



Interact - Children in Armed Conflict Review and Evaluation Workshop

22 June 2004, Pretoria, South Africa

Children and youth are the majority, and policies that don't reflect this are contributing to conflict in Africa, in ways that we are only just beginning to understand.

1. Introduction

After a successful three-year implementation, the ISS project 'Children in Armed Conflict' (Interact) is in its concluding phase. The ISS is proud of the work undertaken and the significant achievements of the project. During the past three years, international attention has shifted away from children only as combatants as it has become more apparent that children and youth play a much more complex and important role before, during and after the outbreak of conflict. It is hoped that the work done by Interact has contributed to this understanding.

The objective of this workshop was to conduct an informal evaluation of Interact's work with some of our stakeholders. The agenda included discussions of challenges and achievements, methodology, new discourses on children and youth in armed conflict and the current state of advocacy.

Towards the end of the day-long workshop, the participants, who came from different governments, non-governmental and academic institutions, were asked to make recommendations on the way forward for advocacy and research on behalf of children and youth and armed conflict.

The organizations represented included:

The South African Ministry of Foreign Affairs;
The Centre for Conflict Resolution (South Africa);
The United Nations University;
World Vision (UK);
Save the Children Sweden;
The Human Sciences Research Council (South Africa);
The SADC Youth Movement;
The Embassy of Germany;

The United Nations of Youth Organization (UNOY)
Women in Law and Development in Africa (Ghana)
African Security Dialogue and Research (Ghana)

This report does not reflect every comment that was made, although all were insightful and valuable. An attempt has been made to capture the discussions of what the author deems to be the most critical issues facing research and advocacy on behalf of children affected by armed conflict in Africa.

2. Background

The current phase of the Interact project, which began in 2001, set out to conduct applied research on security issues, towards addressing the problem of child soldiers in Africa through:

1. Undertaking a survey of the problem of child soldiers and child abduction for co-optation through a questionnaire filled out by caregivers in Africa;
2. Undertaking a survey of military personnel about their perceptions of child soldiers as opponents or comrades;
3. Undertaking research into the special conditions associated with the plight of girl combatants;
4. Creating a training module for international and regional peacekeeping forces on how to deal with child soldiers and girl combatants in the field in the pursuit of peace-keeping, peace enforcement, demobilization and peace support operations.

This was to be achieved through the following activities:

1. Documenting the perceptions of communities on the problem of child soldiers and girl combatants;
2. Exploring indigenous coping mechanisms for the reintegration of abducted and demobilised children;
3. Placing a focus on girl abductees and girl combatants;
4. Researching attitudes of military personnel about their perceptions regarding child soldiers and girl combatants as opponents or comrades;
5. Researching the attitudes of peacekeepers about their experience regarding child soldiers and girl combatants to assist peacekeepers in dealing with child soldiers and girl combatants;
6. A photographic exhibit with special emphasis on girl combatants and abductees.

3. Challenges and achievements

Early in 2001, some changes were made in the project activities, with the aims of:

- Approaching children as actors rather than victims;
- Making the issue more relevant to human security analysis, rather than only to traditional child rights advocacy, by examining the social, economic and political factors and conflict characteristics that lead to child participation;
- Examining more closely the roles played by children and youth, as these appeared to differ from conflict to conflict;
- Eliminating logistical and security problems in the fieldwork. Southern Sudan and Liberia were substituted for Mozambique and Ethiopia. These countries were chosen because longitudinal assessments of the reintegration of child soldiers are rare. Understanding and interventions on behalf of young combatants tend to be framed within war and humanitarian crises, with little focus on their situation before and after conflict.
- Eliminating duplication of work. Training manuals for peacekeeping personnel were already being developed by a United Nations working Group and by Save the Children Sweden in conjunction with ECOWAS. The project coordinator participated in the working group initially, but later the training focus shifted to collaboration with the ISS Training for Peace Programme, which was developing materials for police training on violence against women and children. In addition to facilitation the pilot training course for the Southern African Police Chiefs Coordinating Committee (SARPPCO). Interact also enabled the translation of the materials in Portuguese so they could be disseminated and adopted in two post-conflict contexts, Mozambique and Angola.
- Avoiding ethical problems. The photo exhibit *Amulets and Dreams* does not place a special focus on girls, as there was evidence that girl abductees in many contexts, particularly in Sierra Leone and Uganda, were receiving almost intrusive media attention. Graca Machel's 2001 book "The Impact of War on Children" draws attention to the problem of media exploitation, which, in Sierra Leone, resulted in care centres for child ex-combatants instituting a "no-journalist" policy. *Amulets and Dreams* was aimed at showing the issues of children and war in their political and economic contexts.

