PARIS PRINCIPLES

OPERATIONAL HANDBOOK

PARIS PRINCIPLES STEERING GROUP

unicef ❤️

Save the Children

PARIS PRINCIPLES

OPERATIONAL HANDBOOK

Acknowledgements

PARIS PRINCIPLES STEERING GROUP

FOREWORDS

More than 25 years ago, Dr. Graça Machel presented her seminal report *Impact of Armed Conflict on Children* to the United Nations General Assembly. A central focus of the report was the recruitment and use of children by armed actors – now recognized by the international community as one of the six grave violation of child rights in situations of armed conflict – and on the reintegration of conflict-affected children in their families and communities. The report described in heart-breaking detail, the brutal, destructive, and long-lasting impact that this violation has on children's physical and psychological development and well-being. It also laid out the need for urgent and resolute action by the international community to address the needs of affected children and their families.

Responding to that call for action, fifteen years ago, under the leadership of the Government of France, the *Paris Commitments to protect children from unlawful recruitment or use by armed forces or armed groups* and the complementary *Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups* were launched. Grounded in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict, they represent a ground-breaking milestone in the protection of children affected by armed conflict.

We are pleased that to date, 112 Member States have endorsed these important political and policy commitments. Many Member States have also taken action to turn their commitments into reality. This includes providing concrete support to tens of thousands of children who have been prevented from becoming recruited, who have been supported after their release, or who have found justice for a violation of their rights.
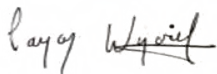
Despite these achievements, however, the reality is that warring parties continue to recruit and use children in situations of armed conflict around the world at alarming rates. At the same time, essential reintegration support for children is not always available, and justice is often elusive.

To truly end all recruitment and use of children by armed actors, and to respond to the needs of affected children, our continued collective vigilance, commitment, advocacy, and operational support are required. To support this effort, *The Paris Principles Operational Handbook* offers guidance to child protection specialists, government officials, policy makers, donors, advocates, and others as they develop strategies and put in place policies and programmes for the prevention, release, and reintegration of affected children.

While calling on additional states to endorse the Paris Principles and their underlying Commitments, we mark this anniversary year by recommitting our organizations to supporting all governments to eradicate recruitment and use of children in situations of armed conflict and to respond to the needs of survivors.

We ask for your continued commitment and support.

Sanjay Wijesekera
Director, Programme Group
UNICEF

Gabriella Waaijman
Global Humanitarian Director
Save the Children

2 December 2022

FOREWORDS

This year marks the 15th anniversary of the Paris Principles and Commitments. Adopted in 2007 at the ministerial conference "Free Children from War" organized by France and UNICEF, the Paris Principles and Commitments have allowed us to define a groundbreaking guide of good practices while endorsing a common definition of child soldiers at the international level.

The Paris Principles and Commitments have contributed to significant progress in the release of children affected by armed conflict. To date, 112 States have endorsed the Principles. Signatories have committed to implementing lasting solutions by ending the use or recruitment of child soldiers and by making every effort to ensure that the Principles are implemented through political, diplomatic, humanitarian or financial actions.

France remains fully committed to the protection of children in armed conflict. It continues to be one of the largest financial contributors to this priority. France will also continue to play a leading role in the Security Council after spearheading the adoption of Security Council Resolutions 1539 (2004) and 1612 (2005), which established a monitoring and reporting mechanism for grave violations against children in armed conflict and the dedicated working group.

Unfortunately, challenge remain. More than 260,000 cases of grave violations against children have been verified in more than 30 conflict situations since the creation of the monitoring mechanism. We must therefore continue our mobilization through concrete actions.

France pays tribute to all actors involved in the protection of children and in particular our long-standing partner in this mission, UNICEF, as well as civil society organizations and NGOs. This common commitment is the best hope for children.

Finally, France reiterates its call for the universal endorsement of the Paris Principles and Commitments and for their full implementation. The Operational Handbook developed by UNICEF and Save the Children will be a valuable tool to prevent the recruitment of children and promote their reintegration into civilian life.

Ambassador Nicolas de Rivière
Permanent Representative of France to the United Nations

2 December 2022

TABLE OF CONTENTS

SECTION 2
PROGRAMMING PLANNING

Chapter 4
Coordination

Chapter 5
Situation Analysis

Chapter 6
Risk Assessment, Security Planning and Risk-Informed Programming

Chapter 7
Funding

Chapter 19
Alternative Care

Chapter 20
Family Tracing, Reunification and Follow-up

SECTION 5
PROGRAMMING FOR REINTEGRATION

Chapter 21
Planning and Delivering Reintegration Programmes

Chapter 26
Children Formerly Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups in Justice Systems

SECTION 7
ADDITIONAL GUIDANCE ON SPECIFIC ISSUES

Chapter 27
Girls associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups

Chapter 28
Recruitment of Children by Armed Groups Designated as Terrorist Groups

Introduction: Overview and Information on How to Use this Handbook

This introduction provides an overview of the **Paris Principles Operational Handbook** along with information on how the Handbook is organized. It is intended to assist you in understanding the content of the Handbook and in finding information that is relevant to you.

The Handbook is for child protection specialists, government officials, and others working to:

- prevent the recruitment and use of children by armed forces or armed groups

- separate children from armed forces and armed groups or to identify them after they have exited armed forces or groups

- support children after their release or exit from armed forces or armed groups and during reintegration with families and communities.

The Handbook contains information and advice on a comprehensive set of topics, from the applicable international legal frameworks to how to manage caseloads and how to approach specific issues such as economic reintegration or justice and accountability.

This introduction will help you to find the information you need.

The Handbook has seven main sections. Each section is summarised in this introduction, with links to each chapter and subsection.

➜ Browse the pages to find the chapters and subsections you need.

➜ Follow the links to the relevant content.

Section 1
Understanding Child Recruitment and Use by Armed Forces and Groups

Section 1 explores the complexity of how children become involved with armed forces and groups, including the 'push' and 'pull' factors that influence their decisions. It looks at how the nature of warfare is changing and the implications this has for children's recruitment.

Section 1 also outlines the international laws, resolutions, and standards designed to prevent children from being used in conflict and to protect their rights. You can use these to further your work, and advocate for their implementation at international, national, and local levels.

Chapter 1
How and Why Children Become Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups

Children enlist, or are recruited, for a wide variety of different reasons, and in different ways. It is essential to understand the context in which you are working and the particular drivers that affect individual children in that context.

This chapter covers:

1.1   How and why does child recruitment and use occur?

* Children can be recruited into an armed force or group by force or through coercion or manipulation. Recruitment may be the result of other drivers or push and pull factors, such as poverty. Some children move in and out of military roles at different points during their childhood.

* Recognising a child's agency in the recruitment process is important – while also acknowledging that a child's enlistment in or use by an armed force or group involves exploitation, manipulation, or other forms of coercion.

1.2   Drivers of child recruitment

Drivers are circumstances or factors that cause a child to leave their current situation to join or become associated with an armed force or armed group. Drivers can be external or internal. They can be positive – such as to a desire for comradeship or status, or sympathy with a cause. Or they may be seeking to escape abuse or poverty. Social norms may also act as drivers. Drivers are often different for boys and girls.

1.3   Why are children attractive to armed forces and armed groups?

Armed forces and groups have different motivations for recruiting boys and girls, for both combat and non-combat roles. Children may be seen as more easily manipulated than adults, they may be considered a cheap and easy way to fill recruitment gaps.

1.4   Examples of roles children play in armed forces and groups

1.5   New forms of child recruitment

* The changing nature of warfare is creating new challenges for children, families, communities and the humanitarian actors that support them.

* The widespread use of social media has created new pathways to indoctrinate, manipulate and subsequently recruit children, including through transnational recruitment.

1.6   Children's experiences of recruitment

1.7   Key Resources

Chapter 2
The Impacts on Children of Child Recruitment and Use by Armed Forces and Armed Groups

Children associated with armed forces and armed groups are exposed to conditions, and experience and witness situations that are likely to negatively affect their physical, mental and psychosocial well-being, their social development, and their long-term life opportunities. The impacts can be very serious and can last a lifetime. Each child has a unique experience and their own way of coping.

This chapter covers:

2.1   Impacts on boys' and girls' health and well-being

- Most children associated with armed forces or armed groups will be exposed to physical and psychological harm. This can be linked to poor living conditions, physical hardship, violence, abuse, exploitation, and combat experience, amongst other things.

- Sexual violence presents an array of reproductive health concerns for girls and boys, that can leave them with a lifetime of health issues.

- Armed forces and groups may not provide or have access to proper medical services or care for children who become sick, injured, or pregnant. In some cases, injured or ill children may be punished, abandoned, or even killed.

    2.1.1   Physical health

    2.1.2   Sexual and reproductive health

    2.1.3   Mental health and psychosocial wellbeing

2.2   Impacts on education, livelihoods and social development

- While associated with an armed actor, children are likely to miss out on education and opportunities for personal development, including the acquisition of knowledge and positive life skills.

- Even if they have access to formal education after their release, children may find returning to learning difficult, due to stigmatisation, problems with concentration and behaviour, or shame and perceived loss of status, among other reasons.

2.3   Impacts on children's relationship with families and communities

- The ways in which families and communities perceive children associated with armed forces or groups will depend on the context. These perceptions may positively or negatively influence their willingness to accept boys and girls back after children leave or are released from such groups.

- Some boys and girls may have experienced a new sense of freedom during association, away from traditional expectations of behaviour and roles within family and community, and may struggle when returning to traditional or subservient roles within families and communities they had before.

2.4   Key Resources

Chapter 3
The Legal and Normative Framework

A substantial body of international law, UN Security Council Resolutions and other standards and norms have been developed to prevent the recruitment of children by armed forces and armed groups and the use of children in conflict. This chapter gives an overview of the main laws and other instruments in this area, and at how to apply them, both in programming and advocacy.

Children who have been associated with armed forces and groups are vulnerable to arrest and detention. A number of provisions frame the way children should be treated within the justice system.

This chapter covers:

3.1   Overview of the international legal and normative framework

This section lists the main laws and other instruments or standards that prohibit recruitment and use of children, and that call for their protection, release and reintegration

3.2   Applying the legal and normative framework in programming and advocacy

A look at laws and norms governing:

3.2.1   **Prohibition on using children in conflict**

3.2.2   **Criminalisation and prosecution**

3.2.3   **Monitoring, reporting, and holding perpetrators accountable under the UN-led Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM)**

3.2.4   **Additional measures for prevention of recruitment and use**

3.2.5   **Release and reintegration of children associated with armed forces and armed groups**

3.2.6   **Protection of children during armed conflict**

3.2.7   **Children in refugee settings**

3.2.8   **Child migrants**

3.2.9   **Stateless children**

3.3   Juvenile justice for formerly associated children

An outline of provisions that govern the way children should be treated within the justice system, covering:

3.3.1   **Protection from prosecution**

3.3.2   **Justice**

3.3.3   **Detention**

3.4 Challenges of counter-terrorism law for the protection of children

This subsection contains advice on working with children who may be associated with armed groups designated terrorist by the UN or that use terrorist tactics with respect to the justice system, – and how to ensure that they are not denied their rights, but are treated as victims of human rights violations. (See Chapter 28 for a full discussion on children associated with armed groups designated as terrorist organizations)

3.4.1 Children suspected of committing terrorist acts

3.5 Children in court

3.6 Advocacy on application of legal frameworks

Laws are not always enforced, due to lack of political will, lack of capacity, or ignorance. This subsection contains suggestions on how child protection actors can advocate for laws to be adopted, ratified, and enacted, and how policy makers can ensure they are fully implemented.

3.6.1 What can child protection actors do?

3.6.2 What can policy makers do?

3.7 Key Resources

3.8 Annex to Chapter 3

This Annex contains laws and other instruments that prohibit the recruitment and use of children, and require their protection, release and reintegration.

- The main sources relating to transitional justice and its role in addressing the violations suffered by children during conflict

- A timeline of key milestones, showing how international and regional law, UN Security Council Resolutions and international standards and guidelines have evolved to better protect children during armed conflict.

'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." (Paris Principles, 2.1)

Section 2
Programme Planning

The advice and information in Section 2 is designed to help you plan your programme. It gives an overview of the various elements you will need to have in place before and as you start work.

The section stresses the importance of thoroughly assessing the context and the risks involved and outlines how to approach situation analysis and risk assessment.

It also outlines how to identify the financial and human resources necessary not only to secure release of children from armed forces and groups, but also to address the factors that make children and communities vulnerable to recruitment and use, and to support meaningful long-term reintegration, including through community strengthening.

Chapter 4
Coordination

It takes a range of people, working together across multiple sectors, to prevent and respond to the recruitment and use of children by armed forces and groups. These may include local, national and international bodies and organisations. It is important that you foster and maintain productive relationships with all these actors.

This chapter covers:

4.1   Responsibility for coordination

National governments bear the primary responsibility for the coordination of efforts to prevent child recruitment and to implement release and reintegration programmes. This subsection looks at options for contexts where a government is unable or unwilling to full this duty.

4.2   Establishing a coordination mechanism

Coordination should take place at both the national level and in decentralised locations, with decision-making appropriately delegated to local actors who may have to adapt programmes to local realities.

> 4.2.1   **Key factors to consider**
>
> 4.2.2   **Regional and cross-border coordination**

4.3   Key roles of coordination structures

The role of a coordination structure will depend on the context in which it is operating. This subsection sets out some ideas of how to establish and maintain coordination structures, and their role in developing common approaches, and streamlining coordination and communication with other actors.

> 4.3.1   **Establish and maintain coordination structures among participating organisations**

Chapter 5
Situation Analysis

If your efforts to support children are not grounded in a comprehensive understanding of the context you are working in, they are likely to be ineffective. They may cause unintentional harm.

A vital first step is to analyse the political, cultural, social, economic, military and security dynamics of the context. Assessing all the conditions that affect your organisation and the communities you plan to support will enable you to identify opportunities and challenges. Mapping who is providing services across relevant sectors and assessing their strength is also a critical step.

This chapter covers:

5.1   Things to consider when developing a situation analysis

5.2   Conducting a situation analysis and identify mitigation strategies

This subsection gives advice on preparing to conduct a situation analysis, including how to facilitate the meaningful participation of children, and how to identify and mitigate risks to children, communities and agencies.

5.3   Collecting information

This subsection looks at types of data and data collection.

5.4   Subjects to explore in your situation analysis

Each context is different, and the choice of issues to explore will depend on your particular situation. This subsection suggests areas you might choose to explore if they are appropriate in your circumstances.

5.5   Key Resources

Chapter 6
Risk Assessment, Security Planning and Risk-Informed Programming

If you are working to prevent or respond to the recruitment of children by armed forces and groups, there are numerous potential risks to which the children and communities you are working with, your own organisation and partners may be exposed.

You are likely to be working in a context where conflict is brewing or ongoing, or in environments of fragile peace. There may be a heavy presence of armed actors and significant tension or hostility in communities.

It is vital that you thoroughly assess the risks and take all possible steps to mitigate them before planning and designing any prevention or response programmes.

This chapter covers:

6.1   Identifying potential risks

6.1.1   Examples of risk-related questions to ask

6.2   Risk mitigation

This subsection looks at ways to devise strategies to mitigate both risks posed by the conflict and risks related to the way the programmes are designed and implemented. It covers:

6.2.1   Security planning

6.2.2   Risk-informed programming

6.3   Risk assessment matrix

This subsection contains brief discussion of what is involved in developing, reviewing and updating a risk assessment matrix, with an example of how UNICEF approached this in the field in one context.

6.4   Key Resources

Chapter 7
Funding

Funding streams often focus on short-term processes for children's release. However, you will also need funding for longer-term interventions to support safe release, address the factors that make children and communities vulnerable to recruitment and use, and support long-term reintegration.

You will require funding that is sufficient to cover all the activities you are planning, that will be reliable, that has some flexibility in how it can be spent, and that will last for the planned period of your programme.

Ideally, funding should come from humanitarian, development or human rights funding frameworks.

This chapter covers:

7.1   What good funding looks like

7.2   Typical funding challenges

7.3   Addressing typical funding challenges

7.4   Key Resources

Chapter 8
Human Resources and Capacity

Staff, including partner staff and volunteers, is the most important resource you have.

Existing child protection workers, including community-based volunteers, may be able to respond to the needs of the children you are working with, but it may also be necessary to hire and train additional staff and identify new partners and community-based volunteers to deliver your programme.

This chapter covers:

8.1   Human resources profiles and skill sets

Specialised skills and knowledge are required for work with children associated with armed forces and groups – as well as core child protection competencies.

The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action has a Child Protection in Emergencies Competency Framework, which lists 24 competencies that may be needed for staff who are working with children associated with armed forces and armed groups. This is a valuable resource to help you define the skill sets you need.

8.1.1   Identifying required child protection core competencies

8.1.2   Capacity development

8.2   How to cope with a lack of qualified staff

8.3   Child safeguarding

8.3.1   Child safeguarding responsibilities of all organisations

This sub-section covers:

• prohibition of sexual exploitation and abuse, and commitment to upholding child safeguarding standards

• advice on mandatory training for all personnel, capacity building, screening and vetting,

• how to facilitate reporting of misconduct, and how to respond to allegations of misconduct.

Chapter 9
Programme Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning

Effective monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (often abbreviated to MEAL) are essential to measure the extent to which your work is achieving its intended results.

Good MEAL systems enable you to monitor the progress of projects and programmes, assess whether the approaches used are working, and to make changes if necessary. They also allow you to be accountable to the children and families and communities you are working with, to your donors, and to other stakeholders.

Planning for MEAL should be done before the programme or project begins.

This chapter covers:

9.1   Setting up a MEAL plan

This subsection includes recommendations for resources from Save the Children, the Open University and the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action.

9.2   Developing indicators and measurement tools

This sub-section includes a wealth of information on indicators and measures, including a table listing key indicators from the Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, and an example of contextually-appropriate indicators developed through participatory methodology in Sierra Leone. Topics discussed include:

9.3   Programme evaluation

This subsection discusses challenges with evaluation and suggestions for how to meet them.

9.4   Remote monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning

Section 3
Programming for Prevention

Section 3 contains guidance to help you plan and implement programmes to reduce the risk of children being recruited and used by armed forces or groups. This requires analysis of the root causes of child recruitment within communities, and work to address them.

It looks at how to use national legal frameworks as well as community level approaches, and includes advice on advocacy and awareness-raising and how to ensure children can participate in peacebuilding in a safe and meaningful way.

Chapter 10
Monitoring Child Recruitment and Use by Armed Forces and Armed Groups

Monitoring and reporting of recruitment and use of children by armed forces and armed groups should be carried out in any conflict context, and elsewhere if there is a risk of recruitment. Evidence-based data on child recruitment and use can inform the design and implementation of your programme and advocacy, assist in leveraging funding for programmes, and provide evidence with which armed forces and groups that recruit and use children can be held accountable.

The UN Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on Grave Violations against Children in Situations of Armed Conflict is a formal mechanism that provides for the systematic gathering of information on six grave violations committed against children in armed conflict, including recruitment and use by armed forces and groups. Certain international conventions, treaties and charters also require States to report on a regular basis.

This chapter covers:

10.1   General principles for establishing a monitoring and reporting system

- Whatever form monitoring and reporting on child recruitment and use takes, it is inherently political, sensitive and challenging. An initial risk assessment is essential and risks must be constantly monitored, and mitigation strategies revised as necessary.

- Sensitisation and training is required for those collecting, recording and reporting information, on verification standards, data and information management systems, protocols and practices.

- All monitoring and reporting must be based on core principles, including the child's best interest, 'do no harm', and a commitment to quality of information recorded.

10.2 What to monitor and how information gathered can be used

10.2.1 **What might you monitor and how?**

10.2.2 **How might the information be used?**

10.3 The UN Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on Children and Armed Conflict (MRM)

How the MRM functions, including:

10.3.1 **The role of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict**

10.3.2 **Composition of the Country Task Forces for Monitoring and Reporting**

10.3.3 **Responsibilities of the CTFMR**

10.3.4 **The role of Non-State Armed Groups**

10.3.5 **The role of communities**

10.4 Monitoring and reporting against international legal standards and principles

A number of international conventions, treaties and charters, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict, require States to report on a regular basis. Child protection actors may be invited or permitted to submit parallel reports under these regimes. This subsection lists some key examples and the requirements and/or opportunities they offer.

10.5 Key Resources

Chapter 11
Community-Level Approaches to Prevention of Child Recruitment

Families, community members, and community-based groups are some of the most effective agents for preventing child recruitment. Although in some contexts, communities play a role in driving recruitment, their potential to disrupt and prevent recruitment flows can also be very powerful.

Practitioners should support and strengthen positive and protective community structures which can prevent or stop recruitment, and be alert to actions that may undermine them.

Because underlying causes often go beyond one sector, linking with other sectors to provide a comprehensive response is often required.

This chapter covers:

11.1   What is 'community'?

'Community' is difficult to define and can mean different things in different places and to different people. Traditionally interpreted in a geographical sense, 'community' is increasingly understood in terms of social bonds, networks, ties and structures.

11.2   Understanding the nature, scale, and causes of child recruitment within communities

It is vital to understand whether and in what ways a community encourages or discourages boys and girls to join armed forces or armed groups

11.3   Community-based monitoring systems

Child protection actors may be able to support community members to establish or strengthen community-based monitoring and early warning systems. This subsection suggests indicators and trends to monitor and discusses approaches to supporting community-based monitors, and how to create links with existing protection programmes for boys and girls.

11.4   Community-level strategies to prevent child recruitment

This subsection explores practical, community-based strategies that have been used in various contexts to reduce the risk of child recruitment and re-recruitment. It cites examples from Côte d'Ivoire, Sri Lanka, Somalia, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

11.4.1   Community-based strategies to prevent forced recruitment of children

11.4.2   Reducing children's motivations to associate with armed forces and groups

11.4.3   Reducing the risk of re-recruitment

11.5   Key Resources

Chapter 12
Prevention of Child Recruitment and Use through National Legal Frameworks and the Security Sector

National laws that prohibit the recruitment and use of children by armed forces or groups can be a significant prevention measure – if they are enforced. You should make sure you understand the legal protections that are in place and where there are gaps.

If you are working in a country where the protective environment for children needs to be strengthened, you should consider advocating for establishment and implementation of legal frameworks and policies (including within the security sector) to protect children from being recruited and that support their release and meaningful reintegration.

You can also support international peacekeeping operations, where relevant, to strengthen their policies and practices with regards to child protection.

This chapter covers:

12.1   Establishing and enforcing a national legal framework

- Preventing child recruitment and use by armed forces and armed groups requires states to have a robust human rights-based legal framework in place and enforced. This requires political will and investment in systems to ensure that the judiciary, the military, national police and border control have the resources they need.

- You will need to understand the legal protections that are in place and how they are enforced - and where the gaps are.

- National legislation relating to trafficking networks is also important if these are part of the dynamics of child recruitment and use in your context.

    12.1.1   Strengthening the legal framework and prohibitions against recruitment and use

    12.1.2   Coordination and advocacy

    12.1.3   Public information campaigns

    12.1.4   Taking action when states fail to establish or to enforce laws and policies

12.2   Support for strengthening or reform of national armed forces, national police, and international peacekeeping operations

The national armed forces, national police, international peacekeeping operations, and non-state armed groups are all key stakeholders to prevent child recruitment and use.

Child protection actors should work collaboratively with all of these to ensure their practices reflect laws and policies that criminalise child recruitment and use, as well as the sanctions for breaching them.

While there are clear differences between their roles and mandates, many of the same steps to strengthen policies and practices will be relevant for all of them.

    12.2.1   Strengthening policies and practices

    12.2.2   Sensitisation and training

A discussion of training for military personnel and NSAGs, including topics to cover and challenges and ways to mitigate them

12.3   Preventing recruitment and use by non-state armed groups

- It is important to encourage non-state armed groups to establish and enforce policies and practices that reduce the risk of harm to children.

- Engaging with non-state armed groups carries risks – potentially to children, their families and communities, and to humanitarian personnel and organisations. A careful risk assessment should be carried out.

12.4   Key Resources

Chapter 13
Advocacy and Awareness Raising

Advocacy is activity designed to influence the policies and actions of others to achieve positive changes. You can use advocacy to influence authorities, policymakers, community leaders, and others to better protect children in conflict.

This chapter provides guidance on advocacy and awareness raising activities related to preventing child recruitment and enhancing reintegration support.

This chapter covers:

13.1   Advocacy planning

- Guiding questions to help you plan and design sustained advocacy campaigns.

- Includes a discussion of different types of power.

   13.1.1   Power analysis

13.2   Situation analysis and risk assessment

Poorly planned advocacy can put children, communities, and your staff and programmes at risk. This subsection recommends a risk assessment and a situation analysis, which are regularly reviewed and adjusted as necessary.

13.3   Approaches to advocacy

This subsection discusses different approaches to advocacy, which may require different combinations of tools and tactics, according to the local context, the desired outcome, the audience, and the sensitivity of the topic.

   13.3.1   Evidence-based advocacy
   13.3.2   Coordinated advocacy
   13.3.3   Public or private advocacy

13.4   Examples of engagement and advocacy at different levels

This subsection suggests ways you can carry out advocacy locally, nationally, regionally and internationally.

13.5   Public awareness-raising

- Informing people about the issues surrounding the recruitment and use of children by armed forces and groups, and about your work to prevent this and to reintegrate children, can help your work in many ways.

- This subsection suggests different awareness-raising strategies, and includes a case study of awareness-raising with children in Nepal.

13.6   Key Resources

Chapter 14
Child Participation in Peacebuilding Activities

Peacebuilding activities are those that aim to reduce the risk of a country or area lapsing or relapsing into armed conflict. Peacebuilding activities vary according to context, and may include working with individuals and groups to help them manage conflict in non-violent ways, foster reconciliation, promote human rights, and address root causes of conflict including social, political and economic inequalities and injustices.

Children and young people have a stake in establishing and maintaining peace and should be included in peacebuilding activities. However, their participation needs careful planning and support, and can be harmful if not done well. You must ensure that peacebuilding activities are ethical and safe – and avoid exclusively targeting children who are or have been associated with armed forces and groups, but instead include a wide range of girls and boys, including hard-to-reach children.

This chapter covers:

14.1 How peacebuilding activities can help prevent recruitment and support reintegration

This subsection outlines a number of ways in which children play important roles in peacebuilding, at community and national levels.

14.2 Examples of peacebuilding activities with children

14.2.1 Examples of children playing direct roles in peacebuilding activities
14.2.2 Examples where children participate in wider peacebuilding activities

14.3 How to promote meaningful child participation in peacebuilding activities.

14.3.1 Ethical and safe child participation
14.3.2 Risks of exclusively targeting children associated with armed forces and groups
14.3.3 Include girls and boys from a range backgrounds
14.3.4 Including 'hard to reach' children and overcoming barriers to participation
14.3.5 Listening to children
14.3.6 Listening to families and communities

14.4 Key Resources

The Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (CPMS, second edition published in 2019) is a 'one-stop shop' for resources on child protection. It guides humanitarian professionals in preventing harm and supporting the recovery of children caught up in crises.

Section 4
Programming for Release

Children are released from – or leave – armed forces and groups in many different ways, from participating in a formal release processes to escaping or being abandoned.

However children make their exit, transition to civilian life is a gradual and uncertain path, sometimes with a high risk of re-recruitment or further exploitation. Your activities to support children should be based on an understanding of the context and of children's different needs, and be appropriate and safe for all participants.

Children should be treated primarily as victims of human rights violations and every release must be carried out with the safety, security and best interests of children as the primary concern.

Chapter 15
Engaging with Armed Forces and Armed Groups

In recent decades, conflicts have become increasingly complex and often involve multiple state and non-state actors. Many of the children involved in armed conflict today are found within the ranks of non-state armed groups (NSAGs) as distinct from government armed forces. In some areas, NSAGs may be acting as the de facto governing authority.

In some contexts, it may be appropriate to engage with NSAGs directly or through international peacekeeping operations or political actors such as UN Missions, or other partners.

This chapter covers:

15.1 Considerations for engaging with parties to a conflict

15.1.1 Legal norms and standards for engaging with parties to a conflic

- While NSAGs cannot become parties to international treaties and conventions, they have human rights obligations as well as obligations under IHL.

- Some NSAGs have voluntarily committed to certain rules that are consistent with international laws and standards.

15.1.2 Deciding who is best placed to engage with a party to a conflict

- This subsection identifies factors to consider when deciding which humanitarian actor is best suited to engage with an armed force or group. It also provides guidance on ceasefire arrangements, political settlements and peace agreements.

15.2 Issues to discuss with armed forces and armed groups

Chapter 16
Undertaking Formal Release of Children

National governments have formal obligations to facilitate the release of children associated with armed forces and groups in their territory. In practice, some governments may be unwilling or unable to do this and child protection actors may play key roles.

Formal release involves the planned transfer of children to a designated third party for their care and protection. This can occur in a number of ways, including as part of a negotiated Action Plan with the armed force or armed group concerned, or as part of a larger-scale disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration process, which may also include adults.

You should ensure that activities to support formal release should meet children's needs, and be appropriate and safe for all participants.

This chapter covers:

16.1 Preparing for formal release

16.1.1 Essential preparatory steps for the formal release of children

This subsection recommends a detailed step-by-step process from analysing conditions for release.

16.1.2   Visits to sites/barracks ahead of release

- It may or may not be possible to visit sites or barracks where children are being held.

- Careful attention should be given to ethical considerations.

- This subsection suggests issues to assess when visiting sites or barracks.

16.2   Eligibility criteria for release

This subsection discusses key issues related to eligibility for release, including age-related issues and activity within the armed group or force.

16.2.1   Age assessment

- Guidance on how to assess a child's age, and factors to consider when doing so.

- A case study from Chad.

16.3   Immediate actions at the time of release

Describe the essential steps to ensure boys' and girls' safety and well-being on release.

16.4   Formal release papers

A discussion of potential advantages and disadvantages of issuing release papers.

16.5   Cash payments/material kits

- Cash payments are not recommended to be paid to children on their release. The risks of doing so have been clearly documented. However, there may be benefits to giving cash that have not yet been fully explored.

- This subsection provides guidance on issues to consider if giving cash and/or materials to children, families or communities.

16.6   Safeguarding children from harmful exposure to media or donor visits

There may be considerable pressure to facilitate media and donor access to children at the time of release. Such exposure can be distressing, exhausting and frustrating for children.

16.7   When children do not participate in formal release processes

16.7.1   Possible reasons for non-participation in formal release process

An examination of possible reasons why children may not participate in a formal release process, including children's perceptions, manipulation by members of armed groups or forces, and issues related to eligibility criteria and access

16.8 How to support children's participation in release processes

This subsection advises on the need for appropriate and confidential ways to communicate with children, and for dissemination of information to counter misinformation and help children make informed decisions.

16.9 The case of militarised communities

Children whose family and community are associated with an armed force or group may not be well served by a formal release and reintegration approach. A community development approach based on the best interest of the child is advised. This subsection offers advice on such an approach, and a case study of working with a militarised community.

16.10 Key Resources

Chapter 17
Understanding and Supporting the Informal Exit and Release of Children

There are numerous ways and reasons why children leave armed forces and armed groups informally. Child protection actors should try to understand these in order to design and implement appropriate reintegration support programmes.

Many children who leave armed forces or groups informally are invisible to agencies involved in formal release processes, sometimes by choice. They may therefore miss out on protection and support to assist them to transition to civilian life. It is important that you proactively identify and support such children, in a way that respects their safety and need for confidentiality.

This chapter covers:

17.1 Why and how children leave armed groups or forces informally

17.1.1 Ways children informally exit an armed force or an armed group

- Informal release or exit of children from armed forces and groups is not well documented.

- As with recruitment, children's options to remain with or leave an armed force or group lie along a continuum of coercion ranging from looking voluntary (while having elements of pressure) to being forced.

17.1.2 Reasons why children choose to leave an armed force or an armed group

A number of factors may combine and result in a child's decision to leave an armed force or group. This subsection looks at factors that influence the likelihood of children deciding to try to leave an armed force or group – and at factors causing them to stay.

17.1.3   Reasons why armed forces and armed groups informally release children

Informal release of children may happen as a result of a decision made by the armed group or force. Reasons for releasing children vary considerably.

17.2 Supporting informally released children

This subsection stresses the importance of seeking safe, appropriate and confidential ways to communicate with children, understanding their concerns and challenges, and adapting release and reintegration programmes accordingly.

17.3 Key Resources

Chapter 18
Case Management After Release

Case management is an approach for addressing the needs of an individual child. The child and their family are supported by a caseworker. Although organised around an individual child's case, it often involves working with families and community members.

For children who are part of a formal release process, case management should begin at identification and registration. If children are detained following capture, case management should begin during detention. For those who leave armed forces or groups informally, services should be available within communities for them to access confidentially.

Case-based support should be available to all vulnerable children within communities, not only those who have been associated with armed forces or groups.

This chapter covers:

18.1 Establishing case management services

- Before establishing case management services, a comprehensive assessment of the existing child protection system should be conducted to determine strengths and weaknesses, gaps in protective services, workforce numbers and capacity, financial resources, access and geographical coverage.

- Child protection case management is a structured step-by-step process. This subsection outlines the steps involved.

18.2 Key considerations related to children's safety in conflict settings

- Children formerly associated with armed forces or groups face considerable risks that should be considered when establishing case management services.

- Where a government is party to a conflict and is unable or unwilling to offer impartial support to children who have been associated with armed forces or groups, it may be necessary to set up a case management system that is distinct from those overseen by government bodies.

- In some situations, it may be inappropriate or unsafe to establish case management services for children associated with armed forces and armed groups. This subsection suggests alternative ways in which children can access the support and services they may need.

18.3 Safety planning for children

18.4 Human resource considerations

18.4.1 Ratio of children to caseworkers

- Factors to consider when determining the appropriate child to caseworker ratio.

18.4.2 Prioritising cases

- Use of standardised vulnerability criteria will help ensure a consistent and comprehensive response.

- When prioritising and assigning cases, it is important to pay equal attention to both complex and straightforward cases.

18.4.3 Assigning caseworkers

18.4.4 Supporting caseworkers

18.5 Identification and registration

- Identification refers to the moment when child protection actors become aware of an individual child with a protection concern.

- Registration refers to the act of capturing basic information about an individual child for the purposes of starting individual case management support.

18.5.1 Determining if identification and registration are safe and appropriate

18.5.2 Supporting children in the community

18.6 Implementing care plans

A care plan should be developed, reviewed and revised, in collaboration with the child and their family. It should detail support that both the child and the family require to support successful reintegration, including referrals to other services.

18.6.1 Good practice for communicating with children and documenting information

18.6.2 Key considerations when providing case-based support to children formerly associated with armed forces and groups

18.6.3 When to get oral or written informed consent or assent

18.6.4 Tools for child protection case management

- The Case Management Task Force (CMTF) of the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action has developed Inter-Agency Guidelines for Case Management and Child Protection, which complement the.

- The CMTF has also developed forms, guidelines, standard operating procedures training materials and other resources.

18.7 Information management for case management

You will require a method to track cases and safely manage information. This subsection contains information and guidance on key aspects of information management:

18.8   Referral to services

Child protection actors should establish a functional referral system. This subsection suggests typical relevant services for children formerly associated with armed forces and groups.

18.9   Case closure

Case closure is dependent on a child's situation, and not based on a fixed time, a fixed number of visits, or on the type of support they have received. This subsection outlines typical circumstances in which a child's case can be closed.

18.10 Key Resources

Case management has been placed in the reintegration section of this handbook, but case-based support is also a key aspect in preventing recruitment and use.

Chapter 19
Alternative Care

Alternative Care in Emergencies Toolkit published by The Inter-Agency Working Group on Unaccompanied and Separated Children, and other resources highlighted in this chapter, provide comprehensive tools and guidance to help you plan and implement interim care and related services for children separated from or unable to live with their families.

This chapter complements existing interagency guidance on alternative care by highlighting key issues relating to alternative care of children who have been associated with armed forces and armed groups. It provides guidance on how to determine when interim or permanent care is appropriate, as well as key principles and good practice to arrange safe alternative care.

This chapter covers:

19.1   Key considerations and safety planning for alternative care arrangements

This subsection outlines key issues to consider when arranging alternative care, including context, safety, practical concerns, and what training and support proposed caregivers should receive. There is also a discussion of safety planning.

19.2   When may interim alternative care be necessary?

Interim care may not be necessary for all children released from armed forces and armed groups. It may delay children's return to their homes, families and communities which can be detrimental to the process of re-establishing relationships. However, children may require or benefit from alternative care in certain circumstances.

19.3   Options for interim alternative care arrangements

- Different interim alternative care options may be considered, depending on the context and the best interests of the child. Some key principles apply to all types of interim care arrangements.

- After kinship care, family-based care options are the most desirable. Where this is not possible, small group living or supported independent living within a community is usually preferable to any form of institutionalised care. This chapter discusses five types of alternative care arrangements:

19.4   Options of last resort

Where no other option is possible, you may have to use a less preferable option. The chapter advises on

19.5   Identification of permanent alternative care arrangements

Permanent alternative care options should be considered based on an assessment of a child's situation and care needs and guided by a Best Interests Determination.

19.6   Key Resources

Chapter 20
Family Tracing, Reunification and Follow-up

This chapter provides guidance on family tracing and reunification activities, including verification, mediation prior to return, and preparation for reunification.

This chapter covers:

20.1 Family tracing

Tracing is the process of searching for a child's primary legal or usual caregivers and other family members, with the aim of finding a long-term kinship solution that is in the best interests of the child. This often means reunification with parents or other close relatives, although other long-term solutions may be identified. Tracing also refers to the search for missing children whose parents are looking for them.

This subsection contains a wealth of advice on family tracing activities, including potential risks, covering:

20.1.1   Child and community-initiated tracing

20.1.2   Organisation-led tracing

20.1.3   Case-by-case tracing

20.1.4   Tracing for young children or children with limited information

20.1.5   Tracing for children with disabilities

20.1.6   Cross-border tracing

20.1.7   Cross-referencing/database tracing

20.1.8   Options of last resort

In cases where usual methods of tracing families do not work, child protection actors should consider other options. This subsection covers some options, which must be carried out in keeping with the principles of Do No Harm and the Best interests of the child.

20.1.9   Not recommended: unannounced visits

20.1.10 Protracted tracing

20.1.11 Discontinuing tracing

20.2 Verification of family links

It is important to establish the validity of relationships and confirm that the child and the family member are willing to be reunited.

20.2.1   Verification of the identity of family members

20.2.2   Verification that reunification is in the best interests of the child

20.3 Family mediation and preparation for reunification

'Going home' is often not a simple or easy transition. It is important to discuss expectations and concerns about reunification with children and family members. Potential risks to safety and well-being should be identified and mitigated.

