

Arms and the child

Various organisations making efforts to reintegrate former child soldiers into their respective communities face many challenges, not least cultural barriers that tend to ostracise such children, particularly girls. ZACHARY OCHIENG reports

THE TRICKY THING ABOUT THE RECRUITMENT of child soldiers by private armed groups is that international human-rights laws do not bind such groups, says a recent United States Institute of Peace briefing entitled *Child Soldiers: New Evidence, New Advocacy Approaches*, presented at the USIP in Washington DC.

The document has been put together by David J. Smith, senior programme officer in the education programme of the USIP; Betty Bigombe, former chief mediator in the northern Uganda conflict; Jennings Randolph, senior fellow at USIP; Jimmie Briggs, journalist and activist on the child soldiers issue and author of *Innocents Lost: When Child Soldiers Go to War*; and Sarah Michael, social development specialist with the Multi-Country Demobilisation and Reintegration Programme (MDRP) at the World Bank.

Others were Michael Wessells, senior child protection advisor for the Christian Children's Fund, professor of clinical population and family health at Columbia University, and author of *Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection*; and Chris Blattman, Jennings Randolph peace scholar at USIP and co-director and principal investigator of the Survey of War Affected Youth.

In her presentation, Ms Bigombe denounces the notion that some child soldiers make a positive choice to join armed groups. "This is not a choice," she says, "when you have nothing else? it's not a choice. It's the situation [of poverty] that propels you."

Ms Bigombe warns that children who have known nothing apart from violence are vulnerable, as they are often ripe for recruitment into other violent organisations, gangs, or terrorist groups.

In over 30 conflict zones today, there are an estimated 300,000 children being used to support military activities as porters, sentries, sex slaves, spies, and combatants.

The World Bank's Ms Michael discusses her agency's effort to demobilise and reintegrate about 450,000 former combatants in the Great Lakes Region.

She identifies three aspects of traditional reintegration strategies that can be improved on. These are support tailored for girls who have been exploited during conflict; adequate psychosocial assistance; and customised aid for adolescents and older youth.

She focuses on the appropriate reintegration programmes for returned child soldiers who are older adolescents. The process takes a few years, so one who is released from an armed group at 17 years of age may be in their 20s by the time they complete their participation in a reintegration programme.

In one of the programmes Ms Michael was involved in, 80 per cent of child-soldier beneficiaries were above the age of majority by the time they finished the reintegration programme. These older adolescents face an onslaught of responsibilities almost immediately after they return to their families: they are expected to take on household duties and to generate income.

She found that, in Rwanda, about 10 per cent of child soldiers had spouses and/or children; in Burundi, about 25 per cent were heads of households, being the primary income generators for either their siblings or their spouse and children.

For these older adolescents, formal education is rarely a realistic reintegration option to consider, since a family's breadwinner cannot spend all day in school.

Despite the fact that many reintegration treat economic and social reintegration programmes as separate approaches, Ms Michael notes that economic reintegration promotes social reintegration.

This is particularly true in the case of girls who become mothers while they are associated with an armed group, usually as a result of rape or sexual slavery.

When they return to their communities after having had a child during their servitude, they face enormous social stigma.

Ms Michael says if the mothers are able to make even a small economic contribution to the community, people's perceptions change. Economic contribution combats stigma, pushes the social reintegration process further along, and reminds a community of the value that young, hard-working people possess.

Vocational training and informal education are popular models. Formal education can sometimes be an option when reintegration programmes provide stipends and facilitate the individual's admission and attendance.

The World Bank studying income-generating opportunities that takes place through the provision of small-enterprise skills training to help an individual start up a self-employment venture.

Ms Michael describes three popular self-employment models that are used in reintegration programmes in Central Africa — animal rearing, crop farming, and small trade or kiosk ownership. The most significant challenge to success in these income-generating activities is a lack of formal education. If a child is not literate or not numerate, keeping track of stock, dealing with suppliers and managing financial flows can be almost impossible.

Also, a child's relationship with their family can be a significant hurdle to getting a small business off the ground. Very poor families may resent the former child soldier who they perceive to have suddenly won a stock of supplies and money.

The child, wanting to be part of the family, is likely to acquiesce if family members try to take advantage. Returned child soldiers are also more likely to allow their customers to purchase items on loan or with IOUs for the same reason: returned child soldiers are, according to Ms Michael, eager to be socially integrated and reluctant to be perceived as hostile or aggressive.

In some cases, programmes have provided specialised technical training according to the chosen enterprise (animal rearing, small business, crop farming, etc.) as well as group training sessions that cover all enterprises.

This approach is highly valuable because in most households, especially poor households, you must possess a multi-faceted survival strategy to hedge against risks like drought or animal illness.

Reintegration programmes require an approach that does not say to a child, "This is what you are going to do for the rest of your life," she says. "It is better to leave the children open to change, and if we can give them the skills to change their lives, we should. A former child soldier may start with a kiosk because he knows that is the fastest way to turn a profit, but because he learned some farming basics at the same time as his small business training, he can switch to farming after a few months."

SHE SAYS SUCCESS IN THE reintegration programmes means going to a village and asking, "Who are the ex-combatants here?" and hearing the reply, "We had some, but I can't remember who they are any more."

Ms Bigombe for her part says she has seen an atmosphere of competition among child soldiers in the bush over who could exhibit the most violence and brutality, because that is the best way to gain recognition and respect from their superiors within the Lord's Resistance Army.

Should reintegration programmes treat the children who were most engaged in brutality the same as children who were on the periphery of the violence? she wonders.

Ms Bigombe also says she has seen outright hostility from communities towards returning child soldiers, usually because the community was seriously victimised by an armed group.

The community's willingness to accept former child soldiers among them will vary, and understanding these attitudes is critical to the success of reintegration programmes.

The situation is even worse for girl soldiers according to Mr Briggs, who was first introduced to the issue of child soldiers while on a trip to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), then known as Zaire, when he worked for Life magazine.

Despite prevailing perceptions of outsiders, Mr Briggs saw equal numbers of boys and girls holding weapons on the frontlines in Zaire's emerging guerilla war.

He says that he was compelled by the thought that these young people were being sacrificed and exploited for causes that they probably did not understand.

He spent the next several years travelling to Rwanda, Uganda, Colombia, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and back to the DRC in an effort to better understand what factors draw children into war and to identify what we can learn from their individual experiences.

The most pressing issue for him was the use of girls in war. Everywhere he travelled, he encountered former child soldiers who were girls.

The norm for girl soldiers, he says, is to fight alongside the boys during the day, and to be subjected to sexual violence at night. This is the "double-trauma" that girl soldiers experience. Girls who survive their experience as child soldiers may have a child or children, usually born when the mothers were extremely young; they may be incapable of ever having children as a result of the abuses they suffered; and they may have one or several sexually transmitted diseases, including Aids.

Mr Briggs discusses the need for a greater response to the special needs of girl soldiers, especially counselling. In most reintegration programmes in Africa, there is no space for girls to talk about their experiences. They may be counselled the same way as boys regarding their experience as child soldiers, but they are not counselled as rape victims, child mothers, nor are they routinely tested for Aids and other STDs.