- Understanding patterns of youth co-option and how they correlated with economic and political contexts and conflict trends through historical research.

In carrying out the research, it was thought that taking a 'template' approach would result in losing much of the contextual information from each of the country studies. It became very clear, as the work progressed, that the roles of children, their reasons for joining, the recruitment methods used and the prospects for successful reintegration varied widely from context to context.

4. Workshop Participants Comments and Questions

What was the Methodology used?

The research methodology took into account typologies of conflict, meaning that certain conflicts had particular features that seemed to be worthy of investigating in the context of the child soldier issue. A formal questionnaire was used to interview former soldiers (now adults) in Ethiopia, Uganda and Mozambique. Methods common to all of the country studies were key informant interviews and focus group discussions, but these were used to explore issues that seemed to stand out in each of the countries. For example:

Ethiopia: The Tigray People's Liberation Front movement had a high percentage of girl soldiers who were later demobilized as adult women. The TPLF political manifesto also contained a vision of women's equality, which appealed to some degree to the young women who joined to fight. TPLF fighter women were found to be role models to girls seeking education, emancipation and social oppression. The study therefore focussed on women recruited as children and demobilized as adults, using psychological methodology. The results of the study contributed to an understanding of how conflict changes gender roles and the difficulties women face when identities and social relations are changed as a result of their roles as fighters.

Sierra Leone: A number of features of the Sierra Leone conflict shaped the methodology of this study:

- A high incidence of atrocities committed by and against children;
- An insurgency that was supported by both urban educated and rural youth;
- A great diversity of recruitment methods used by the state, the civil defence forces and the Revolutionary United Front

It was therefore thought that the study needed to address child and youth recruitment at different levels. Recruitment methods emerged as one of the most important factors in involving young people in this war; they emerged as an indicator of political, economic and social vulnerability throughout the course of the conflict. The ease with which youth angry with the corruption and unaccountability of the government were recruited was one of the root

causes of the war. As things progressed and security conditions deteriorated, younger children became vulnerable to recruitment due to hunger, displacement, the desire to protect their communities and to get revenge. Children constituted a major force in the Sierra Leone conflict and the failure to protect them from recruitment was one of the factors that enabled the continuation of the war. There are also indications that the failure of the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programme to adequately address the problems of former child and youth combatants has contributed to ongoing conflict. This study highlighted the fact that the rights and welfare of children are a governance issue, and thus also relevant to conflict prevention and resolution.

Mozambique: With over a decade of peace and remarkable political stability behind it, the intent of this study was to conduct a longitudinal study of reintegration. The civil war in Mozambique was one of the first to bring the world's attention to the problem of under-age combatants, yet very little is described in the literature other than the abduction of children by the Mozambique National Resistance (RENAMO). Thus it was decided to make an effort to include former FRELIMO child combatants as well. One startling finding of the Mozambique field research was the notion, among former FRELIMO child fighters, that they were not in fact child soldiers and that this term only applied to RENAMO abductees. FRELIMO's ideological project played an important role in recruiting young people in the colonial liberation struggle, but later permitted the abuse of mechanisms of the state, such as the education system, to enlist children. The near-total denial of FRELIMO of their use of children in the civil war and the repeated condemnation of RENAMO for doing the same illustrates that child soldiers have been, and continue to be used as political currency. Having said this, former child fighters did not appear to differentiate between their own situations and those of their families and communities. They share, with the rest of young Mozambican population, serious concerns about education, employment and governance.