20.4 Family reunification

A child and their family should be involved in planning for the reunification process so that it is as positive and problem-free as possible. This subsection also covers issues to considerwhen families live in active conflict areas

20.4.1   Reunifying children with family living in active conflict areas

Section 5
Programming for Reintegration

A child's transition from association with an armed force or group into civil society is a long and complex process. It depends on creating an environment where their needs and rights are recognised and met, including their needs for a safe home, education, and economic security.

Many children may experience distress and difficulties in re-establishing relationships with family members and peers, and need specialised mental health and psychosocial support.

This section offers guidance on aspects that your reintegration programme will need to cover.

Chapter 21
Planning and Delivering Reintegration Programmes

This chapter highlights how to prepare reintegration support and highlights key principles that should guide reintegration programming for children formerly associated with armed forces or groups. It also identifies common challenges and provides evidence-based guidance to address these challenges.

This chapter covers:

21.1 Preparing for reintegration with children, families and communities

- An essential primary step is to conduct a thorough situation analysis (see also Chapter 5).

- Establishing ways in which children, families and communities can meaningfully participate and take a leading role in the process is essential at the outset.

> **21.1.1** **Preparing for reintegration with children**
> **21.1.2** **Preparing for reintegration with families**
> **21.1.3** **Working with family members to support returning children**
> **21.1.4** **Preparing for reintegration with communities**

21.2 General principles for programming reintegration support

21.3 Challenges to reintegration

Most children do not experience reintegration as simply 'going home'. 'Home' as the child knew it may no longer exist, and they may face challenges around developing a new identity or dealing with stigma.

21.4 Context-related challenges to reintegration support

In some contexts, specific challenges may influence the type, structure and management of reintegration programmes.

21.5 Ongoing support to individual children and families

It is important to stay in touch with children and their families after reunification, to monitor progress and continue to offer support

21.6 Key Resources

Chapter 22
Mental Health and Psychosocial Reintegration Support

Children associated with armed forces or armed groups are likely to be exposed to disturbing experiences, which can lead to severe distress, difficulties in re-establishing relationships with family members and challenges with peer relations, in the immediate and longer term. All conflict-affected children are likely to benefit from some form of mental health or psychosocial support.

It is important to note, however, that the experience will affect children in different ways. The impact on their psychological well-being will vary, so interventions should be targeted to address individual children's needs.

Parents' and caregivers' mental health and psychosocial well-being can affect their ability and willingness to welcome children home and to understand and support their needs.

This chapter provides guidance on providing mental health and psychosocial support to children, families and communities affected by conflict, with a focus on children associated with armed forces and armed groups.

> **"Mental health is a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community."**
>
> The World Health Organization

This chapter covers:

22.1 Understanding mental health and psychosocial support

- It is important to understand local concepts of mental health and psychosocial well-being. You should be cautious of trying to adapt mental health and psychosocial support models from other contexts to local cultures.

- It is important to consider and support approaches that children themselves feel are important to their recovery and well-being; these may involve a combination of traditional and cultural activities and activities more akin to Western forms of psychosocial support.

22.2 Providing mental health and psychosocial support to children formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups

This subsection examines different ways in which children can be affected by the experience of armed conflict – and factors that can hinder psychosocial recovery.

22.2.1   Addressing immediate and longer-term needs

22.2.2   Assessing children's capacities and needs

22.3 Four layers of mental health and psychosocial support

The Interagency Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings identify four layers of support, from basic to specialised services.

22.3.1   Referral pathways between layers of support

A two-way referral pathway should be designed between layers, so that children requiring more specialised support can also receive basic services, and children can be referred to specialised services should the need arise.

22.3.2   Layer 1: Basic services and security

22.3.3   Layer 2: Community and family support

22.3.4   Layer 3: Focused, non-specialised supports

22.3.5   Layer 4: Specialised services

22.4 Challenges to programming mental health and psychosocial support

This subsection lists the kind of challenges you may encounter when designing and implementing mental health and psychosocial support programmes for formerly associated children and their families, as well as potential strategies to overcome the 22.5.

22.5 Key Resources

Chapter 23
Economic Strengthening for Reintegration

Strengthening the economic situation of families and working-age children is a key element in preventing child recruitment or re-recruitment, as economic vulnerability and the lack of livelihood opportunities often drive child recruitment.

This chapter provides guidance on economic strengthening for working-age children and of families. It also lists resources which provide detailed guidance on programme planning and implementation.

This chapter covers:

23.1 Challenges to providing economic strengthening programmes for working-age children and families

This subsection discusses challenges related to the profile of the target group, institutional roles, conflict and post-conflict environments, and the duration of the economic reintegration process – as well as ways to tackle them.

23.2 Roles and responsibilities for providing economic strengthening to working-age children and families

• Coordinating with other sectors and linking children and families with complementary services is one of the most important roles child protection actors can play.

• This subsection outlines how stakeholders from government, national and international NGOs, international agencies, training service providers and others can contribute to economic strengthening.

23.3 Economic reintegration of working-age children

This subsection includes Guidance on all aspects of economic reintegration covering:

23.3.1 What is economic reintegration?
23.3.2 Who is economic reintegration for?
23.3.3 Technical components of economic reintegration support
23.3.4 Pre-training activities
23.3.5 Training activities
23.3.6 Post-training support
23.3.7 Protecting children from hazardous work

23.4 Economic strengthening of families and caregivers

Economic reintegration programmes targeting parents/caregivers can have many positive effects, and can allow children to go to school or participate in vocational training. They can also have unintended negative consequences. This subsection discusses some approaches to economic strengthening of adults, and issues to consider.

23.5 Institutional capacity building

Different institutions can play roles in providing economic strengthening to children and families and may require some level of capacity building. This subsection contains suggestions for:

> **23.5.1   Government, UN, (I)NGOs and other relevant stakeholders**
>
> **23.5.2   Service providers**

23.6 Linkages with broader recovery and development frameworks

- Reintegration, and in particular economic reintegration programmes, should be designed and implemented in close cooperation with wider recovery and development frameworks.

- You should support the transition of reintegration programmes into long-term development interventions, managed by national actors. Your programmes should connect with initiatives that prepare communities to absorb young people and create jobs, such as private sector development programmes.

23.7 Key Resources

Chapter 24
Education Support for Reintegration

The longer a child's education is interrupted by conflict, the less likely they are to return to school. When children are unable to access education, it does not only affect them. It also undermines a society's ability to recover from the conflict.

Access to education can contribute to effective reintegration of children into their families and communities, and increase their access to better opportunities.

This chapter covers:

24.1 Why support education during conflict and post-conflict?

This subsection outlines the many, interconnected benefits of education for children in conflict and post-conflict contexts, including personal, psychological, economic benefits, prevention of recruitment, supporting reintegration and aiding access to other services.

24.2 Different options for participating in education

This subsection provides an overview of different types of educational opportunities, and the advantages and disadvantages of each.

24.3 Key challenges to accessing education

Formerly associated children can have difficulties accessing safe, appropriate and quality educational opportunities. This subsection outlines some of the most common challenges.

24.4 Good practice for supporting education in conflict and post-conflict situations

This subsection highlights some agreed good practices when supporting education in conflict and post-conflict contexts, while stressing that what is appropriate in one context may not be in another.

24.4.1 Invest resources in strengthening schools as a whole

24.4.2 Increase school safety

24.4.3 Increase participation of children, families and communities

24.5 Key Resources

Section 6
Justice Systems in Relation to Child Recruitment and Use

Justice requires society to take action against individuals who commit grave violations against children. Yet in practice, there is still a long way to go to end the 'culture of impunity' for child recruitment and use. And children who come into contact with justice systems, whether as alleged offenders or as victims or witnesses, face challenges.

This section discusses how you can promote accountability for those who recruit and use children in armed conflict, and support individual children as they navigate the judicial system.

Chapter 25
Addressing Impunity for Child Recruitment and Use

The recruitment and use of children during conflict is a grave violation of international law and of the individual rights of the child involved. Justice and accountability imperatives require that society take action against individuals who commit such violations.

This chapter explains the concept of accountability in relation to child recruitment and use by armed forces and armed groups. It gives guidance about how you can promote accountability – or lay the groundwork for an accountability process in the context where you are working.

It advises how to ensure that children can participate in judicial and administrative procedures concerning them – and that their participation is fully informed, safe, and in their best interests.

This chapter covers:

25.1 Accountability for child recruitment and use

The word 'accountability' is often used to describe formal processes for holding individuals responsible for wrongdoing. These processes can include criminal prosecutions that can lead to prison sentences or civil proceedings that can lead to monetary damage awards or other forms of compensation or action.

25.1.1   Approaches to accountability

There are various approaches to pursuing accountability, both judicial and non-judicial. All offer their own opportunities and challenges, and pursuing a combination of several complementary mechanisms is usually the most appropriate approach.

25.1.2   The role of child protection actors in supporting accountability

25.2 National judicial mechanisms

States bear the primary responsibility for holding the perpetrators of child recruitment and use to account. National-level judicial systems should investigate cases of child recruitment and, where appropriate, prosecute those responsible. The opportunities to use national judicial mechanisms may vary based on national contexts.

25.2.1   National judicial mechanisms: Challenges
25.2.2   The role of child protection actors

25.3 International judicial mechanisms

The international community has established a system of international justice that can offer an alternative means of holding perpetrators to account when national judicial mechanisms are unable or unwilling to do so. These have a different set of advantages from national ones.

25.3.1   International justice mechanisms: Challenges
25.3.2   The role of child protection actors

25.4 National non-judicial mechanisms

Truth commissions and other justice mechanisms that are locally informed or community based can offer a non-judicial route to accountability and can complement formal judicial processes. In some contexts, national human rights commissions and national ombudsmen may also offer non-judicial mechanisms for accountability.

25.4.1   What are truth commissions?
25.4.2   What are locally informed or community-based justice mechanisms?
25.4.3   National non-judicial mechanisms: Opportunities and challenges
25.4.4   The role of child protection actors

25.5 International non-judicial mechanisms

There are international non-judicial mechanisms designed to achieve a certain level of accountability for violations committed against children in armed conflict, including recruitment and use.

25.5.1   International non-judicial mechanisms: Opportunities and challenges

25.6 Reparations

As victims of human rights and international humanitarian law violations, children formerly associated with armed forces and groups may be eligible for reparations to address the harms they suffered.

25.7 Key Resources

Chapter 26
Children Formerly Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups in Justice Systems

This chapter explores situations in which children associated with armed forces or groups are in contact with the justice system and provides guidance on how you can support them.

All children in contact with the law have rights to basic protection and procedural guarantees, including when they are deprived of their liberty. The principle of the best interest of the child should guide all actions by both public and private actors in legislative, judicial and administrative decisions.

As a child protection actor, you should support governments, relevant ministries, children and their families so that children are better served and protected by justice systems and that duty bearers apply international norms and standards applicable to children within justice systems.

This chapter covers:

26.1 Children as victims and witnesses in judicial processes

26.1.1 The role of child protection actors in helping to make judicial systems better for child victims and witnesses

- Children's testimonies may play a pivotal role in the prosecution of perpetrators of child recruitment and use. Children should be supported when making decisions to testify and encouraged to think through the possible implications.

- A critical concern for child witnesses is that they may incriminate themselves in the course of their testimony. Access to a legal representative who can advise them and protect their rights is therefore essential.

26.1.2 Children as witnesses

26.1.3 Children as claimants for rights violations

- Children have the right to just and timely remedy for violations of their rights.

- The State has primary responsibility for providing access to justice for children who have suffered harm.

- Children seeking justice in conflict and post-conflict contexts often face challenges. They should be supported to consider which route is likely to bring the most satisfactory outcome for them, taking into consideration the risks and challenges.

26.2 Children as alleged offenders

- International law emphasises that children associated with armed forces and groups should be primarily treated as victims, and urges states to favour reintegration, rehabilitation and restorative justice over any punitive measures. International law also stresses that states should support children's physical and psychological recovery and assist them with their social reintegration.

- International standards and principles on child protection and justice for children and applicable national legislation must be respected, including provisions for minimum age of criminal responsibility.

26.2.1 Victim or perpetrator: a false duality

- Children's social identity should not be reduced to the status of victim. Viewing children only as passive victims can be disempowering and may contradict how society perceives and treats them.

- Some form of accountability – based on restorative approaches – can contribute to a child's reconciliation with his community, with the victim and with him or herself.

26.3 Judicial measures for alleged child offenders

26.3.1 Prosecution of children by international courts or tribunals

- The decision on whether to prosecute is left to States. The emerging trend of international tribunals has been to decline the prosecution of children and focus instead on the prosecution of those higher up the chain of command.

26.3.2 Prosecution of children by national judicial systems

- Children over the minimum age of criminal responsibility may be prosecuted by national courts for serious crimes committed while associated with armed forces and groups.

- The age of criminal responsibility varies from country to country, ranging from seven to 18 years. All children who face national judicial proceedings for crimes are entitled to be treated to the highest standards and safeguards in accordance with international standards for juvenile justice.

26.3.3 International standards for juvenile justice

This subsection outlines key components of international standards for children in justice systems.

26.3.4 The role of child protection actors in improving the treatment of children by justice systems

26.3.5 Detention of alleged child offenders

This subsection sets out minimum standards for children in detention.

26.3.6 The role of child protection actors in engaging on the issue of administrative detention

26.3.7 Non-judicial measures for alleged child offenders

Non-judicial mechanisms, including mediation, truth commissions or other alternative locally-informed reconciliation mechanisms may provide appropriate opportunities to address the social responsibility of children formerly associated with armed forces and groups.

26.4 Key Resources

Section 7
Additional Guidance on Specific Issues

Section 7 gives additional guidance on how to support two specific groups of children.

Girls associated with armed forces and armed groups face particular risks and forms of abuse related to their gender.

Laws, policies and popular discourse around designated 'terrorist' groups pose additional challenges to supporting children recruited and used by such groups.

Chapter 27
Girls Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups

Girls are estimated to make up somewhere between 10 and 40 per cent of children associated with armed forces and armed groups around the world. They play a variety of roles, and face serious risks before, during, and after their period of association.

Historically, prevention, release and reintegration programmes have inadequately addressed girls' specific and varied needs. This, along with the risk of stigmatisation and rejection from communities, has led girls to actively avoid participating in release and reintegration programmes.

There is a growing understanding of girls' experiences, needs, capacities and priorities. This chapter explores the varied experience of girls associated with armed forces and groups and provides guidance to support their release and reintegration.

This chapter covers:

27.1 Girls' experiences of recruitment and use by armed forces and armed groups

It is important to understand girls' experiences during their association with armed forces and groups as being influenced by broader, gendered power structures that both pre-date and will last beyond the conflict.

Girls' experiences differ greatly across and within contexts, and it is important not to generalise. However, it is possible to identify some similarities and common patterns in their experiences.

- **27.1.1   How girls become associated with armed forces or armed groups**
- **27.1.2   Girls' experiences during the period of association**
- **27.1.3   Sexual violence**
- **27.1.4   Girls' strengths and capacities**

27.2 Preventing the recruitment of girls by armed forces and armed groups

A thorough situation analysis with a strong gender and conflict sensitivity analysis is necessary to identify and explore risks to girls at individual, family and community levels and to develop approaches to prevention.

27.3 Supporting the release of girls from armed forces and armed groups

The ratio of girls to boys among formally released children is often very low compared to their presence within armed groups and forces. This subsection looks at reasons why girls may choose not to participate in formal release processes, and at external factors which may prevent them from doing so.

27.3.1 Factors preventing girls participating in formal release operations and reintegration services

27.3.2 External barriers preventing girls participating in formal release processes

27.3.3 How to make release and reintegration processes more accessible and attractive to girls

27.4 Supporting the reintegration of girls formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups

Child protection actors and policy makers must design formal release processes to be accessible for girls. Using a gender lens throughout, and conducting a gender analysis specifically to assess and mitigate the risks girls face is highly recommended. This subsection contains advice on programme design, methods to reach girls, messaging to use, and advocacy to armed forces and armed groups

27.4.1 Challenges to reintegration of girls

27.4.2 The role of child protection actors in supporting girls' reintegration

27.5 Key Resources

Chapter 28
Recruitment of Children by Armed Groups Designated as Terrorist Groups

In recent decades, the UN and regional bodies, as well as nation States, have designated certain armed groups as 'terrorist organisations'. New laws and policy frameworks have emerged that can make engagement with such groups for release of children risky or impossible.

Yet the experience of children recruited and used by designated terrorist groups is similar to those of children recruited and used by other armed groups. Their right to support is the same.

This chapter contains a discussion of the legal implications of designation for child protection practitioners.

This chapter covers:

28.1 Definitions and Use of the terms 'Terrorism', 'Violent Extremism' and 'Radicalisation'

There are no commonly agreed definitions of the terms 'terrorism', 'violent extremism' or 'radicalisation'. They are often used inconsistently and sometimes interchangeably. This subsection discusses different terminology and problems caused by the lack of internationally agreed definitions.

28.2 Not just ideology: Addressing the real reasons why children join armed groups designated as terrorist groups

Ideology is often a proxy for more important factors that drive children's association with armed forces and groups. Factors such as psychological distress, social isolation, traumatic experiences and losses, ostracism and discrimination are likely to be key factors driving child association with armed forces and groups.

Using an approach focused on changing an individual's ideology can hamper reintegration and disincentivise participation in such programmes.

28.3 Implications of labelling armed groups as terrorist

Labelling of a group as 'terrorist' has serious implications for children who may be associated with the group. Penalties under counter-terrorism laws tend to be harsher than a state's standard criminal law. Children are more likely to be treated through a security lens rather than a child rights or child protection lens, and states often feel less obliged to uphold children's rights.

28.3.1 How 'association' is defined in the context of groups labelled as terrorist organisations

28.4 Principles of programming for children associated with groups that commit terrorist acts

The United Nations University's 2018 report 'Cradled by Conflict' proposes five principles to guide decisions on when and how to adjust prevention and release and reintegration efforts for children associated with designated terrorist groups. This subsection summarises those five principles and includes suggestions for programming for children associated with such groups.

28.5 Key Resources

UNDERSTANDING CHILD RECRUITMENT AND USE BY ARMED FORCES AND GROUPS

Chapter 1

How and Why Children Become Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups

© ©UNICEF/UN057860/Romenzi

'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." (Paris Principles, 2.1)*

'Unlawful recruitment or use' *is recruitment or use of children under the age stipulated in the international treaties applicable to the armed force or armed group in question or under applicable national law." (Paris Principles, 2.5)*

'Armed forces' *refers to the armed forces of a State. (Paris Principles, 2.2)*

'Armed groups' *refers to groups distinct from armed forces as defined by Article 4 of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict. (Paris Principles, 2.3)*

Source: The Paris Principles[1]

Introduction

It is essential that all those working to prevent and respond to the recruitment and use of boys and girls by armed forces and groups understand why and how children become associated with them.

The reasons for any child becoming associated with armed forces or armed groups are complex and usually involve a combination of drivers in the child's life and environment. The motivations of armed forces and groups for recruiting children, and their tactics of recruitment, also vary considerably according to time and context, as do the reasons why children are attractive for them.

Policies, strategies and programmes aimed at preventing and responding to child recruitment and use must be designed to embrace this complexity. They must carefully consider both the nature of the conflict and the armed group or force, and the context of the recruited children, before recruitment and on and after release.

1.1 How and why does child recruitment and use occur?

Recruitment of a child by an armed force or group can occur through coercion or manipulation; it can be a result of other drivers or push and pull factors, or of direct violence or threats.

For many children, recruitment, use and release are not a one-time occurrence. While recruitment may be a sudden and unique event for some, other children may be born into families and communities already embedded in inter-generational conflict, may move in and out of military roles at different points during their childhood, and/or may join at the beginning of the conflict, or much later.

Children can be forcibly recruited, including by abduction from their homes, schools or other locations, or they may be intimidated into joining through threats or acts of violence, as happened for example in Sierra Leone and Uganda. As a report by the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict said, "*The Sierra Leone and Uganda models of forced recruitment, where many children were abducted, drugged, and beaten into submission was for a long time the archetype of child soldiering.*"[2]

"I tried to refuse but I couldn't. I just had to go with them [Al-Shabaab]. If you refuse, maybe sometimes they come and kill you or harm you, so I just went with them. One of my friends who was older than me, they came and started with him the same as they did to me and he refused, and they left him but another day they found him on the street and shot him."

14-year-old boy, Kenya, 29 May 2011[3]

Another tactic of forced recruitment is planned abduction on a large scale, sometimes referred to as 'press-ganging', where recruitment sweeps are made in areas where there are large concentrations of children, such as schools, care institutions, market areas, and internally displaced persons' and refugee camps.[4]

In some contexts, families can be forced into giving up their children as part of a quota system imposed on communities, as part of non-age-bound conscription laws, or in return for protection for the rest of the family.

Families and communities may also have positive perceptions of child participation in armed forces or groups and may encourage or require children to enrol for social and economic reasons.

There are many other reasons why a child might become associated with (or be recruited or used by) an armed force or group. Recognising children's agency in this process is important while also acknowledging that a child's enlistment in an armed force or group involves exploitation, manipulation, or other forms of behavioural control or coercion. Reasons for children's enlistment with an armed group fall along a 'continuum of coercion' which ranges from outright abduction to joining out of economic necessity or to be with family.[5]

As social media has developed, mass online campaigns to attract and subsequently recruit children, especially transnationally, have become a powerful means of manipulating children to join armed groups.

Whether a child's association with armed forces or groups can ever be genuinely and fully informed and voluntary remains contested.[6] Under international law, it can never be considered voluntary.

It is important that all child protection actors, as well as community members, families and other stakeholders, understand the complexity of the reasons for children's association with armed forces and armed groups, and that all awareness-raising and training activities aimed at preventing child recruitment into armed forces and groups and supporting their reintegration be based on a contextual analysis.

- On one hand, denying the agency of children who claim to have voluntarily joined an armed force or group does not recognise their capacity to make decisions on things that matter to them, and may disempower them during any reintegration process.

- On the other hand, considering that children associated with armed forces and groups are fully informed and act voluntarily fails to recognise the inherently coercive nature of recruitment. It can also negatively influence the way communities perceive and treat children who have returned from armed groups.

> **"In instances where children exercise some agency, there is no evidence to suggest that a single factor or motivation drives them to associate with [non-state armed groups (NSAGs)] ... Even the few studies that recognize some correlation between a particular factor and involvement with NSAGs find that the association only appears to explain a small minority of cases, suggesting that other factors are at work and cautioning against broad generalizations."**
>
> Siobhan O'Neil & Kato Van Broeckhoven[7]

1.2 Drivers of child recruitment

Identifying and understanding the drivers within an individual child's life as well as the broader context in which they live, will help child protection actors to better prevent and respond to child recruitment and use by armed groups and forces.

Drivers of child recruitment are circumstances or factors in children's lives that cause them to leave their current situation to join armed forces and armed groups. Drivers can be external or internal, and they can be prosocial – a desire to protect or help others, or to maintain relationships.

Drivers of recruitment vary significantly and may operate in combination, ranging from a desire for comradeship, status, power, sympathy for a cause, deprivation of basic needs or need for protection, to seeing the armed force or group as the only apparent option for survival.

Several studies have shown that "*across contexts, children cite domestic violence and oppressive family environments as motivating factors for joining non-state armed groups. This is true for both boys and girls, but girls often have fewer options when they run away to escape domestic abuse.*"

> **"[... Also,] sexual abuse of girls may have a significant impact on their trajectories into armed groups. In Nepal, girls often cited abusive marriages, or an effort to avoid arranged marriage,) as a reason for joining the Maoists. Statements from female members of the LTTE [Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, in Sri Lanka] suggest they were motivated to join the group because of 'past sexual victimization or fear of rape... to protect themselves or avenge their enemies', a motive deliberately exploited by LTTE recruiters."[8]**

Social norms may also act as drivers. For example, some families or communities expect their children to actively participate in a conflict, sometimes as an effort to protect the community or social group. This is particularly relevant in communities experiencing long-running armed conflicts. Joining an armed force or group may also be viewed as heroic or positive.

Real or perceived rewards for becoming associated with armed forces and armed groups can also influence a child's decision to join or a family's decision to send a child to join a force or group.[9] These usually relate to protection, food, shelter or other means of survival. Other factors may include a child's desire for revenge, status, power or money.

Distinct gender roles are among common drivers for child association, boys maybe being expected or encouraged to join as a demonstration of maturity or manliness, especially in highly patriarchal societies. For girls, joining an armed force or armed group may represent an opportunity for emancipation and empowerment outside traditional gender roles.[10] Wearing a uniform or possessing a weapon can instantly yield power.

In a study of child involvement in armed groups on the Myanmar-China border, Chen Kai identified three relationship levels between a child and a recruiter that facilitate child participation in armed forces: (a) a victim-coercer relationship, (b) a patron-client relationship, and (c) comradeship.[11]

Whether the different factors and recruitment tactics by armed forces and groups are successful partly depends on the existence and effectiveness of the mechanisms in place to protect children and prevent recruitment.

EXAMPLES OF DRIVERS OR FACTORS THAT CAN INCREASE THE LIKELIHOOD OF CHILD RECRUITMENT

- Lack of protection or physical security in the community

- Violence, abuse, neglect, discrimination or marginalisation by families or communities

- Harassment or attacks by an opposing force or group

- Poverty or inability to meet basic needs

- Lack of civil documentation

- Lack of education opportunities

- Lack of employment opportunities where joining an armed force or group may represent a regular salary

- Feeling of grievance against government

- Desire to seek revenge

- Desire to defend family and community

- Sympathy for the goals publicly espoused by the group

- Sense of belonging and purpose

- Desire to experience power, status, respect, adventure

- Comradeship and peer pressure

- Social norms that promote participation

- Membership of family, tribe or other social group

1.3 Why are children attractive to armed forces and armed groups?

Armed forces and groups have different motivations for recruiting boys and girls, for both combat and non-combat roles.

Children may be seen as more easily manipulated than adults into carrying out hazardous missions, such as serving as human shields to protect other more experience fighters or acting as suicide bombers.[12]

They may be considered a cheap and easy way to fill recruitment gaps, and perhaps as an expendable resource given their high numbers in the population.[13]

In some situations, "there is the sad truth that the shock value of child soldiers on of-age infantry personnel is a savvy war tactic as they may prove more hesitant to fire on children."[14] The availability of light weapons has been a contributing factor towards the use of children in combat roles.

Children might be perceived as better able than adults to fulfil certain roles, such as slipping back and forth across enemy lines on reconnaissance or spying missions or delivering messages without attracting suspicion.[15]

They may be recruited specially to fulfil secondary tasks, such as carrying supplies or looted goods through difficult terrain or walking long distances carrying containers of water to camps.

Girls may be recruited for a variety of reasons including for sexual exploitation, although both boys and girls may be subjected to sexual violence.

) See Chapter 27 on Girls Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups.

Most recruited children hold multiple roles simultaneously and these roles evolve during their period of association with the armed force or armed group.

1.4 Examples of roles children play in armed forces and armed groups

- Fighting on frontlines

- Manning checkpoints

- Conducting armed patrols

- Gathering intelligence

- Carrying supplies, looted goods, water

- Laying mines or improvised explosive devices

- Guarding prisoners

- Carrying out domestic and support duties such as gathering food/cooking, fetching water

→ Acting as:
  - human shields
  - suicide bombers
  - in execution squads

→ Serving as:
  - sexual slaves
  - bodyguards
  - medical assistants
  - messengers
  - recruiters

1.5 New forms of child recruitment

The changing nature of warfare, in particular changing methods of recruitment by groups that commit terrorist acts, is creating new challenges for children, families, communities and the humanitarian actors that support them.

Beginning in the latter half of the 20th century, conflicts increasingly tended to be characterised by their protracted nature, the proliferation of small arms, and the involvement of a complex map of multiple state, state-allied and non-state actors, sometimes spreading across borders. This tendency has continued in the 21st century.

In addition, as forms of communication have evolved and online media has made it easy to reach more people, armed groups, including those that use terrorist tactics, have become very skilled in the use of social media to indoctrinate, manipulate, and subsequently recruit children, especially those in particularly vulnerable situations. The widespread use of social media has also facilitated transnational recruitment.[16]

Ultimately, how children are recruited and how warfare is conducted will continue to change. Child protection practitioners should constantly monitor developments and adapt their approaches to respond to the evolving context and protect children within it.

> ❭ See also Chapter 28 on Recruitment of Children by Armed Groups Designated as Terrorist Groups

1.6 Children's experiences of recruitment

"The war came in the weekend. I was in town, working in my uncle's workshop. Everybody fled. I fled with my cousin. We went to the bush, then to the village. My uncle was there. He told us that he feared his place in town would get robbed. He did not have the time to lock his home. The attack had arrived so quickly that even the food was still on the stove. So with my cousin, we went back to town to guard the houses. We stayed in one home, and we were watching the others. One day, a rebel came. He told us not to worry and he started staying with us. We were eating together. After a while another rebel came, and then another. Eventually, there were a lot of them in the house. My cousin said we'd better join them. We were stuck anyway. We could not go back to the village because they had installed checkpoints and we could not leave the town."

Child in Côte d'Ivoire[17]

"I chose to join the group because of the general situation here, the national spirit to resist the occupation and the conditions in the refugee camp. Another reason was that 12 members of my extended family have been killed by the Israelis."

Child in the Occupied Palestinian Territories[18]

"The guerrillas used to come around a lot. They came to buy milk, chickens, and bananas. I left when I was 13 and joined the 24th front of the FARC-EP. They brought me to their camp and gave me everything. I went with them because I was really sad and unhappy. They were like my family."

Child in Colombia[19]

"In Batticaloa District [Sri Lanka], Human Rights Watch received numerous reports of the LTTE seeking to secure one child from each Tamil household. The LTTE communicates this 'quota' through letters, house-to-house visits, radio announcements, and community meetings. Families that refuse to hand over a child are often subjected to more coercive measures, including threats against the child's parents, burning of houses, and abduction."

Child in Sri Lanka[20]

"JAS [also known as Boko Haram, in Nigeria] has recruited children through abduction, threatening children's families, and incentivizing boys and young men to join the group by providing them with monetary compensation. Some speculate that the group has also recruited 'almajaris'—poor children who are sent by their families to receive a free Islamic-based education."

JAS, Watchlist[21]

"The chief assembles all of the villagers and the Civilian Joint Task Force asks you to join them. They take all the boys that can fight... Some people hide their children... If you don't give up your children, they will beat you."

Woman who lived near Lake Chad in Borno State, Nigeria[22]

"It is not voluntary... No one can refuse... We look at their [young men's] structure and size. Not their age. That is how we decide who joins."

Former member of the Civilian Joint Task Force, Nigeria[23]

1.7 Key Resources

- UNICEF, Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups, 'The Paris Principles', adopted February 2007, **Link**

Chapter 2

The Impacts on Children
of Recruitment and Use by
Armed Forces and Groups

©UNICEF/UN0277725/Souleiman

Introduction

Children associated with armed forces and armed groups are exposed to a range of conditions that are likely to negatively affect their physical, mental and psychosocial wellbeing, their social development, and their long-term life opportunities. These conditions may also have significant impacts on their relationships with families and communities after they leave armed forces or groups.

Even when exposed to the same threats and acts of violence or coercion, each individual child will be affected differently by his or her experience. While one child may be profoundly emotionally harmed and unable to function, another child may demonstrate considerable resilience and capacities to recover.

The range and severity of impacts will depend on many factors, such as the child's:

- age

- gender

- disability status

- individual level of resilience

- duration of their association

- whether they travelled far from their home

- the nature of their involvement in the armed group or force

- how they were treated

- whether they were involved in committing or witnessed particular acts of violence

- what their life was like before their association

- the level of support available for reintegration after they leave the armed group or force.

A child who has been physically injured will be better able to recover if he or she has access to health and rehabilitative services than a child who does not.

As each child has a unique experience and their own way of coping, child protection practitioners should avoid making assumptions, and listen to what children say about their experience, as well as the ways they understand, express, and live the various consequences of their association with the armed force or armed group.

2.1 Impacts on boys' and girls' health and wellbeing

Whatever the reasons behind a child's recruitment, the vast majority will be exposed to physical and psychological harm, including harms linked to poor living conditions, physical hardship, violence (including sexual violence), abuse, exploitation (potentially including trafficking) and combat experience.

2.1.1 Physical health
The short- and long- term consequences on children's physical health can be very serious. Access to weapons, experience of arduous or punishing training and initiation ceremonies, hazardous labour, as well as engagement in combat can result in death, chronic injury, disability such as loss of a limb, reduced mobility, deafness or loss of sight, as well as illness. Separation from family and particularly caregivers often means greater exposure to health threats.

Lack of good nutrition, poor living conditions, and substance abuse can all result in sickness and ill-health. Long-term consequences can include micronutrient deficiencies, acute respiratory difficulties, stunting or lack of physical growth.

Armed forces and armed groups may not provide or have access to proper medical care for children who become sick, injured, disabled or pregnant, so that even preventable diseases may have long-term impacts. In some cases, injured or ill children may be punished, abandoned or even killed by the armed forces or groups.[24]

Sexual violence presents an array of reproductive health concerns for girls and boys, that can leave them with a lifetime of health issues.

2.1.2 Sexual and reproductive health

Sexual violence against children associated with armed forces and armed groups is widespread and has significant impact on their sexual and reproductive health. While both boys and girls may be subjected to sexual violence, this risk is more recognised in the case of girls.

While it should not be assumed that all girls associated with armed forces and groups are victims of sexual violence, the reality for many is repeated exposure to sexual activity, very often forced and violent. This presents an array of reproductive health concerns for girls, particularly young girls, including genital damage, fistula, incontinence, sexually transmitted infections including HIV and AIDS, and sterility. It can also result in pregnancy often with minimal or no medical oversight, leading to girls giving birth in harsh environments, maternal mortality, early motherhood, and forced or voluntary abortions in unsanitary conditions without medical supervision. Lasting psychological harm can negatively affect girls' ability to form healthy relationships in the future. Stigmatisation and shame are often associated with this form of abuse, in some cases even leading to the rejection by family, friends and community members of girls and of children born from sexual violence or during the girl's time with the armed force or group.

Sexual violence is often at the core of girls' physical insecurity within an armed force or group, owing to their age, the low status of their gender, and their physical weakness compared to men and boys.[25] They may be raped repeatedly by one individual and possibly forced to 'marry', gang-raped by multiple men at a time, or raped by many different men over a period of time. Some girls avoid sexual violence through gaining respect and status as a fighter. Other girls have described choosing the 'least worst option', such as attaching themselves to one man and resigning themselves to being abused by him in order to avoid being harassed and raped by other men.

"The men took us as their 'wives' – they treated us very badly. They didn't start to rape me at the beginning, for the first year. It was later on that it began. There were lots of little houses in the military camp. They put girls and men in the houses. Then, the military men took us as their women; they didn't consider the fact that we were still children. At any time they wanted, they came and had sex with us. There were so many men. You could have one man who had sex with you and then he left. Then, a second came and talked to you and then had sex and went back to his home. Then a third would come to you, talk and have sex with you and go to his home. So, they did what they wanted with me. We were only there to do what they wanted. Even if you refused, the men took you anyway – they would insist. [...] I felt like I had no more energy left within me. I felt so weak and feeble and like I had lost all of my intelligence. There were seven of us girls who were treated that way. We all experienced the same

thing. Now, I feel very bad here [pointing to her lower abdomen/ reproductive area]."

Girl in Democratic Republic of Congo who was abducted aged 14[26]

Boys are also subjected or exposed to sexual violence. In some cases, sexual violence is used as a means of forcing submission and control within their own armed force or group, or when captured by an opposing armed force or group. They may be forced to rape or witness the rape of others. As with girls, sexual violence exposes boys to physical injury such as anal fistula, sexually transmitted diseases including HIV and AIDS, stigmatisation and shame. Given taboos about sexual violence against males, the harmful effect on the mental health of boys who have experienced or been exposed to rape and sexual violence can be significant in the short and longer term, and may affect their ability to develop healthy relationships.

Given the stigma and shame that surround sexual violence, it should always be assumed that sexual violence against girls and boys is taking place and is underreported, and efforts should be made to make services accessible to and appropriate for both girls and boys.

⟩ See also <u>Section 5</u> on Programming for reintegration.

2.1.3 Mental health and psychosocial wellbeing

Exposure to armed conflict can create deep emotional wounds that children can carry for a long time. Studies have shown that "exceptionally stressful experiences early in life predictably have long-term consequences for a child's learning, behaviour, and both physical and mental health."[27] How children cope with their experience of association with an armed force or group largely depends on their individual history, how much support they receive after they leave the armed force or group, and how well they are accepted by communities within contexts that are still fragile. Research on girls in DRC and South Sudan has shown that many continued to feel guilt about their experiences. For some, what haunted them most was not the abuses they endured but the 'bad things' they did to others.[28] These problems may persist for years, although with decreasing intensity. Family, community, sociocultural and political influences, and the services and structures that surround them will all play a role on children's ability to recover. Longitudinal research looking at long-term implications for boys who had been associated with armed groups in Mozambique demonstrated how many of the participants still struggled with their experiences 16 years later; in some cases, this had an impact on their livelihoods and family situations. It was noted that those boys who had received support from child protection agencies during their reintegration fared better than those who did not.[29]

Armed groups have been known to foster substance addiction and dependence in their young recruits as a means of control. Consequently, substance addiction and abuse can plague children for years after their release, especially where medical and social services are ill equipped to deal with these problems.

The impact on mental health differs for each child, depending on a variety of factors including the child's experience within or on exiting the armed group, his or her level of resilience and access to support, and the aspects of their life that were affected. Yet children who are or have been associated with armed forces or groups are likely to have impacts across all dimensions of psychological wellbeing and mental health.

Some children experience ongoing fear, lasting confusion, guilt, shame, anxiety or depression, and deep psychological wounds. This may manifest through high-risk or aggressive behaviour, challenges with eating or sleeping, nightmares, stress, social withdrawal, flashbacks, difficulties with relationships, or drug or alcohol addiction. Other children may cope better and maintain a general state of wellbeing or return relatively quickly to a healthy state after a short-term period of distress.

It is critical to recognise the role of protective factors that may enhance children's levels of resilience and mitigate the effects of harmful experiences. The support and acceptance of

family, community and peer groups, as well as educational and livelihood programs and mental health and psychosocial support services may all help children maintain moderate-to-high levels of functionality and wellbeing.

⟩ See [Chapter 22](#) on Mental Health and Psychosocial Reintegration Support.

Children's own perception of their involvement with armed forces and groups is also an important factor in how they make sense of and try to recover from their experiences. Some children gain a sense of empowerment or agency as a result of their association with an armed force or group due to roles and responsibilities they are given or assume, or simply from being out of a previous environment of restriction or experience of neglect or abuse. Others might experience disempowerment and sense a loss of control over their lives. Both types of feelings can significantly affect how a child will settle back into family or community life.

