

Child soldiers in the DRC: an interview with Sarah Michael, MDRP Social Development Specialist

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There has been a lot of talk recently about child soldiers, but what exactly is a child soldier?

In fact, as we've come to learn more about the ways in which children are used in armed conflict, we've begun to use the term *child soldier* less often. We now tend to refer to *children associated with armed forces and groups* to refer to anyone under 18 who has been recruited or used by an armed force or group. This term helps to convey that children are not just used by fighting forces to carry weapons and fight

on the front line, but are also used as porters, messengers, spies and for sexual purposes.

Unfortunately, while there are international laws and agreements which should prevent the recruitment of children into armed conflict, including the world's most widely ratified convention, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, too often children continue to be used by armed forces and groups all around the world.

What is the extent of the child soldier problem in the Great Lakes Region?

The Great Lakes region is one of the most affected in the world. MDRP-supported demobilization and reintegration (D&R) activities include children in five of the seven countries in which we work: Burundi, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda and Uganda. In certain armed groups, children may even make up the majority. In the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda, for example, estimates suggest that children could make up to three-quarters of the group.

And in the Democratic Republic of the Congo?

Most armed groups involved in the DRC conflict have had children in their ranks. We estimate that between 30,000 and 35,000 Congolese children, from small children to young adults of seventeen, have directly participated in the conflict. Many children are abducted into these groups and movements. Others actually join of their own will – poverty and social or economic exclusion can also make young people susceptible to recruitment. So far, the MDRP has supported the demobilization of over 27,000 children in the DRC – 3,000 more than we had initially hoped to support.

How does MDRP support these children?

In the DRC, only a small number of children are demobilized through the national D&R program. The rest receive support through four special projects, run by six child protection agencies: the Belgian Red Cross, CARE International, International

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Rescue Committee, the International Foundation for Education and Self-Help, Save the Children UK and UNICEF. These projects advocate for the release of children from armed groups and also support released children themselves in child centers, separate from adult ex-combatants. In these centers, children receive food, shelter and psychological and medical assistance. They have the opportunity to play and learn and begin to readapt to civilian life. If possible, the projects also try to find children's family members and reunite them with the child. Once children have returned home, MDRP also supports a range of activities such as education, vocational training, and psychosocial activities to assist their longer-term socioeconomic reintegration.

What percentage of these children are girls?

Well, over 12% of the children who have been demobilized in the DRC today are girls. This is quite a bit higher than in most past demobilization and reintegration programs in Africa and around the world. Still, we know that there are more girls who have left armed groups and would benefit from reintegration assistance. Probably the greatest challenge we face is identifying these girls. Unfortunately, many of them fear rejection or stigmatization in their families and communities and are unwilling to come forward to be formally registered for D&R support. One way in which we've tried to reach out to as many girls as possible is to make MDRP-supported programs available both to girls who formally demobilize and register as ex-combatants, as well as to those who "self-demobilize" and report informally to the NGOs and local organizations who provide reintegration support.

Each special project also offers specialized assistance to girls. For example, Save the Children UK leads family mediations for girls rejected by their families and organizes girls' clubs that bring together girl ex-combatants and other vulnerable girls in the community. CARE International has implemented a system for local women elders and female social workers to work with the girls to develop an individualized strategy for their social and economic reintegration.



Sarah Michael,
MDRP Social
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What do you see as the main challenges and opportunities for completing the demobilization and reintegration of former Child soldiers in the DRC?

Well, continued insecurity is an obvious challenge to our work, especially in the Eastern DRC. The unwillingness of many armed groups to actually release the children within their ranks is also a serious problem. While we can't force armed groups to let the children within their ranks go, the MDRP does support efforts to make these groups more aware of the issue and of national and international laws against using children in armed conflict. The other big challenge that I see relates to the coordination of child protection activities. I think that there is a lot of potential for organizations that work with children associated with armed groups in the DRC to be more consistent in terms of their approaches, to better share lessons learned, and to ensure regular communication and exchange with the government and the national D&R program.

In terms of opportunities, I think that the multi-country mandate of the MDRP offers a real chance for our national partners to learn from the experiences of their neighbors. In Rwanda, for example, the D&R program has developed an approach to supporting older children in income-generating activities, such as crop-farming and animal rearing, which I think could be very valuable for adolescents in other countries. The other real opportunity I see – across all of our programs, in fact – is to better mobilize local communities, including local officials, cultural and religious groups, teachers and health workers. With training and support, these community actors can play a stronger role in supporting children returning from armed groups and in helping to prevent re-recruitment, or the recruitment of other children in the future.

For more information on MDRP, please visit www.mdrp.org or contact Bruno Donat, Communications Officer, MDRP Secretariat, World Bank at info@mdrp.org.