began the DDR process for children. However, as the conflict continued in South Kivu, he was eventually re-recruited by the Mayi-Mayi and returned to the front line. He described his last battle with pride: "I participated in the war of June 2004 when the RCD and [Colonel] Mutebusi attacked Bukavu. We managed to chase Mutebusi back into Rwanda".

During his narrative, this young man placed great importance in having participated in this heroic routing of the RCD forces. Even more crucially for him, he had at last avenged the death of his father, an act which helped him make sense of the conflict.

I got to know this young man only in 2010, six years after his last involvement with an armed group. At 21 years of age he was struggling each day just to survive in the patronage-dependent economic networks of Bukavu. He had previously completed a reintegration programme for children, but, like most of the other young people I have known who have gone through this kind of training support, the skills he had learned as a mechanic were inadequate and irrelevant in the urban economy. Instead, he earned money by working at the port of Bukavu, transporting extremely heavy loads of merchandise or sand into town. For this young man the most distressing part of his story was not his years fighting in the AFDL, the RCD or the Mayi-Mayi forces, but rather that just living today was so difficult.

Resilience over victimhood

The second main assumption of the children's DDR discourse was articulated in September 2011 by Under-Secretary-General Radhika Coomaraswamy, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, in a speech to the Human Rights Council, when she noted that "children should be treated primarily as victims, not as perpetrators".⁹ This perspective of "child-as-victim" continues to dominate international child protection policy and practice, despite ample research findings which call this perspective into question. Researchers working in Israel and Palestine,¹⁰ Northern Ireland,¹¹ South Africa¹² and northern Uganda¹³ have shown that many children are often not as traumatized by their involvement in violent conflict as is commonly thought, and that they are generally able to adapt to and cope with the daily risks and adversities in ways that defy expectation.¹⁴

As my work and research have shown, resilience is a concept which is useful in helping us understand how children cope with insecurity and violence. In the psychological literature, resilience can be defined as "the dynamic process of adjustment that leads to a relatively good outcome despite the experience of risk conditions that would otherwise lead to

psychopathology or other serious secondary effects".¹⁵ Resilience theory examines concepts such as "locus of control",¹⁶ and considers the role of family and social support networks¹⁷ as well as processes of meaning-attribution¹⁸. These theoretical considerations contribute to understanding what anthropologists might consider as children's "constructive engagement with adverse societal conditions".¹⁹

The narrative of another young person in South Kivu who participated in my doctoral research provides further insights on children's actual experience of being associated with armed groups. I also first got to know this 22-year-old woman in 2010 and have since stayed in close contact with her. Her story offers powerful testimony contrary to the assumption of victimhood—young people regarding themselves as victims—and reveals their courage and resilience. She had been abducted by the Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda (FDLR) during one of the many battles in her rural town at the height of the conflict. Her narration of her abduction experience was brief:

Some things one can forget, and once forgotten, they are gone forever. But other things cannot be forgotten. I was in my fourth year of secondary school. It was 2003, I was 15½. On 1 August 2003 I was taken by the FDLR. I stayed in the forest with them for seven months.

Eventually, she managed to escape and to find her way home. In contrast to the scarcity of detail which she used when describing her abduction experience, the description of her return home was full. It is a period of her life which continues to weigh heavily on her thoughts:

I was able to escape on 7 March 2004, and I found my way home. I was already seven months pregnant by then. My family told me repeatedly that I had to get rid of the pregnancy. They considered my unborn baby the enemy—*le serpent*. But I wanted to keep it—I believed it was God's will. I was hated by the whole family. My family was so angry with me, they told me they lost their cows because I had been raped.

Despite the intense rejection and emotional abuse she experienced, she refused to abort the pregnancy. Her commitment to her unborn child was anchored in what she described as her spiritual faith—a way of accepting what she had lived through. The emotional loss of rejection by her family, however, continued to trouble her deeply. Later she recounted the more recent abduction, and eventual killing, of her youngest sister by other elements of the FDLR. Her sister's death had a profound impact on her family: "My parents lost all their hope then. They cried and they mourned the loss of yet another daughter". Quietly she continued, "Like her, I'm dead to them".

This young woman is incredibly dynamic, but it was clear that over the years she had come to internalize the rejection by her family. Several times she expressed a recurring worry about her

future: “I dream of getting married one day. But I’ll never find a man who would accept me, who would love my son”.

I continue to meet with this young woman on each of my visits back to the DRC, and in-between visits we talk on the phone. Her hopes of getting married and finding some stability remain an important preoccupation for her. Her son, now 7 years old, is the centre of her life. She had also gone through the children’s DDR process, and was a “beneficiary” of a tailoring skills-training programme—yet this “skill” brought little to her in the way of earning her livelihood. Now she spends her days doing small jobs or asking others for financial help. Her son is now in primary school, and she is in her second year of university. Not once in her story would she allow the word “victim” to feature.

The danger of selective outrage

The aim of this article has been to challenge some of the dominant assumptions and the accepted discourse about children’s association with armed groups. By showing some of the complexity of the experience of just two young people, I hope to show how far removed children’s DDR programmes remain from the actual needs of children and young people.

Rather than association with armed groups, my research has shown that today in the DRC it is the “invisible violence”—structural violence—which has the greatest negative impact on young people’s lives.²⁰ Structural violence can be defined as “chronic, historically-entrenched political-economic oppression and social inequality”;²¹ an especially insidious form of violence because it “is silent, it does not show”.²²

Today in the DRC, the impact of structural violence is evident in the hopelessness and defeat expressed by so many young people, who increasingly tell me that “today is worse than yesterday—tomorrow will probably be worse than today”. A sentiment expressed by one research participant was echoed by many: “During the war there was nothing I could do to protect myself. But even now I still have no means to change things”. Another young man who I interviewed in Goma replied to a question about his future aspirations: “Why should I have thoughts about my future? I’m already dead”.

During a discussion with a group of young people, they tried to explain to me how this powerlessness feels:

Inside we are destroyed. We’re losing our morale. We are unable to defend ourselves. We have realized that power is not ours, that there is nothing we can do to protect ourselves. We have learned that anytime we try to defend ourselves, we will be punished by force.

Conclusion

Life in the DRC today is as complex as it is difficult. The simplistic assumptions upon which the children's DDR framework is built obscure the agency and the courage of so many young people as they navigate the complex terrain of conflict in eastern DRC. There is a need to go beyond the formulaic approach to DDR and to understand and appreciate the complex ways in which young people experience and cope with violent conflict. As argued here, the internationally mobilized outrage against children's association with armed groups is dangerously selective, as it obscures much deeper, systemic harms. Acknowledging and responding to the oppressive structures of violence, poverty and blocked opportunities facing most young people in the DRC today—the structures which also lay the foundations of the child recruitment phenomenon—would likely contribute to more relevant and effective interventions for the protection of children.

Notes

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