> **"At first I was so scared… then I got used to it."**
> Ayman, who began fighting with an FSA brigade in Syria when he was 15 years[30] old

> **"Maybe we'll live, and maybe we'll die."**
> Omar, who began fighting at age 14 with an armed group in Syria[31]

> **"The most disturbing part of being a child soldier was the spontaneous murder that commanders would commit in rebel camps… It was relatively common for children to be killed at random while eating; they would be shot without warning in the back of the head… their faces falling into their bowls."**
> Female former child soldier from Sierra Leone[32]

> **"Whenever I turned on the tap, all I could see was blood gushing out. I would stare at it until it looked like water before drinking or taking a shower. Boys sometimes ran out of the hall screaming, 'The rebels are coming'. Other times, the younger ones sat weeping and telling us that nearby rocks were their dead families."**
> Ishmael Beah, formerly associated with armed forces in Sierra Leone[33]

2.2 Impacts on education, livelihoods and social development

While associated with armed forces and groups, children may miss out on formal and informal education and opportunities for personal development, including the acquisition of knowledge and life skills.

Children associated with armed forces and armed groups rarely have the opportunity to pursue their formal education.[34] Even if they have access to catch-up or more formal education systems after their release, continuing or returning to learning opportunities may be difficult for them, due to:

- stigmatisation and reluctance by other students and teachers to let them back into the classroom.

- difficulty with concentration, motivation and maintaining appropriate behaviour

- shame and perceived loss of status at attending school, especially in a class for younger ages.

They may also have missed out on learning the social and cultural norms, and participating in age-appropriate recreational, social and cultural activities that are critical in confirming their membership of their family or community and equipping them with the knowledge and skills they need to become productive and respected adults in their communities. They may also have been living in situations or performed acts that are considered taboo within their community, which can seriously limit their capacity to reintegrate into a normal social life. Children who were captured or recruited at a young age or born into captivity often learn the language of their captors, rather than that of their origin community, which makes reintegration into education and social life extremely difficult after they exit the armed group.

Finding livelihood opportunities to support themselves and their families is the greatest preoccupation of many children after release. The transition from being a member of an armed force or group to engaging in productive livelihoods can be extremely challenging, and lack of life and work skills, particularly for adolescents, can jeopardise their reintegration. Necessary skills include being able to negotiate and interact with others within a civilian environment.

⟩ See Chapter 24 on Education Support for Reintegration

2.3 Impacts on children's relationship with families and communities

It is important to consider how a child's experience in an armed force or group may affect their child's relationships with their family and community: these relationships are key to safe and smooth reintegration after release.

The consequences for family and community relations may depend on the reasons why the child became associated with the armed force or group and the community's perception of what this means. Where it is socially and culturally expected that children, particularly boys, will join armed forces of groups, or where children have joined for protection or to contribute to family income, families and communities may react negatively to boys and girls who have left or been released from an armed force or group. These reactions can influence a child's sense of self-worth and place within families and communities.

Families and communities from which boys and girls were forcibly recruited, may harbour feelings of guilt, helplessness or shame for being unable to prevent their recruitment, and children may feel anger, blame or disappointment towards their families for their failure to protect them. These and other feelings may positively or negatively influence family and community willingness to accept boys and girls back as well as the care they provide to the child or others.

Some boys and girls experience a new sense of freedom during association, away from traditional expectations of behaviour and roles within family and community. This is particularly the case for girls. They may struggle when returning to the subservient roles within families and communities they had before. Lack of understanding of these differing environments and experiences, as well as a lack of understanding of normalisation of violence on children, can mean that some families may struggle with their children's behaviour after return. Such changed behaviours and attitudes may not manifest until the medium and longer term and relationships may turn difficult after a period of reunification if expectations on both sides are not met.

Some families and communities may worry about potential retribution by the armed force or group, or perceive the child as dangerous, especially if the child committed violence against the community, displays aggressive behaviour or disrespects authority. Others may stigmatise or marginalise children who have suffered sexual or other violence or who they perceive as having engaged in sexual activity, while children born to women and girls in the

context of association with armed forces and groups may be rejected. It is not uncommon for children and adolescents to settle in new communities rather than return to their communities of origin due to fear of being rejected, fear of stigma or even fear of being killed.[35]

Children may also fear to express their feelings, including feelings of distress, anger or depression, or to describe their experiences to their families, both due to stigma related to psychological distress or fear of their families' reactions. If the child has become disabled during their period of association with the armed group or force, this could be perceived as a burden for families to cope with.

It is important to recognise that families and communities are likely to have faced their own challenges and stresses during conflict, and that other children who were not recruited into armed forces or groups may have had similar experiences of displacement, family separation, exposure to extreme violence and lack of access to services, and yet may not receive any support. This is a key reason why reintegration support programmes should adopt an inclusive approach, addressing the needs of all children at a community level, leading to greater chances of successful community reintegration.

⟩ See in particular Chapter 21 on Planning and Delivering Reintegration Programmes.

Finally, for a small proportion of children it may not be possible to return to their families or communities of origin or the child may be unwilling to do so for a variety of reasons including the death of family members, irrevocable breakdown in their relationship with family, or extreme risk of physical harm in the family's location. Alternative options should be explored for these children, including long-term family mediation, alternative long-term care and support options and integration into other communities.

⟩ See also Chapters 19 on Alternative Care, ⟩ 20 on Family Tracing, Reunification and Follow-up, and ⟩ 21 on Planning and Delivering Reintegration Programmes.

2.4 Key Resources

• Siobhan O'Neil & Kato Van Broeckhoven, 'Cradled by Conflict. Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict', United Nations University, 2018. **Link**

• The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 'Girls Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups: Lessons learnt and good practices on prevention of recruitment and use', December 2021. **Link**

Chapter 3
The Legal and Normative Framework Introduction

Introduction

The recruitment of children by armed forces and armed groups and the use of children in conflict are a violation of international human rights, international humanitarian law and international criminal law. Since the ground-breaking report by Graça Machel in 1996,[36] and the subsequent establishment of the mandate of the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, the issue of child recruitment and use of children by armed forces and armed groups has been placed firmly on the international agenda[37] and the urgency of addressing it has gained recognition by the international community.[38]

A substantial body of international law, UN Security Council resolutions and interagency standards have been developed to prevent and respond to the issue.

The international legal framework and the international normative framework (meaning the accepted norms or standards, etc.) to prevent child recruitment and use and to support release and reintegration recognise children as rights-holders. It also accords them special protections as persons who are particularly vulnerable. These frameworks are made up mainly of laws contained within international human rights law, international humanitarian law, and international criminal law. In some contexts, refugee law and counter-terrorism law are also relevant.

Customary international law is another primary source of international law. This is 'general practice that is accepted as law' – that is, customs or general practice that are accepted as legal requirements or obligatory rules of conduct; practices and beliefs that are so vital and intrinsic that they are treated as if they were law. It applies independently of treaty law.

With the potential exception of so-called 'persistent objectors' (states which have consistently and clearly objected to a norm of customary international law since its emergence, and consider themselves not bound to observe it), a rule of customary international law, based on a general practice accepted as law, is binding on all states. Some treaty provisions and rules of customary international law that are applicable in non-international armed conflicts are also binding on non-state parties to armed conflict. The International Committee of the Red Cross holds a database of international customary law, developed following a comprehensive review of international customary law conducted in 2005. This database contains 161 rules of customary international humanitarian law and practices related to these rules.

In addition, a number of international standards, declarations, and resolutions, represent best practice and may be considered morally binding even if they are not legally binding.

Regional, national or sub-national laws, decrees, treaties, etc., also govern the recruitment, use, release and reintegration of children. These include laws addressing recruitment by the national armed forces, measures for children's protection and wellbeing, and transitional justice processes such as truth-seeking, institutional reform, reparations, and criminal accountability, which can address the effects of violations against young people and positively affect their social reintegration and psychological recovery.

Not all the instruments are binding in the same way. Treaties are generally binding only on State Parties – those countries who have signed them. Therefore, standards that apply to a given country will depend on the international and regional instruments to which it is party.

3.1 Overview of the international legal and normative framework

Table 3:1 gives an overview of the international legal and normative framework, listing the main laws and other instruments or standards that govern the prohibition of recruitment and use of children, and that call for their protection, release and reintegration. It also lists the main sources relating to transitional justice and its role in addressing the violations suffered by children during conflict and ensuring they receive the support they need to become productive members of society.

TABLE 3.1 Overview of the international legal and normative framework

TYPE OF INTERNATIONAL LAW/NORM	RELEVANT BODIES OF LAW/STANDARDS (NOT EXHAUSTIVE)

International Human Rights Law	· The UN Declaration of Human Rights (1948). Although not a binding treaty, it is generally held to be the foundation of international human rights law (see Customary International Human Rights Law below).
	· The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC) (1989)
	· Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (OPAC) (2000)
	· International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966)
	· International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966)
	· International Labour Organisation (ILO) Conventions 29 (1930) and 182 (1999) (Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention)
	· Convention against Torture (1984)
	· Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment No. 24 (2019) on Children's Rights in the Justice System
	· Regional human rights instruments:
	  – African Charter on the Rights and Welfare the Child (1999),
	  – Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (2003)
	  – Ibero-American Convention on the Rights of Youth (2005)
	  – Covenant on the Rights of the Child in Islam (2005), adopted by the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC)
	  – ASEAN Human Right Declaration (2012)
	· Customary International Human Rights Law The Convention on the Rights of the Child is considered by many to have achieved *jus cogens* ('compelling law'). (Customary internal law arises from general and consistent practice by States based on what they believe to be legal obligations, compared to the obligations from arising formal treaties/conventions. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, likewise, includes aspects that are considered customary international law such as Article 1 on self-determination, Article 2 on non-discrimination, and Article 6 on the right to life, amongst others.

International Humanitarian Law	· The Four Geneva Conventions (1949) · Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions (1977) The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has identified three customary international humanitarian law rules that are particularly relevant to child recruitment and use · Rule 135: Children affected by armed conflict are entitled to special respect and protection · Rule 136: Children must not be recruited into armed forces or armed groups · Rule 137: Children must not be allowed to take part in hostilities
International Refugee Law	· The Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951) · The Refugee Protocol (1967) · African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (2009) · African Union Convention Governing Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa (1974)
International Criminal Law	· The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (1998) · The Geneva Conventions (1949) and First Additional Protocol (1977) · The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948) · Customary International Criminal Law
UN Security Council Resolutions	· UN Security Council Resolutions 1261 (1999), 1314 (2000), 1379 (2001), 1460 (2003), 1539 (2004), 1612 (2005), 1882 (2009), 1998 (2011), 2068 (2012), 2143 (2014), 2225 (2015), 2250 (2015), 2427 (2018)

Sustainable Development Goals (2016)	· Target 8.7 Take immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking and secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including recruitment and use of child soldiers, and by 2025 end child labour in all its forms · Target 16.2 End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence and torture against children
International standards (resolutions, guidelines, principles)	· The Paris Commitments to Protect Children Unlawfully Recruited or Used by Armed Forces or Armed Groups (2007), and the Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups (2007). [The Paris Principles supersede the Cape Town Principles and Best Practices on the Recruitment of Children into the Armed Forces and on Demobilization and Social Reintegration of Child Soldiers in Africa that were established in 1997.] – Rules and Guidelines relating to juvenile justice: – UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1992), particularly General Comment 24, Article 37 and Article 40 – 'The Beijing Rules': UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice (1985) – 'The Tokyo Rules': UN Standard Minimum Rules for Non-Custodial Measures (1990) – 'The Riyadh Guidelines' for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency] (1990) – 'The Havana Rules' for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of their Liberty (1990) – 'The Bangkok Rules': UN Rules for the Treatment of Female Prisoners and Non-Custodial Measures for Women Offenders (2010). · The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (1998) · The Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (2019) · The Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers (2017) · Regional standards: – N'Djamena Declaration on Ending Recruitment and Use of Children by Armed Forces and Groups (2010) – Guidelines on Children and Armed Conflict adopted by the European Union (2003, updated 2008 and 2010) – Resolution on Children and Armed Conflicts by the Organization of American States (2000)
International standards relating to the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence	· Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law (2005) · UN Guidance Note of the Secretary-General on the UN's Approach to Transitional Justice (2010) · United Nations. E/CN.4/2005/102/Add1. Set of principles for the protection and promotion of human rights through action to combat impunity [Joint Principles] (2005) · UN Economic and Social Council, Updated Set of Principles for the protection and promotion of human rights through action to combat impunity, E/CN4./2005/102/Add.1 (2005) · See also the Reports of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence
International Law and Counter-Terrorism	General Assembly resolution 70/291 on the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy Review (2016)

3.2 Applying the legal and normative framework in programming and advocacy

A good, basic understanding of the major provisions on child recruitment, use, release and reintegration, and key documents, is essential when developing effective policy and programming for preventing and addressing the phenomenon.

3.2.1 Prohibition on using children in conflict

Additional Protocols of Geneva Conventions and UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Armed forces and armed groups are prohibited from recruiting or using children under the age of 15 years as combatants or in support roles and must prevent them from participating in hostilities. This applies to both international and non-international armed conflict.[39]

The Optional Protocol to the UN CRC on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict prohibits the forced recruitment and use of children under the age of 18 within the arena of combat without exception, and applies in both international and non-international armed conflict.

The Paris Commitments and Principles, ILO Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child all support the Optional Protocol.

State armed forces may accept volunteers from the age of 16 years, but they must establish clear safeguards for such children to ensure that recruitment is not coerced and that persons under the age of 18 years are not deployed to an arena of conflict.

3.2.2 Criminalisation and prosecution

The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court classifies the conscription, enlistment and use of children under 15 in active hostilities as a war crime.[40]

Article 38 of the UN CRC also requires the criminalisation of recruitment and use of children in conflict. States that have ratified the UN CRC should develop national legislation prohibiting and criminalising the recruitment and use of boys and girls.

⟩ See <u>Chapter 25</u>, Addressing Impunity for Child Recruitment and Use.

3.2.3 Monitoring, reporting, and holding perpetrators accountable under the UN-led Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM).

The MRM was established in 2005 to hold parties to conflict accountable, and pressure them to stop committing grave violations of children's rights in conflict including recruitment and use. It provides for the systematic gathering of accurate, timely and objective information on six grave violations committed against children in armed conflict:[41]

- killing or maiming of children

- recruitment and use of children by armed forces and armed groups

- rape and other forms of sexual violence against children

- abduction of children

- attacks against schools or hospitals

- denial of humanitarian access for children.

In addition, to ensure that monitoring and reporting lead to an effective response to violations, the MRM can lead to the 'listing' of armed groups and forces that commit grave

violations against children in the annexes of the UN Secretary-General's annual report on Children and Armed Conflict. Once listed, armed forces and groups must enter into an Action Plan with the United Nations to address the violations. Any of the first five violations can act as a trigger for a party to a conflict to be 'listed' in this way. A UN-led Country Task Force on Monitoring and Reporting (CTFMR) must then be established to systematically gather accurate, timely and objective information on grave violations against children in armed conflict in that country. The CTFMR monitors all parties to the conflict, not only the listed party or parties.

An armed force or group can be 'de-listed' once its Action Plan has been successfully implemented and monitoring has been conducted for at least one additional year verifying that the violation has in fact been stopped.[42]

In addition to the UN-led MRM, other accountability mechanisms are also important and useful. These include country-specific reporting on implementation of the UN CRC and its Optional Protocols; every State which has ratified the UN CRC is obliged to report to the UN Human Rights Council on progress on its implementation. Another key mechanism is UPR Reporting. Universal Periodic Reviews of Human Rights in all 193 Member States of the UN General Assembly, required under UN General Assembly Resolution 60/251.

3.2.4 Additional measures for prevention of recruitment and use

The legal and normative framework also urges states to consider a range of additional measures to prevent the recruitment and use of children by armed forces and groups.

The Paris Principles and Commitments remind states of their obligations under international law to take all feasible measures to prevent unlawful recruitment and use of boys and girls. It reminds states that it is the act of recruitment and use of children that is illegal.

Similar to the UN CRC, the Paris Principles and Commitments encourage states to issue birth certificates for all children within their jurisdiction, including refugees, internally displaced and returnees.

The Paris Principles and Commitments also requires states to provide training on legal standards and obligations to prevent recruitment and use, which is also called for in UNSC Resolution 2143.[43]

UN SC Resolution 2143 (2014) and the **Safe Schools Declaration and Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict (2015)** call on states in armed conflict around the world to respect and protect schools from attacks and use by armed forces or groups.

3.2.5 Release and reintegration of children associated with armed forces and armed groups

The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (OPAC) requires States Parties to take all feasible measures to bring about the release of children who have been illegally recruited. (Art. 6.3). OPAC requires states to provide all appropriate assistance to ensure children's physical and psychological recovery and their social reintegration. (Art 6.3)

ILO Convention 182 requires states to provide the necessary and appropriate direct assistance for the rehabilitation and social integration of children, as well as access to free basic education, and, wherever possible and appropriate, vocational training. (Art. 7(2)(b)(c))

The Paris Principles "underscore the humanitarian imperative to seek the unconditional release of boys and girls from armed forces or armed groups at all times, even in the midst of conflict and for the duration of the conflict" (Art. 1.5), noting children's right to be released, including children who are not in their state of nationality. They state that the "release, protection and reintegration of children unlawfully recruited or used must be

sought at all times, without condition and must not be dependent on any parallel release or demobilisation process for adults." (Art. 3.11) This should include release of children held in detention for association with armed forces or groups.

The Paris Principles call on states and local communities to pay special attention to the situation of girls associated with armed forces or armed groups; children with disabilities; and children seeking refugee status (Art. 5.2 to 5.6; 7.50; 7.59 to 7.67) and set a range of standards for release and reintegration (Art. 7.1 to 7.84).

Importantly, **the Paris Principles** call on states to provide services to boys and girls who have been recruited and used, as well as other children who may be vulnerable to recruitment.

The **MRM** encourages parties to conflict to negotiate plans with the UN for the unconditional release of boys and girls.

3.2.6 Protection of children during armed conflict

The legal framework also protects children against the abuse, violence and exploitation they might suffer before and after, not just during, their association with armed forces and groups.

UN CRC: States Parties are obligated to ensure the protection and care of boys and girls at all times, including during armed conflict (Art. 38.4).

The UN CRC also notes the protective nature of family unity, birth registration and nationality, as well as the importance and requirement for strong child protection systems and education to protect vulnerable boys and girls.

Geneva Conventions: The Third and Fourth Geneva Conventions and the Additional Protocols also establish special protections for children during armed conflict. They state that during armed conflict children are to be protected from any form of indecent assault and parties to conflict must "provide them with the care and aid they require".[44]

A number of UN Security Council resolutions also aim to protect children from violence and promote the accountability and compliance of parties to conflict. To enforce its provisions, for example, the MRM established the UN Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict, consisting of the 15 Security Council members. This Working Group reviews the Secretary-General's annual reports on children in armed conflict in specific country situations and makes recommendations to the parties to conflict, governments, donors, and other UN actors on actions to promote the protection of war-affected children.

3.2.7 Children in refugee settings

UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)'s Operational Guidelines on Maintaining the Civilian and Humanitarian Character of Asylum[45] provide specific considerations related to the protection of children in refugee settings, including:

- Unlawful recruitment or use of children is a child-specific form of persecution that may justify the granting of refugee status.

- A key aspect of protection for all refugees is ensuring the humanitarian character of refugee influxes, camps and settlements (for example, camps should be located at least 50km from an international border), and by ensuring the identification and separation of combatants from the civilian population.

- Children must not be turned away from a country when they are at real risk of unlawful recruitment, or on the basis of their association with an armed force or armed group.

- Where former or active child combatants are identified in a country of asylum, child-friendly procedures must be in place to ensure that their best interests are a primary consideration in all decisions relating to their protection and care, usually through a 'Best Interests' procedure.

- Individual registration and documentation of refugee children, including children associated with armed forces and armed groups, is an important tool to protect against (re)recruitment and use.

- All actions on behalf of children associated with armed forces and armed groups who are refugees should be coordinated with UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, and the host government.[46]

3.2.8 Child migrants

All children, including children outside their country of nationality, have rights that must be maintained. International human rights law applies to all children, regardless of migration status. Unlawful presence in a country and illegal entry should not be criminalised.[47] It is never in a child's best interest to detain them due to migration status.[48]

3.2.9 Stateless children

Children recruited by armed groups may not have documentation, which may cause them to be treated as stateless. All children have the right to nationality and to a legal identity, as stated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.[49] Actors should support the provision of identify and registration documentation so that children can return to their country of nationality and have the rights and protections that are due to citizens.

3.3 Juvenile justice for formerly associated children

Children who have been recruited and used by armed forces and armed groups are vulnerable to arrest and detention due to actual or perceived association with those bodies. Children can be accused of crimes under international law allegedly committed while they were associated with armed forces or armed groups. A number of provisions frame the way children should be treated within the justice system.

3.3.1 Protection from prosecution

Geneva Conventions: The Additional Protocols to the Geneva Convention state that individuals shall not be subject to the death penalty for crimes committed when they were under the age of 18 years.

Rome Statute: The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court states that the court has no jurisdiction over any person who was under the age of 18 years at the time of an alleged commission of a crime. Children should not be prosecuted by an international court or tribunal.

Paris Principles: The Paris Principles state that children accused of crimes under international or national law allegedly committed while they were associated with armed forces or armed groups are entitled to be treated in accordance with international juvenile justice standards (Art. 8.8).

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: General Comment 24 states that the minimum age of criminal responsibility is 14 years.

The UN CRC also states that children under that age should not be prosecuted. It also provides that State Parties should not impose capital punishment or life imprisonment without possibility of release on a child (Art. 37)[50] and, moreover, that the treatment of children within the justice system be respectful of their age and level of development and promote rehabilitation. (Art. 40).

3.3.2 Justice

The Paris Principles state that children accused of crimes under international law allegedly committed while they were associated with armed forces or armed groups should be considered primarily as victims (Art 3.6) and should not be punished for their association with the armed group or force (Art. 8.7).

The Geneva Conventions Additional Protocol II (Art. 6), ***The Beijing Rules*** and ***The Havana Rules*** provide further details on obligations to support and protect boys and girls within justice processes. Within these instruments, it is stated that if a child is prosecuted for specific criminal acts committed during their association with an armed force or group, and they have reached the age of criminal responsibility, they may be criminally liable for certain actions, but should only be prosecuted with due consideration to their right to child-specific due process, and minimum standards based on their age, needs and specific vulnerabilities, and with respect for internationally recognised juvenile justice and fair trial standards.[51] During the course of any trial, consideration should be given to the coercive environment under which the child was living or forced to act. Minimum standards for juvenile justice must be compiled with without discrimination. Further, the promotion of wellbeing of children should be primary as should the promotion of social justice. There should be full mobilisation of resources to support boys and girls and alternatives to sentencing must be sought.

Additional Protocol (II) to the Geneva Convention (Art. 6) provides that the authorities in power should grant the broadest amnesty to persons who have participated in armed conflict.

3.3.3 Detention

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: States Parties should protect children from arbitrary or unlawful detention, including in times of armed conflict. Further, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights protects against arbitrary detention and guarantees the right to liberty for all people. Children should only be arrested, detained or held in prison as a measure of last resort and for the shortest possible period of time. Governments should ensure that children's cases are "determined without delay by a competent, independent and impartial authority in a fair hearing according to law...." (Art. 37; see also, General Comment No. 24, §§ 19, 55).

In addition, children who are arrested or detained are entitled to certain minimum conditions of detention, including separation from adults (except where families are accommodated as family units), separation of girls and boys, contact with their family, access to legal, medical and other assistance and access to mechanisms for lodging complaints in case of torture, cruel treatment or punishment.[52]

3.4 Challenges of counter-terrorism law for the protection of children

Since the beginning of the 21st Century, and particularly since the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, the existing body of laws and policies on counter-terrorism has been reinforced and extended. The UN Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee was created in 2001, and the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy adopted in 2006 "to enhance national, regional and international efforts to counter terrorism",[53] and specialised offices have been set up within the UN secretariat devoted to counter-terrorism policy and processes and their dissemination.

There are no specific measures in this framework of laws that address child recruitment and use by armed groups that use terrorist tactics. But in its Resolution issued during the fifth biennial review of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy in 2016, the UN General Assembly strongly condemned "the systematic recruitment and use of children to perpetrate terrorist attacks, as well as the violations and abuses committed by terrorist groups against children [...] noting that such violations and abuses may amount to war crimes or crimes against humanity" (UN General Assembly Resolution 70/291).

While this acknowledges that the recruitment and use of children is a child rights violation, there remains a high risk that under counter-terrorism laws, children associated with groups designated terrorist by the UN will be denied their fundamental rights and be primarily treated as terrorists rather than victims.

3.4.1 Children suspected of committing terrorist acts

Children recruited by armed groups that use terrorist tactics may commit serious offences, and because of their association with such groups, they may be perceived as a threat to national security. Some countries have enacted 'anti-terrorism' legislation and related emergency measures that typically do not differentiate between adults and children.

In considering whether a child associated with an armed group that uses terrorist tactics should be held criminally liable or accountable for offences committed during the course of their association, or solely for their association with the group, it is important to highlight that even under counter-terrorism law, the child's status as a child should be the primary consideration.

Article 18 of General Assembly Resolution 70/291 on the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy Review reiterates that, "given their potential status as victims of terrorism as well as of other violations of international law, every child alleged as, accused of or recognized as having infringed the law, particularly those who are deprived of their liberty, as well as child victims and witnesses of crimes, should be treated in a manner consistent with his or her rights, dignity and needs, in accordance with applicable international law, in particular obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child".[54]

Member States' actions must be consistent with human rights law, as related to domestic law enforcement and counter-terrorism, including the CRC.[55] The best interests of the child should be the primary consideration in counter-terrorism laws and policies[56] and law enforcement should exercise maximum restraint in any use of force against children.[57]

Children, as victims of the crime of recruitment and use, should not face criminal charges for their association with a designated terrorist group. States should investigate and prosecute adults who recruit children or order them to commit terrorist acts.[58] Likewise, expressions of support for particular groups, acts, or ideologies that do not rise to the level of incitement to discrimination, hostility, or violence, or to committing terrorist acts, should not constitute criminal offences.[59] In addition, victims of trafficking should not be punished for crimes committed as a result of their being trafficked.[60]

Thus, in accordance with the international legal framework:

- A child associated with an armed group that uses terrorist tactics should be primarily considered as a victim and the focus should be on his or her rehabilitation and reintegration.

- When held accountable or criminally liable for the offences he or she may have committed, international juvenile justice rules and standards should be applied.

3.5 Children in court

Children who testify in court against individuals accused of terrorist acts, whether as a victim or a witness, may suffer hostile questioning and direct confrontation with perpetrators that may be distressing and/or incite threats of, or actual, retaliation from terrorist groups.

Specific safeguards related to the rights of child victims and witnesses should be applied in all terrorism-related cases where children are required to testify in court.

3.6 Advocacy on application of legal frameworks

Despite the existence of a comprehensive legal and normative framework, laws are not always enforced, due to lack of political will, lack of capacity (financial, human, technical and infrastructure) or ignorance. If they are not enforced, they will have limited effect and may result in a violation of children's rights and increase the vulnerability of children affected by conflict.

Therefore, it is necessary to:

    a.   advocate for laws to be adopted and/or ratified, and enacted
    b.   advocate for their full implementation by Member States, not just politically but also through ensuring adequate budgets
    c.   support dissemination and understanding so that they are known
    d.   support their implementation.

A legal system will only be respected if it is fair, neutral, just and follows the rule of law, from the moment of suspicion through arrest to conviction and eventual release of the alleged perpetrator. Child protection actors have a role in advocating for a fair justice system.

3.6.1 What can child protection actors do?

- Advocate for the adoption and implementation of laws, principles and standards that protect boys and girls affected by conflict, particularly the prohibition and criminalisation of recruitment and use.

- Support the development of processes that enable prosecution of those who recruit and use children in armed forces and groups.

- It is important to recognise differences between adoption of laws and the implementation of those laws and policies at national and local levels. Work is required to secure comprehensive implementation. It is also important to be mindful of the influence of social norms in relation to children's involvement in armed groups and the need to work to address these norms alongside advocating for legal goals.

- Advocate for and support the correct administration of juvenile justice standards to protect the rights and needs of any boys and girls affected by conflict, particularly those who have been recruited and used by armed forces or armed groups. Advocate for the release of any children who are detained due to actual or perceived association with an armed group. Where relevant, support work to monitor and conditions for children in detention.

- Collaborate with others where relevant in advocating for release of any boys and girls associated with armed forces or groups, including contributing to the goal of the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism and the development and implementation of Action Plans.

- Document evidence of adverse or positive impacts of counter-terrorism measures on children and programmes.[61]

- Support the reintegration of children who have been recruited and used with armed groups designated as terrorist groups by the UN, acknowledging their status as victims along with other children affected by the conflict within the community.

- Help disseminate the legal instruments and train stakeholders, including the military, on laws and standards, and on children within the justice system. Attention should be given to the equal rights and needs of boys or girls who have been recruited and used by armed forces or groups.

- Advocate for the necessary level of human and financial resources required to support the holistic functioning of the justice system in line with internationally recognised juvenile justice procedures and standards (including all phases and cadres involved:

police, prosecution, courts, probation, detention and alternatives to detention, and reintegration on release).

- Advocate to governments and donors for adequate resources, infrastructure, services and policies that support the prevention of recruitment and the reintegration of children and embed services within child protection and other systems.

- Support complementarity with community-based peace-building and socio-economic strengthening programmes which are needed in both prevention and reintegration. Reiterate the importance of child-focused recovery initiatives within all sectors.

3.6.2 What can policy makers do?

- Adhere to international and national legislation and policy protecting boys and girls affected by conflict through accountability mechanisms and provision of services. Particular attention should be made to ensure that any counter-terrorism legislation and policy respects the rights and needs of any boys or girls affected by conflict including those who are known or believed to have been recruited and used by terrorist groups.

- Enact accountability mechanisms in laws, principles and standards to protect boys and girls affected by conflict, particularly by prohibiting and criminalising recruitment and use, and supporting prosecution of those in armed forces and groups who recruit and use children.

- Adopt legislation, policies and structures that adhere to international juvenile justice standards and protect the rights and needs of any boys and girls affected by conflict within the justice system, including in national security and counter-terrorism processes.

- Advocate for the release of any children who are detained due to actual or perceived association with an armed group. Specify monitoring and accountability mechanisms to monitor the situation and conditions of children in detention.

- Disseminate legal instruments and policies, and train stakeholders, including the military, on laws and standards and on children within the justice system. Attention should be given to the equal rights and needs of any boys or girls who have been recruited and used by armed forces or groups.

- Commit to addressing the root causes of conflict.

- Promote multi-disciplinary approaches and coordination when developing and implementing policies and interventions intended to prevent recruitment of children and support their reintegration.

- Develop and implement handover protocols for transfer of any boys and girls who have exited armed groups to child protection actors.

- Take action for the immediate release of all boys and girls from armed forces or armed groups that are under government control.

- Where relevant, collaborate with the UN to develop Action Plans to support the immediate release of boys and girls.

- Document evidence of adverse or positive impacts of legislation and policy, including counter-terrorism measures, on children and programmes.[62]

- Support the reintegration of children who have been associated with armed forces or groups over the long-term and according to the needs of children, families and communities.

- Support reintegration of all boys and girls who have been associated with groups designated terrorist by the UN, or other similar armed groups, acknowledging

their status as victims along with other children affected by the conflict within the community.

- Commit to providing sufficient human and financial resources to support both child protection and education systems that help prevent recruitment and community-based reintegration and child protection services within communities, that are long-term and support national and local systems and social and economic recovery.

- Ensure that recovery initiatives are inclusive of boys and girls.

3.7 Key Resources

- Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, 'Safe Schools Declaration Endorsements'. **Link**

- International Committee of the Red Cross, 'Customary International Humanitarian Law Database'. **Link**

- Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, 'Virtual Library: International Law'. **Link**

- Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, Permanent Mission of France to the UN, UNICEF, Background paper: 'Fifth Ministerial Follow-up Forum to the Paris Commitments and Paris Principles on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups'. Monday 3 December 2012, UN Headquarters, New York, USA. **Link**

- Sustainable Development Goals Knowledge platform. **Link**

- The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, 1998. **Link**

- United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. 'Status of ratification. Interactive Dashboard', UN, Nov. 2018. **Link**

3.8 Annex to Chapter 3

This Annex gives an overview of the international legal and normative framework, listing the types of laws and other instruments that prohibit the recruitment and use of children, and that call for their protection, release and reintegration.

It also lists the main sources relating to transitional justice and its role in addressing the violations suffered by children during conflict and ensuring they receive the support they need to become productive members of society.

Also provided is a timeline of key milestones, showing how international and regional law, UN Security Council Resolutions and international standards and guidelines have evolved and progressively extended to better protect children during armed conflict and against recruitment and use by armed forces and groups.

TABLE 3.2 The international legal and normative framework

TYPE OF INTERNATIONAL LAW/NORM	EXAMPLES OF LAW/STANDARDS (NOT EXHAUSTIVE)
International Human Rights Law	· The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) · Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (OPAC) (2000) · International Labour Organization Conventions 29 (1930) on Forced Labour and 182 (1999) on Worst Forms of Child Labour
Regional human rights instruments	· African Charter on the Rights and Welfare the Child (1999) · Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (2003) · Ibero-American Convention on the Rights of Youth (2005) · Covenant on the Rights of the Child in Islam (2005), adopted by the Organization of the Islamic Conference · ASEAN Human Right Declaration (2012)
Customary International Human Rights Law	· Customary internal law arises from general and consistent practice by States based on what they believe to be legal obligations, compared to the obligations from arising formal treaties/conventions. · The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966).
International Humanitarian Law	· The four Geneva Conventions of 1949 · Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions (1977)
Customary International Humanitarian Law	· The International Committee of the Red Cross has identified three customary international humanitarian law rules that are particularly relevant to child recruitment and use · Rule 135: Children affected by armed conflict are entitled to special respect and protection. · Rule 136: Children must not be recruited into armed forces or armed groups. · Rule 137: Children must not be allowed to take part in hostilities.
International Refugee Law	· The Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951) · The Refugee Protocol (1967)
Regional Refugee Law	· African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (2009) · African Union Convention Governing Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa (1974)
International Criminal Law	· The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (1998) · The Geneva Conventions (1949) and First Additional Protocol (1977)
UN Security Council Resolutions	· See the Annex for relevant Resolutions
International standards (resolutions, guidelines, principles)	· The Paris Commitments to protect children unlawfully recruited or used by armed forces or armed groups (2007) · The Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups (2007) · The Sustainable Development Goals (2016) · Rules and Guidelines relating to juvenile justice · International standards relating to the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence
International Law and Counter-Terrorism	· General Assembly resolution 70/291 on the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy Review (2016) · General Assembly resolution A/RES/75/291 on the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy Review (2021)

TABLE 3.3 Key milestones

YEAR	MILESTONE
1948	UN Declaration of Human Rights. Although not a binding treaty, this is generally held to be the foundation of international human rights law.
1948	Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide
1949	The four Geneva Conventions and the two Additional Protocols added in 1977 are international treaties that contain the rules limiting the barbarity of war. They protect people who do not take part in the fighting (civilians, medical personnel, aid workers) and those who can no longer fight (wounded, sick and shipwrecked troops, prisoners of war and other persons detained), and place limits on the means and methods of warfare.
1951	Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees
1966	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. This includes aspects that are considered customary international law, including Article 1 on self-determination, Article 2 on non-discrimination, and Article 6 on the right to life. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
1967	Refugee Protocol
1974	African Union Convention Governing Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa
1977	Additional Protocol I and II to the Geneva Conventions. The Additional Protocols of 1977 contain specific prohibitions on the recruitment and use of children by armed forces and armed groups.
1984	UN Convention against Torture
1985	'The Beijing Rules': UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice (1985)
1989	UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This is considered by many to have achieved *jus cogens* ('compelling law') status.
1990	'The Tokyo Rules': UN Standard Minimum Rules for Non-Custodial Measures 'The Riyadh Guidelines' for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency 'The Havana Rules' for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of their Liberty
1996 *Graça Machel report*	In response to the recommendations of Graça Machel's study on the impact of children and armed conflict, the United Nations General Assembly established the mandate of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict; it became operational in 1997.
1997 *The Cape Town Principles*	The Cape Town Principles and Best Practices on the Recruitment of Children into the Armed Forces and on Demobilization and Social Reintegration of Child Soldiers in Africa provided a first framework for working with recruited children. The definition of a 'child soldier' as 'any person under 18... in regular or irregular armed force... in any capacity...' led practitioners over the next decade to develop the more inclusive terminology of 'children associated with armed forces or armed groups'. The Cape Town Principles were superseded by and institutionalised in the Paris Principles in 2007.
1998 *The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court*	The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), initially adopted in 1998, entered into force in 2002 and established a permanent international criminal court to address war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide. It is a war crime under the Rome Statute to conscript or enlist children under the age of 15 into the national armed forces or into armed groups, and to use children to actively participate in situations of international armed conflict or in situations of internal conflict. In addition, the Rome Statute established sexual slavery as a war crime.[63]
1998	The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement

1998 **International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda case Prosecutor v. Jean Paul Akayesu and International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia case Prosecutor v. Furundžija**	Rape and sexual violence were defined as war crimes.
1999	African Charter on the Rights and Welfare the Child
1999	UN Security Council Resolution 1261 First Security Council resolution condemning the targeting of children in armed conflict
1999 **Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour**	The unanimously adopted International Labour Organization Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour calls for immediate and effective measures to secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, which include the forced and compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict (a child being defined as a person under age 18).
2000	UN Security Council Resolution 1314 Second Security Council resolution on children and armed conflict; calling for greater measures to protect children
2000	Resolution on Children and Armed Conflicts by the Organization of American States
2000 **Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict**	The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict raised the minimum age for direct participation in hostilities from age 15 to 18 and prohibits conscription or forced recruitment below age 18. In May 2010, UNICEF and partners launched a campaign aimed at the universal ratification and effective implementation of the Optional Protocol, to commemorate the 10-year anniversary since its entry into force. As of March 2022, 172 countries have ratified it.[64]
2000 **Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission**	Sierra Leone's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) became the first mandated to give "special attention" to "the experiences of children within armed conflict." The TRC was also empowered to implement special procedures to address the needs of child victims, including child perpetrators of abuses or violations. The Commission was the first to involve children in statement-taking and in hearings and issued a child-friendly version of its final report. It also recommended a range of reparations measures for children who suffered either as victims of physical and/or psychological violence or as the dependents of victims. Among the benefits recommended was free education for children who were abducted or conscripted during the conflict.
2000 **International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia case Prosecutor v. Kupreskic**	Jurisprudence against enforced disappearance and abduction leading to enslavement as a crime against humanity. Deprivation of food and services also considered a war crime.
2001 **UN Security Council (SC) Resolution 1379**	UN SC Resolution 1379 requested the UN Secretary-General to annex to his annual report on children and armed conflict a list of parties that recruit and use children.
2002 **The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court**	The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, initially adopted in 1998, entered into force in 2002 and established a permanent international criminal court to address war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide. It is a war crime under the Rome Statute to conscript or enlist children under the age of 15 into the national armed forces or into armed groups, and to use children to actively participate in situations of international armed conflict or in situations of internal conflict. In addition, the Rome Statute criminalizes various forms of sexual violence, including sexual slavery as a war crime.[65]