Uganda: Ongoing child abductions by the Lord's Resistance Army in northern Uganda and their rather prominent presence in the media raised questions about the political dimensions of this conflict. It is frequently represented as irrational and senseless and the historical facts of a marginalized Acholi people, failed reintegration of Museveni's Acholi fighters (many of whom were Kadogos (child fighters) are overlooked. There was therefore a need to contextualize what is presented consistently as a humanitarian, rather than a political, crisis. Given the high incidence and extraordinary brutality of atrocities committed by and against children and the impact of this on communities (or what is left of them), the prominent role of children as victims and perpetrators is a contributing factor in the intractability of this war. Concerns were raised in the research findings that the problem of child abductions was being used as a smokescreen by the Ugandan government to conceal the real political issues concerning the north, and has affected understandings of and approaches to resolving the conflict.

Definitions of childhood differ in Africa from elsewhere. How was the problem of age groups addressed?

By international legal definition, anyone under the age of 18 is a child. Youth are defined as those between the ages of 15 and 25. In Africa however, socio-economic circumstances dictate that children often bear adult responsibilities and youth are unable to attain the economic and social status that accompanies adulthood. The exploitation of children in war has more to do with vulnerability of young people in particular political, economic and social positions than strict chronological age. Conversely, some youth are not able, for economic reasons, to attain adult status, which often requires marriage and the establishment of a household. It is this position that makes a much larger group than just children vulnerable. Adding to this is the fact that the child-adult distinction is blurred in war, as is the military-civilian distinction, making young people more vulnerable than ever.

In order to transcend this problem, and to not restrict the research within artificial, chronological definitions of age, we considered the reality of demographics. With over half of the African population under the age of 18, HIV/AIDS decimating the care-giver age group and severe poverty affecting the whole of the continent, the legal frameworks protecting children are perhaps not being used effectively. Child and youth welfare need to be approached as a governance issue, i.e., of accountability to a young majority, and thus one of conflict prevention as well. Preventing vulnerability of children to politicization and militarization would be a major contribution to political stability.

In this sense, the research would not strictly be rights-based, but will hopefully contribute to new ways of promoting children's rights, in the interest of conflict prevention, for example. It is not that legal frameworks are inadequate – they need to be used as more than safety nets.

What have been your levels of interaction with Governments in policy formulation and with youth-based civil society organizations?

Much of this project has been dedicated to field research as opposed to advocacy, and to re-conceptualizing the issue of child soldiers in a way that makes it more than simply a means of raising awareness. The issue has achieved a high profile, there is comprehensive international legislation, but as the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers has demonstrated, the problem is getting worse. This might be because child soldiers issue, as it has been rather narrowly defined, is a symptom of a much greater problem – youth exploitation across the board.

In order to be relevant to a broader range of policy areas, we needed to first deepen our understanding of why it is so easy to recruit children and to demonstrate that they are stakeholders and not just victims in conflict. There is more political space that can be taken advantage of than formal, UN peace processes or traditional methods of child advocacy. Therefore, we have tried to engage people who are not necessarily in the field of child welfare, as this might have limited impact in the long run. We have therefore attempted to influence the thinking of a variety of agencies, including those involved in arms proliferation, human rights, youth movements, regional and sub-regional organisations, conflict analysis and others.

We hope that the message getting out there is “children and youth are the majority, and policies that don’t reflect this are contributing to conflict in Africa, in ways that we are only just beginning to understand”. This discourse needs to be taken up, to evolve and to be integrated into people’s thinking. We are not yet ready to approach governments with concrete agendas. For this, we need partnerships and new levels of engagement in policy processes, such as NEPAD, for example. Child soldiers may not be a policy priority for peace and stability in the region, but conflict prevention is, and strategies need to take into account who the majority really is, and how conflict prevention measures will work effectively with them.

Humanitarian agencies face shrinking political space for advocacy and we cannot afford to be confrontational. Humanitarian agencies are targeted since they are forced to negotiate with armed groups.

