

## Diverse Panel at the *USIP* Reflects on Children Associated with Armed Forces

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USIP - Betty Bigombe

On June 1, 2007 the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) hosted a panel to discuss issues related to children associated with armed forces – sometimes referred to as “child soldiers” – and their reintegration into society.

Betty Bigombe, USIP fellow and a major figure in peace negotiations in Uganda, began the panel by highlighting that the issue of child soldiers must be looked at in a broad sense. Prevention and protection are crucial, she pointed out, so that groups are unable to recruit children in the first place. And because the “gun becomes a symbol of power,” and children are more prone to joining an armed group if they are desperately looking for a means of livelihood, the

daunting issue of poverty must also be addressed.

Fellow panelist Sarah Michael, Social Development Specialist at MDRP, echoed many of Ms. Bigombe’s ideas but from a more technical operational perspective. Ms. Michael’s presentation on children associated with armed forces discussed several of the considerations that must be taken into account for the design and implementation of child soldier reintegration efforts. She highlighted that the consideration of a child’s age, and how long they spent associated with armed groups, in program planning and design has historically been missing.

Raising the issue of children’s reunification with family after time spent in armed groups, Michael said, that in her experience, immediate reunification was not always appropriate. Rather, it was essential that reintegration programs work with each individual child until he or she felt ready to return home, while simultaneously helping prepare his or her family and community for the child’s return. Furthermore, she stressed that, since social integration is often so closely linked to economic well-being, one cannot separate economic from social reintegration. Both social and economic support should therefore be provided simultaneously. Along those same lines, she stressed the importance of taking into account a community’s social traditions and economic situation when developing reintegration programs.

The remaining three presenters also shared their own views on how to address the needs of children associated with armed forces.



MDRP - Sarah Michael

# News & Noteworthy



Jimmie Briggs- Journalist

As a journalist, Jimmie Briggs shared personal stories of his encounters with child soldiers. Through his sometimes emotional tales, he highlighted the importance of understanding that the phenomenon of child soldiering affects both boys and girls. Girls are furthermore haunted by what he calls a “double trauma” of war and sexual abuse, which means that reintegration programs must be tailored to gender.

Michael Wessells of Columbia University gave the audience insight into the importance of mental healing from a psychology perspective. He observed that, contrary to common belief, ex-combatants’ psychological disturbance is more often associated with present issues than with past traumas. Wessells stated that programs must be open to cultural approaches to healing, for example,

through the incorporation of spiritual cleansing that dissolve a person’s sins and allow them to move on.

The event’s final speaker, Christopher Blattman, a Visiting Fellow at the Center for Global Development, deconstructed popular images of child soldiers increasingly seen in the media, which his research indicates can be very misleading. Extravagant images of very young children with guns and stories of children who return as callous and violent teenagers or with extreme and enduring trauma are publicized as being the rule, when research so far indicates that they are rather the exception. Statistical evidence in fact seems to demonstrate that most children who are released from armed forces have not engaged in extreme violence and are ultimately able to reintegrate quite well.

Through the presentation of a variety of perspectives, from the more technical to the more subjective, the audience left the presentation with the understanding that child soldiers are not “killing machines” or “lost people,” but human beings whose potential contribution to their families and communities can be encouraged by reintegration programs which take into account their special needs.



USIP - Public

For more information on MDRP, please visit [www.mdrp.org](http://www.mdrp.org) or contact Bruno Donat, Communications Officer, MDRP Secretariat, World Bank at [info@mdrp.org](mailto:info@mdrp.org).