2002 ***Special Court for Sierra Leone***	The Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL) was established by the UN and Sierra Leonean government in 2002, to prosecute those "who bear the greatest responsibility" for war crimes, crimes against humanity and other serious violations of international humanitarian law, along with several domestic offences, committed since 1996, including the recruitment and use of children (in Art. 4). It was also the first time that children testified as witnesses. Although they had the mandate to prosecute children over 15 accused of committing crimes during the war, the court chose not to do so, focusing instead on those who recruited and used them.
2003	UN Security Council Resolution 1460 Third Security Council Resolution specifically focused on the protection of children affected by conflict, calling for the endorsement of international norms and standards to protect children.
2003	Guidelines on Children and Armed Conflict adopted by the European Union. Revised several times since adoption.
2003	Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa
2004 ***UN Security Council Resolution 1539***	UN SC Resolution 1539 requested parties to the conflicts listed in the annexes of the Secretary-General's report to dialogue with the UN to prepare and implement time-bound action plans to stop the use of children.
2005 ***UN Security Council Resolution 1612***	UN SC Resolution 1612 established the UN-led Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on grave child rights violations and the Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict.
2005	Covenant on the Rights of the Child in Islam adopted by the Organization of the Islamic Conference
2005	Ibero-American Convention on the Rights of Youth
2005	United Nations. E/CN.4/2005/102/Add1. Set of principles for the protection and promotion of human rights through action to combat impunity [Joint Principles]
2005	Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law (2005)
2006	UNHCR's Operational Guidelines on Maintaining the Civilian and Humanitarian Character of Asylum
2006 ***Thomas Lubanga trial, ICC***	The trial of Thomas Lubanga Dyilo was the first case before the International Criminal Court focusing on charges of recruitment and use of children under age 15 in the Democratic Republic of Congo.
2007 ***The Paris Commitments and The Paris Principles and Guidelines***	The Paris Commitments to Protect Children Unlawfully Recruited or Used by Armed Forces or Armed Groups and The Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups were elaborated and endorsed at the Paris Conference 'Free Children from War', organised by France and UNICEF.
2007 ***First convictions by Special Court for Sierra Leone***	The SCSL handed down their verdict against three accused men from the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council – Alex Tamba Brima, Brima Bazzy Kamara and Santigie Borbor Kanu – and found them guilty of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and other serious violations of international humanitarian law, including the recruitment and use of children.
2009 ***UN SC Resolution 1882***	UN SC Resolution 1882 expanded the scope for parties to be listed by the Secretary-General and requesting action plans for addressing sexual violence against children in armed conflict and killing and maiming of children in armed conflict in contravention with international law.
2009	African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa
2010	N'Djamena Declaration on Ending Recruitment and Use of Children by Armed Forces and Groups
2010	'The Bangkok Rules': UN Rules for the Treatment of Female Prisoners and Non-Custodial Measures for Women Offenders
2010	*UN Guidance Note of the Secretary-General on the UN's Approach to Transitional Justice*

2011 **UN SC Resolution 1998**	UN SC Resolution 1998 expanded the scope of the parties to be listed by the Secretary-General and requested action plans for addressing deliberate attacks on schools and hospitals in contravention with international law.
2011 **Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on a communications procedure**	This third optional protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child allows individual complaints to be brought against State parties for alleged violations of children's rights under the Convention and its protocols to which that State is party. The Committee on the Rights of the Child carries out this function.
2012 **The ICC convicted Thomas Lubanga Dyilo**	The International Criminal Court convicted Thomas Lubanga Dyilo of the war crime of conscripting and enlisting children under the age of 15 and using them to participate actively in hostilities in the Democratic Republic of Congo from 1 September 2002 to 13 August 2003.
2012 **UN SC Resolution 2068**	UN SC Resolution 2068 stated the Security Council's readiness to impose sanctions on parties to conflict who persistently violate the rights of children and called on Member States to bring them to justice through national judicial systems and, where applicable, international mechanisms.
2012 **Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (WGEID)**	In 2012, the WGEID issued a General Comment on Children and Enforced Disappearances that recognises that 1) children can become victims of enforced disappearance, including as a result of their forced recruitment as child soldiers and 2) states should address the different challenges and needs faced by girls and boys, adolescents and younger children, refugee and internally displaced children, and children recruited into armed forces and groups, among others.
2012	ASEAN Human Right Declaration
2013 **The Special Court for Sierra Leone convicted Charles Taylor**	With the conviction of Charles Taylor, the SCSL confirmed that international tribunals have the capacity to bring to justice those responsible for the crimes of recruitment of children or their use in hostilities, including those political leaders who support the commission of these crimes.
2014 **UN SC Resolution 2143**	UN SC Resolution 2143 urged all Member States in armed conflict around the world to respect and protect schools from attacks and use by armed forces or groups. Strong emphasis is put on the inclusion of "child protection in military training and standard operating procedures, as well as in military guidance".
2015 **Safe Schools Declaration andGuidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict.**	The Safe Schools Declaration is a commitment through which countries express their political support for protecting education from attack during times of armed conflict; the importance of the continuation of education during war; and the implementation of concrete measures to deter the military use of schools. When they endorse the Declaration, states commit to use the Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict and bring them into domestic policy and operational frameworks as far as possible and appropriate.[66]
2015 **UN SC Resolutions 2225 and 2250**	UN SC Resolution 2225 expanded the scope of the parties to be listed by the Secretary-General and requested action plans for the abduction of children in situations of armed conflict in contravention of international law. UN SC Resolution 2250 calls for greater involvement of youth (persons 18-29 years) in the maintenance of international peace and security, recognising the 'important and positive' role they can play. (Increased and specific involvement of youth in peace and security work was reiterated in UN SC Resolution 2535 in 2020.)
2015 **Trial of Dominic Ongwen begins at the ICC**	Dominic Ongwen, an alleged Brigade Commander of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Northern Uganda, faced 70 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity related to attacks against the civilian population. Mr Ongwen, who was abducted by the LRA as a child, was the first former child soldier to face trial at the ICC. He was found guilty on 4 February 2021 of 61 crimes against humanity and war crimes committed in Northern Uganda between 1 July 2022 and 31 December 2005. The crimes for which he was found guilty included attacks against the civilian population, sexual and gender-based crimes, and conscripting children under the age of 15.
2016	General Assembly Resolution 70/291 on the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy Review (2016)

2016 **Sustainable Development Goals**	The Sustainable Development Goals were adopted in 2015 and came into force on 1 January 2016. · Target 8.7: "Take immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking and secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including recruitment and use of child soldiers, and by 2025 end child labour in all its forms". · Target 16.2: "End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence and torture against children"
2017	The Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers
2017 *Reparations award in Thomas Lubanga Dyilo case*	The ICC awarded symbolic and collective reparations for former child soldiers who were conscripted and enlisted into service during the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Mr Lubanga Diyalo was found liable for reparations to the amount of $10 million, although because of his indigency, the Trust Fund for Victims was directed to propose and implement programmes.
2017 *UN SC Resolution 2396*	Within the counter-terrorism framework, UN SC Resolution 2396 focuses on children who may have links to fighters and who travel across borders to join non-state armed groups who commit acts of terrorism, referred to as "children associated with foreign terrorist fighters". It emphasises that children returning or relocating to and from conflict may have served in many different roles and stresses the importance of assisting those who may be victims of terrorism, while accounting for gender and age sensitivities. It further notes that children are susceptible to recruitment by such groups and may need counselling, while stressing the need to respect their rights and dignity.
2018 *UN SC Resolution 2427*	UN SC Resolution 2427 provides a legal framework for mainstreaming the rights, wellbeing, protection and empowerment of children in armed conflicts. The resolution also aims to combat the recruitment of children; pays particular attention to children associated with armed groups, including those who commit acts of terrorism; urges non-judicial measures as alternatives to prosecution and detention; and affirms that recruited children should be treated primarily as victims.
2019	The Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 2019)
2019 **ICC decision in The Prosecutor v. Bosco Ntaganda**	The ICC unanimously found Bosco Ntaganda guilty of 13 counts of war crimes and five of crimes against humanity in the Democratic Republic of Congo (2002-2003). This included counts of conscripting and enlisting children under 15 years old into an armed group and using them to participate actively in hostilities.
2019	Committee on the Rights of the Child General comment No. 24 on children's rights in the child justice system.
2020 **General Comment on Children in Armed Conflict adopted by African Committee on Rights and Welfare of the Child**	In 2020, the African Committee on the Rights and Welfare of the Child adopted a General Comment on Article 22 of the African Charter, which addresses children in armed conflict. Among other things, the General Comment affirms the 'straight-18' prohibition of recruitment and use of children under the African Charter, and details the need for alternatives to prosecution and detention of children in armed conflict contexts.
2021 **UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy Review Resolution 75/291**	The 2021 Resolution expressly references the best interests principle, alternatives to prosecution and detention, and the Paris Principles.

Endnotes SECTION 1

1 UNICEF, 'The Paris Principles. Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups', ('The Paris Principles'), adopted February 2007.

2 Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, 'Working Paper 3: Children and justice during and in the aftermath of armed conflict', UN, New York, USA, 2011. p.27.

3 Human Rights Watch, 'No Place for Children: Child recruitment, forced marriage and attacks on schools in Somalia,' Human Rights Watch, USA, 2012. p.20.

4 Michael Wessells, 'Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection'. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, USA, 2006. pp.40–41. The author cites examples of raids on schools in Uganda and Burundi and on IDP camps in Liberia as examples.

5 Siobhan O'Neil & Kato Van Broeckhoven, 'Cradled by Conflict. Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict', United Nations University, 2018, (hereafter, 'Cradled by Conflict'). p.33.

6 'Cradled by Conflict'.

7 'Cradled by Conflict'.

8 'Cradled by Conflict'.

9 Kristin Barstad, 'Preventing Recruitment of Child Soldiers: The ICRC approach,' Oxford Journals, *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, vol. 27, no. 4, 4 December 2008. pp.143–144.

10 Myriam Denov & Alexandra Ricard-Guay. 'Girl soldiers: towards a gendered understanding of wartime recruitment, participation, and demobilisation 'Gender & Development, Vol.21, Issue 3. 2013, (hereafter, 'Girl soldiers'). p.477.

11 Kai Chen, 'Why Children are Involved in Armed Conflicts?', chapter in 'Comparative Study of Child Soldiering on Myanmar-China Border', Springer Singapore, 2014.

12 See Bernd Beber & Christopher Blattman, 'The Logic of Child Soldiering and Coercion', International Organization, Vol 67(1), 2013, and 'Cradled by Conflict', p.45.

13 Julie McBride, 'The War Crime of Child Soldier Recruitment', Springer, The Hague, Netherlands, 2014, (hereafter, 'The War Crime of Child Soldier Recruitment'). p.10.

14 Julie Guyot, Suffer the Children: the Psychosocial Rehabilitation of Child Soldiers as a Function of Peace-Building, Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, London, UK, 2007. p.3.

15 'The War Crime of Child Soldier Recruitment'.

16 Amanda Rogers, 'Viewing Non-State Armed Groups Through a Brand Marketing Lens: A Case Study of the Islamic State', United Nations University, 2017. This case study examines Islamic State (IS)'s brand and strength in using user-driven engagement and participatory marketing to draw in younger users. This enables the group to provide adolescents with social validation and individual identity.

17 Magali Chelpi-den Hamer, 'Militarized youths in western Côte d'Ivoire: Local processes of mobilization, demobilization, and related humanitarian interventions (2002–2007)', African Studies Center, 2011. p.159.

18 Defence for Children International – Palestine Section, 'Recruitment and Use of Palestinian Children in Armed Conflict', February 2012. p.3.

19 'Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection'.

20 Jo Becker & Tejshree Thapa, 'Living in Fear: Child Soldiers and the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka', Human Rights Watch, Vol. 16, No 13 (C). November 2004. p.16.

21 Watchlist on Children in Armed Conflict, 'Who will care for us? Grave violations against children in northeastern Nigeria,' September 2014, (hereafter 'Who will care for us?'). p.5.

22 'Who will care for us?', see footnote 21. p.29. The Civilian Joint Task Force is a local group formed in 2013 to support the Nigerian security forces in the fight against Boko Haram in northeast Nigeria and to protect local communities from attacks by Boko Haram.

23 'Who will care for us?' p.29.

24 Save the Children, 'Chapter 3. Experience and impact of recruitment', Internal guidelines, unpublished (courtesy of Save the Children).

25 'Girl soldiers', p.478.

26 Save the Children, 'Forgotten Casualties of War: Girls in armed conflict', London, UK, 2005. p.18.

27 Neil Boothby & Bronwyn Nichol, 'Child Soldiering: Impact on child development and learning capacity,' Columbia University, USA, 2010. p.5.

28 Child Soldiers International, 'What the girls say. Improving practices for the demobilization and reintegration of girls associated with armed forces and armed groups in Democratic Republic of Congo', 2017.

29 Neil Boothby, 'What happens to child soldiers when they grow up? The Mozambique case study.' Intervention. Vol. 4. No. 3, 2006.

30 Human Rights Watch, 'Maybe we Live and Maybe we Die: Recruitment and use of children by armed groups in Syria,' Human Rights Watch, USA, 2014, (hereafter, 'Maybe we Live and Maybe we Die'). p.2.

31 'Maybe we Live and Maybe we Die', see note 30.

32 The Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative, 'Living Within Armed Groups: A Gendered Perspective,' Centre for Foreign Policy Studies, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Canada, 7–9 May 2012. p.15.

33 Ishmael Beah, 'The Making, and Unmaking, of a Child Soldier', *The New York Times*, January 2007, Accessed January 2019.

34 Some children may have access to informal education provided by the armed force or armed group. However, content and quality may not be adequate and may focus on the group's politics and ideology.

35 Save the Children, 'Situation Analysis of Recruitment and Use of Children in N. Nigeria', January 2018. Unpublished internal document (courtesy of Save the Children).

36 Graça Machel, 'The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children', UN General Assembly, 1996.

37 Office of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, 'Virtual Library: International Law', accessed January 2019.

38   Fifth Ministerial Follow-up Forum to the Paris Commitments and Paris Principles on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups. Monday 3 December 2012, UN Headquarters, New York, USA. p.1.

39   Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, (Protocol I), 8 June 1977, Art. 77(2); Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, (Protocol II), 8 June 1977, Art. 4(3)(c); UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), 1989, Art. 38; ICRC Customary International Humanitarian Law, Rules 136-137; also see: African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, Organisation of African Unity (OAU), 1990, entered into force in 1999, Art. 22 (2).

40   Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, 1998, Art. 8(2)(b) and 8(2)(e).

41   Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, 'The Six Grave Violations', online, accessed February 2019.

42   Draws on Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, 'Action Plans', online, accessed February 2019.

43   Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups, UNICEF, 2007, Art. 6.1, 6.7.0, 6.7.1; UN Security Council Resolution 2143, Adopted by the Security Council at its 7129th meeting, on 7 March 2014.

44   Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, (Protocol I), 8 June 1977, Art. 77; Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, (Protocol II), 8 June 1977, Art. 4 (3).

45   UNHCR, 'Operational Guidelines on Maintaining the Civilian and Humanitarian Character of Asylum', December 2018.

46   For more information, see UNHCR, 'Child Protection Issue Brief: Child recruitment', September 2013.

47   United Nations, Joint general comment No. 3 (2017) of the Committee on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families and No. 22 (2017) of the Committee on the Rights of the Child on the general principles regarding the human rights of children in the context of international migration, 16 November 2017; see also Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, paragraph 27(f), 11 June 2018.

48   General Comment No. 6 on Treatment of Unaccompanied and Separated Children Outside their Country of Origin, Committee on the Rights of the Child, Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005 (CRC/GC/2005/6), para. 61; Committee on the Rights of the Child, Report of the 2012 Day of General Discussion: The Rights of all Children in the Context of International Migration, para. 32, 78; A/HRC/40/28 para. 26.

49   United Nations, 'Convention on the Rights of the Child', adopted 20 November 1989, Art. 7 and 8.

50   Additional Protocol I, Art. 77(5); Additional Protocol II, Art. 6(4); CRC, Art. 37 (a); United Nations, Committee on the Rights of the Child, 'General Comment to the Convention on the Rights of the Child No. 24, Children's rights in the child justice system', CRC/C/GC/24, 18 September 2019, paras. 79–80.

51   See, for example, UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice ('Beijing Rules'), and International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

52   Convention on the Rights of the Child, United Nations, 1989, Art. 37 and 40; Geneva Convention III Art. 71; Geneva Convention IV, Art. 116; Additional Protocol (I), Art. 77; Additional Protocol II, Art. 5.

53   United Nations, Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment to the Convention on the Rights of the Child No. 24, Children's rights in the child justice system, CRC/C/GC/24, 18 September 2019.

54   General Assembly Resolution 70/291 on the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy Review, Article 18, 2016.

55   UN Security Council Resolution 2396, S/RES/2396, 21 December 2017, Art. 7.

56   UN General Assembly, A/HRC/40/28 'Protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism', 10 January 2019, para. 60.

57   UN General Assembly, A/HRC/40/28, para. 58.

58   UN General Assembly, A/HRC/40/28, para. 51.

59   UN General Assembly, A/HRC/40/28, para. 44; see also 'International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights', 1966, Art. 19 and 20; United Nations Global Counterterrorism Strategy; and United Nations Security Council Resolution 1624, 2005.

60   See, for example, 'UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and its Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children' ('Palermo Protocol'), GA Res. 55/25, A/45/49 (Vol. I) Nov. 15, 2000.

61   Humanitarian Practice Network. 'Counter-terrorism laws and regulations. What aid agencies need to know', 2014, (hereafter, 'Counter-terrorism laws and regulations'). p.13.

62   'Counter-terrorism laws and regulations'.

63   Article 8(2)(b)(xxvi), Article 8(2)(e)(vii), Article 8(2)(e)(vii). The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, 1998.

64   UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. Status of ratification. Optional Protocol to the CRC on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict', UN, online, Accessed June 2022.

65   Article 8(2)(b)(xxvi), Article 8(2)(e)(vii), Article 8(2)(e)(vii). The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, 1998.

66   As of May 2022, 114 states had endorsed it. Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, 'Safe Schools Declaration Endorsements' online, accessed May 2022.
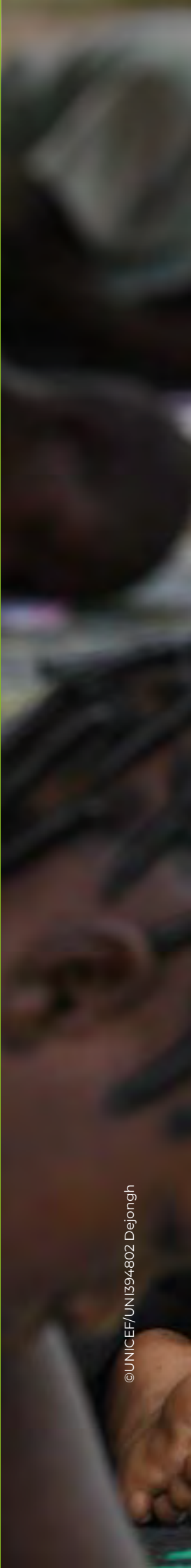
PROGRAMMING PLANNING

Chapter 4
Coordination

©UNICEF/UNI334935/Ryeng

Introduction

It takes a range of actors, working together across multiple sectors, to prevent the recruitment and use of children by armed forces and groups, to secure the release of such children, and to reintegrate them into their families and communities. These actors may include relevant local and national statutory bodies; local and international child protection organisations; specialist education, health, livelihoods and peace-building organisations; community-based organisations and volunteers; UN entities; other international organisations; regional organisations; donors and private sector bodies.

To ensure children receive a comprehensive response to their needs, child protection actors should coordinate their efforts and work with others in sectors relevant to the prevention of child recruitment and use and to holistic reintegration support. Depending on the context, they may also require links with formal disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programmes to coordinate the identification and transfer of children to child protection actors.

Given the particularly sensitive and political nature of working with children associated with armed forces and groups, and the necessity to provide comprehensive holistic support for effective reintegration, it is essential to invest time in fostering and maintaining close and productive relationships between child protection and other relevant actors.

Coordination is central to effective programming for a range of reasons:

- It helps to prevent duplication of efforts, to identify gaps in programming and services, and to avoid confusion, delays and frustration among children and community members.

- It enables organisations to be more efficient and consistent, to learn from each other, to ensure approaches are harmonised and standardised, and to provide comprehensive and targeted training and support services, thus increasing accountability towards beneficiaries and donors.

- It can help actors to 'speak with one voice', making them stronger in terms of advocacy and fundraising.

- Coordination across sectors extends the impact of the programming, making it more sustainable and ensuring a more appropriate, holistic response to children's needs.

4.1 Responsibility for coordination

National governments bear the primary responsibility for the coordination of efforts to prevent child recruitment and to implement release and reintegration programmes. In contexts where a government is unable or unwilling to fulfil this duty, a range of actors may provide support to the government or assume some of the government's responsibilities on an interim basis.

In situations where a government is involved in the armed conflict, its ability to treat children neutrally and impartially may be compromised, putting children, and potentially child protection programmes, at risk. In such situations, alternative options may need to be considered, such as including the government in coordination rather than supporting them to lead coordination efforts.

Where there is no immediately obvious choice as to who is best placed to lead coordination, it may be helpful to analyse the comparative advantages of different organisations, considering their skills, capacities and expertise.

In many contexts, UN agencies, who have a strong and mandated role in inter-agency humanitarian coordination, may work together with government bodies responsible for coordination. This strengthens links with NGOs in child protection and other sectors who

address recruitment and support reintegration within their programmes. The humanitarian cluster system and, in refugee settings, the UNHCR sectors, are designed to facilitate coordination between government structures and humanitarian agencies by establishing coordination focal points.

4.2 Establishing a coordination mechanism

It is important to take into account what coordination mechanisms already exist, who is already involved and who else should be involved, and what mechanisms work best in the context. For example, coordination discussions could take place at existing general protection meetings, at child protection meetings, at a dedicated working group of only those actors directly involved in the programme, or in a wider forum bringing together cross-sectoral representation.

Coordination should take place at both the national level and in decentralised locations. Actors in the field almost always know the local context better than those at the national level, but it may be important for national actors to be involved so that they can support and advocate effectively on behalf of local actors. It is important that decision-making is appropriately delegated to local actors who may have to adapt programmes to local realities and may need to make speedy decisions when there is not time to discuss issues at any length with central actors.

Due to the sensitive and political nature of work with children associated with armed forces and groups, in some contexts, coordination meetings may need to be limited to only those agencies that are implementing prevention, release, and reintegration programmes or related activities for children.

4.2.1 Key factors to consider

Factors to consider when establishing a coordination mechanism include:

- The number, location and mandates of existing child protection actors. Are there other non-traditional actors at local, regional or national levels, including community-based structures, with whom it would be useful to coordinate?

- How child protection actors can coordinate effectively with other relevant sectors. This might be by participating in each other's coordination meetings, establishing inter-sectoral referral mechanisms, or conducting joint field visits.

- The capacity and political impartiality and neutrality of government authorities and humanitarian actors, and how these factors may influence support to vulnerable children and communities.

- The capacity, access and languages of national and sub-national actors. Support may be needed to strengthen their coordination or programming capacity, translate documents or provide interpreters, choose and perhaps rotate the location of meetings so most actors can attend, consider the frequency of meetings, or use electronic meeting options.

- Coordination between national and sub-national coordination bodies (and any in between), and, where relevant, between different sub-national coordination bodies should be established, building on any structures that exist. Coordination should be established, both vertically and horizontally.

- The different mandates and authorities that actors have to make decisions – to determine which decisions might need to be made by higher or other levels of authority.

- The physical security of participants (including the location and visibility of meetings) should be assessed and monitored.[67]

- Creation of an observer status could be appropriate in some situations.

- The use of a co-chair or revolving chair model could be useful to distribute coordination responsibilities.

- Secondment of staff by an organisation to the coordination body can fill capacity gaps.

- The possible establishment of technical groups within or under pre-existing coordination structures, such as the Child Protection Working Group or the Country Task Forces on Monitoring and Reporting (see Chapter 10 on Monitoring Child Recruitment and Use), Child Protection Area of Responsibility,[68] or government-led coordination structures.

In some cases, active conflict, insecurity, extreme political sensitivity, direct threats against humanitarian actors or other factors may make it unsafe or unfeasible to establish coordination structures in the programming location. In such cases, alternative coordination methods such as identifying a trusted focal point to liaise bilaterally, and if necessary, confidentially, between actors on the ground and those outside the location. In some cases, secure electronic means of communication may be a feasible alternative to ensure effective coordination between actors in different locations.

4.2.2 Regional and cross-border coordination

In recent decades, conflicts have increasingly spread across borders. This may cause refugee flows to or from neighbouring countries, an increase in child trafficking, and recruitment of children by armed forces and groups from one country to another.

In such cases, there is a need to establish regional and cross-border systems to coordinate and strengthen efforts to prevent recruitment and trafficking of children and to respond if these are already occurring. Cross-border coordination might be required for the identification, temporary care, repatriation, reunification and reintegration of children released or escaped from armed forces and groups of neighbouring countries. Other bodies, such as border control or the DDR mechanisms of any peacekeeping mission, might need to be involved.

Example of a regional coordination structure: Mali[69]

Since 2012, Mali has been affected by conflict, food and nutrition crises and political instability. This has resulted in ongoing internal displacement and refugee influxes into the neighbouring countries of Burkina Faso, Mauritania, Niger and Algeria. Since the start of the conflict there have been reports of recruitment and use of girls and boys by armed groups. Children associated with armed groups have reportedly fled from Mali into neighbouring countries, fearing arrest or reprisals, and cases of children associated with armed groups coming from Niger and Burkina have been identified in Mali. There is also a history of child protection concerns related to patterns of family separation, and movement of children across the region increasing, making children more vulnerable to recruitment.

For these reasons, UNICEF appointed a sub-regional Child Protection in Emergencies Specialist in 2012, focused on cross-border child protection issues, including child recruitment and use.

The Specialist worked to promote a consistent, sub-regional approach to programming in all four countries, and to strengthen coordination between actors at national and regional levels by, for example: conducting regular conference calls and field visits, promoting standardised tools and resources, sharing assessment results and lessons learned, and facilitating inter-agency workshops to establish standard operating procedures. Sub-regional cross-border meetings were organised with key partners (UNHCR - The UN Refugee Agency, International Committee of the Red Cross, International Organization for Migration and Save the Children) to gain their support for the coordination of activities such as cross-border, inter-agency family tracing, repatriation, and reunification of children formerly associated with armed groups.

4.3 Key roles of coordination structures

The role of a coordination structure will depend on the context in which it is operating. This section sets out some ideas of how to establish and maintain coordination structures, and their role in developing common approaches, and streamlining coordination and communication with other actors.

4.3.1 Establish and maintain coordination structures among participating organisations

- Clarify the objectives of the body and the roles and responsibilities of each organisation.

- Establish a database of contact information and focal points from each organisation and keep it up to date.

- Maintain transparent matrices outlining delegation of responsibility (eg, '3W' matrices of Who does What Where) and identify 'providers of last resort' for different services.

- Monitor and evaluate the organisations' impact and progress, taking corrective action when necessary.

- Mobilise resources (human and financial) and act as a focal point with donors.

- Develop joint strategy documents and establish agreed standard operating procedures.

- Share information between organisations.

- Promote and maintain strong interpersonal relationships among representatives of different organisations.

4.3.2 Develop common approaches

- Develop and document common programming approaches.

- Develop an inter-agency Information Sharing Protocol for data protection.

- Work with case management actors and other coordination bodies to develop inter-agency standard operating procedures for case management and to establish and periodically update referral pathways for services.

- Work with other child protection actors to develop contextualised guidelines for provision of alternative care based on the UN Guidelines on Alternative Care.

- Develop guidelines for involving children, families and communities in reintegration programme design and feedback. (See Chapter 21, Planning and Delivering Reintegration Programmes.)

- Develop joint contingency plans for sudden large-scale release or other unplanned events.

4.3.3 Streamline coordination and communication with other actors

- Streamline communication and collaboration with other coordination structures (eg, the Country Task Force on Monitoring and Reporting, child protection working group or subcluster), security sector actors and others, in particular for formal release processes.

- Conduct joint advocacy when appropriate.

- Coordinate with other related programmes, such as those for victims of sexual violence, children living on the street, refugees, internally displaced persons and adult DDR programmes (especially for children nearing the age of 18 years).

- Streamline coordination with regional and global coordination mechanisms.

4.4 Steps to support coordination

Coordination can be challenging, especially when those involved – individuals and organisations – have different backgrounds, capacities, mandates and visions. To avoid pitfalls, child protection actors should make efforts to:

- Work out a Terms of Reference, a common strategy or Standard Operating Procedures early in the process to establish roles and responsibilities and avoid potential confusion, delays, duplication of efforts and gaps in services.

- Share information, lessons learned (what seems to be working and what has not worked so well) and credit for achievements with each other, recognising that successes are the product of effective joint efforts. Sharing information such as assessment findings avoids potential duplication of effort and frustration among community members.

- Map who is doing what and where and keep the map up to date.

- Invest time in fostering and maintaining close, respectful and productive relationships between those working on child protection and other relevant actors, recognising that everyone has different backgrounds, capacities and mandates.

- Make use of opportunities and resources available by coordinating with other actors and wider programming for children. Working in isolation can restrict vision and means children may not receive comprehensive support.

4.5 Key Resources

- The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 'CAAFAG Programme Development Toolkit', 2021. **Link**

- Child Protection Area of Responsibility, 'Child Protection in Emergencies Coordination Handbook', 2016. **Link**

- Child Protection Area of Responsibility, 'Sharing Leadership: NGO co-leadership of child protection coordination groups at country level (guidance and tools)', 2016. **Link**

- UNICEF, 'Cluster Coordination Guidance for Country Offices', 2015. **Link**

- Child Protection Area of Responsibility, 'How Field Based Protection Clusters and Sub-Clusters Work Together: Q&A', 2015. **Link**

- The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, Global Case Management Task Force, 'Inter-agency Child Protection Case Management Standard Operating Procedures', 2019. **Link**

- Child Resilience Alliance, 'A Guide for Supporting Community-led Child Protection Processes', 2018. **Link**

- Child Resilience Alliance, 'A Toolkit for Reflective Practice in Supporting Community-led Child Protection Processes', 2018. **Link**

Chapter 5
Situation Analysis

©UNICEF/UN0430194/Shahan

Introduction

No programme should be developed without a current situation analysis.

All programming, policy and advocacy work to prevent and respond to child recruitment and use by armed forces and groups must be grounded in a comprehensive understanding of the political, cultural, social, economic, military and security dynamics of the context. Without this firm foundation, efforts to support children are likely to be ineffective, or even risk causing unintentional harm.[70]

Carrying out a situation analysis is therefore a vital first step in programme planning and should be carried out as soon as there is an indication of a risk of children being recruited and used by armed forces or groups, or when new programming to prevent and respond to child recruitment and use is planned. Assessing the internal and external conditions that affect your organisation and the communities you plan to work with will enable you to identify opportunities and challenges.

5.1 Things to consider when developing a situation analysis

A situation analysis has two main components: assessment (what is happening, what has changed, what is the evidence) and analysis (why, what are the implications). It is required to:

- understand the nature, extent and causes of child recruitment and use

- assess boys' and girls' needs (immediate and potential/prospective)

- evaluate the extent to which duty bearers are fulfilling their obligations to children

- evaluate the efforts already underway by communities and other actors to prevent and address child protection issues, including recruitment and use by armed groups and forces, and what needs to be strengthened.

What is the best approach in your context? Situation analyses can vary considerably, depending on factors such as access to the affected population, the availability of reliable information or data from other sources, such as censuses and reports by government or non-governmental organisations, and the priorities of other humanitarian and development actors.

Conduct a rapid assessment first, where necessary: In some circumstances, particularly in a rapid onset emergency, such as a sudden increase in social or political unrest or conflict, a rapid assessment of the situation should be conducted first, to provide a clear view of emerging or new security, political, social, or conflict dynamics and their relationship to child recruitment and use.

Embrace the broader context for children: A child at risk of recruitment and use by an armed force or group may face multiple protection risks and other issues. These risks do not occur in isolation but are influenced by factors within a child's immediate personal environment including their family, friends, school, community, and by broader social, cultural, political and economic influences. Carrying out a broad analysis of the situation for children, their families and their communities, rather than focusing narrowly on the issue of child recruitment and use, will allow a deeper understanding of the dynamics of child recruitment and use within the wider context and inform a more comprehensive response.[71] This approach also helps ensure that efforts to support children associated with armed forces and groups are situated within broader support to the conflict-affected population, and contribute towards building more comprehensive child protection systems.

Adopt a conflict- and gender-sensitive approach: Given the sensitive nature of child recruitment and use, and the possibility of harm stemming from programme interventions, it is important to examine gender dynamics within the situation. Consider the appropriate inclusion of males and females within the team conducting the analysis and the inclusion of affected community members (including boys and girls). This approach will also help

you consider how to design programme interventions in ways that avoid contributing to stigmatisation or perceived preferential treatment and that have the potential to maximise positive contributions to reducing conflict.

Balance the pros and cons of undertaking interagency assessment and analysis: Situation analyses and underlying assessments do not need to be inter-agency exercises. Before conducting an interagency exercise, it is important to consider the advantages and challenges involved, balancing the potential benefits with the time and resources needed. Benefits can include pooled resources, joint planning and approaches that contribute to coordination, and minimising need for repetitive interviews or data gathering, reducing fatigue and hostility from communities. On the other hand, organisations may need to consider their internal security or operational issues, which may be difficult to incorporate into inter-agency analyses. And different organisations may need to take different points from analyses, which can be difficult if done as an inter-agency endeavour. The time needed for collaboration can delay essential assessment work that individual agencies may need to do. If undertaking an interagency assessment or analysis, these challenges should be considered through strong inter-agency coordination

>) See <u>Chapter 4</u> for more information on Coordination.

Ensure your approach to information gathering is ethical: See the advice in Section 5.4.3 below.

Regularly review the situation analysis: A situation analysis reflects a situation at a specific time; it is based on information gathered by those involved using the capacity and tools available to them at that moment. No situation analysis is definitive or static: new knowledge may become available, interpretations of previous information may change, and experience gained from implementing programmes might shine a new light on assumptions. Situation analyses should be constantly questioned and updated as situations evolve. Moments of deliberate, focused review and reflection should be built into programming on a regular basis.

5.2 Conducting a situation analysis and identifying mitigation strategies

Table 5.1 outlines steps that need to be taken to prepare for a situation analysis on recruitment and use of children by armed forces.

TABLE 5.1 Preparing for a situation analysis

Define objectives	· Agree on what you need to know: key context-specific information about the situation of children and existing response capacities.
Conduct a risk assessment related to the conducting the situation analysis	· Consider potential risks to affected children, families and communities. · Consider potential risks to humanitarian actors and humanitarian space. · Consider conflict sensitivity and how communities and authorities may view humanitarian actors conducting such an analysis. · Keep risk assessments continually updated.
Establish a methodology	· Tailor the methods to contextual factors (eg, access to the affected population, geographic scope, gender breakdown of team members, available timeframe, availability of existing secondary data, relevance of sampling approaches, potential risks, similar efforts by other actors). · Consider use of various methods (eg, desk research, interviews or surveys with children, families, community leaders, teachers, religious leaders, government officials, armed actors and/or other respondents, observational walks through areas, participatory exercises with children or adults, focus groups or semi-structured interviews). · Consider contextual sensitivities (eg, relevant language(s), age-appropriate language/approach, cultural and political context). · Develop and validate questionnaires or other structured formats. · Consider potential biases.

Consider coordination	· Evaluate the possibility and utility of a joint analysis. · When coordinating, ensure agreement on division of roles and responsibilities, accountability structures and leadership.
Develop a work plan	· Establish roles and responsibilities and timelines for each activity. · Arrange planning workshops to engage all relevant individuals and agencies.
Arrange budget and logistics	· Identify projected costs of all anticipated activities and material/logistical needs.
Prepare human resources	· Determine required competency areas (eg, quantitative/qualitative research skills; knowledge of child, gender, disability issues, language, culture-sensitive approaches). · Consider including gender specialists and staff from other sectors (eg, education, livelihoods). · Recruit and train staff as needed and appropriate. · Ensure there is an appropriate mix of male and female staff as well as staff who are able to speak comfortably with children, adolescent boys and girls and men and women. · Consider the ethnic make-up of the analysis team, as well as language requirements. · Consider potential biases that team members may naturally bring into their work. · Ensure selection of team complies with safeguarding rules and train team members on referrals if safeguarding or other protection concerns are identified. · Conduct training or refresher training on assessment and analysis methodologies.
Identify potential respondents	· Identify potential respondents (see below). · Seek balanced representation of gender, age, disability, ethnic and religious affiliation among respondents. · Obtain informed consent from all respondents.
Prepare for child participation	· Engage children as central participants when safe and appropriate. · Engage children of different ages, sex, abilities and perspectives. · Identify and reduce barriers and risks to children's participation. · Obtain informed consent. · Identify referral services which may be needed if concerns are reported during analysis.

Draws on: Child Protection Working Group, 'Child Protection Rapid Assessment Toolkit,' Global Protection Cluster, December 2012, p.8.

After the analysis has been done, the findings should be validated before they are shared either within agencies or with other stakeholders, including children and communities.

Make sure to update the situation analysis on a regular basis and to conduct additional assessments on specific relevant issues such as detention of children, the need arises.

5.2.1 Child participation

Child participation is not only a fundamental right enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child but also a key asset in situation analysis and in programme planning, monitoring and evaluation. For these reasons, as the Child Protection Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Action state, "*children with a wide range of experience (regardless of their gender, age or disability) should be supported to express their views freely and safely. Humanitarian actors must respect children's views, take children and their opinions seriously and use children's input to inform decision-making processes.*"[72]

Children can provide perspectives often overlooked by adults and influence the design of programmes to prevent and respond to child recruitment and use. For example, boys and girls who have previously been associated with an armed group or force may be able to provide information about how many other children were within the force or group, where they come from, their ages, their experiences, etc. They may also be able to explain how they were able to exit the force or group and what support they considered helpful.

Children who have avoided recruitment may be able to describe how recruitment was being carried out and how they managed to evade it. Children who are not targeted for recruitment might be able to describe the opportunities and challenges in communities to which children formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups will be returning. All children should be able to discuss prevailing perceptions, norms and other factors that may influence recruitment tactics or the likelihood of a child being recruited or used.