Making our issues relevant to governments, for example, even though our approaches are controversial, does not necessarily need to be confrontational. We do need to explore, and try to move into new political spaces. Ilene Cohn, who has been writing on children in armed conflict for many years, says that “child advocates must creatively characterize child rights policy concerns in the language of economic incentives and imagine ways of bringing child protection issues out of the typically ‘private’ domain into the realm of public regulation and programmatic response”. One of the major difficulties of advocacy is that there is competition between NGOs and

civil society groups for funding and profile. There is therefore enormous pressure to conform to donor driven agendas and to stick rigidly to their policy priorities. Granted that there is not always room for creativity, especially in humanitarian relief, where you have people's lives depending on the delivery of food aid. Nonetheless, even emergency operations can have political consequences that impact on youth, and we need to be mindful of this.

Perhaps most importantly, livelihood crises and vulnerability can begin decades before conflict. In a world of liberal economic agendas, conflict has opened new opportunities. We need to ask, for example, why the most profitable commodities circulating in the informal sector in much of West Africa are small arms and light weapons, drugs and mercenaries and why mercenarism has become a viable economic option for many young West Africans and relate this to positioning in the world economy. Dr. Kwesi Aning has observed that the quickest way to gain power and to become a political actor in West Africa is to lead a violent insurgency. This is a crisis of governance and of state capacity that has a direct and devastating impact on young people, but cannot be solved using the current legal frameworks regulating the use of under-age combatants.

There are problems with the politicization of youth organizations and the lack of consistency in structure and funding. Young people cannot be treated separately from main events and must be accommodated in government, religious and NGO functions.

Our historical research has shown that the co-option or suppression of vocal youth groups and individuals is almost inevitable. This has forced the interests of young people into the more private domain of child welfare, where it is un-threatening, and made them marginal to more 'mainstream' concerns, such as governance and economic policy. This is why there is such an imperative for mainstreaming. We cannot afford to continue marginalizing groups that represent the majority of Africans.

I would like some clarity on the roles of children and youth in conflict.

To understand this, we need to look at the controversial issue of voluntarism. You don't need a coherent political agenda to mobilize young people. The idea of incentives is key here. What makes a child a stakeholder in conflict is not necessarily identification with a political or military agenda. Children join fighting forces for a variety of reasons – hunger, the need for security, the desire to belong and be associated with fighters - these are expressions of individual agency. It their collective agency that becomes significant on the political and military level. In addition to the violations of individual children's rights that occur, we need also to ask the question "why is it so easy to raise an army in Africa?" We have come up with the idea of the recruitment spectrum: the more vulnerable people are, the easier recruitment becomes.

All young people face pressures that define the context in which they make rational decisions, even when the pressure is severe, as in a life-or-death situation, a choice, with significant consequences, is still being made.

Do you take into account the political and economic circumstances in which children become soldiers?

This is what the project is all about: contextualizing the problem of child soldiers. We have developed the idea of incentives – the political, economic and social push factors that make youth join armed groups. This approach offers an important counter-balance to the current focus on abduction and coercion. We are seeing that approaches such as this are catching on. The recent UN Secretary General's report to the Security Council Report West Africa targets cross-border arms trafficking, child soldiers and mercenaries as the three main interlinked problems at the moment. These are all symptomatic of a regional war economy that has somehow become normalized. Being a mercenary has become a viable livelihood option for many young people in the region; for those coming from conflict areas, it is still more desirable and definitely more lucrative than sitting in an IDP or refugee camp. Shortfalls in DDR programmes in Sierra Leone have resulted in young people re-joining armed groups in Liberia and Cote d'Ivoire. Instability in West Africa is an extremely complex problem, and the report highlights the fact that child soldiers are an inextricable part of it that we cannot simply blame on a few unscrupulous warlords who exploit children.

5. Presentations by Field Researchers

The aim of these presentations was to demonstrate the links between individual and collective agency and to draw attention to why the agency of children is so important to our understanding of the nature and trajectory of conflicts.

Dr. Angela Veale, Ethiopia and Uganda

This presentation dealt with issues of identity; that is, relations between communities and ex-fighters and the implications for successful reintegration. Both are transformed in conflict, and individuals experience difficulties in re-negotiating their positions.