Your goal should be to facilitate meaningful participation to the extent that it is safe and appropriate to do so. This may involve identifying barriers to different children's participation and ways to overcome these. For example, children with disabilities may need additional support to participate effectively, such as sign language interpreters. A range of creative methodologies can be used by appropriately trained staff to facilitate children's participation. The inter-agency initiative Action for the Rights of Children (ARC) has produced a resource pack with practical information, guidelines, and participatory tools to support organisations in enabling the meaningful participation of children in project, programme and policy responses and service delivery.[73]

Without appropriate support, meaningful and safe participation of children in situation analysis can be challenging and potentially harmful. Potential risks include:

- Children currently in armed forces and groups may face harsh consequences for speaking to humanitarian actors. In cases where they are allowed to speak, they may be unable to speak freely.

- Children who have left armed forces or groups, particularly those who did so without being formally released, may have legitimate fears of being identified through the interview process or by the information they provide.

- Those at immediate risk of recruitment may also be reluctant to communicate if they fear they are being monitored.

The Child Protection Rapid Assessment Toolkit does not currently recommend child participation as an automatic component of the rapid assessment due to the potential risk of harm for children.

In each context, experienced child protection personnel, in close consultation with local actors who best understand the nuances of the context, should make an informed decision about the extent to which it is safe for children to participate.

For further discussion of child participation, and resources on the subject, see Chapter 14, Child Participation in Peacebuilding Activities.

5.2.2 Consideration of risk

Carrying out a situation analysis is an intervention in itself as it directly affects the lives of the people concerned. Merely raising the issue of child recruitment and use by armed forces and groups may spark strong reactions amongst community members or officials. Thus, practitioners should carefully weigh potential risks and consider possible mitigation strategies prior to carrying out a situation analysis. Table 5:2 gives examples of potential risks to consider and below are examples of mitigation measures.

TABLE 5.2 Examples of potential risks

Risks to children	Risks to communities	Risks to agencies
· Deliberate attack or targeting of boys and/or girls by armed forces or groups · Rejection or targeting of boys and girls by community members due to perceived association with armed forces or groups · Armed forces/groups may deliberately recruit more children · Armed forces/groups may hide children to prevent their release · Armed forces/groups may informally release children to give impression they do not have children within their ranks. Such children might therefore have limited access to reintegration services.	· Attack or threat of attack by armed forces or groups due to perceived contribution to analysis · Communities, including boys and girls, may develop unrealistic expectations of support available	· Physical attack or threat of targeting of agency staff or partners · Lack or reversal of acceptance of agencies by communities, affecting ability to implement programmes · Agencies may be expelled from area by authorities · Communities may deny or reinforce existing norms or perceptions to avoid risk leading to inaccurate analysis and assumptions

Examples of mitigation measures:

- Ensure your team is conflict-sensitive and has the skills and knowledge you need (see Table 5).

- Use an ethical approach to information gathering (see section 5.4.3 below).

- Consider location and methodology for informant interviews (eg, in public or private areas, individual or focus groups, etc.). In extreme situations, gather information only from people who have left the area for a safer location (eg, camps for internally displaced people or refugees). In these situations, the risks to them should still be assessed and risk mitigation measures implemented.

- Study and respect the local context, culture and gender norms.

- Be respectful and preserve the dignity of all respondents.

- Build trust and respect before initiating sensitive conversations.

- Mix questions about child recruitment with questions about less sensitive topics; consider how to learn more about recruitment without the need to ask sensitive or difficult questions.

As in all programming, keep the principles of do no harm and the best interest of the child at the front of your mind when developing the process. The safety and emotional state of any informant must take priority over information gathering. Child safeguarding considerations must be paramount.

5.3 Collecting information

The methodology of assessment and situation analysis should be tailored to the context and sensitivities, in order to gather what you need to know. The following guidelines may be helpful.[74]

- Try to identify a broad range of stakeholders to interview, including both men and women, from different religious, ethnic, socio-economic, political and educational backgrounds as appropriate, including people with disabilities, to develop a full understanding of the situation rather than a single perspective. Think outside the box – are there any other actors who could provide useful information or a valuable perspective?

- Consider combining various data collection methods. Gathering both primary and secondary information, as well as quantitative and qualitative data. Using data from various sources enable you to crosscheck information (sometimes referred to as triangulation).

- Avoid making assumptions or accepting subjective judgements as fact without carefully checking them out. By deliberately and self-consciously reflecting on and identifying possible sources of bias and error, you can minimise their impacts.

- Establish a transparent assessment process. Sharing observations, perceptions and understandings with the affected populations helps to avoid the dangers of missing certain key items of information and of misinterpreting the data.

5.3.1 Qualitative and quantitative data

Using a combination of quantitative and qualitative data is advisable for a situation analysis. Both have their strengths and weaknesses, and they are complementary.

Quantitative data are measures of values or counts and can therefore be expressed numerically, which is useful for comparisons and identification of trends. However, quantitative information only gives part of a picture; causes or contributing factors may not be evident from purely quantitative data. In addition, data collection methods, locations and samples can also limit reliability.

Quantitative data is particularly useful to measure the scope of child recruitment and use, as well as capacities in programming.

Qualitative data is descriptive and can be spoken or written. Although harder to compare, it does provide much more information on causes and contributing factors to issues and a range of views from different respondents. It can also be used to triangulate or qualify qualitative data.

Qualitative data is useful to provide perspective and insights that help in understanding the dynamics of recruitment and use of children, as well as evaluating the quality of response given to it.

5.3.2 Primary and secondary information

Both primary and secondary information are needed to inform your assessment and analysis.

Primary information is collected directly from firsthand accounts from the source: from actors at community, national, and regional levels.

Primary information gathering requires professional skills (such as interviewing, observational skills, facilitating group discussions, or conducting observational walks, individual interviews, etc.) and personal skills (including the ability to adapt to a context, sensitivity, self-reflection, being respectful, kindness, etc.).

Secondary information is information that has already been collected, analysed and reported to others. It can be found in books, reports, surveys, censuses, databases and maps, as well as monitoring and reporting systems, and is usually gathered through a desk review.

A desk review is a necessary first step of situation analysis. It will enable you to take stock of what is already known and helps to identify gaps and inconsistencies in information. It will help you avoid carrying out duplicate assessments and will give you information on important issues to explore with the affected population during assessments. It also helps you decide what methods to use for collecting primary information and carrying out the situation analysis, including possible 'question and answer' options for qualitative interviews.

Table 5:3 provides some suggestions for key actors and potential respondents whose knowledge and opinions could be useful.

TABLE 5.3 Potential sources of primary information

Community level	Children, including children formerly associated with armed forces and groups (if possible)
	Families and children directly affected by armed conflict, for example through displacement, recruitment of children, reliance on humanitarian assistance, etc.
	Local government officials
	Elected and traditional community leaders, including women and youth leaders
	Religious leaders and representatives of local faith communities
	Medical and social workers
	Teachers and heads of schools, including formal, non-formal, technical and vocational institutions
	Representatives of business and commerce associations
	Non-governmental, community based, and civil society organisations.
	Local commanders of armed forces and groups, if appropriate
	Border control and police, if appropriate
National level	Representatives of national government (if functioning, and if appropriate to approach), particularly ministries responsible for: children and youth; education; welfare and development; labour; disarmament and demobilisation; defence, national security and counter-terrorism; border control; and reconstruction and rehabilitation.
	Representatives from the private sector, workers and employers' organisations
	Members of national religious and inter-religious organisations
	Representatives of armed forces and other security services, and representatives of non-state armed groups.
	Staff of relevant UN agencies involved in armed conflict prevention, response and coordination (eg, UN OCHA, UNICEF, UNDP, UNDPO, OHCHR, ILO, UNHCR, etc.)
	Staff of international humanitarian, human rights and advocacy orientated non-governmental organisations (NGOs), as well as research organisations and universities.
	Staff of national NGOs involved in humanitarian and human rights efforts
	Representatives of donor agencies
Regional level	Regional political bodies such as the African Union
	Regional human rights and humanitarian coordination structures

5.3.3 An ethical approach to information gathering[75]

• Establish and uphold protocols for protecting children and other respondents.

• Commit to taking follow-up action, as necessary (do not make any promises you cannot keep).

• Be honest with communities about the objectives of the assessment both before and during the assessment, especially when assessing the needs of children.

• Obtain parental or family consent before interviewing children.

• Preserve confidentiality of personal or sensitive information.

• Inform people that participation is voluntary and can be stopped at any time if they feel uncomfortable or change their mind.

- Ensure respondents are aware of and able to access referral services if needed.

- Identify and find ways to support community coping mechanisms that do not violate the basic rights of or harm children.

5.4 Subjects to explore in your situation analysis[76]

Table 5:1 lists recommended subjects to explore in your situation analysis. Each context is different and questions will need to be adapted to your particular context. This list is not comprehensive and some suggestions will not be appropriate in some contexts.

An example of a more detailed situation analysis matrix is available in the annexes.

TABLE 5.4 Subjects to explore in your situation analysis

The context	· National legal and normative frameworks that address recruitment and use; counter-terrorism legislation and policy; and juvenile justice standards and practice
	· Political conditions, including stakeholders and duty bearers at national and local levels, plus regional factors
	· Social and cultural conditions, noting differences at local and national levels; importance of cultural norms; access to schools; situation of disabled children
	· Economic conditions, noting differences at local and national levels, considering who has access to economic resources and opportunities
	· Gender and age issues; the legal and cultural situation of women and girls, men and boys; the situation of LGBT children; gender and age dynamics within homes and communities
The conflict	· Conflict profile (international or not)
	· Causes or drivers of conflict
	· Characteristics of parties to conflict
	· Conflict dynamics and impact on communities, including ethnic, religious, tribal or other dimensions
	· Gender and age dynamics of conflict; how conflict or insecurity has affected dynamics between males and females, adults and children; the positions that women and girls, men and boys hold in the community and their roles in decision-making and leadership positions
Impact of conflict on children and communities	· Social impacts affecting communities, social norms and dynamics within families
	· Economic impacts on families and communities
	· Levels of displacement
	· Family separation
	· Child labour and other hazardous labour and any differences between the effects on or prevalence among boys and girls
	· Physical violence and other harmful practices
	· Sexual violence
	· Mental health of boys and girls, parents/care-givers, and impact on communities
	· Characteristics of children who may be socially, economically or otherwise excluded and the reasons for the exclusion
	· Prevalence and detail of grave violations against boys and girls; differences in the extent or manner to which these violations affecting boys and girls
	· Inequities in impact of any or all of these factors
The nature and scale of recruitment and use of children	· Push and pull factors leading to recruitment and use
	· Estimates of scale, age and gender profile or other status of affected boys and girls
	· Common methods of and motivations for recruitment and use of children
	· Identification of parties who are recruiting and using boys and girls
	· Existence and functioning of the UN-led Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism

Actions to prevent recruitment and use	· How do children avoid recruitment? What role do families, communities and peers play to protect them? What mechanisms or services are in place that could support or enhance these roles?
	· How are local and community-based organisations engaged in prevention and response? Are they linked with national, regional and international actors?
	· What other local resources are available for prevention (eg, traditional or cultural leaders, community-based prevention mechanisms)?
	· What national, international and regional resources are available or being used for prevention (eg, aid, mediation of peace processes, international peacekeeping, formal or informal release processes)?
	· Are current efforts adequate? If not, what are the gaps? What extra resources do they need?
	· Who are the main actors involved in prevention? Are there other actors who could contribute to efforts who are not currently involved? Eg, agencies in other sectors such as livelihoods, education, peacebuilding?
	· How are the likely push/pull factors that led to boys and girls becoming associated being addressed in reintegration support?
	· What cultural norms or practices help to protect children?
	· Have there been efforts by child protection actors to prevent recruitment or support children's release and reintegration? What can be learned from these experiences?
Impact of recruitment and use on boys and girls	· Roles played and potential skills acquired during association with armed force or group
	· Impact of methods of recruitment and length of association
	· Degree of displacement and family separation
	· Disabilities (including visible and invisible disabilities).
	· Mental health impacts on boys and girls, including substance abuse and addiction
	· How are children alleged of having committed crimes during or after their period of association with an armed group or force treated?
	· How do boys and girls perceive their experiences and their futures?
	· Are girls and boys returning with children of their own?
	· How are children's relationships with their families and communities affected by their experiences during association?
Exit and reintegration	· By what means are boys and girls exiting armed forces or groups?
	· What formal processes are in place to support release and which stakeholders are involved in these processes?
	· Are there any statutory bodies involved in the formal release of boys and girls? If so, how are they coordinating with other child protection actors and NGOs? What other related coordination mechanisms are in place?
	· What processes are in place to identify children who exited armed forces and groups informally and who may need assistance?
	· If children are being released as part of a broader DDR process which also includes adults, what preparation has been made to ensure the safety of boys and girls and transfer them to child protection actors during such processes? What is the perceived number of boys and girls exiting armed forces and groups?
	· Age and gender profile of children likely to come out of armed forces or groups (either formally or informally)
	· What are the barriers to boys and girls leaving and how can they be overcome?
	· The continuing power of the original push and pull factors for child association
	· How are families and communities affected by their experiences of conflict and the recruitment and use of children? What attitudes do families and communities hold towards children who have been associated, and any children they may have had
	· Geographic locations of recruitment, likely release and likely reintegration, including consideration of children being released in their original communities
	· Has information been prepared and given to children, families or communities about release processes?

Protection mechanisms	· Main actors within existing protection mechanisms
	· Strengths and weaknesses of national and local protection systems
	· Community-based protection mechanisms and the ways in which boys and girls are protected by families and communities.
	· National resources and capacity to help prevent recruitment and support reintegration
	· Mapping of services for mental health and psychosocial support, gender-based violence, case management, and other necessary sectors, as well as opportunities for social, educational and economic engagement for children, adolescents, families and communities
	· Cultural norms and practices that are supportive or unsupportive of prevention of recruitment or reintegration
	· Availability and accessibility of health and other services for disabled children
Social and economic conditions and opportunities	· Strength and diversity of local labour markets
	· Common and emerging labour skills (including skills boys and girls may have developed during association)
	· Mapping of training opportunities including formal and informal training, and training in non-traditional skills (eg, computing, accounting, etc.) and availability of and access to opportunities for girls and boys, men and women
	· Boys', girls' and women's access to income and resources
	· Barriers to training and livelihood opportunities
	· Existence of and linkages to socio-economic recovery or strengthening programming and funding
	· Access and barriers to formal and informal education opportunities, particularly for girls and disabled children
	· Existence and inclusivity of social cohesion and peace-building programmes and initiatives at both participant and leadership levels, including community-led initiatives
	· Other recovery strategies and initiatives including those supported by the authorities and/ or UN/international community. How are boys and girls being considered within these initiatives?
	· Are all formerly associated children accessing available services no matter the way in which they exited the armed force or group?
Other services	· How accessible are medical and mental health services to boys and girls?
	· Are there any specific services for girls who have left armed forces or groups?
	· What training and livelihood opportunities are available to boys and girls who have come out of armed forces or groups? Are such opportunities also available to parents/caregivers and families to assist their ability to care for children?
	· What linkages are there between services and programmes that support reintegration and other development initiatives?
	· What peace-building programmes exist and how can they support either prevention of recruitment or reintegration?
	· How are services and programmes being provided in a manner that does not promote stigmatisation of boys and girls?

5.5 Key resources

- The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 'CAAFAG Programme Development Toolkit: Training Guide and Guidelines', 2021. **Link**

- Save the Children, 'Situation Analysis Tool, Programme Guidelines on Addressing Recruitment & Use of Children by Armed Forces', 2018, **Link**

- Committee on the Rights of the Child, 'General Comment 12 on the right of the child to be heard', see paragraph 134, pages 26–27. **Link**

- Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 'Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action', 2019. Principle 3 on Children's Participation. **Link**

- Save the Children Norway, 'A Kit of Tools for Participatory Research and Evaluation with Children, Young People and Adults: A compilation of tools used during a Thematic Evaluation and Documentation on Children's Participation in Armed Conflict, Post Conflict and Peace Building', 2008, **Link**

- Save the Children, Youth Voices: Participatory action research with adolescents affected by the Syria crisis in Egypt and Lebanon, 2018, **Link**

- Siobhan O'Neil & Kato Van Broeckhoven, 'No Research About Us Without Us', United Nations University: New York, 2019. **Link**

Chapter 6

Risk Assessment, Security Planning and Risk-Informed Programming

©Sam Tarling/Save the Children

Introduction

Risk assessment and mitigation are necessary for all programming to prevent or respond to recruitment of children. Such programmes are most likely to be implemented in contexts where conflict is brewing or ongoing or in environments of fragile peace. There may be a heavy presence of armed actors, and significant tension and hostility along various lines of difference in communities. Alternatively, armed actors may be less visible yet their threat and presence will still be felt.

In such contexts, implementing programmes to prevent and respond to child recruitment presents numerous potential risks to beneficiaries, organisations and their staff.

Armed groups may fear prosecution, retaliation, or competition over resources, and may respond by threatening or harming beneficiaries, the staff of implementing organisations, or the infrastructure of the organisation. They may be able to stop the organisation working altogether. They may react by detaining, hiding, threatening to harm or actually harming any children still associated with them. They may carry out reprisals against children who have already been released or escaped. Children involved in programmes, and their families and communities, might be at risk of stigmatisation and exclusion, re-recruitment, trafficking, or retaliation by those who see them as traitors or as the enemy. Conversely, in some communities, the children may be celebrated for 'fighting the enemy', which can be equally detrimental to a rehabilitation programme.

Risks may be related to the conflict. For example, it may be dangerous for children, their families and child protection staff to remain in areas where armed groups are still fighting.

The way in which programmes are designed or implemented may in itself create risk. For example, the simple act of approaching or speaking to a child in public while conducting a situation analysis may put them at risk, because they could be suspected of having shared sensitive information. Similarly, interventions intended to support vulnerable boys and girls (and families and communities) may actually increase their vulnerability to violence, abuse, stigmatisation or discrimination, and potential re-recruitment or abduction, by singling out individual children or families, or because they are not secure or confidential.

To limit these risks, it is essential that a risk assessment and analysis is carried out before any programme activities begin – in addition to the risk assessment prior to conducting a situation analysis. The resulting risk assessment matrix seeks to document all potential risk scenarios and what steps could be taken to mitigate them. It should be updated regularly, including with the information provided by the programme and its outcomes.

A risk assessment and analysis follows the same rules, and might use the same tools of with the situation analysis.

> ⟩ See Chapter 5 on Situation Analysis.

6.1 Identifying potential risks

In identifying potential risks, you need to consider both risks posed by the conflict itself, and risks arising from the way your programme is designed and implemented.

Risks are specific to each context. The following list of areas to explore is not comprehensive or prescriptive, and some suggestions will not be appropriate in some contexts. You will need to draw up risks specific to the particular context you are working in, and seek as detailed information as possible.

6.1.1 Examples of risk-related questions to ask
- Is there a risk of exposing children, families or community members to stigmatisation, resentment or reprisals? Who is likely to carry out these reprisals?

- Is there a risk of decreasing the acceptance of the humanitarian actors and of exposing them, their buildings or assets to violent attacks? Who is likely to carry out these attacks and what form might they take?

- Is there a risk of loss of access to children or affected communities, either due to ongoing fighting or deliberate denial of access by armed actors?

- What are the risks to children and communities of your organisation working remotely through local implementing partners? What risks are there to local partners? Are there partners with the required experience and capacity?

- Is partnering with specific stakeholders/organisations likely to result in reputational risks or limit future actions? What are the positions of the government, the military, different communities and donors on the issue of child recruitment and use and the work to prevent or respond to it?

- Is there a risk of conferring legitimacy to armed groups or forces through dialogue with them?

- Where, when and how is sensitive data at risk of falling into the wrong hands? What options are there for protecting data in the context?

- Is there a risk that children will be re-recruited if their status as formerly associated children becomes known?

- Is there a risk that children will be at risk from authorities or other armed groups because of their former association with an armed group or organisation?

6.2 Risk mitigation

You will need to devise strategies to mitigate both risks posed by the conflict itself and risks related to the way the programmes are designed and implemented.

6.2.1 Security planning

Good security planning means that child protection actors avoid or mitigate predictable risks which children, their families and communities, and partners and staff might face, and can respond in a timely and appropriate manner if a risk becomes a reality. Security, readiness and contingency plans for various scenarios should be established and regularly updated. Agencies' security advisors and personnel should be involved in assessing security risks and devising mitigation plans.

The following represent good practice in security planning:

- Establish and regularly revise a security plan, including an evacuation plan, and ensure all staff are familiar with it. Ensure every staff member (including partner organisation staff and volunteers) have understood and internalised the security plan and feel confident about what is expected of them and what they can expect from their organisation.

- Establish a contingency plan for various possible scenarios, in case of sudden or major security developments. The team should be ready to adapt your approach to ensure continuity and avoid harm to children, their families, partners and yourselves.

- Ensure there are adequate resources (equipment such as first aid kits, expertise such as training in psychological first aid, human resources such as security focal points, etc) available for staff and other relevant stakeholders to respond to security threats that may affect them, their work, or the children they are working with.

6.2.2 Risk-informed programming

Risk informed programming means that programmes are designed to account for potential risks in order to mitigate them. As risks evolve, programming and programme outcomes should be adapted and updated, informed by an updated risk assessment.

Every context is different. Risks and mitigation must be considered by actors who have access to updated risk assessments for the context and specific location.

In addition, certain programming approaches have inherent risks that should be considered and mitigated before including them in planned programmes. For example, the Paris Principles recommend that cash payments should not be made to children on release, as there is evidence to show that this puts children in some contexts at risk (see Box).

Cash programmes: the risks

Child Protection practitioners may sometimes consider making direct cash payments to children on their release from armed forces or groups, in the same manner that adults who pass through formal DDR processes are given transitional settlement allowances. However, these programmes can risk doing more harm than good.

In some contexts, there can be a risk that commanders may recruit children just to put them through the release process then take their cash payment. Or they may put the names of children who had not been recruited on release lists to gain their cash payment, while leaving off those of children who were recruited and who remain associated with the force or group.

The knowledge that they will receive cash on release may push children to join armed forces or groups. There are also significant safeguarding risks, including an increased risk of exploitation, for children who receive direct cash payments. The level of risk may vary based on a child's age: younger children may be at higher risk compared to older children, who may be better able to safeguard themselves.

Some practitioners argue that the costs and benefits of giving cash have not yet been fully explored and point to examples of children who sell items they are given on release, to obtain cash with which to buy things they consider more important. They highlight the dignity and self-determination that cash can give a child. This interpretation might inform a decision to include cash payments in a programme, with great care taken at the design phase to mitigate inherent risks.

Risks of perverse incentive, of creating an entry point for corruption or exploitation, and of creating divisions between groups of vulnerable children if one group gets cash while another does not, must all be considered during the programme design phase.[77]

Table 6:1 gives some examples of programme-related risks and corresponding mitigation strategies. Remember that every context is different, and specific risks and mitigation measures should be considered with reference to information from up-to-date risk assessments for your context.

TABLE 6.1 Examples of possible risk mitigation or management

Risk	Examples of possible risk mitigation or management
Risk to programmes of access for staff being sporadic and ad-hoc due to ongoing conflict and insecurity or withdrawal of permissions	· Build the capacity of partners or staff based in concerned communities so that they can be integrated into delivering day-to-day programme activities, including monitoring, evaluation and learning. · Strengthen communications with local partners or staff by providing mobile phones or other communication devices. · Recruit staff with experience of managing remote programming. · Anticipate that costs are likely to be higher than in lower insecurity locations and budget accordingly. · Ensure an exit strategy is planned from the beginning, with an emphasis on transfer of responsibility to locally sustainable support. · Advocate with parties to the conflict for humanitarian corridors to allow humanitarians to access civilians and/or allow civilians to escape active conflict zones. · Design the programme and activities so that they will not cause harm if interrupted, and plan interventions that are sustainable or adaptable to withdrawal of personnel. · In relation to monitoring and evaluation, ensure you choose indicators that are manageable and avoid an overly complex or risky reporting burden. Explore remote monitoring approaches. For example, reports from partners and staff could be complemented by interviews with community members who have recently left the area. All monitoring and evaluation activities should be planned and conducted carefully in line with conflict sensitivity and safeguarding policies and procedures. See Chapter 9 for guidance on how to choose indicators and on remote monitoring.
Risk of reprisals against or non-acceptance of boys and girls who have been associated with opposing armed forces and groups and who are returning home	· Work with community elders and leaders to identify appropriate ways to promote forgiveness and acceptance of children. For example, child-friendly traditional and locally-informed restorative justice mechanisms can be explored. Encourage them to lead by example, to show acceptance and to welcome returning children. · Create space for individual and collective dialogue on issues provoking tension and conflict. · Provide information to children and family members so that they know who to go to for help if they face challenges. · Explore with communities, families and children, methods and opportunities for interaction between them that can support improved acceptance of children. · Consider integration of children in other locations/communities which they are not originally from where they can access appropriate support. · Carry out extensive sensitisation work with community members ahead of and after children's return. 〉 See Chapter 25 on Addressing Impunity for Child Recruitment and Use
Engaging with an armed group, particularly one deemed to be a terrorist organisation, poses a security risk to staff and risks organisational reputation of neutrality and independence, and the ability to partner with certain donors or coordinate with other actors	· Detailed discussions may be needed in some contexts between donors, national governments, the UN and other humanitarian actors, in order to navigate the tensions between politically aligned or opposing parties, counter-terrorism laws, donor conditionality, and humanitarian action. · Advocacy should emphasise that dialogue with an armed group is necessary for the purpose of humanitarian access and does not confer legitimacy or approval to the group. · Sometimes it may be less sensitive to engage in dialogue with affiliated members of an armed group who are based outside the country in which the conflict is taking place. · It may be preferable to engage in dialogue through intermediaries, perhaps on both sides. Among the humanitarian community, some actors may be better placed to engage in dialogue on behalf of others, such as specialist organisations like Geneva Call. 〉 See Chapter 15 on Engaging with Armed Forces and Armed Groups

Confidential data may be at risk of falling into the wrong hands	· Sensitise all staff about the risks associated with handling sensitive data.
	· Establish data security and confidentiality management practices and ensure all staff fully understand these and the consequences and greater implications of not following these practices.
	· Ensure that plans are in place to remove or destroy sensitive data in the event of an evacuation, including personal, identifiable information about children formerly associated with armed forces and groups. It is important that all staff working in the office know what to do, as there may be no child protection staff in the office when the decision is made to evacuate. Marking filing cabinets and hard drives for destruction in an unobtrusive manner may be warranted.
	· Where the risk and likelihood of sensitive data falling into the wrong hands are extreme, avoid conducting activities that involve gathering sensitive data, such as individual case management information of children formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups. Instead, implement broad-based programmes that seek to support children with a range of backgrounds, which might include formerly associated children.
	⟩ See Chapter 18 on Case Management After Release.
Risk of staff members and/or local partners abusing or exploiting children	· Develop a Child Safeguarding Policy and Code of Conduct Policy and ensure that these are understood and upheld by all personnel. It is necessary that all staff, volunteers and local partners understand and agree to the policies, particularly in view of any cultural and traditional norms that either counter the safeguarding policy, such as child marriage and child labour, or enhance community children protection, such as kinship. Monitor adherence to the policies. (See Chapter 8 on Human Resources and Capacity).
	· Set up confidential reporting mechanisms that are child friendly, age and gender accessible, and suitable for literacy rates.
	· Ensure that all staff have received training in Child Safeguarding and understand how to report any concerns. Training should not be limited to programme staff.
	· Examples, of safeguarding measures include requiring that staff work in twos or more, that girls not be alone with male staff, and conducting data protection training.
	· Identify and train child safeguarding focal points.

6.3 Risk assessment matrix

The results of the risk assessment will allow the agency to identify and document all potential risk scenarios and what steps could be taken to mitigate them.

Different elements of risk are identified and their likelihood and potential impact evaluated. A level of risk can be assigned based on information gathered, both objective (observed or reported facts) and subjective (feelings, rumours, testimonies), and triangulated (compared with other information) to verify it. Possible measures to mitigate risks can then be identified and documented.

As risk is not static and may change in both likelihood and potential impact as the context evolves, the risk assessment matrix should be reviewed and updated on a regular basis. This process should include programme, operations and security staff, including field-based staff, with designated responsible people to conduct regular updates and monitoring for compliance.

The development and monitoring of a risk assessment matrix should be carried out in consultation with a range of relevant stakeholders in each geographical area covered by the programme, as the risks are likely to vary in different contexts.

Developing a Risk Assessment Matrix in the field

Along with our local partner, we developed a risk assessment matrix that listed all areas or factors of risk deriving from programming on children and armed violence and analyzed scenarios based on a combination between related threats and their likelihood to occur.

The exercise allowed for a rational analysis of all possible scenarios and led to the development of a set of mitigating measures (security and first aid training for staff, upgrade of security measures) and specific programmatic choices (for instance disengaging with specific categories of children, establishing specific conditions for intake or participation in activities, conducting internal advocacy in UNICEF and with the government to ensure acceptance and address reputational risks).

What was interesting was that the risks varied from program location to another, due to different local community level politics/identities etc. Associating the implementing partner to the exercise helped to address fears and strengthened the ownership of harmonized security precautions and program approach. For example, we thought about what staff should say if asked about their work by security forces in the area, and what everyone would need to do if we had to suddenly evacuate the area.

Child protection specialist[78]

6.4 Key resources

- UNICEF, 'Guidance on Risk Informed Programming' 2018. Module 10 on Child Protection. **Link**

- UNICEF, 'Summary Guidance on Risk, Resilience and Linking Humanitarian and Development Programming', 2018. **Link**

- The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 'Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action', 2019. Standard 4: Programme Cycle Management, and Standard 7: Dangers and Injuries. **Link**

- Save the Children, 'Guidelines for Child Participation in Humanitarian Programing', Risk Assessment Tool', 2013 **Link**

- The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 'CAAFAG Programme Development Toolkit,' 2021. **Link**

Chapter 7
Funding

©UNICEF/UN0243154/Morris VII Photo

Introduction

Funding for programmes to address the recruitment and use of boys and girls by armed forces and armed groups should come from humanitarian, development or human rights funding frameworks. Funding is needed for both immediate and longer-term interventions, which support safe release, address the factors that make children and communities vulnerable to recruitment and use, and support meaningful long-term reintegration, including community strengthening.

Funding streams often focus on less costly short-term processes of release. This can situate such work within security frameworks, to the detriment of children and their rights. Framing the prevention of child recruitment and child release of children from armed forces and groups as solely a security issue fails to support the needs of children and their communities, fails to address drivers of recruitment that may also undermine reintegration, and fails to support community-based recovery, while also undermining boys' and girls' rights and capacities.

All programmes require funding that is adequate for planned results and activities, that will last for the planned period of the programme, that arrives without delays or gaps, and that has some flexibility in how it can be spent, recognising that contexts are not static.

The Paris Principles stress that funding should be "*made available for activities in communities benefiting a wide range of conflict-affected children.*"[79] This enables services and interventions that can help address vulnerabilities to recruitment within homes and communities and which also support reintegration. Making such interventions accessible to all vulnerable boys and girls also allows those who have not gone through formal release processes to access services and support that they need in a safe and confidential manner. It also promotes equality and cohesion within communities as it is provided on the basis of need and not just because a child has been released from an armed force or group.

> **"Reintegration is a long-term process requiring a long-term commitment from states, supported or assisted by child protection actors and donors alike. Funding should, therefore, be available for the time required to ensure full reintegration of children who have been associated with armed forces or armed groups. It should be flexible, enabling programmes to be more responsive to the expressed needs of girls and boys and the needs for capacity-building of actors involved in these activities."**
>
> Paris Principles, 3.25

In relation to reintegration, the consequences of inadequate or inflexible funding are significant. If children are returned to communities without meaningful reintegration support and follow-up, they may be at risk of re-recruitment, trafficking, reprisals from community members, or engaging in hazardous and exploitative activities for income, and they may struggle to make more positive or productive contributions to their societies.

7.1 What good funding looks like

Child protection practitioners should push for funding that is in line with the Paris Principles. The following points should be considered:

- Funding should support the differing needs of boys and girls, and younger children and adolescents

- Funding should support activities that enable children to participate in the planning, design, monitoring and adaptations of interventions that help them.

- Funding should be allocated for activities to prevent child recruitment as well as to respond to child recruitment. Crucially, this should include funding for prevention activities in locations where no child recruitment has yet taken place, but the risk has been identified.

- Funding for child protection programming should be increased in locations where children who have been recruited or children who are vulnerable to recruitment can be supported within larger caseloads of children and families.

- Funding should be considered for all sectors that contribute to preventing recruitment and supporting reintegration of children, including education, livelihoods and peacebuilding, and multi-sector approaches.

- Funding should come from humanitarian, development or human rights funding frameworks that focus on the rights and needs of boys and girls, seeing them as vulnerable individuals and not as potential security threats.

- Initial funding should be linked as soon as possible to funding strategies for longer-term reintegration and recovery programmes across the humanitarian, development and peacebuilding continuum and should strengthen the capacity of local and national actors to provide long-term support to children, families and communities.[80]

- Funding should support all services and elements of programming, considering, for example, that case-based support, community-based activities, mental health and psychosocial support services, monitoring, reporting, evaluation, and capacity building activities all require different competencies and resources to meet the minimum standards for child protection.

- Funding should support programming for both prevention activities and the immediate and long-term needs of formerly associated children, their families and communities, in line with Paris Principles 3.25.[81]

- Funding should enable preparations for release, before release is fully secured. Preparations should be made so that constraints in funding should not delay children being released by armed actors.

- Release of children from armed forces and groups should be encouraged at all times during and after conflict. Accordingly, funding for release and reintegration should never be contingent on any formal peace agreement, peace process, adult disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration or other formal release processes.

- Funding for reintegration activities should be sufficient to allow for an inclusive community-based approach that supports both children known to be formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups and other vulnerable conflict-affected children.

- Funding should be flexible to allow child protection actors to respond to constantly changing, sometimes volatile contexts, to the evolving needs of children, and to the capacity strengthening needs of local partners. For example, funding earmarked for a formal release process might be used to support children released informally if formal release processes are delayed and many children exit armed forces or groups informally.

- Funding must include strategies to improve access for children with disabilities to all basic services and activities as well as to provide targeted services to address their identified needs (physical rehabilitation, medication, assistive devices, transportation, physical accessibility, training and sensitisation of staff, etc.). Targeted measures may be neglected unless funding is specifically allocated.

- Funding for long-term impact evaluation studies should be included.

7.2 Typical funding challenges

Funding remains one of the most consistent and critical challenges for programming for children associated with armed forces and groups. Common funding challenges include:

- Child protection is the least funded of the humanitarian sectors, receiving only 0.53% of humanitarian funding between 2010 and 2017.[82]

- There is a lack of connection between humanitarian funding and recovery/development funding. Funding for prevention of recruitment and reintegration support needs to be included within recovery and development funding frameworks.

- Donor conditions or donor frameworks that focus on counter-terrorism, 'prevention of violent extremism' or national security rather than humanitarian, human rights, development or peacebuilding may influence the delivery of programmes in ways that can cause harm or create risk for service providers. Programming within these frameworks may create a perception of alignment with particular parties to the conflict, and may put staff in danger and risk possible harm or stigma to children who may be labelled as 'terrorists' if they participate in programmes under these frameworks.

- Funding is too often short-term or 'on/off' and subject to gaps. Typically, humanitarian funding is secured for periods of six to twelve months, with uncertainty about the likelihood of additional funding until very late. This can disrupt and delay programme activities and result in a loss of confidence among children and communities as well as an inability to recruit and retain qualified, trained staff.[83]

- Donor commitments may be made but then significantly delayed, reduced, or not delivered, particularly if donors lose confidence in a peace process or in the ability of child protection actors to coordinate and deliver programmes effectively.

- Increased competition for funds in light of frequent emergencies, and the protracted nature of conflicts, creates additional uncertainty due to donor fatigue and cycles of short implementation periods. Donors may not view child protection as priority, 'life-saving' interventions.

- Donors may be reluctant to fund prevention activities, especially where it is difficult to prove that there is a risk of recruitment. Effective prevention programmes often also have a significant price tag, including investing in systems building, strengthening access to quality education and supporting children to enter work.

- Donors may be reluctant to fund programmes for small numbers of children being released, eg, perhaps 10 or 15 children at time or only 100 in a year, due to a need to show high numbers reached.

- Donors may be reluctant to fund inclusive community-based approaches that support other conflict-affected and vulnerable children in the community.

- Donors may push for budgets to be orientated around a fixed 'cost per child', and sometimes to specify how many will receive education support or economic support, when it is frequently not possible to know at the start of a project how many children formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups will be reached. In addition, a fixed cost per child approach is overly simplistic and inflexible, failing to take into

account children's differing needs and choices, evolving options and constraints in a context, the possible variety of support needed and available, and community components of reintegration.

- Agencies may significantly underestimate the costs of quality programming, either as an attempt to be competitive or as a result of poor planning.

- Donors may be reluctant to fund staff posts, expecting organisations to fund staff costs from other sources.

- Donors may be cautious about funding programmes in locations where armed groups designated as terrorist groups operate, or may place conditions on funding that contravene humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, independence and impartiality, due to counter-terrorism laws and policies which limit financial support for such groups.[84]

- Available funding may be overtly or covertly political, especially in ongoing conflict. Donors may be partly motivated by the chance to reduce troop sizes and disrupt operations of an armed actor.

Funding can become more complicated the more actors there are along the chain of funding. A donor government or global foundation might, for example, fund a UN agency, that may fund an international non-governmental organisations at the country level, that in turn might fund a variety of national NGOs at the local level. The longer the chain, the greater the likelihood of delays, overhead costs, and gaps in funding.

As a mitigation against malfeasance and mismanagement, donors rarely release all funds at the outset of a project. Usually donors release funding in 'tranches'. As a condition of funding, regular monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning reports are required, sometimes before the next tranche of funding is released. Each donor may have a different format or list of requirements for reports, which can become time consuming, labour intensive and costly, particularly if the project is funded by several donors. These processes can lead to delays and gaps in funding, as well as staff fatigue, and divert resources from the programming itself, particularly the further down the funding chain an organisation is.

7.3 Addressing typical funding challenges

There are things child protection actors can do to address typical funding challenges. You can:

- Gather evidence that demonstrates the need for prevention and response interventions. Consider collaborating with all relevant implementing agencies and donors to jointly make the case for adequate funding in line with the Paris Principles and the Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action.

- Donors may be more reluctant to fund less visible prevention programmes than release and reintegration programmes. Encourage donors to consider the greater costs of release and reintegration that may be required in future if recruitment is not prevented.

- Demonstrate to donors that funding requests are part of a coordinated inter-agency effort that will use resources efficiently and avoid duplication or gaps.

- Escalate funding advocacy through a regional or head office or coordinate with other organisations that have access to regional and international levels to put pressure on donors at a higher level.

- Urge donors and humanitarian actors to investigate new sources of funding for child protection and mobilise new child-focused recovery funding as a core element of post-conflict reconstruction, building human capital by investing in children's education, mental health and psychosocial support.

- Where donors are reluctant to fund child protection programming, focus on integrated programming with other sectors where interventions that support prevention of recruitment and reintegration can also be supported, eg, within livelihood programmes supporting socio-economic strengthening.

- Negotiate for programme staff to be budgeted as a 'direct cost' as opposed to a 'support cost', recognising that staff themselves are the 'key inputs' in many programme activities, such as case management, and specialist skill sets are required.

- Try to budget upfront for all possible needs, including those that might only become relevant in months to come, such as costs of supporting traditional community-based restorative justice and reconciliation activities, supporting children who are in conflict with the justice system, or overcoming logistical challenges during rainy or winter seasons, for example. The cost of transport for family tracing and follow-up visits is often underestimated. It is always easier to offer to return unspent money at the end of a programme than to request more, although donors will frequently agree to re-allocating unspent funds to a different activity if good reasons are provided.

- As budgets are drawn up before discussions with individual children about what combination of education and livelihoods support will suit them best take place, and because these different types of support have different price tags, err on the side of slightly over-budgeting for these activities. Agree with the donor plans for re-allocating any surplus funds.

- Refuse funding that is unethical (eg, funding for case management work that has a three-month time frame without any prospect of follow-on funding), and advocate for funding levels that will allow partners to meet the Paris Principles and Child Protection Minimum Standards.

- Beware of funding that are tied to security-focused and counter-terrorism frameworks. Advocate for funding provided regardless of the political context, from the perspective of supporting the development and wellbeing of all boys and girls up to the age of 18 years.

- Explore diverse sources of potential funding including: rapid response funds; in-kind and cash funding from UN agencies; post-conflict government contributions; institutional and foundation grant funding; and direct appeals to the public. Identify ways in which child reintegration is situated within humanitarian, development and peacebuilding frameworks to try to access more stable longer-term funding streams.

- Work to achieve donor acceptance (through advocacy and political pressure) that child protection actors need to engage with non-state armed groups, including those designated as terrorist groups, as well as with states. This is necessary to gain access to children who need humanitarian support, and not to confer legitimacy to these groups. Detailed discussions may be needed to navigate the tensions between counter-terrorism action and humanitarian action.

7.4 Key resources

- Child Protection Working Group, 'A Matter of Life and Death'. Child Protection programming's role in ensuring child wellbeing and survival during and after emergencies', 2015. **Link**

- The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 'Still Unprotected. Humanitarian Funding for Child Protection', 2020. **Link**

- Global Coalition for Reintegration, Office of the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, 'Financing Support for Reintegration', 2021. **Link**

- Child Protection Working Group, 'Fundraising handbook for Child Protection and Gender Based Violence in Humanitarian Action', March 2014. **Link**

Chapter 8
Human Resources and Capacity

©UNICEF/UNI276509/Ashawi

Introduction

Staff, including partner staff and volunteers, are the most important resources of programmes focused on preventing and responding to the recruitment and use of children by armed forces and armed groups.

Existing child protection workers, including community-based volunteers, may be able to respond to the needs of children who are released from armed groups, or leave on their own, but it is often necessary to hire and train additional staff and identify new partners and community-based volunteers to implement prevention, release and reintegration programmes. This may be necessary for example, when a large-scale formal release of children is anticipated, or to establish the longer-term continuum of care needed for effective reintegration of children into their communities.

Ratio of case workers to children

In the Child Protection Minimum Standards, the minimum ratio recommended for basic case management is:

- 1 case worker for 25 children

- 1 supervisor for every 5 or 6 case workers.

A higher ratio may be advised for children formerly associated with armed forces where cases are complex.

For group activities, the recommended number of staff depends on the age group involved:

- 2 adult facilitators for every 25 children aged between 10 and 12 years

- 2 adult facilitators for every 30 children aged between 13 and 18 years.[85]

Staff and community-based volunteers will need to master a strong foundation of community-based approaches and core child protection competencies for both prevention of recruitment and reintegration programmes. Competencies specific to working with children affected by armed conflict and children associated with armed forces and armed groups are also needed. Providing high quality services along the continuum of care for effective reintegration requires investment in building all these capacities.

Moreover, it is essential to establish and implement ethical codes of conduct for staff and volunteers to safeguard the vulnerable children with whom they interact. Every organisation should have a Child Protection Policy, Safeguarding Policy or Code of Conduct that make clear, strong and positive commitments to safeguard children, to which all staff and volunteers must adhere.[86]

Staff will also require support to manage their own safety and well-being, recognising the particular demands of working with children associated with armed forces and armed groups.

8.1 Human resources profiles and skill sets

Child protection programming in any context requires a solid grounding in the core child protection competencies. For work with children associated with armed forces and groups, more specialised competencies are also required.

The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action has developed a Child Protection in Emergencies Competency Framework in order to establish a "standard for assessing competency needs and gaps, performance, aspirations, ability, engagement, and potential" for the sector.[87]

The Competency Framework comprises:

Core values (the organisation's or sector's fundamental principles, standards of behaviour, or basis for the code of conduct) Values, such as empathy or integrity, influence the *ways* in which an individual performs behavioural and technical competencies. For example, child protection staff must communicate with beneficiaries (behavioural competency) with empathy or handle sensitive case management information (technical competency) with integrity and confidentiality

Behavioural competencies (the sets of interpersonal or 'soft skills' required for successful job) include working with people, communicating effectively, building trust, and delivering results.

Technical competencies (the sets of technical or 'hard skills') include field-specific technical knowledge, experience, and skills (eg, child protection, health, education, communication, information management, etc.)

Although children associated or formerly associated with an armed group or force are vulnerable to a range of risks that are generally similar to other conflict-affected children, a specific competency domain focused on the knowledge and skills needed to work with this particular group of children is also needed. The Competency Framework lists 24 competencies for preventing and managing risks to children associated with armed forces and armed groups and can be a valuable source to help you define the skill sets you need.[88]

When recruiting and identifying staff and volunteers, or entering into partnership agreements with other child protection organisations, it is important to consider the profiles of individuals within a team and the balance of different profiles across the team. This is good practice in general, but particularly important for programmes that prevent and respond to child recruitment and use in conflict and post-conflict contexts, accordingly, you should support measures to advance diversity and inclusivity of the workforce.

Be mindful that staff members and volunteers may struggle with how they regard and behave towards boys and girls who have been recruited or used by armed forces or armed groups because of social norms they grew up with or that exist within the communities in which they live. This is particularly relevant in attitudes towards girls (including those that are mothers) and boys who have been recruited or are vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups that are designated terrorist groups. The capacity of staff members to challenge their own and other's prejudices and preferences, is crucial to build trustworthy and honest relationships with children. Table 8:1 contains considerations and suggestions to take into account.

TABLE 8.1 Profiles – some key considerations

Background (ethnicity, religion etc.)	· Different religious, ethnic, caste and geographical backgrounds should be represented. Some may be able to access different areas with more safety and greater influence that others. Children may feel more comfortable interacting with people from the same religious/ethnic/caste background.
Language skills	· Different language skills will be needed to communicate with different groups of children and community members.
Gender	· In some cases, girls may feel more comfortable talking to women, and boys with men. Mixed-sex staff teams are also seen as a positive child safeguarding measure.
Age	· A range of ages should be represented. Younger staff may be better able to relate to children, particularly adolescents, whereas older staff may be more respected and influential in community outreach or negotiations with armed forces and groups.
Disabilities	· Adults with disabilities may be more able to relate to and support children with disabilities, and to act as a focal point to monitor the extent to which programme activities and community-based services are addressing the needs of children with different disabilities. Simply seeing adults with disabilities productively employed may encourage and inspire children who are struggling with disability and normalise disability generally.

Local knowledge	· Emphasis should be placed on the value of local NGOs or individuals hired locally who have knowledge and understanding of local political, religious, ethnic or caste-based sensitivities. Local organisations or individuals are likely to be able to better navigate these context-specific dynamics than international NGOs or international staff. For example, they can quickly judge whether a child of a certain background can safely be included in activities with children from contrasting backgrounds. Comparative salaries should be analysed and care taken to avoid setting pay levels so high as to create a pull factor that is harmful to local organisations and government ministries.
Neutrality and impartiality	· Independence, neutrality and impartiality are key requirements for all organisations and individuals. Local organisations or individuals may be politically or otherwise aligned or associated with an armed force or armed group. Carry out background checks for staff including translators.
Values, attitudes, behaviours	Individuals must demonstrate and agencies must promote the following values, attitudes and behaviours: · Empathy and respect and concern for others · Ability to see issues from others' perspectives and acknowledge and value other people's perspectives and differences · Respect and sensitivity towards gender, age, cultural and religious differences · Non-judgemental, self-aware, and with an ability to challenge one's own and others' prejudices, biases and intolerances. · Aware of power dynamics with children and communities and exerts authority with respect and humility. · Maintains high ethical standards and act as a positive role model. · Active listener, aware of non-verbal cues, and able to communicate with boys and girls of differing ages.

Various complimentary skills will be needed across the organisations and among the individuals involved in work addressing prevention of child recruitment and reintegration. When planning, also consider how best to invest in long-term capacity building to improve expertise and avoid creating a pull factor that is harmful to local organisations. Table 8:2 contains considerations and suggestions.

TABLE 8.2 Skill sets – Key considerations

Experience with children in conflict with the law / gangs/street-connected children	· Identify local organisations or individuals who have experience working with children in conflict with the law, gangs or street-connected children, who may have useful skills and knowledge. For example, experience of mediating between children and families who have fragile relationships, of working with children who are used to using violence to survive, and of working with children at risk of recruitment into armed gangs.
Experience with families and communities	· All staff, including volunteers, should have a basic level of skill for working with children and families and with communities. This includes communication with children and parents/caregivers, case management, and basic psychosocial support.
Experience in case management	· Staff and community workers who will be in charge of case management need not only to know case management process, but also to be familiar with the issue of child recruitment and use, and look at it from the perspective of the child.
Local connections	· Consider organisations or individuals who have invaluable local knowledge, experience and contacts that can be leveraged to support the programme.
Psychosocial and mental health expertise	· There is no need for all staff and volunteers to have high levels of experience and skills in mental health and psychosocial. However, where there are many children with significant psychosocial and mental health issues, but limited professional expertise available, specialists can offer support and coach other staff through a tiered system to reach much larger numbers, and provide individual assistance to children and families with particularly high needs. The 2007 Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings are an important resource for planning and coordinating integrated activities to address the most urgent mental health and psychosocial issues in emergencies. See Chapter 22 for more information on psychosocial and mental health issues.

Disability	· Many organisations and individuals lack knowledge about the rights of persons with disabilities, are unaware of local specialist disability services and so fail to make referrals or have difficulty communicating with children or colleagues with disabilities.
	· Provide training for staff, partners and volunteers, on disability and how to manage persons with disabilities and provide practical examples of how to adjust services so that they are accessible to children with disabilities.
	· Ensure that issues related to children with disabilities are included in partnership agreements, job descriptions and performance evaluations.

8.1.1 Identifying required child protection core competencies

There is no need for all staff and volunteers to have high levels of experience and skills in mental health and psychosocial support, working with girls, with disabled children, with communities, etc. Individuals and groups that already provide support to children (such as parents, friends, religious groups, teachers and schools) should be identified and supported, for example by training and engaging local women's groups to increase their outreach if it is known that girls trust them.

However, it is essential that agencies employ mental health and psychosocial support specialists, and specialists in working with girls, disabled children and communities, or build capacity on these issues within their teams. Your agency will need to identify the expertise needed for each role and develop job profiles with specific responsibilities, to attract qualified staff and further develop their professional capacities.

As discussed in greater detail elsewhere (See sections 3 and 5 on Programming for Prevention and Reintegration), programming to prevent and respond to child recruitment and use should take a community-based approach that seeks to support all conflict-affected children. The community-based approach reduces likelihood of stigmatisation of or resentment against children who were formerly associated with armed groups or forces, and promotes their effective reintegration, while reaching as many children as possible with prevention measures.

Child protection actors working with conflict-affected children will need a level of familiarity with a wide range of more specialised issues and the corresponding basic skill sets needed to work in these areas, depending on the context.

These could include:

- Unaccompanied and separated children
- Sexual and gender-based violence
- Mental health and psychosocial well-being
- Monitoring and reporting of grave rights violations against children
- Education
- Advocacy
- Livelihoods support to children and families in emergencies
- Peacebuilding
- Children and justice
- Child and adolescent developmental phases
- Child-focused recovery
- Conflict analysis, risk assessment and risk management.

Every child has multiple needs. Child protection workers should identify and address as many of the child's needs as possible, in a holistic way, to avoid leaving unaddressed needs that can hamper reintegration. Addressing children's whole needs will require close collaboration and coordination between teams with different areas of expertise, including teams from other sectors such as health and education, and other organisations.

8.1.2 Capacity development

Capacity building of staff, partner organisations and volunteers should be based on an assessment of the competencies, attitudes and behaviours required to fulfil their role and their current level of skills, knowledge and experience. Capacity building needs and approaches will therefore differ from context to context.

There are many different ways in which capacity building can be carried out. Technical workshop-style training events and computer-based training packages have value, but capacity development should not stop there. Ongoing learning and on-the-job training enable theory to be practised and contextualised. Different approaches include:

- Workshop-style group training
- Individual self-led learning with appropriate resources, including online resources if possible
- Mentorship or coaching of junior staff by senior staff
- Pairing staff with different skills and experience to work alongside each other
- Exchange visits between field offices or organisations
- Secondment of skilled staff into a different team
- Periodic staff workshop discussions to reflect on learning
- Monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning reflections also present an opportunity to share learning and build capacity (see Chapter 9 on Programme Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning).

Recruiting new staff

The influx of new organisations in an area can have both positive and detrimental impacts. On the one hand it may create employment and training opportunities for local members of the community and enhance child protection values and expertise in the community. On the other hand, it can lead to a drain of staff from existing organisations and the government, raise salary expectations, and cause disappointment if funding does not permit longer-term employment. New organisations should be conscious of their impact on other organisations in a community, be sensitive to existing salary scales, and invest in capacity development.

8.2 How to cope with a lack of qualified staff

Where possible, building on and strengthening the capacity that already exists should be the starting point, including when more staff is required. Organisations that specialise in related fields may be open to expanding into child protection work, including on issues related to prevention of recruitment and reintegration, especially if capacity building is offered.

If there is a lack of available child protection workers with the right profile, skills and experience, it might be helpful to consider the options presented in Table 8:3 below.

TABLE 8.3 Options when there is a lack of qualified staff

Use volunteers	Consider using volunteers, supervised by qualified staff, and providing training as required, to adhere to 'do no harm' principles.
Second staff	Second staff with specialised experience to the programme from other locations. Identify a national counterpart to work alongside international experts and to eventually take over from them. Qualified staff from the region may be preferable to those from elsewhere if they have a greater understanding of the context and language skills.
Capacity building	Hire relatively inexperienced staff but invest heavily in a range of capacity building measures so that capacity will look quite different in 6-12 month time.
Prioritise	Consider how to prioritise the resources that are available to the greatest effect (see Chapter 18 on Case Management After Release).

While it is tempting to rely on volunteers, they have commitments beyond the programme, and overburdening them may prove counter-productive in the long run if they withdraw due to other priorities or pressures on their time or finances. Identifying ways of recompensing volunteers, eg, by covering transport and/or meal costs, and providing training that they can use for future employment, can be helpful. Paying a daily allowance is also possible but, in some contexts, has been seen to discourage true volunteerism. Care should be taken not to expect volunteers to perform staff functions which have different skill needs and accountabilities. In all cases, volunteers must be supervised by professionals and encouraged.

8.3 Child safeguarding

Children associated with armed forces and groups, and those at risk of recruitment, are likely to be some of the most vulnerable children in the community. It is essential that all staff, whatever their role and level in the organisational hierarchy, including staff of partner organisations and volunteers, adhere to strict child safeguarding standards.

8.3.1 Child safeguarding responsibilities of all organisations[89]

Prohibition of sexual exploitation and abuse, and commitment to upholding child safeguarding standards: Establish a Child Protection Policy, Safeguarding Policy or Code of Conduct that makes clear, strong and positive commitments to safeguard children. The policy should outline the appropriate standards of conduct, preventive measures, reporting, monitoring, investigation and corrective measures the organisation will undertake with regard to child safeguarding, including protection from sexual exploitation and abuse. The policy should make reference to:

- Inter-Agency Standing Committee Six Core Principles Relating to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (see section 8.4.1)

- Secretary-General's Bulletin on the Special Measures for Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (for UN agencies)

- Keeping Children Safe Standards and Resources.

It should cover "actions or behaviour which may constitute poor practice or potentially abusive behaviour". For example, adults must never "develop relationships with children which could in any way be deemed exploitative or abusive". [90]

Ensure all staff and volunteers not only receive and sign these policies but that they are fully discussed, understood and internalised by staff.

Mandatory training for all personnel: Hold mandatory and regular training events for all personnel on the organisation's Child Protection or Safeguarding policy and procedures, to include:

- a definition of sexual exploitation and abuse, aligned with the UN's definition

- prohibition of sexual exploitation and abuse

- actions that personnel are required to take in the case of misconduct, including sexual exploitation and abuse (ie, prompt reporting of allegations and referral of survivors).

Capacity building: Facilitate workshops to explore how the organisation's policies relate to the specific context, and identify any areas where staff might feel torn loyalties between the organisation's policy and their friends, family, community, politics, religion or culture. Develop scenarios in which staff might be at risk of breaking the policies and discuss appropriate behaviour in such situations (see box below). These issues should be discussed regularly and not be the subject of a one-off session.

Screening and vetting: Include a standard clause in all contracts and partnership agreements requiring contractors, suppliers, consultants and sub-partners to commit to a zero-tolerance policy on sexual exploitation and abuse and to take measures to prevent and respond to it. There should be a systematic vetting procedure in place for job candidates (eg, reference checks, police records, Google searches) in accordance with local laws regarding employment, privacy and data protection, including checking for prior involvement in sexual exploitation and abuse or other safeguarding concerns. At the stage of staff recruitment, obtain references from previous employers and carry out background checks with the police if possible. Ask questions regarding any reports of misconduct, abuse of authority, or sexual harassment, exploitation or abuse. During the job interview ask the candidate questions that relate to child safeguarding, particularly scenario-based questions, which can give insight into how they might treat children and whether their personal ethical framework is in line with the organisation's policies. Where community volunteers are employed, references from community members may be considered.

Reporting misconduct: Have mechanisms and procedures in place for personnel, children, families, and communities, including children, to report allegations of misconduct, including sexual exploitation and abuse. The mechanisms and procedures should comply with core standards for reporting (i.e. safety, confidentiality, transparency, accessibility) and all beneficiaries must be made aware of them and that there are adequate safeguards for confidentiality and whistleblowing. Provide training to staff on their obligations to report and to children, families and communities on their rights to be free from abuse and how to report instances of misconduct.

Response, including assistance and investigations: Have a system in place to ensure survivors of abuse, including sexual exploitation and abuse, including children, receive immediate professional assistance, referring them to relevant service providers. Establish a process for investigation of allegations of misconduct and that your organisation is able to provide evidence that it has appropriately dealt with past allegations, if any, through investigation and corrective action.

Mixed teams of male and female staff must be involved in all aspects of programming.

Examples of scenarios that should be contextualised and discussed with all staff and volunteers

1. A caseworker is busy arranging apprenticeships for children. The children are frustrated and keen to begin as quickly as possible, but the placements take time to organise. The caseworker is approached in the street by a friend who has a son and asks the caseworker to prioritise helping her son. She invites the caseworker to come to her house that evening for a meal.

2. A social worker and her supervisor sit next to each other on a public bus as they travel home from work. The social worker has had a difficult day. She is upset about a case of a boy who has been sexually abused, who is now staying with a foster family in the local community. Her supervisor comments that she looks tired and asks her to tell her what is wrong.

3. The office cleaner overhears the finance manager boasting that he has a young girlfriend who will do anything for him. No one will employ her, because she used to be with an armed group. He gives her money for her school fees and she comes to his house most days after school.

> **Inter-Agency Standing Committee Six Core Principles Relating to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse[91]**
>
> 1. Sexual exploitation and abuse by humanitarian workers constitute acts of gross misconduct and are therefore grounds for termination of employment.
>
> 2. Sexual activity with children (persons under the age of 18) is prohibited regardless of the age of majority or age of consent locally. Mistaken belief regarding the age of a child is not a defence.
>
> 3. Exchange of money, employment, goods, or services for sex, including sexual favours or other forms of humiliating, degrading or exploitative behaviour is prohibited. This includes exchange of assistance that is due to beneficiaries.
>
> 4. Any sexual relationship between those providing humanitarian assistance and protection and a person benefitting from such humanitarian assistance and protection that involves improper use of rank or position is prohibited. Such relationships undermine the credibility and integrity of humanitarian aid work.
>
> 5. Where a humanitarian worker develops concerns or suspicions regarding sexual abuse or exploitation by a fellow worker, whether in the same agency or not, he or she must report such concerns via established agency reporting mechanisms.
>
> 6. Humanitarian workers are obliged to create and maintain an environment which prevents sexual exploitation and abuse and promotes the implementation of their code of conduct. Managers at all levels have particular responsibilities to support and develop systems which maintain this environment.

Particular emphasis should be placed on the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse of children by humanitarian staff, including UN agencies, international and national NGO partner staff, and peacekeepers. There have been many cases where these actors, whose role is to protect and assist, instead commit acts of sexual exploitation and abuse against vulnerable populations. Whenever there are unequal power dynamics there is risk of sexual exploitation and abuse. Children are particularly vulnerable due to the greater power of adults in most societies, especially as they rely on adults for their care and sustenance. Children may have no trusted adult in their life to whom they can report abuse, and their experiences within an armed force or group may have conditioned them to expect this type of abuse.

In addition to the above requirements of personnel working with children, all centres where children are supported should have information on how to report abuse and seek support visibly posted, in a local language, adapted for children and illiterate populations. This should include, at minimum, a phone number and a trained staff member who can be spoken with directly. Anonymous complaint boxes are not recommended, as they may create delays in a child receiving prompt assistance and risk causing further harm. The harm caused to a child who has been sexually abused of exploited is discussed in Chapter 2 on The Impacts on Children of Recruitment and Use by Armed Forces and Groups, Chapter 22 on Mental Health and Psychosocial Reintegration Support, and Chapter 27 on Girls Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups, and cannot be underestimated. In addition to the harm caused to individual children, sexual exploitation and abuse, abuse of authority, bullying, or favouritism by staff members can lead to a decrease in wider staff morale, a loss of trust among community members and partners, delays to implementation, termination of employment contracts and potential criminal proceedings for the individual staff member(s) responsible. Further, organisational reputation will suffer, permissions to operate may risk being revoked and some donors may cut funding, preventing the organisation from being able to support child protection programming.

8.4 Staff security

There are security risks for all staff working in conflict and post-conflict areas. However, staff working with children associated with armed forces and groups, particularly national staff and local community workers or volunteers, may encounter heightened risks to their personal safety. For example, staff may be at risk of:

- aggression or reprisals from armed forces and groups

- physical violence from children who may be desensitised to violence and struggling to control their emotions. Some children may still have access to weapons

- attacks from community members or opposing armed actors for 'helping the enemy'

- being caught in indiscriminate violence in conflict zones.

It is important to discuss and understand staff's security concerns and try to mitigate them, and to regularly update safety and evacuation plans based on a continuous assessment of the security situation. See also Chapter 6 on Risk Assessment, Security Planning and Risk-Informed Programming.

> **"The best security measure you can have is local staff who are dedicated, believe passionately in what they are doing, and have the respect of their community. However, you also have to recognise that their lives are inseparable from the conflict dynamics. Some of our staff have agreed to work with children associated with one armed group, but they fear that their own lives will be in danger if they work with children associated with another armed group. So we respect this and we use different teams in different areas."**
>
> Save the Children child protection technical adviser, Central African Republic, 2014[92]

8.5 Staff welfare

Organisations owe their staff, including volunteers, a duty of care. This calls for measures to support their staff to maintain good physical and mental health.[93] An investment in staff well-being is an investment in the quality and professionalism of all areas of programming. Provision for staff well-being is frequently underfunded and deprioritised.

Staff working with children associated with armed forces and groups may be exposed to high levels of stress, work long hours, and have decreased opportunities to exercise, socialise or do other activities that normally help them to relax.

When working with children formerly associated with armed forces and groups staff may feel physically threatened, or struggle with strong emotions of frustration, anger, guilt or grief.

Staff living and working away from home may be cut off from their usual support systems and feel isolated when working in remote areas.

Staff from conflict zones may be directly affected by conflict dynamics and effects and may be coping with personal loss or major changes in their own lives. They may feel complicated emotions towards the children because of violence committed toward fellow community members or may be criticised by community members for helping these children.

Furthermore, local staff may be living with the knowledge that if the security situation worsens, international staff will be evacuated, while they and their families may be unable to leave.

8.5.1 Key steps to promote staff well-being[94]

- Create a concrete plan to protect and promote staff well-being for the specific context, including culturally appropriate relaxation and team building exercises.

- Prepare staff for their jobs and the context.

- Facilitate a healthy working environment.

- Actively identify and address potential work-related stressors.

- Support access to healthcare and psychosocial support for staff, including staff who have experienced or witnessed extreme events or who frequently hear or read stories of violence.

- Provide access to adequate, professional supervision and debriefing, particularly for social workers and caseworkers. This can be achieved through a tiered staffing structure with clear line management responsibility for confidential debriefing.

- Support staff at the time of programme closure for national staff; or after deployment, for international staff.

8.6 Key resources

Managing human resources
- The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 'Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action', 2019 edition. **Link**

- The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 'Child Protection in Humanitarian Action Competency Framework', 2020. **Link**

Child safeguarding
- Yvonne Kemper, 'Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA): A Practical Guide and Toolkit for UNICEF and Partners', UNICEF, 2020. **Link**

- Keeping Children Safe, 'Safeguarding Children in Emergencies Toolkit, 2012. **Link**

- Keeping Children Safe, resource library, online. **Link**

- Inter-Agency Standing Committee, Task Force on Protection from Exploitation and Abuse in Humanitarian Crises, 'Six Core Principles Relating to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse,' PSEA Taskforce,.**Link**

- Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 'Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA). Inter-agency cooperation in community-based complaint mechanisms. Global standard Operating Procedures', May 2016. **Link**

- United Nations Secretariat, 'Secretary-General's Bulletin on the Special Measures for Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse', ST/SGB/2003/13, October 2003. **Link**

Staff well-being
- Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 'Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings', IASC, Geneva, Switzerland. 2007. **Link**

- Antares Foundation, 'Managing Stress in Humanitarian Workers. Guidelines for Good Practice', 2005. **Link**

- Headington Institute, Resources and free online training modules on understanding and coping with the stress associated with humanitarian work, online. **Link**

Chapter 9

Programme Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning

Introduction

Effective monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (MEAL) are essential to measure the extent to which your work is achieving results. Good MEAL systems enable accountability to children, their parents and communities affected by conflict; to donors; and among child protection actors. They enable you to monitor the progress of projects and programmes, assess whether the approaches used were suitable for the circumstances and made a difference, and to make course corrections. What you learn from monitoring and evaluation can inform the future direction of the programme or project being monitored and others elsewhere or in the future.

Planning for MEAL should be done before the programme or project begins, and monitoring and evaluation should be conducted throughout the course of programming, to assess progress and allow adjustments to improve interventions where necessary, for example to improve the quality and reach of interventions, add more appropriate and effective activities, or include more girls, disabled and other vulnerable children.

Close continuous monitoring of both programme and context is essential. Data to inform this monitoring can come from your programme and project monitoring as well as context monitoring, such as the UN-led Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (See Chapter 10 on Monitoring Child Recruitment and Use by Armed Forces and Armed Groups).

- Programmes and projects should try different approaches, learn from what seems to be working and what does not, informed by regular MEAL activities.

- Practitioners and policy makers should understand that it may be difficult to definitively attribute outcomes of a project or programme in such a complex, unpredictable and uncontrollable environment and must be flexible in their approach, learning as they go.

- As a project may focus on a specific geographical area, organisations may learn from the MEAL results of other organisations working in the same area, or from other projects of their own organisation in different locations. Coordinated efforts to share learning should be encouraged, while accounting for any differences in the context.

> A **project** has specific expected objectives to be attained and activities to be conducted during a specific period.
>
> A group of related projects are components of and contribute to a larger **programme**, which is designed to achieve broader collective outcomes. Related projects are managed and coordinated together to achieve those greater results.

9.1 Setting up a MEAL plan

Preparing a thorough and realistic MEAL plan at the outset of a project or programme is worth all the time and effort invested. Monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning must not be an add-on, only considered at the end of a project, but must be carried out throughout the lifetime of a project or programme.

Generally, a MEAL plan is developed after a thorough analysis of the situation and as an integral part of preparation of the programme as shown below.

>) See also Chapter 5 on Situation Analysis.

- Conduct a safe participatory consultation with children, families and community members to develop processes for obtaining feedback on the project activities and outcomes.

- Identify a manageable list of appropriate indicators and corresponding tools, developing a measurement scale. Identify sources of data, frequency of data collection, and establish baselines and targets.
  For guidance on selecting indicators tools, data collection, baselines and targets, see section 9.2 below.

- Develop and agree ethical and safeguarding considerations and budget for your MEAL system.

- Define the roles and responsibilities of staff members with respect to MEAL. These could include MEAL specialists and people working in sectors other than child protection, (eg, education, health). Train staff in how to carry out monitoring activities.

- Monitor periodically and record the information collected.

- Analyse the data to demonstrate both the positive and negative impacts of the interventions.

- Use your analysis to adapt programming and make course corrections to improve interventions.

- Feed back lessons learned to stakeholders in the programme.

There are good generic resources on how to build a Monitoring and Evaluation framework. For example: Save the Children and the Open University's course on Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning,[95] the Save the Children Feedback and Reporting Mechanism,[96] and the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action.[97]

Finally, to learn what works and what does not work in different contexts, and develop an understanding of why, you need to look at the same subjects – such as people – repeatedly over a long period of time (e.g., five, ten or fifteen years after their release from armed forces and armed groups). Such long-term studies can contribute to a better understanding of the impact of child recruitment and use, and of the experiences of reintegration, long into adulthood. They can provide valuable insights to enable adjustments in policy and practice.

9.2 Developing indicators and measurement tools

9.2.1 Indicators and measures

Indicators that measure objective information can be a numerical measure of a quantity (a number, an index, ratio or percentage). This kind of 'quantitative' indicator is useful for capturing a certain type of numerical information which is useful for determining programme reach and beneficiary information. They can provide a clear determination of the situation and are easily comparable between different projects or over time if the same methods have been used to measure them (eg, number of children that have gone through a reintegration programme).

Such measures, while easy to understand and compare across contexts, may not capture important, nuanced, information related to programme quality or indicate the causes for the changes measured. Nor can they capture information about experiences and perceptions. Such outcomes are better captured by 'qualitative' indicators, such as how effectively children are reintegrated or how much confidence communities of return have in the support their children have received. Both types of measures have value and importance although one or the other may be more suited for a particular purpose. See also Chapter 5 on Situation Analysis.

In Standard 11 'Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups', the Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action highlight key quantitative outcome indicators (ie, specific, observable, and measurable characteristics or changes that represent achievement of the planned outcome) for programmes aiming to prevent recruitment and use of children by armed force and groups, and support their release and reintegration. They are presented in Table 9:1.[98]

TABLE 9.1 Indicators

Indicator	Target	Notes
11.1 - The percentage of children who remain disengaged from armed forces or groups 12 months after completing targeted programmes. (Numerator: children who completed programme and who remain disengaged with armed groups after 12 months. Denominator: total number of children completing targeted programmes)	75%	Time period to be contextualised (eg, months here); the time reference needs to be long enough to be a meaningful measure of impact 'Targeted programmes' to be defined in context.
11.2 - The percentage of children separated from armed forces or groups who were reintegrated into a family environment. (Numerator: number of children separated from armed forces or groups who were reintegrated into a family environment. Denominator: total number of children separated from armed forces or groups)	60%	'Family' refers to biological family or alternative, such as a foster family, kinship care, etc. Targeting reflects recognition that some children will not reintegrate into a family environment but will be able to reintegrate into community.
11.3 - The percentage of children who were reintegrated into family environment and were still with their families 6 months after placement. (Numerator: number of children who separated from armed forces or groups who were reintegrated with their families and remain there after six months. Denominator: total number of children separated from armed forces or groups who were reintegrated with their families)	80%	Time reference to be contextualised; it needs to be long enough to be a meaningful measure of impact
11.4 - The percentage of identified children separated from armed forces or groups who receive basic services to support their recovery. (Numerator: number of identified children who separated from armed forces or groups who receive basic services to support their recovery. Denominator: total number of children separated from armed forces or groups)	80%	Services can include healthcare, psychosocial support, education etc. Each should be measured separately.

Most indicators require specific guidance and clear definitions of terms to assist those involved in collecting and analysing data. For example, 11.2 "reintegration into family environment" needs to be clearly defined as it means something beyond merely reunification with family. It could mean self-reported positive feelings or perceptions of acceptance by immediate family, or absence of reported experiences of specific types of discrimination.

9.2.2 Potential additional quantitative indicators

To complement the above indicators, which record basic quantitative information, the following are examples of additional indicators that could be used within a project if relevant. Exactly which indicators are relevant will vary depending on the context, project objectives and activities. Each indicator would need to have an established means of verification and calculation.

Outcome indicators – measuring programme impact:

- The percentage of targeted communities where 80% of those surveyed can describe commonly-agreed strategies to prevent and report child recruitment (target: to be determined in country context)

- The number of military personnel trained in child rights and child protection who demonstrate increased knowledge through pre and post testing

- The percentage of humanitarian workers surveyed who demonstrate a clear understanding of how to identify and report cases of child recruitment and use

Output indicators – measuring programme actions:

- The percentage of children released from an armed force or group, and reunified with their parents or provided with alternative care solutions, that have received a follow-up visit within three months of reunification

- The number of parents and caregivers provided with information on symptoms of psychosocial stress and how to deal with these in a non-violent manner

- The number of community-based child protection networks who have received training on appropriate physical security and prevention of child recruitment strategies and are supported and active

- The number of households supporting children released from an armed force or group who access livelihoods programmes

It is advisable to be realistic and select a few good indicators that are clearly defined and for which information can be regularly and reliably gathered rather than overburden staff with excessive monitoring and reporting demands or use weak indicators. All indicators must be broken down by age and sex and in any other ways that are relevant to the context, such as disability.

9.2.3 Developing contextually-appropriate definitions of successful reintegration

What is considered effective reintegration may vary greatly between contexts, even in the same country. Children, families and community members are best placed to comment on the extent to which children have successfully reintegrated into their communities. Therefore, to develop indicators to measure what successful reintegration looks like in a particular context, a participatory process must be undertaken with the children, families and communities involved. During the process, it is helpful to discuss whether each indicator should have equal weight, or whether some are more important than others.

The example below shows some ways a participatory process could be carried out. There are many other accessible and tested tools including Participatory Rural Appraisal, 'participatory ranking' and 'free listing'. Whatever methods are used, it is important that they are participatory and facilitated in a manner that participants feel safe with and by someone with whom they feel comfortable to discuss the issues with. Anonymous or third-party assessments could also be helpful in addressing potential bias.

Selecting meaningful context-specific indicators for successful reintegration

One way to do this, which involves children from the start, is through consulting with children and young people about what assets, behaviours, skills, attributes and relationships they think would be necessary for children to be able to 'successfully reintegrate' in their community. So, in other words – what would be the indicators of 'successful reintegration'?

This may be done through asking:

- Children you're currently supporting what they feel will help them in the future to reintegrate.

- Other young people or adults who have reintegrated what was important to them in terms of successful reintegration and what may have been a barrier.

- Local children in the community about what they feel would help a child integrate into their community.

- Elders or adults in the community about what elements are important for a child to be accepted and included in the community.

Such consultations may involve the following questions being asked:

- How would you know if a child was integrated and accepted in the community?

- What does a well-integrated child look like? How do they act? What qualities would they have?

Through discussing and grouping answers into different domains or areas (for example behaviours, skills, knowledge, attitudes, relationships) the team, together with the children and young people, may be able to come up with locally relevant understandings and indicators of successful reintegration in their particular context that could then be used for monitoring purposes.

Extract from Cody, Claire, 'Monitoring and Evaluation of Reintegration Toolkit', (Working Draft 2013, 2016), University of the Highlands and Islands Centre for Rural Childhood, Perth College, pp.30-31.

Experience of developing contextually-relevant indicators for children associated with armed forces and groups suggests that they tend to cluster around particular themes such as those below.[99]

- **Psychosocial wellbeing**: resilience, degree of self-worth and self-confidence; confidence in relationships and engagement with others, identification of role models, hope and ability to think about the future

- **Acceptance by family**: school/financial support from family; equal treatment among children in household; listened to by family

- **Acceptance by community**: participation in community activities; perception of child by community; listened to by community

- **Economic situation**: adequate shelter; frequency of meals; ability to buy essentials

- **Physical health**: general hygiene; frequency of illnesses; use of contraceptives; access to health care services

- **Education**: access to education; performance in education; knowledge of key life skills

It is important that boys and girls express feelings of progress in their situations and acceptance within families and communities. Parents, caregivers and members of communities should also express the degree to which they accept children and how

they have settled into communities. The box below list indicators developed through a participatory process with girls, women and boys formerly associated with armed groups in Sierra Leone. While it is context specific, and is not relevant for all contexts, it provides some food for thought.

Example of indicators developed through participatory methodology in Sierra Leone

Indicators developed with girls and women formally associated with armed groups in Sierra Leone in 2007:[100]

- Is engaged in income-generating activity

- Married/has a good marriage

- Goes/has gone to school

- Has children

- Good health

- Eats well

- Emotional and/or financial support from family

- Is invited to join community events and celebrations

- Is invited to women's safe space events

Indicators developed with girls and boys, including both children formally associated with armed forces and groups and other children in the community, in Sierra Leone in 2004:[101]

1. Is reunited with family and community

2. Experiences care and love in the family

3. Has acceptance and active involvement in the community

4. Experiences peace and security

5. Has or had access to school and skills training

6. Contributes towards household livelihood and to meet basic needs

9.2.4 Identifying people to provide information

It is important to get information and views on the success or challenges of reintegration projects from a mix of different perspectives, for example from children who were formerly associated with an armed group or force, other children in the community, parents and caregivers, teachers, and community leaders (see Chapter 5 on Situation Analysis, for key respondents). Participatory methods can be used to help identify profiles of people to approach.

Some children may not wish to disclose their status as being formerly associated with an armed force or group, but may be willing to speak about their perceptions of community reintegration in general by participating in project monitoring activities or more generally framed discussions.