The Ethiopian study revealed that for a group of TPLF women, all recruited as children and none of whom claimed to have been forced to fight, had wartime experiences fundamentally changed their identities. Having fought alongside men and shared labour equally with them. Being expected to resume traditional gender roles caused some difficulties within families and communities. Nonetheless, the women described themselves as more independent and self-confident than non-combatants women.

The study also highlighted the fact that although girls joined for many different reasons, which were not all political, it was their collective agency that was politically significant.

The Ugandan study explore the relations of former LRA abductees with their communities, and the cognitive dissonance arising from being both a perpetrator of atrocities against what were in some cases, their own communities, and the need to be accepted back into them. Interventions have focussed on rehabilitation and reconciliation, but there may be issues of justice that have not been addressed, to the detriment of community cohesion and long-term peace. There may be a need for restorative justice approaches in this and similar contexts, such as Sierra Leone and Rwanda, drawing on juvenile justice practices.

Dr. Kwesi Aning, Sierra Leone

The Sierra Leone fieldwork took place in 2001, after the ceasefire and before the elections, in an atmosphere of optimism and euphoria, which allowed unprecedented access to people. Dr. Aning observed however that despite the “peace rhetoric” that had been adopted enthusiastically by many people, many claimed that there were still scores to settle, and that this would be done quietly.

The individual case studies, like those of Uganda and Ethiopia, also revealed how war changes the identities of young people, particularly in relation to their elders. From politically-driven urban youth rebellions to forced child recruitment in the later days, the war in Sierra Leone has left young people with a fundamental distrust of older authority figures, whether government or village elders. This ‘generational conflict’ needs to be adequately addressed in post-war policy-making’. One of the most serious consequences of weaknesses in DDR programmes is the re-recruitment of young people into conflicts in neighbouring states, including Liberia and Cote d’Ivoire. This is an indication of the lack of opportunities and incentives for young people in peace; they have chosen to remain part of the war economy that continues to destabilize the region, along with weak state capacity, a lack of political will and mistrust between leaders in regional peace-building efforts. All of these factors enable youth agency to have a negative impact on the region.

6. Concluding remarks

The emergence of child soldiers as a high-profile international policy issue has brought a particular understanding to the role of young people in conflict; one that has served the needs of awareness-raising and advocacy against the use of children as combatants. While this victim-definition has lent itself successfully to mobilizing support for the international ban, it has perhaps restricted understandings of the role of young people in conflict. The ubiquitous involvement of young people in both peaceful and violent political transformation suggests that conflicts might be better informed by a more

varied discourse on children involved in war, one that recognizes them as actors in a conflict rather than as collateral damage.

The need to look at conflict and policy from a youth-actor perspective arises from three important facts:

1. Demographics; children and youth are the majority of Africans and policies should be appropriately accountable to them;
2. Children and youth are unfailingly the targets of recruitment, both military and political.
3. Child advocacy has operated in a very restricted political space, child and youth welfare are not considered relevant to governance and conflict prevention; this is in part a problem of discourse and a lack of understanding of agency.

7. Participants Comments and Recommendations

- Youth forums are not having an impact on policy at a national level; even less so in regional processes such as NEPAD. This is very often a capacity issue related to a lack of access to information technology. There needs to be greater collaboration of youth concerns into regional processes.
- Youth issues must be taken up with United Nations missions in individual countries. Existing forums such as the Human Security Network should be used more often, to disseminate new ideas.
- There must be stronger partnerships between civil society organisations and collaboration on advocacy positions in order to maximize political space. New approaches must be taken to advocacy.
- Youth empowerment must involve feeding youth perspectives into processes through targeted research outputs.

8. The Way Forward

The next phase of Interact will examine more closely the impact of policies on children and youth. While we feel it is necessary to mainstream youth concerns into as broad a range of policies as possible, we have chosen three areas that are having, and will continue to have profound effects on the lives of African youth; namely international criminal justice, post-conflict reintegration and livelihoods and small arms and light weapons proliferation (from the demand perspective). The new project will focus on the two ongoing regions affected by conflict in Africa; West Africa (Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire, Liberia) and the Great Lakes.