9.2.5 Measurement tools

After you have defined the indicators that demonstrate effective reintegration within your context, you will need to agree a means of verifying whether a particular child

has achieved this. This could be meeting or making progress on all or a portion of the indicators, particularly the most important. You will need to create measurement tools for each indicator. Some indicators, such as reunification with family, access to school or skills training, and improved livelihoods or access to basic needs, may be assessed through case file or programme information, while for more subjective indicators, such as experiencing peace and security, care and love in the family, and feeling accepted and actively involved in the community, a questionnaire may need to be completed by the child or family or both. Questionnaires completed by community members could also assist in determining the effectiveness of reintegration programmes, particularly when measuring the level of community acceptance and involvement.

Overall, developing effective measurement tools to adequately assess programme outcomes requires specialised monitoring and evaluation expertise that should be brought into the programme planning process at the earliest possible stages.

9.3 Programme evaluation

Evaluating the impact of programming is essential to learning but is often challenging.

While it may be possible to observe and measure changes over time, it is not always easy to attribute observed effects to a particular programme or activity. This is especially true in programmes concerning such complex issues as the prevention of child recruitment and the release and reintegration of children, in which so many factors are at work that practitioners may not be aware of or able to keep up with changes and interactions. It may be difficult to conclude with certainty, for example, that rates of recruitment are decreasing due to programme interventions and not because a conflict is winding down or is shifting to a different location. Approaches that would require comparing rates of recruitment or success of reintegration between project beneficiaries and a 'control' group that had been deliberately denied support are not ethical. However, particularly where there are resource constraints and not all programme participants are able to receive every service, there are ways to gather existing information for purpose of comparison.

A further challenge to longer-term impact evaluation is the short funding cycles that so often limit how long MEAL can continue. Funding for projects in humanitarian contexts is typically made available for periods of up to 12 months. This makes it difficult to plan for meaningful longer-term impact evaluations, considering that it may take several years or more for children to have successfully reintegrated into their communities, and within that time their situation may fluctuate significantly. There should be frank discussions with donors about the length of funding necessary to plan for meaningful evaluation of project impact.

Nevertheless, assessing the impact of reintegration activities is possible to some extent, if approached with sensitivity and care. Comparisons can be made between groups that have been involved in a programme for different periods of time, or received different combinations of services, in order to discern which programmatic approaches and activities are more effective. In addition, gathering information from participants over the course of the programme and for a period afterwards can give an indication as to the impact.

Additionally, making time for consultations with key stakeholders at the beginning, middle and end of projects can provide opportunities to gather in-depth information about the various 'push and pull' factors that can or are continuing to influence child recruitment and use, as well as reintegration effectiveness.

It is also important for evaluations to try to capture the views of children and young people who were not able to access services in order to establish what the particular barriers to their participation were as well as the consequences of non-participation. Save the Children's Evaluation Handbook[102] and ALNAP's Evaluation of Humanitarian Action Guide[103] provide more guidance for planning and implementing evaluations.

In planning impact evaluations, it is important to consider:

• the objectives of the evaluation – what do you want it to tell you?

• the scope of evaluation – which activities will be examined, in which areas, over which time period?

• indicators and methodology for gathering information: How will baseline data be captured at the beginning of the project? Will there be a mid-point evaluation in addition to an end-of-project evaluation?

• how the information will be used and who it will be shared with

• staffing, resources and budget needed.

9.4 Remote monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning

Project activities may be implemented by local, national or international organisations. In some contexts, it may be impossible for those managing the project to gain access to certain areas due to ongoing conflict, instability and political sensitivities, or poor weather and impassable roads. In such situations, the most common way to implement child protection activities is through partnerships between international or national and local organisations. This may require remote programme monitoring and evaluation. Remote monitoring and evaluation are very challenging to do effectively and to a high degree of confidence, but there are lessons learned from experiences in different contexts.

Good practices for remote monitoring and evaluation[104]

• Aim for a 'good enough' approach and actively avoid over-burdening implementing partners with intensive MEAL demands.

• Select a few key indicators that will give a basic indication of quality and progress. Don't just copy from another location where access is easier.

• Use simple language and ensure key terms are defined and understood.

• Pay particular attention to the 'Means of Verification' for each indicator; have a realistic and transparent conversation with implementing partners about how the information will be obtained and verified. Photos and videos may be useful to supplement written reports, provided they do not identify individual children.

• Explore innovative, context-specific ways to get information from different sources to confirm data in monitoring reports from implementing partners; while always first assessing these other sources for potential risk of harm. For example,

  – Interview community members who have recently left the area about their knowledge of services available in the area.
  – Interview by phone key community stakeholders, such as teachers or community leaders, about programme activities.
  – Establish a feedback and complaints phone line or online mechanism (connectivity dependent) to enable people inside a restricted area to share their views.
  – Arrange for peer-to-peer monitoring with other local organisations working in the area.
  – Identify appropriate third-party actors who are able to safely carry out monitoring in the restricted areas.

- When assessing the capacity of potential partners, consider their ability to collect data for monitoring purposes, and identify any gaps that will need strengthening.

- Consider bringing implementing partners to a safer location to participate in training on monitoring and evaluation to address any gaps in capacity.

- Facilitate frank discussions of context-specific challenges and possible ways to overcome these. Foster a relationship where implementing partners feel able to openly share problems and discuss solutions, as opposed to feeling motivated to hide or cover up problems for fear of losing funding.

- Maintain regular contact with implementing partners through phone calls, emails and video chats; this may require budgeting for high communications costs.

- Although regular and predictable access may not be possible, occasional ad hoc visits may be, during which monitoring can be carried out.

- Recruit staff with experience of remote implementation and remote monitoring from other contexts to manage the implementing partners.

International child protection organisations must be mindful of the danger of simply transferring risk to local partners, local staff, and third-party evaluators. Even if local actors have access to an area, it may still not be safe for them to carry out a full range of programming activities relating to child recruitment and use. For example, the identification of children associated with armed forces and armed groups may put children, families and staff at huge risk. In insecure and high-risk contexts, activities that avoid calling attention to individual children, and which will not cause further harm if started and then disrupted, should be favoured. An exit strategy should be planned from the beginning, focused on increasing the capacity of local implementing partners.

) See Chapter 6 on Risk Assessments, Security Planning and Risk-Informed Programming for more guidance.

9.5 Accountability to children, families and communities

All child protection actors should strive to be accountable to the children and communities that they intend to support as well as to the donors who fund them. General best practices and approaches to accountability can be found in resources such as Save the Children's Accountability Guidance Pack.[105] Different methods will be appropriate depending on the context. It is essential that children, their families and community members are involved in deciding appropriate accountability methods that suit them.

Key components of accountability:

- Information sharing with beneficiaries and community members

- Participation of community members in programme design and implementation

- Feedback and complaints mechanisms

Potential methods of achieving accountability:

- Suggestions/complaints/feedback box

- Suggestions/complaints/feedback desk, in a camp or town centre

- Telephone hotline or online complaint mechanism

- Regular community meetings

- Election of community representatives or advisory committees, including child and youth representatives, to collect and channel feedback

- Targeted focus group discussions with particular stakeholders including children

- Online methods such as websites, so long as they do not pose risks and complies with data protection standards

9.5.1 'Do no harm'

A key principle of accountability to children, their families and the community as well as to staff in one's own organisation or partner organisation is that no harm is done to them through programme activities. This applies across all areas of programming and requires a conflict-sensitive approach that accounts for specific risks in the context of the conflict, including those that may differ between programme sites.

- Be aware of the harm that can be caused through drawing attention to children who were formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups or their families.

- Avoid activities that single out children formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups and their families, highlight differences between them and their peers, or create further stigmatisation or risk of reprisals.

- Provide safe and confidential ways for children and others to input on programme design and feedback on programme implementation.

- Provide safe, confidential, and child-friendly ways for children and others to report incidents of unethical conduct by programme staff, including sexual exploitation and abuse.

9.6 Learning from experience

Monitoring, evaluation and accountability actions provide the opportunity to learn from successes and failures as well as from the programme experience.

It helps to build moments of reflection into the project cycle to incorporate feedback and adjust the project design. Not everything that has been planned will work, no matter how much effort was put into the preparatory planning stages. Contexts change and in a complex situation such as recruitment of children in armed conflict, there are so many interacting forces at work that many will not be apparent, predictable or controllable. It is unlikely that everything will go to plan.

Be flexible and ready to learn and adapt. Do not feel constrained to only try approaches that have worked in a different context or at a different time. Some of the most effective programming has resulted from a courageous decision to follow well-informed hunches about how something may work in a particular context. If it does not work, take time to try to understand why and share that learning.

One way to build moments of reflection into programming can be to hold regular workshops to reflect on what is going well and what is not, to promote sharing and learning between teams of staff working in different areas or on different activities, to make required changes, and to provide feedback to the community about these changes. Such moments of reflection can be built into programme proposals and planning discussions with donors and managers.

This will help make them aware of the complexities of the programming and the value of such an approach.

9.7 Key resources

- The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 'Assessment, Measurement and Evidence Working Group'. **Link**

- The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 'Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action', 2019. Standard 6: Child Protection Monitoring, Standard 11: Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups. **Link**

- The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 'CAAFAG Programme Development Toolkit: Training Guide and Guidelines', 2022. **Link**

- ALNAP, Monitoring and Evaluation Resources, online. **Link**

- Save the Children and the Open University, 'Online training for Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning', 2017. **Link**

- Save the Children, 'Feedback and Reporting Mechanism', 2020. **Link**

- UNICEF, 'Child Protection Resource Pack: How to Plan, Monitor and Evaluate Child Protection Programmes', 2015. **Link**

Endnotes SECTION 2

67 It may be possible to allow participants anonymity through the use of codes rather than organisation names.

68 The Global Humanitarian Cluster System is designed to facilitate coordination between and among government structures and humanitarian agencies by establishing coordination focal points.

69 Source: Conversation with UNICEF, February 2019.

70 International Save the Children Alliance, 'A Fighting Chance: Guidelines and implications for programmes involving children associated with armed groups and armed forces', Save the Children, London, UK, 2004. pp.19-20.

71 Isobel McConnan & Sarah Uppard, 'Children not Soldiers: Guidelines for working with child soldiers and children associated with fighting forces,' Save the Children Fund, London, UK, 2001, (hereafter, 'Children not Soldiers'). pp.43–44.

72 The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 'Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action', 2019, (hereafter, 'Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action'). p.41.

73 Action for the Rights of Children. Foundation module 4: 'Participation and inclusion', 2009. pp.39–40.

74 Draws on 'Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action', particularly Standard 4 (Programme Cycle), p.79, and Standard 11 (Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups), p.139.

75 Draws on: Child Protection Working Group, 'Child Protection Rapid Assessment Toolkit', Global Protection Cluster, December 2012, p.10, and Action for the Rights of Children resource pack, Study material, Foundation module 3. 'Programme design', p.25, and Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, Standard 4: Programme Cycle Management, p.79.

76 Draws on 'Children not Soldiers', pp.292-303.

77 Further information, see United Nations, Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standard (IDDRS), Module 5.20, 'Children and DDR', Section 8.5.8. See also Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action' for information on emerging lessons on child protection and cash programming.

78 Personal correspondence with a UNICEF child protection specialist.

79 UNICEF, 'The Paris Principles. Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups', adopted February 2007, (hereafter, 'The Paris Principles'). Principle 3.24, p.12.

80 'The Paris Principles', Principles 3.23, 3.24, 3.25, p.12.

81 'The Paris Principles', Principle 3.25. See also, Principles 7.2 and 7.40.

82 Save the Children, 'Unprotected: A Crisis in Humanitarian Funding for Child Protection', The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 2019. See also, Save the Children, 'Still Unprotected: Humanitarian Funding for Child Protection', The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 2020.

83 Global Coalition for Reintegration of Child Soldiers, 'Reframing reintegration: From humanitarian action to development, prevention, peacebuilding and beyond', 2021. See also Joanna MacVeigh, Sarah Maguire & Joanna Wedge, 'Stolen Futures: The reintegration of children affected by armed conflict', Save the Children, 2007, London, UK, pp.ix–x.

84 For more information on this topic, see: Emanuela-Chiara Gillard, 'IHL and the humanitarian impact of counterterrorism measures and sanctions', Chatham House, London, UK, September 2021, and Humanitarian Practice network, 'Counter-terrorism laws and regulations. What aid agencies need to know', Number 79, November 2014.

85 'Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action', Standard 18, p.198.

86 See 'Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action'. Standard 2: Human Resources, pp.63–64.

87 The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 'Child Protection in Humanitarian Action Competency Framework', December 2020, (hereafter, 'Child Protection in Humanitarian Action Competency Framework').

88 'Child Protection in Humanitarian Action Competency Framework', p.25.

89 See Yvonne Kemper, 'Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA): A Practical Guide and Toolkit for UNICEF and Partners', UNICEF, 2020.

90 Save the Children International, 'Child Protection Policy,' 2020.

91 Inter-Agency Standing Committee Secretariat, 'Six Core Principles Relating to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse', September 2019.

92 Personal correspondence with Save the Children child protection technical adviser.

93 Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 'Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings', IASC, Geneva, Switzerland, 2007, (hereafter 'Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings'). p.87.

94 Adapted from 'Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings'. pp.87–91.

95 Save the Children and the Open University, 'Online training for Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning', 2017.

96 Save the Children, 'Feedback and Reporting Mechanism Guidance', 2020. **Link**

97 Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 'Assessment, Measurement and Evidence Working Group'.

98 'Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action', 2019 Edition, p.142.

99 Draws on: Tomo Hamakawa & Katherine Randall, 'Measuring the Immeasurable: Community Reintegration of Former Child Soldiers in Côte d'Ivoire', Harvard Kennedy School and Save the Children UK, April 2008; and Lindsay Stark, Alastair Ager, Michael Wessells & Neil Boothby, 'Developing Culturally Relevant Indicators of Reintegration for Girls Formerly Associated with Armed Groups in Sierra Leone using a participative ranking methodology', Intervention, 2009, Volume 7, Number 1, (hereafter, 'Developing Culturally Relevant Indicators of Reintegration for Girls Formerly Associated with Armed Groups in Sierra Leone using a participative ranking methodology'). pp.4–16; and Save the Children, 'No Place Like Home? Children's experiences of reintegration in the Kailahun District of Sierra Leone', Save the Children, 2004.

100 'Developing Culturally Relevant Indicators of Reintegration for Girls Formerly Associated with Armed Groups in Sierra Leone using a participative ranking methodology'.

101 'Developing Culturally Relevant Indicators of Reintegration for Girls Formerly Associated with Armed Groups in Sierra Leone using a participative ranking methodology'.

102 Save the Children, 'Evaluation Handbook', 2012, **Link**.

103 Margie Buchanan-Smith, John Cosgrave & Alexandra Warner, 'Evaluation of Humanitarian Action Guide', ALNAP, 2016.

104 Draws on: Somalia NGO Consortium, 'Remote Programming Modalities in Somalia Discussion Paper,' drafted by Oxfam International and Merlin for NGO Consortium, January 2009.

105 Save the Children, 'Programme Accountability Guidance Pack'. 2013, **Link**.
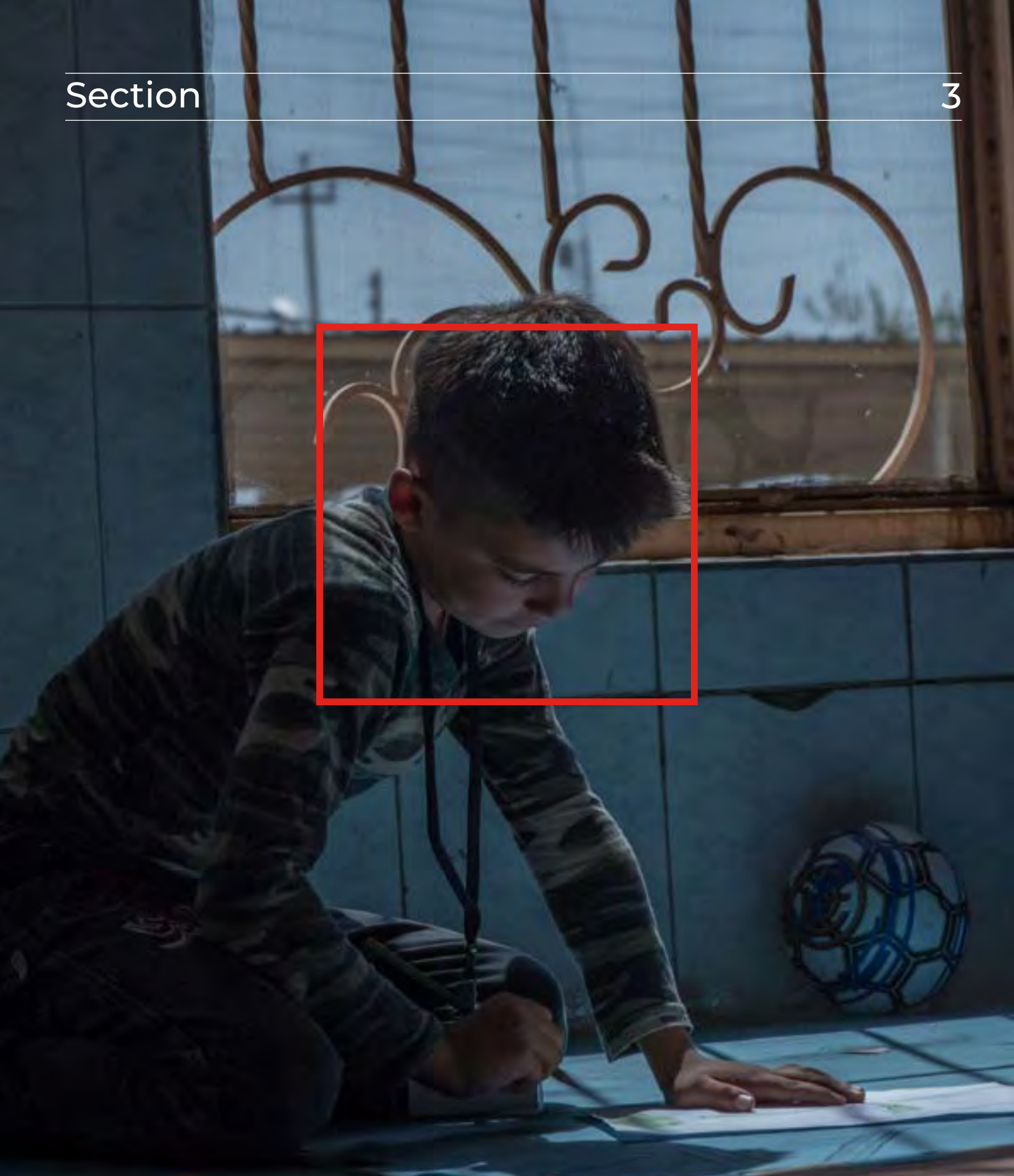
PROGRAMMING FOR PREVENTION

Chapter 10
Monitoring Child Recruitment and Use by Armed Forces and Armed Groups

Introduction

Monitoring and reporting of the recruitment and use of children by armed forces and armed groups should be carried out in any conflict context, and elsewhere if there is a risk of recruitment. With the changing nature of conflicts and forms of recruitment, in particular the increasing use of social media, the risk of recruitment can be present in peaceful contexts.

Evidence-based data on child recruitment and use can:

- inform advocacy to end and prevent recruitment and use of children

- inform design and implementation of programmes for prevention and response

- assist in leveraging funding for programmes, and

- provide evidence with which armed forces and groups that recruit and use children in armed conflict can be held accountable.

Monitoring and documenting recruitment and use of children by armed forces and groups can be conducted in a variety of ways. It may be undertaken by child protection actors or child rights organisations, including human rights organisations, as part of an ongoing situation, trend or needs analysis (see also Chapter 5 Situation Analysis), for advocacy purposes, or to inform programme design and targeting. In some situations, child protection actors have supported community members to build or strengthen community-based monitoring networks or early warning systems.

The Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on Grave Violations against Children in Situations of Armed Conflict (the MRM), established in 2005, is a formal monitoring mechanism. It is triggered when a country is added to the UN Secretary-General Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict as a situation of concern or when a party to a conflict is listed in an Annex to the report.

Certain international treaties and charters, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (1989) and the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (OPAC), require States to report on progress on a regular basis. Child protection actors may be invited or permitted to submit parallel or 'shadow' reports in some cases, for which monitoring information is useful.

Whatever form monitoring and reporting on child recruitment and use takes, it is inherently political, sensitive and challenging. Monitoring and reporting activities should not be carried out at the expense of putting children, their families, monitors, or communities at risk, nor of endangering humanitarian staff or jeopardising humanitarian access. They should only be conducted after a risk assessment and responses for potential findings have been prepared. Such responses may include support for children in the community who need to access protective, legal, gender-based violence, medical and mental health and psychosocial support services, or release and reintegration programmes.

10.1 General principles for establishing a monitoring and reporting system[107]

Monitoring and reporting of rights violations against children in armed conflict poses many risks given the inherently political nature of the activity. These can include:

- risks to victims, survivors and their families, including the risk of stigmatisation or reprisals if the community learns that a child has allegedly committed violent acts, is sympathetic to certain causes or has been sexually abused;

- risks of sharing self-incriminating evidence;

- risks to individuals and communities reporting instances of recruitment and use, including the risk of violent reprisals if an armed force or armed group learns that they have reported sensitive information;

- risks to child rights monitors and humanitarian staff gathering or suspected of gathering information

- risks to humanitarian organisations and operations, including the possibility their access to beneficiaries or authorisation to work in the area or country could be denied.

An initial risk assessment is essential in every context. Risks must be constantly monitored, and mitigation strategies revised as necessary. Monitoring and reporting of child recruitment (and other grave violations) should only be carried out consistent with 'do no harm' principles after considering, in collaboration with child protection programme implementers, the potential impact on both the programme and child, family and community safety. Before engaging in monitoring and reporting, programming to respond to the needs of children, families and communities should be in place in case they disclose violations.

In some situations, maintaining a distance between those carrying out the monitoring and reporting and those implementing programmes can reduce the risks for programmers. Nevertheless, a joint assessment of risks is always useful to ensure that appropriate contingency planning and risk mitigation measures are in place.

Whoever conducts monitoring should be trained to undertake risk assessments, to identify and interview sources where safe and appropriate to do so, to triangulate and verify the quality and accuracy of the information, to document the information gathered, and to maintain safe and coordinated information management.

A key component of risk mitigation is the sensitisation and training of those collecting, recording, and reporting information. Data and information management systems, protocols and practices to maintain strict security and confidentiality should be in place. Individuals who collect information should be trained so that they fully understand the risks, how to adhere to protocols and practices, and the implications for breaching them. In some contexts, it might be appropriate to extend training to journalists and human rights activists monitoring child recruitment and use by armed groups and forces.

>) See also, <u>Chapter 6</u> Risk Assessment, Security Planning and Risk-Informed Programming.

No matter how monitoring is carried out, all those involved in collecting, analysing, managing and reporting information related to child rights violations in conflict should have a sound understanding of and commitment to the following principles.

Table 10:1 provides principles for monitoring and reporting child recruitment and use.

TABLE 10.1 Principles for monitoring and reporting recruitment and use of children

Best interests of the child	In all decisions involving children, their best interests must be a primary consideration. This includes decisions made about an individual child or groups of children. While the decision to establish the UN Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism in a particular situation or country comes from the UN Security Council, when planning and implementing the mandate, staff must consider children's individual and collective best interests.
Do no harm	All staff must reflect on what applying the 'do no harm' principle means when monitoring in a given context. No action should be taken that might jeopardise a child's or their family's safety, such as proceeding with an interview in an exposed location, disclosing their identity or information that could identify them in public reports, or insisting on asking questions on matters they do not want to talk about. Among the necessary considerations are: · Ensure child's access to essential services prior to collecting testimony. · Understand relevant referral pathways and services for children and offer them to the children and their families. · Pair monitoring efforts with referrals to needed services. · Follow up to ensure there is no negative impact from making a disclosure, to the extent possible. · Adhere to safe information management practices.
Informed consent	When documenting an incident, the person – adult or child – who is providing information, the informant, should be told why the information is being sought and how it will be used. They must be made aware of the potential risks of disclosing the information and given time and opportunity to consider the potential implications so that they can make an informed decision about whether to share their information. If they do not want to share information, informants should not be pressured to do so and should be reassured that there will be no penalty for not sharing information, such as the withdrawal of services. 〉 See <u>Chapter 18</u> on Case Management After Release, for additional guidance on obtaining informed consent from children.
Respect for the views of the child	The child's opinion on how he or she wants their information to be treated, including if they change their mind about sharing the information, should be respected, unless carrying out the child's wishes might compromise his or her safety or psychological wellbeing.
Confidentiality and security of information	Due consideration must be given to the security of children who have suffered rights violations, their families and communities, witnesses and other information providers, and those carrying out monitoring activities. · Protect anonymity in public reports including information that, even if anonymised, could lead to a child, family, informant or monitor being identified. · Maintain confidentiality in the interview process. · Establish and abide by information security protocols. · Capture a minimum level of detail and secure all identifiable data. (See Information Management Systems in Chapter 18: Case Management After Release.)
Impartiality and objectivity of information gatherers	Information collectors should be independent, not affiliated to parties to the conflict, and should gather and provide information on rights violations committed by all parties to an armed conflict impartially and without prejudice. · Engage independent, impartial and objective information collectors. · Provide information collectors with guidance on monitoring principles and training in data collection and interviewing guidelines and best practices. Conduct timely and strategic monitoring as close to or as near in time to the event(s) as possible.

Assistance for those reporting	Monitoring mechanisms must be coupled with response programmes. Those gathering information must know where to refer children or families for support.
	Follow-up is necessary to ensure no negative impact from making a disclosure.
Coordination among organisations	Establish or strengthen existing coordination and information-sharing mechanisms among different actors working on monitoring and reporting efforts (e.g. across different regions, between local and national levels), as appropriate.
	· Enable networks of focal points to share information among themselves and at national level while adhering to safe information-sharing practices.
	· Conduct cross-border monitoring activities where relevant and feasible.
	· Create secure inter-agency information management systems (e.g. local and sub-regional databases).
	· Agree on baseline information and key indicators to be monitored as well as approaches to monitoring.
	〉 See also Chapter 4, Coordination
Quality of information	Maintain a commitment to practices that enable verification of the quality, reliability and accuracy of information, for example, triangulating information from multiple sources.
Timeliness	Monitoring and reporting must both be done in a timely and strategic way. Monitoring should take place consistently or as near in time to the event as possible and reported soon after to facilitate appropriate responses. Limited access to affected children may affect immediate verification, but should still be undertaken for the purpose of prevention, referral and accountability of violators.

10.2 What to monitor and how information gathered can be used

Monitoring violations of children's rights by armed forces and armed groups is likely to involve gathering a broad range of qualitative and quantitative information. These may include, for example, the conditions of detention, how recruitment was carried out, how many children reported or verified as recruited, what proportion of the total number of recruited children have been released. Information can be gathered from primary sources (firsthand, such as interviews with children, families, teachers, direct witnesses, etc.) and secondary sources.

10.2.1 What might you monitor and how?
The way in which information might be gathered will vary depending on the circumstances. You might monitor:

- Incidents of attempted unlawful recruitment, the level of force, coercion or manipulation employed, and whether successful. Information about the circumstances of recruitment and use, such as the number of children affected, their age and gender, where and how the recruitment or use took place, and the attitude of the community towards the recruitment could also be used to inform risk assessments and programming needs and approaches.

- Cases of abduction or disappearances of children, unexpected school dropouts and concerns about links to armed forces or armed groups, including for armed groups that engage in terrorist acts, should be investigated. Anecdotal information will need to be verified but can be useful to direct monitors where and how to follow up on emerging or less visible trends.

- Likewise, the number, location, and manner in which children exit armed forces and groups should be monitored, including which forces or groups are involved.

- Observational monitoring of and reporting on children currently associated with armed forces and groups should be sought where active monitoring might pose too great a

risk to the child or monitor. For example: children observed with weapons, in military clothing, working at checkpoints, carrying out tasks to support an armed force or group, living with the armed force or group, travelling with or providing information for an armed force or group – including cross-border troop movements.

- Incidents of children who have been captured/detained/released/rescued or who have escaped from or left armed forces or groups.

- Identification of children within their armed groups by focal points in charge of monitoring from inside.

Programmes for children affected by armed conflict can also provide useful information. For example, monitoring activities and outcomes of release and reintegration programmes can help identify geographic trends, methods of and risk factors for recruitment.

Situation monitoring can also provide valuable information. For example, observing increased presence of military personnel, increased militarisation of schools, including the use of schools for military activities and recruitment drives in or near schools, or the distribution of political leaflets inciting violence or encouraging voluntary recruitment might indicate that there is a risk of children being recruited or affected by armed conflict. Monitoring the media for political speeches and articles might also provide insightful information.

10.2.2 How might the information be used?
The information you gathered might be used:

- **To form a basis for actions** to engage with parties to the conflict to take steps to stop recruitment of children into armed groups and forces and seek the release of children currently associated with an armed group or force.

- **To help to form an evidence base** to hold perpetrators accountable through judicial processes, such as national or international courts, and non-judicial processes, such as sanctions.

- **To help child protection actors to monitor trends and patterns over time** to inform programming. Nuanced analysis and interpretation of the information, based on a thorough understanding of the context, will be necessary to ensure accuracy. For example, an apparent reduction in the number of children recruited or used may be the result of increased fear of reporting by community members or loss of contact between community members and child protection actors. Insecurity and geography may also present access challenges for external monitoring and verification, or children may be hidden during inspections of bases or training camps.

- **To increase awareness** about the existence or prevalence of children associated or formerly associated with armed forces and groups within a population, for the purpose of advocacy and resource mobilisation for prevention and response activities.

10.3 The UN Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on Grave Violations of Child Rights (MRM)

The MRM was established by the UN Security Council in 2005 through Security Council Resolution 1612. This formal mechanism provides "*for the systematic gathering of accurate, timely, objective and reliable information on grave violations committed against children in situations of armed conflict, as well as in other situations of concern as determined by the Secretary-General. Such information should be used as a basis to foster the accountability and compliance of parties to conflict with international child protection standards and norms, and should lead to well-informed, concerted and effective advocacy and responses to protect and care for children.*"[108]

The MRM specifically monitors six grave violations against children in armed conflict:

- Killing or maiming of children

- Recruitment and use of children

- Rape and other forms of sexual violence

- Abduction of children

- Attacks against schools or hospitals

- Denial of humanitarian access to children

Any of the first five violations can act as initial 'triggers' for a party to a conflict to be 'listed' in the annexes of the Annual Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict. A UN-led Country Task Force on Monitoring and Reporting must then be established to systematically gather accurate, timely and objective information on grave violations against children in armed conflict in that country.

10.3.1 The role of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict

The Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict (SRSG-CAAC) serves as the UN system focal point for the Security Council-related children and armed conflict agenda and implementation of the MRM. The Office of the SRSG-CAAC is responsible for preparing the Annual Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict. It also receives, reviews and compiles information and provides quality control for the country reports of the Secretary-General under Security Council Resolutions 1612, 1882, 1998, 2068 and 2143, as well as the Global Horizontal Note, a quarterly confidential note, which provides updates to the Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict (SCWG-CAAC) on MRM countries and situations of concern.

The Office of the SRSG-CAAC plays an important role in supporting the Country Task Forces for Monitoring and Reporting (CTFMR) in their activities, in collaboration with UNICEF headquarters, the UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO), the UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) and other UN agencies, funds and programmes.

10.3.2 Composition of the Country Task Forces for Monitoring and Reporting

CTFMRs are composed of all relevant UN entities, represented at the most senior level in-country. These may include, at a minimum and as relevant to the country context, representatives of: DPPA, DPO, UNICEF, OCHA, UNHCR, OHCHR, UNDP, UNESCO, UNFPA, UN-Women, ILO and WFP. The CTFMR is co-chaired by the highest UN authority in the country, whether it is the SRSG or Resident/Humanitarian Coordinator, and the UNICEF representative. Designation of an additional co-chair may also be considered in contexts where specific UN entities play a key role in the MRM process.

Other members of the human rights and child protection community operating in-country may be invited to become members of the CTFMR. Such entities must be neutral, impartial and independent from all parties to the conflict. They may include NGOs and independent national bodies such as a Human Rights Commission or Ombudsman. NGOs may associate themselves with the work of the CTFMR either as formal members or, if security or other considerations preclude this, they may be associated informally. The composition of the CTFMR may be reviewed and amended by its co-chairs on a yearly basis, to ensure the most appropriate representation.

- Note that typically, a lot of time and energy needs to be invested in coordination and relationship building between the members of the CTFMR. Due to the inherent risks and challenges, there is a need to build trust and confidence over time.

- It is important that members of the humanitarian and development communities who are outside the child protection field know how they can report suspected incidents of child recruitment and use to CTFMR focal points.

10.3.3 Responsibilities of the CTFMR

The CTFMR serves as a forum for information collection, verification, analysis that contributes to the Secretary-General's Annual Report, and the quarterly Global Horizontal Notes and country-specific reports to the SCWG. It is also a forum to discuss and inform responses by the United Nations country team and other relevant child protection actors at the national and global levels in application of Security Council resolutions on children and armed conflict and applicable recommendations of the Secretary-General and SCWG-CAAC. Actions by various members of the CTFMR are in accordance with each member's respective mandate.

The CTFMR also engages parties to conflict in dialogue, including in preparation, implementation and monitoring of Action Plans against child recruitment and use. Even when armed forces or armed groups are de-listed, monitoring should continue. The CTFMR should work to ensure that the MRM is phased into a strong national monitoring system with the ongoing involvement of child protection actors.

⟩ See also Chapter 25 on Addressing Impunity for Child Recruitment and Use for more detail on Action Plans.

Example of an innovative approach to monitoring violations in Syria[109]

There have been significant challenges to monitoring grave violations against children in Syria since the armed conflict began there – including lack of access to affected areas; a lack of response services; and potential risks to monitors, and to victims and other people providing information. The UN has therefore developed an innovative approach to the MRM, whereby violations that have occurred inside Syria are documented among refugees and humanitarian workers who have left Syria and crossed into one of the four neighbouring countries. This monitoring is undertaken almost exclusively by UN agencies. There continue to be key challenges, including verifying information in the absence of access to the locations where events occurred, and significant coordination to ensure that teams working across five countries are using a common approach. Nevertheless, remote monitoring has been shown to be possible. This could potentially be a useful approach in other situations where there is limited access to an area of intense fighting, but where there is movement of people out of that area into places of refuge.

10.3.4 The role of Non-State Armed Groups

Various Security Council Resolutions on Children and Armed Conflict call for the CTFMR to enter into dialogue with Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs) to prevent and address grave violations against children, including child recruitment and use, while noting that such engagement does not entail UN 'recognition' or confer legitimacy on such actors.

NSAGs listed in the Secretary-General's reports on children and armed conflict may be invited to enter into Action Plans with the CTFMR. Dialogue with NSAGs regarding Action Plans may take the form of regular face-to-face visits to discuss progress, or sporadic encounters via intermediaries or third party 'influencers', for example. In some contexts, NSAGs may be willing to engage and receive support to work towards international standards, especially where they wish to play a role in peace negotiations and political life. In other contexts, NSAGs may have no interest in engagement. Key challenges can include diffuse chains of authority and lack of access due to insecurity or geography.

⟩ See Chapter 15: Engaging with Armed Forces and Armed Groups.

10.3.5 The role of communities

Community-based child protection mechanisms are an important component of the protective environment for children. In some contexts, where it is safe and appropriate to do so, community-based child protection mechanisms can play an important role in the MRM. In situations where humanitarian access is limited by insecurity, these groups may be able to obtain information that would otherwise not be recorded.

However, their work is not without challenges. These challenges include exposure to significant personal risk, uncertainties over sustainability, financial and technical capacities, and potential ethnic, political or other biases. As such, it can be beneficial to support their work and to maintain a link with their efforts to monitor, prevent and respond to child rights violations.

There may be additional practical ways to support communities in strengthening monitoring and early warning systems to prevent child recruitment. See Chapter 11: Community-Level Approaches for Prevention of Child Recruitment.

Example of the role of community-based mechanisms[110]

In Mindanao in the Philippines, Community Based Child Protection Networks have been established in the conflict-affected areas in an effort to address child recruitment and use by armed groups. This is in recognition of the fact that more formal child protection structures (known as Local Councils for the Protection of Children or Barangay Councils for the Protection of Children), do not function as well in conflict affected areas. This approach has been seen as a "good practice."

10.4 Monitoring and reporting against international legal standards and principles

Monitoring and reporting may take place against certain international legal standards and principles, key examples of which are listed below.

⟩ See also Chapter 3, The Legal and Normative Framework.

TABLE 10.2 Examples of mechanisms for monitoring and reporting against legal standards and principles

Mechanisms	Reporting requirements/opportunities
Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict (OPAC)	State Parties must submit periodic reports to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child every five years. Independent child protection actors contribute to government reports and/or submit alternate shadow reports.
The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child	State Parties must submit initial reports within two years of ratification or the entry into force to the Committee of Experts, and every three years thereafter. African Union and UN agencies and relevant NGOs and civil society organisations are periodically invited to submit reports on specific technical areas.
The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court	States Parties or relevant child protection actors periodically submit reports or other documentation at the request of the Court on situations under investigation by the Office of the Prosecutor.
The European Union Guidelines on Children and Armed Conflict[111]	The EU Heads of Mission, Heads of Mission of civilian operations, EU Military Commanders (through the chain of command) as well as the EU Special Representatives include an analysis of the effects of conflict on children, including recruitment and use of children, in their periodic reports and may prepare *ad hoc* reports on country situations, which may include information on recruitment and use of children.

International Labour Organisation's Conventions, including The Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention and The Forced Labour Convention	State Parties submit reports every two years to the Committee of Experts detailing implementation measures.
Independent NGO reports	Based on their missions some child protection and human rights NGOs monitor and document instances of recruitment and use of children and other grave violations in armed conflict and provide reports to relevant entities, such as the UN Security Council, national governments, regional organisations and the public.

10.5 Key resources

- Monitoring and reporting Mechanism on Grave Violations Against Children in Situations of Armed Conflict website. **Link**

- United Nations Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations and United Nations Children's Fund, 'FIELD MANUAL: Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) on Grave Violations Against Children in Situations of Armed Conflict', 2014. **Link**

- United Nations Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations and United Nations Children's Fund, 'GUIDELINES: Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on Grave Violations against Children in Situations of Armed Conflict,' UNICEF, 2014. **Link**

- United Nations Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations and United Nations Children's Fund. 'GLOBAL GOOD PRACTICES STUDY: Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on Grave Violations against Children in Situations of Armed Conflict. Global Good Practices Study'. New York: United Nations. November, 2013. **Link**

- Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, 'The 1612 Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism: A Resource Pack for NGOs', 2nd edition, May 2015. **Link**

- Child Protection Working Group, 'Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action', 2019. Standard 6: Child Protection Monitoring and Standard 11: Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups, **Link**

Chapter 11
Community-Level Approaches to Prevent Child Recruitment

©UNICEF/UN0549930/Dubourthoumieu

Introduction

"Preventing the exploitation of children as soldiers is one of the monumental challenges of our time. It makes little sense to stand back and allow the damage to occur, picking up the pieces afterwards."

Michael Wessells, child protection practitioner[112]

Preventing the recruitment and use of children by armed forces or groups is an essential programme component and requires analysis, funding and work to address the root causes of child recruitment within communities, and reduce the risk of child recruitment or re-recruitment before it starts happening.

Families, community members, and community-based groups are some of the most effective agents for preventing child recruitment. Although in some contexts communities play a role in driving recruitment, their potential to disrupt and prevent recruitment flows can also be very powerful. Community actors, with support from external actors as necessary, can play a significant role in disrupting any social and gender norms or economic drivers that may drive recruitment.

Child protection actors should place high importance on strengthening positive community structures, that can prevent or stop recruitment, in a manner that is appropriate and safe. The exact shape and function of such structures is best defined contextually. It is impossible to prevent recruitment without a thorough understanding of the various factors that drive it. These are likely to be multiple, evolving, and inter-linked, particularly at community level, and will vary from context to context. All efforts by child protection actors should be built on a comprehensive understanding of existing community norms, practices and mechanisms that protect children. They should seek to promote, support and strengthen positive practices and mechanisms and be alert to actions that may undermine them.

Because underlying causes often go beyond one sector, it is necessary to link with all relevant sectors to ensure a comprehensive response. Recognising that children who are vulnerable to recruitment are also likely to be vulnerable to other protection concerns, efforts should be holistic, connected to existing systems, and coordinated with wider and longer-term child protection strategies and supportive services.

This chapter begins by considering the concept of community and suggests guidance on the role communities can play to prevent recruitment and re-recruitment.

11.1 What is 'community'?

Children are raised within families and within wider communities. The families and communities within which boys and girls are reared influence their beliefs, how they behave, what options are available to them, how much support they have, and more.

The idea of 'community' can be difficult to define and can look very different in different places and to different people. Traditionally communities have been interpreted in a geographical sense, such as a village or an urban neighbourhood. Increasingly, communities have come to be understood in terms of social bonds, networks, ties and structures.

A community in this sense might include a child's extended family, friends, school community, religious community, online community, or diaspora community connected through media. A child's community may be different from his or her parents' and children in the same geographical area may be members of different communities. Conflict and displacement may disrupt and transform communities.

In this Handbook, we use the term 'community' to refer to the experience of social bonds, networks, ties and structures. Child protection actors should endeavour to understand which communities a child at risk of recruitment may be a member of and how those communities might influence his or her choices and actions in relation to recruitment. Communities can be very effective at preventing child recruitment, just as they can promote recruitment. These influences may be exerted differently on different groups of children, such as between boys and girls, children of different ethnicities or other characteristics, and of different ages and abilities.

The communities to which a child belongs may change over time. Situations are not static and child protection actors should be constantly monitoring changes in situations.

It is useful to read Standard 17 of the Child Protection Minimum Standards, Community-Based Approaches,[113] in conjunction with this chapter.

11.2 Understanding the nature, scale, and causes of child recruitment within communities

Chapter 1 of this Handbook looks at the reasons why children may become associated with armed forces, and the importance of understanding drivers within an individual child's life as well as the broader context in which they live. Chapter 5 contains guidance on how to carry out a comprehensive assessment of the context you are working in, including the cultural, social and economic context.

In order to decide whether and how to conduct community-level recruitment prevention activities, it is vital that you understand the situation in which the risk of child recruitment is present. A key element is to understand is whether and to what degree a community permits, deliberately encourages, or discourages child recruitment. It is also essential to look at the influences within communities which may encourage or force boys and girls to join armed forces or armed groups. For example, in a context where children are motivated to fight for revenge or because they struggle to make their voice heard in their community, it may be appropriate to support them using alternative non-violent ways to shape and express their concerns (see also Chapter 14 on Child Participation in Peacebuilding Activities). However, in a context where many children are joining armed groups because it seems the best way to ensure that they are protected and can eat, it would be more appropriate to look at how boys and girls are treated within homes and communities and at the socio-economic conditions within communities.

Attention should be paid to underlying social and gender norms within a community, which may influence vulnerability to recruitment. For boys this may include the social expectation or requirement that they join local armed groups from a certain age. For girls, there could be a wide variety of complex factors, such as a desire to escape restrictive domestic and community prescribed roles, burdensome care responsibilities, violence at home or a lack of education or livelihood opportunities compared to their male peers.

Although parents, teachers, local leaders, community-based child protection groups and other local stakeholders may already be engaged in the issue, it is of central importance to conduct a gender- and age-informed risk analysis to listen to what children, their families, and their communities say, as well as to encourage them to lead the design and implementation of activities. Children, in particular, may have valuable insights into how to protect themselves and others from recruitment. As the Paris Principles state, "*children who have joined up are best placed to describe why they did so.*"[114] Likewise, "*for every child who joins, many others from similar communities and socio-economic backgrounds do not take part in the conflict and manage to escape the fighters.*"[115] They can all describe why and how they made the choices that they did. All consultations should be conducted in a manner that safeguards and does not stigmatise boys and girls, and other respondents.

11.3 Community-based monitoring systems

Child protection actors may be able to support community members to establish or strengthen community-based monitoring and early warning systems, to monitor changing indicators, trends in child recruitment and risk factors.[116] Issues to monitor can include:

- Increased presence of armed actors

- Increase in number of individuals carrying weapons

- Increased militarisation of young people

- Increases in promotion of armed groups or hate speech

- Increased school drop-out rates and closure of schools

- Crop failures and an increase in unemployment and other economic shocks within homes and communities

- Population movement and displacement

- Separation of children from families.

Community-level monitors can also capture information about the frequency and nature of child recruitment itself, if it is already occurring. It is important to note that community-based monitors should not always seek to actively identify at-risk girls and boys themselves but instead look to establish referral routes with existing trained providers, if such services are in place, in collaboration with child protection actors if they are present.

Support to early warning networks will vary depending on the context. It might include, for example, providing mobile phones to trusted focal points in remote villages. This can enable focal points in different villages to share information, such as the location and movement of armed forces and armed groups through the area, if this will not put them at greater risk. This in turn allows community members to take steps to keep their children safe, such as relocating to a different area or keeping children at home.

Child protection actors who are overseeing or participating in such monitoring systems should seek links with existing protection programmes for boys and girls to get a sense of specific gender- and age-related risks in the community.

Community-based monitoring systems can also share information with actors at a regional or national level, to raise the alarm, to try to attract more support and resources, and for purposes of high-level advocacy. These monitoring systems can also be directly linked to national monitoring structures, including the United Nations Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism where it is established.

Note that monitoring child recruitment can be a high-risk activity for children and their families, community members, monitors and humanitarian actors alike. It is essential to carry out a risk assessment and to mitigate identified risks prior to beginning this type of activity.

>) See Chapter 6 on Risk Assessment, Security Planning and Risk-Informed Programming and) Chapter 10 on Monitoring Child Recruitment and Use by Armed Forces and Armed Groups for more detailed guidance.

11.4 Community-level strategies to prevent child recruitment

Some community members may encourage children to join armed forces and armed groups. Others may be able to prevent child recruitment.

Strategies that communities use to prevent child recruitment can be positive, but some can be understood as harmful coping strategies, that trade the risk of recruitment for other types of risk.[117] Engaging children in harmful or hazardous work, sending children to another location where they are then outside family care and vulnerable to multiple forms of abuse, or arranging for early marriage of girls where this 'disqualifies' them from joining an armed force or armed group, are examples of strategies that may prevent recruitment but be harmful in other ways.

Positive community prevention strategies in Côte d'Ivoire[118]

Students and parents reported that pupils would initially travel to and from school in groups as a safety precaution even before the crisis. Some mothers said that following the crisis they accompanied the groups of students as an additional safety measure. Later, successful negotiations between the school principal and commanding officers in the area eliminated the need for group travel and escorts for the students.

Students and parents in urban areas reported using mobile phones as part of informal early warning systems during and after the 2011 crisis. Students called friends and family to check on their safety and find out about the situation, and women used mobile phones to confirm the safety and well-being of their children. When fighting was bad and it was difficult to obtain phone credit, some network operators provided free airtime to their customers.

Early marriage: a harmful prevention strategy in Sri Lanka[119]

During the long conflict in Sri Lanka many children got married in order to avoid recruitment. Subhashini, who was 16 years old at the time, decided that was the best option for her.

> **"That was the only solution for boys and girls at that time,"
> Subhashini recalled. "So all the students began to drop out of school
> and get married to avoid recruitment. But those underage like me
> couldn't register their marriage, so the next option was to have a
> child to prove you are a new family."**

She had a little boy, Pavithran, but they still weren't safe. "*I looked too small to become a mother, and the armed group didn't believe Pavithran was our baby, so they still forcibly recruited my husband,*" she says. "*It was only after I got Pavithran's birth certificate did they release him. My husband's sister [16 at that time] was forcibly recruited before she could get married and was killed in battle the following year.*"

The trade-off between risks is complex and will vary depending on the context and the range of alternative options open to children and their families.

Child protection actors should be wary of casting judgement before trying to understand why children and their families make the choices they do. Better understanding will help you to identify and support potentially less harmful options.

Child protection actors should identify and build on existing local strengths and capacities, which have the advantage of local legitimacy and acceptance. Local efforts are likely to be underway before any external child protection actors arrive, and to continue when external actors lose access and beyond the life of any particular project.

Child protection actors should encourage caregivers to adopt gender- and age-sensitive approaches to prevent harmful child recruitment mitigation strategies-and build their capacity accordingly. For example, safe space programming for girls with a caregiver curriculum component (with contextual adaptations made to the curriculum where necessary) can be useful – see below.

In any conflict context, there is no single, uniform recruitment process, so child recruitment cannot be prevented using a 'one size fits all' approach. Instead child protection actors should support and strengthen a combination of prevention activities,[120] that are identified by children themselves and the community.

The following sections explore practical, community-based strategies that have been used in various contexts to reduce the risk of child recruitment and re-recruitment. What is appropriate in a particular setting will depend on the context and may not be appropriate as that context. These suggestions are therefore neither prescriptive nor exhaustive.

11.4.1 Community-based strategies to prevent forced recruitment of children
The following activities may help to prevent forced recruitment of children:

- Conduct risk mapping' of times and places where child abduction by armed forces or groups tends to happen – for example, at water wells at dusk, at the school gates, or online. Based on your findings, encourage children to adapt their behaviour to minimise exposure to this risk. Carry out a safety audit with groups of women and girls to ensure gender-specific risks are identified and prioritised.

- Mobilise adults to escort students to and from school to deter recruiters at school or in after-school settings; or organise a community presence in front of schools at the start and/or end of the school day.

- Share information about the presence of armed actors or the safety of certain routes or areas using networks of phone calls or text messages between parents and children. Whistles and bells might also be used to raise alarm in the immediate vicinity.

- Pre-identification by families or communities of a safe place children can run to or where the family can re-assemble if they become separated. When planned at a community level this can help to aid family reunification, and reduce risks to children, as children will be among people who know them and can help them find their family.

- Mechanisms to monitor and control the movements of would-be child recruiters. For example, controlling access to refugee camps, internally displaced persons' sites or shelters.

- Monitor and outreach to families or caregivers who may view recruitment positively; or may be considering harmful preventative strategies such as forced or early marriage. Such outreach should be combined with gender-sensitive caregiver peer support interventions, where they exist.

- Direct dialogue with armed actors to end the practice of forced recruitment "stands a good chance of success in situations where the armed groups depend on local people's moral or material support." Resisting child recruitment can be an opportunity "for communities to rally around their children, compelling commanders both to release current child soldiers and halt their recruitment of children." Note, however, that this approach depends on community leaders opposing the recruitment of children. These negotiations can also be dangerous for family and community members. See Chapter 15 on Engaging with Armed Forces and Armed Groups.

Refer also to Chapter 24 on Education Support for Reintegration for further strategies relating specifically to preventing recruitment of children from schools and to Chapter 12 on Prevention of Child Recruitment and Use through National Legal Frameworks and the Security Sector for examples of the role of local government in community-based prevention strategies.

Safe space programming to prevent girls' recruitment

Programming, including mentorship interventions, can provide a safe space (whether static, mobile or remote) in which girls can increase their resilience and resistance to recruitment and use. It includes participatory safety auditing of locations where forced or coerced recruitment is likely to occur, targeted safety plans that consider the circumstances of individual girls, and early warning alert and monitoring systems managed by a group of trusted female community mentors and members who girls can contact with concerns about sexual exploitation and abuse. Where context permits, an ideal intervention would see a wider system involving trusted formal or informal community security providers to enhance safety for girls and to move them to other locations where necessary.

Family plans to avoid forced recruitment

"My father and my uncles built a place deep in the forest for us to hide. They kept food there and some clothes and other things for us to use for cooking while we were hiding in the forest. They always told us that if anything happens, this is where we should go."

Girl who avoided recruitment in Liberia[121]

11.4.2 Reducing children's motivations to associate with armed forces and groups

The line between forcible and coerced recruitment is extremely thin. If a boy or girl is facing domestic abuse or extreme economic deprivation and cannot foresee being able to earn a living, their decision to join an armed force or group may be a conscious choice. Children who may have lost family members to armed conflict, or have a strong belief in the aims of the armed force or group, may similarly want to join up. However, "*exploitation, manipulation, or other forms of behavioural control [...] could underlie an individual voluntarily joining an armed group*".[122] In all the examples given, joining an armed force or armed group may be understood as the most pragmatic choice for survival out of the apparent options open to children.

Community-based child protection groups and community focal points are well placed to identify children most at risk of choosing to join an armed force or group. With training and support, they can look out for these children and try to reduce the risk they face in ways that are appropriate to their individual situation. This might include establishing one-to-one mentoring between children and an older role model who can offer advice and guidance and try to link them up to services. Or it might mean work with the community to promote positive parenting and non-violent discipline, and offering guidance for particular challenges that parents are facing with their children.

Where children are being pressured to join armed forces or groups by peers, family members or community members, working with the child alone will not reduce this push factor. Engage in outreach through community discussion sessions, parent support groups, schools and children's clubs. Children should be made aware of their right not to be recruited and know where they can go for help if they are being harassed by people trying to recruit them.

The following community-based strategies may help to reduce children's motivation to be associate with an armed force or group:

- Support communities to advocate to appropriate bodies (the government, the UN) to protect the safety of populations that are coming under attack, to avoid children making the choice to take up arms as a means of self-preservation or self-defence.

- Support viable livelihood opportunities for children and/or their families, such as apprenticeships, vocational training, income-generating activities, small loans and savings groups. Supporting opportunities that already exist in the community may result in greater sustainability than setting up new initiatives. (See Chapter 23 on Economic Strengthening for Reintegration.)

- Work with school authorities and children to develop school safety plans which support access to schools for all children and teach boys and girls self-protection strategies to mitigate and reduce their risks of recruitment and other dangers.

- Support children to access education, through measures such as waiving school fees or the need to buy school uniforms, scheduling school shifts around work commitments, and finding ways to maintain access to school in some form during conflict.

- Support informal education alternatives, such as literacy and numeracy classes, where formal education is unavailable to all children. These may be organised using teachers or other trained individuals from the same community and classrooms or other community space after school hours.

- Support adolescents to engage in positive activities that strengthen their sense of belonging and purpose based on cultural and religious norms and values and help increase their self-respect, self-esteem, status, community appreciation and acceptance, providing them with ways to contribute towards the community without taking up arms to protect it.

- Facilitate children's group activities, through structured recreational activities, gender-sensitive life-skills programming, or psychosocial support activities, to foster peer support, increase children's sense of belonging, give them a space in which to express feelings of grief and anger, and facilitate monitoring of vulnerable children.

- Facilitate activities that engage with children's hopes and dreams and explore options for adventure and self-discovery as an alternative to joining an armed force or group; include interventions that can reduce or mitigate against harmful gender norms that restrict children's aspirations.

- Support public information campaigns about the risks of association, targeting children and their parents, such as community sensitisation meetings, talks in schools and children's groups, guidance from religious leaders, peer-to-peer outreach, radio announcements, posters, social media, etc.

- Identify cultural and religious ideas that support the prevention of child recruitment and encourage religious leaders and community elders to promote these ideas.

- Facilitate participation of children formally associated with armed forces or groups in information campaigns when it is safe and non-stigmatising to do so. These children can play a pivotal role in dispelling the glorified notions of war that recruiters sometimes use to persuade children to join.

Where there is strong community support for an armed force or armed group, children may find that when they return home from conflict, adults may silence or undermine their experiences of the realities of war. Enabling space for their competing views to be shared can help to further a sense of accountability and contribute towards reducing the risk of future recruitment.

- Identify celebrities who children look up to, such as pop stars or sports stars, and involve them as champions in public campaigns.

- Support charismatic children or young adults to act as positive sources of influence and provide alternative role models for younger children.

- Support parents, through parents' groups, to provide advice and encouragement to their children to resist joining armed forces and armed groups, and to talk to them about the harsh realities and dangerous consequences of recruitment.[123]

- Actively engage community leaders, service providers and local authorities to reduce mistreatment of children, recognising that children may be pushed towards recruitment if they are harassed, attacked or discriminated against.[124]

- Work with armed actors to encourage them to turn away children who approach them. Ensure armed groups know appropriate places to refer these children.

- If working to support the release and reintegration of children while conflict is ongoing, pay particular attention to the risk of creating a motivation for other children to join an armed force or armed group if they perceive that they will be rewarded when they leave.

- Organise local drives to obtain birth certificates, identification papers or demobilisation papers, and materials to store these safely, such as waterproof folders. This can be done through awareness raising campaigns, or perhaps through cash transfers or rotating small loans and savings schemes, to enable parents to meet the associated costs.

"I had my children go to school and I used to talk to them all the time about the importance of education. They promised me that they were not going to join – and they did not join."

Mother, Liberia[125]

Example of prevention strategy in Somalia

Al-Shabaab's tactics to recruit children includes demanding that clan leaders supply a certain number of boys and guns. At other times they call people to come to a mosque, speak about their cause, and then ask for people to raise their hands to volunteer to join them. If a boy raises his hand there is nothing a father can say or do, Al-Shabaab will take him. Al-Shabaab is not interested in engaging in a dialogue with humanitarian actors about this issue, and the general high levels of insecurity make this an extremely challenging environment in which to work.

However, child protection organisations are seeking to prevent child recruitment by working with local religious leaders to raise awareness amongst the population, particularly parents, about the reality of life for children with Al-Shabaab. They work with religious leaders to identify parts of Islam and parts of their cultural history that resonate with the idea of protecting children from the harm associated with recruitment. They are then able to raise these messages during community dialogue or prayers at the mosque. These leaders arguably have more influence in the local communities than any other official. Parents are encouraged to speak to their children to discourage them from wanting to join Al-Shabaab, and to think about how they can move children to safer places within the area if they know that Al-Shabaab is coming to recruit.

Child protection worker, Somalia[126]

A public information campaign to prevent child recruitment in South Sudan[127]

The Child Rights Club in Bor met with the local radio station. Together they discussed how they could reach the government and other listeners. Children were given airtime every Saturday from 10am to noon. During these two hours they discussed problems of violence against children, the lack of education for girls and how children suffer from poverty. The children also talked about why conflicts exist and how they can be stopped. They talk especially about the importance of peace within family and community.

Another big problem they talk about on the radio is the abduction of children by armed groups. Children talk about how to protect each other from abduction. The radio programme inspired the governor in Bor to take action. He travelled to the place where the abducted children were held and talked with the armed groups about bringing the children home. Some children were released and brought back to their families. This made the Child Rights Clubs work to get more schools opened so there would be room for the returning children.

"If abuse propels many children into armed groups, family love and support are potent forms of prevention."

Michael Wessels, child protection practitioner

Working to support community-level initiatives in the Democratic Republic of Congo[128]

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) works with children, families and communities to support the development of community-based approaches to preventing child recruitment (and re-recruitment), in active cooperation with the youth section of the Red Cross of the Democratic Republic of Congo (RC DRC).

In North and South Kivu, the programme uses community-based approaches to identify children at particular risk of recruitment (and re-recruitment), and to support local initiatives aimed at reducing this risk. For example, in several communities in North Kivu, local RC DRC volunteers organise regular activities with the aim of strengthening community ties and improving the integration of at-risk children in their community. Such initiatives include sports, play and vocational training, as well as awareness raising about the risks and the detrimental impact that association with armed actors creates on children.

The ICRC also supports the socio-economic integration of children previously associated with armed actors in their communities, with basic training in setting up revenue raising activities, as a way to address some of the factors that push children towards being associated in the first place.

11.4.3 Reducing the risk of re-recruitment

Where there is a history of conflict, a cycle of recruitment, release, and re-recruitment can often occur. Children's newly acquired skills and experience can make them attractive both to the armed force or group they have left and to opposing armed actors.[129]

It is important to remember that when children return home, they may well be influenced by the same economic, social and political factors that led to their initial recruitment. Stigmatisation borne out of perceptions of returned girls 'degraded value' after a period

away may also drive them to re-recruitment. Unless these and any other new or emerging risk factors are addressed, children are at high risk of being re-recruited.

Many of the methods for preventing recruitment listed above are also effective in preventing re-recruitment. The following activities can also help to reduce the risk of re-recruitment:

• Community outreach workers can engage with children who may be motivated to rejoin and refer them and their families to services and support, for example by referring families of children who were recruited because of a lack of income in the household for livelihood options (see Chapter 23 on Economic Strengthening for Reintegration for more details).

• Where it is not too risky to do so, community members or case workers can monitor whether contact between children and the armed force or armed group continues.[130]

• Community leaders may conduct awareness raising, dialogue and mediation with family and community members to overcome challenges and enable children to feel that they are being welcomed home to a place where they are accepted. This should include gender-sensitive sessions that address stigmatisation of girls who may have suffered sexual abuse and exploitation and any children they bore while with the armed force or group.

• Where armed actors participate in a release process, they could be encouraged to give positive messages to children who are being released such as, "you can't come back to join this armed force/group, if you try to come back we will turn you away".

• Assign community mentors to individual children to offer them guidance and support throughout their reintegration process, to increase support if they feel children are at risk of becoming re-recruited, and to mediate if they feel frustrated, shunned or excluded.

• Provide reintegration assistance to address the child and family's needs for as long as it is needed, such as sustained mental health and psychosocial support, ongoing follow up and case management, etc.

Support that is community driven has a greater likelihood of being sustainable and avoiding re-recruitment in the long term.

Community intervention to prevent re-recruitment

"Two times since then rebels have come to bother me. They came to my house and tried to take me back, calling me a deserter. But the local community here pleaded with them to leave me alone. It is two months now since they have stopped coming to bother me."

Girl, Democratic Republic of Congo[131]

11.5 Key resources

- Save the Children Norway, 'Global Story Book: children and young people as actors in peacebuilding', 2010. **Link**

- Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 'CAAFAG Programme Development Toolkit', 2021. **Link**

- The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 'Reflective Guide: Community-level Approaches to Child Protection in Humanitarian Action', 2020. **Link**

- The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 'Strengthening Community-level Child Protection in Humanitarian Action – a Capacity Building Resource, 2020, **Link**

- Save the Children International, Prevention and Response to Child Recruitment and Use: A Programming framework in the Middle East and Eastern Europe Region'. 2020. **Link**

- International Rescue Committee and Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 'Intervention Curriculum – Growing Strong Together: A Parenting Programme to Support the Reintegration of Children and prevent their recruitment', 2021, **Link**

Chapter 12

Prevention of Child Recruitment and Use through National Legal Frameworks and the Security Sector

©UNICEF/UN070811/Anmar

Introduction

National laws that prohibit the recruitment and use of children by armed forces and groups, and that are enforced, are a significant prevention measure.

Child protection actors who want to support states to strengthen the protective environment for children should take care not to undermine states' ownership of this process or their accountability to their citizens. Investing in relationships with government ministries and security sector actors through support and capacity building during peacetime as well as during conflict can provide a valuable foundation from which you can pursue advocacy should a need arise.

Child protection actors can also support international peacekeeping operations to strengthen their policies and practices with regards to child protection, including child recruitment and use.

Where non-state armed groups (NSAGs) have control over territory and populations, child protection actors might be able to influence them to protect children, including stopping recruiting and using children. Given the sensitivity and potential dangers of working with NSAGs, this work should be closely coordinated with other humanitarian actors.

This chapter complements 〉 Chapter 3 the Legal and Normative Framework, 〉 Chapter 11 Prevention: Community-Level Approaches for Prevention, 〉 Chapter 13 Advocacy and Awareness Raising, 〉 Chapter 15 Engaging with Armed Forces and Armed Groups and 〉 Chapter 26 Children Formerly Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups in Justice Systems, which addresses capacity building of national judicial systems.

12.1 Establishing and enforcing a national legal framework

Under international law, states are responsible for the safety of people in their country and in areas under their control, including preventing recruitment and use of children by armed forces and armed groups. Preventing child recruitment and use requires states to have a robust legal framework in place and enforced. This requires political will and investment in systems and personnel for enforcement, including providing judicial, military, national police and border control personnel with the necessary resources and capacity. It also requires well-resourced child protection systems.

Child protection actors should understand the legal protections that are in place and how they are enforced. This will involve undertaking not only an analysis of the legal framework, but an assessment of gaps and needs within the framework and enforcement policies and practices.

Where a state does not have a legal framework or practices in place with respect to child recruitment and use or child protection systems, child protection actors should advocate for governments to criminalise child recruitment and specify a minimum age of recruitment, along with sanctions for not respecting the law. This could involve the ratification of international laws or conventions relating to child recruitment, followed by amendment of existing national laws, or creation of new national laws. Chapter 3: Legal and Normative Framework provides a detailed overview of the legal and normative framework pertaining to child recruitment and use.

Moreover, where legislation pertaining to child recruitment and use exists, it may need to be streamlined and clarified, as it may be found under several different laws, for example, child protection law, military law, counterterrorism or national security laws and labour law. If the same crime carries different penalties under the different laws, revision of law or clarification about which has precedence may be required to prevent 'forum shopping' whereby prosecutions might be pursued in the court thought most likely to provide a favourable judgment.

National legislation relating to trafficking networks is important as well if these networks are part of the dynamics of child recruitment and use in your context. The movement of

children associated with armed forces or armed groups is often enabled by corrupt border officials and other shadow facilitators, many of whom go unpunished as a result of weak national anti-trafficking legislation.

Child protection actors may be able to provide technical support to governments with the amendment and enforcement of national laws and policies, and/or influence the government through advocacy.

This section gives practical examples of activities you might take.

12.1.1 Strengthening the legal framework and prohibitions against recruitment and use

- Support the government to ratify, implement and comply with international conventions, including through military law and military directives, and to integrate international standards into domestic national legislation, including criminalising child recruitment.

- Support the government to increase capacity within the criminal justice system to effectively investigate and prosecute allegations of unlawful recruitment and use.

- Support development of military directives and training of military officials on such orders that make recruitment and use of children a criminal offence.

- Consider strengthening national legislation relating to trafficking networks if these are understood to be part of the dynamics of child recruitment and use in the context.

- Support governments to establish systems for free and compulsory birth registration for all children, to allow for independently verifiable proof of age for each child. Support national efforts to overcome the barriers to accessing birth registration and obtaining identification documents, such as the cost of travelling to a centre and fines for late registration.

- If there are not effective processes in place to verify the age of new recruits, provide support, to establish and monitor such processes.

The International Committee of the Red Cross's experience of supporting legal reform

> **"The ICRC is the guardian of international humanitarian law, and we work to spread knowledge and understanding of this body of law [....] While training armed forces in humanitarian law, we emphasize obligations related to the protection and welfare of children. Our Advisory Service stands ready to help States draw up domestic laws to implement humanitarian law and to provide support in enforcing the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 38) and its Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict."[132]**

However, *"on the basis of its legal work and its activities in conflict situations, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has concluded that, in the absence of practical implementation measures at the domestic level, accepted rights and obligations are often no more than a dead letter."*[133] With this in mind, *"In 2011, the ICRC produced a document titled Guiding Principles for the Domestic Implementation of a Comprehensive System of Protection for Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups. This suggests concrete measures for effective domestic implementation of the international rules protecting children affected by armed conflict."*[134]

12.1.2 Coordination and advocacy

- Advocate for a national level strategy to prevent child recruitment, including investment in child protection and social protection systems – especially education, livelihoods and mental health and psychosocial support services – and for the establishment of a child rights monitoring and reporting system.

- Advocate (via country ambassadors to the UN) for the UN Security Council to issue penalties to countries where child recruitment is ongoing, or to countries who trade weapons with countries where children are recruited and used in conflict.

- Engage non-state armed actors in dialogue to seek to persuade them to abide by the legal and normative framework (see Chapter 15: Engaging with Armed Forces and Armed Groups).

- Explore ways to prevent child recruitment through regional and sub-regional organisations and arrangements, such as The African Union, The European Union, The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, The Arab League, and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. This could be through harmonised child protection training for troops, harmonised guidelines or policies, establishing regional child protection focal points, or the coordination of monitoring and reporting where appropriate.[135]

- Consider promoting bilateral cross-country learning regarding the implementation of Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) Action Plans, for example through facilitating inter-country visits between governmental child protection focal points.

- Advocate for the professionalisation of security sector actors at national level, including training on child rights and child protection, incorporating the issue of prevention of recruitment and use of children by armed forces and groups.

- Advocate to national government forces or United Nations forces for the physical protection of children who are being forcibly recruited and for efforts to maintain the civilian nature of refugee and internally displaced people's camps.

- Engage with the Committee on the Rights of the Child and advocate for it to include recommendations in its periodic State Party reports and act as an advocate for adoption of national legislation, military law or directives that integrate international standards and criminalise child recruitment.

- Advocate (via the Universal Periodic Review mechanism of the Human Rights Council or national authority's country ambassador to the UN) for adoption of national legislation or directives that criminalise child recruitment, including through military law and military directives.

12.1.3 Public information campaigns

The law needs to be known if it is to be obeyed, therefore public information campaigns may be needed.

- Conduct a risk asessment to identify and mitigate risks that might arise from support for a public information campaign on recruitment and use of children, even if the campaign will be led by the authorities. Agencies perceived by opposition groups as having connections with campaigns led by government authorities could be at risk.

- Fund translation of international legal instruments into national languages, including into plain language and child-friendly language, so that these important documents are more accessible for both citizens, including children, and members of the government.

  – Support public information campaigns to raise awareness of national and international child protection laws. Consider which tools are best suited to the context, especially where there are low rates of literacy.

"National authorities can help to prevent recruitment by investing in social protection schemes, education systems and the creation of jobs, thereby reducing vulnerability and providing meaningful alternatives to joining armed struggles. Equally, there is a need to document recruitment, sensitize communities on the risk of children being recruited, sensitize members of armed forces and groups, assist communities to establish child protection mechanisms, and educate them on the importance of not stigmatising returned children associated with armed forces and armed groups."

African Union Child DDR Guidelines 2014[136]

12.1.4 Taking action when states fail to establish or to enforce laws and policies

Even the most robust legal framework will have little preventive value if it is not respected or enforced and if no action is taken when laws are broken. Here are some ways you can work to promote and support enforcement:

- Promote the adoption and implementation of MRM Action Plans with national and local level stakeholders where relevant. (See Chapter 10 Monitoring Child Recruitment and Use by Armed Forces and Armed Groups.)

- Advocate for states that fail to establish or enforce laws or policies against recruitment and use of children in armed conflict to be excluded from contributing troops to UN and AU missions or other regional bodies, and therefore from receiving corresponding remuneration.

- Support the work of national courts and the International Criminal Court to prosecute recruiters of children. (See Chapter 25: Addressing Impunity for Child Recruitment and Use.)

- Support national courts and the International Criminal Court to use child-friendly sytems and procedures for child victims and witnesses, including child victims of recruitment and use by armed forces and groups. (See Chapter 26: Children Formerly Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups in Justice Systems.)

- Where states or other armed actors are breaking laws with impunity, consider sharing information with national or international human rights organisations that may be better placed to carry out strong public advocacy.

Example of successful advocacy to the government of Chad[137]

The Chadian government signed an MRM action plan in June 2011, which included ceasing military recruitment and use of children. However, in April 2012, children were found in a military site. UNICEF, as co-chair of the MRM Task Force, led an intensive dialogue with the military focal point, requesting access to all military sites to investigate if any children were present. For months this was denied, and despite many conversations, general progress on the action plan stalled. After some time, UNICEF advocated for a new military focal point, and a multi-stakeholder workshop to review why the action plan was stalling. In May 2013 the workshop was held, key challenges and barriers were identified, and a new road map drawn up to accelerate the implementation of the action plan.

The Chadian military was keen to become a contributor to the UN peacekeeping force in Mali, which became an entry point for discussion of removal of children from their ranks as a condition for participating in a peacekeeping mission. UNICEF enlisted the support of a range of national, regional and global level actors to advocate for the government and stress the importance of implementing the existing action plan to end recruitment and use of children. These actors included the UN Security Council, the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Children and Armed Conflict, various international donors, and other members of the MRM Country Task Force.

The government responded positively to this advocacy and granted access to all military barracks and the president issued a decree prohibiting the recruitment and use of children. In addition, plans were made for training of military personnel on child protection, and members of the military were identified to act as child protection focal points within each site to report any incidences of suspected recruitment. Verification processes were conducted jointly with members of the MRM Country Task Force to inspect and verify the age of potential recruits.

12.2 Support for strengthening or reform of national armed forces, national police, and international peacekeeping operations

The national armed forces, national police and international peacekeeping operations, as well as non-state armed groups, are all key stakeholders to prevent child recruitment and use. Child protection actors should work collaboratively with them to strengthen implementation of relevant policies and practices. These actors should be aware of laws and policies that criminalise child recruitment and use, as well as the sanctions for breaching them.

They also should be aware of the roles they can play in supporting children to exit armed forces and armed groups, and how to treat children in age-appropriate survivor-centred ways, as they may be the first people that children come into contact with when leaving an armed force or group, whether by escape, capture or being formally or informally released.

While there are clear differences between the roles and mandates of armed forces, police and international peacekeeping troops, many of the same topics and steps to strengthen policies and practices will be relevant across all these actors.

12.2.1 Strengthening policies and practices

Child protection actors can support national armed forces, national police, international peacekeeping operations and non-state armed groups to improve implementation of policies and practices in a variety of ways, depending on the context. While you may be able to influence but not wholly determine these bodies' policies and practices, alternatives to use of children and to lethal force can be encouraged within the framework of raising awareness of child rights and child protection issues and through technical support on such policies and practise. This section contains suggestions; these are neither prescriptive nor exhaustive.

Proof of age policies: Every jurisdiction should have a 'proof of age' policy for all recruits as well as identified age assessment mechanisms to prevent underage recruitment. Any policy for age verification should contain alternative legitimate, and practical ways for authorities to verify the age of individuals who lack identification documents (such as a birth certificate, passport, national ID card). See more detailed guidance in section on Proof of Age in Chapters 1: Formal Release of Children from Armed Forces and Armed Groups and Chapter 17: Informal Release of Children. Where there is any doubt, it must be clear that responsibility for establishing the age of a recruit lies with the recruiting party. If there is any doubt about the age of a person, such doubt should be construed in favour of a determination that the person is a child.

Any proof of age policy should be recognised and approved by the military justice system and disseminated to military prosecutors, who are often in contact with children released from NSAGs. These policies should also be sent to all personnel directly involved in recruitment, not only those in senior positions, and all personnel should receive training on application of the procedures in practice.

Sanctions/punishments: Sanctions or punishments for violating policies, including the proof of age policy, Codes of Conduct, etc., should be known by those responsible for complying with them and enforced through appropriate legal and disciplinary channels. Sanctions can act as a powerful deterrent to violating policies. Child protection actors can provide technical support to develop policies, procedures and enforcement mechanisms and trainings or other capacity-building support for individuals to understand their obligations and implement the processes.

Monitoring: Proactive monitoring of recruitment procedures and adherence to policies, including the proof of age policy and Codes of Conduct, etc., should be encouraged. An independent body is usually best placed to do this. To assist in verification processes, it may be helpful for government authorities to establish a central database containing information about all military personnel, including their date of birth and supporting documentation.

In addition to monitoring to prevent children from being recruited, there should be vetting mechanisms for adults to ensure that those previously responsible for violations and abuses against children, including recruitment and use, are not accepted into the ranks.[138]

Child Protection Units: Establishing dedicated Child Protection Units (CPUs) within armed forces and groups, and training existing military personnel to run them, has proved effective in some contexts. CPUs can be mandated to handle all issues relating to children's rights and child protection, including:

- Identifying children within their ranks, offering them immediate care and protection, and referring them to appropriate release and reintegration programmes.

- Receiving children who have surrendered, been captured, or been rescued from opposing forces, offering them immediate care and protection and referring them to appropriate release and reintegration programmes.

- Receiving complaints about underage recruitment from children, families or community members.

- Monitoring and reporting on child rights violations.

- Addressing issues relating to sexual exploitation and violence by personnel, or liaising with a separate unit focused on this.

- Coordinating or conducting child protection training of all personnel.

Support for children to leave armed groups: CPUs within armed forces[139]

In Somalia, in collaboration with the Dallaire Institute, the Somali Ministry of Defence (MOD) has integrated a Child Protection structure and policy into its structure and established a Child Protection Unit that oversees child protection activities within the MOD. This has resulted in prioritization on children's protection and rights throughout the process of release, handovers, and reintegration. A dedicated Child Protection Unit within a Ministry of Defence helps to improve continuity of approaches, opportunities to learn and improve, and networks that can be key conduits for further advances in child protection.

Standard Operating Procedures and Rules of Engagement: Standard Operating Procedures should be reviewed and revised if necessary to include child protection considerations.140 For example, personnel should be clear about what they should do if they encounter children in different situations, including if they come across a child seeking to escape from another armed force or armed group.

Rules of Engagement with respect to children may also be addressed. For example, how to respond if ambushed or engaged in a firefight by children. See the Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiatives Child Soldiers: A Handbook for Security Sector Actors for more guidance on the type of training that can be provided.

Codes of Conduct: Establish or strengthen existing Codes of Conduct for personnel vis-à-vis children. This might include references to issues such as: child recruitment and use; prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse; arrest, detention and interrogation of children; and treatment of the civilian child population; handover of children found in ranks of armed forces and groups. Personnel must be not only aware of relevant Codes of Conduct, but also must understand and commit to adhering to them.

Diversity of personnel: The presence of women in the military, police, peacekeeping operation, and NSAGs, along with the presence of people from mixed ethnic and religious backgrounds, can itself be a positive factor for children. Women, and people from minority backgrounds, may bring different outlooks and help to positively shape the work culture, including military culture.

Example of security sector reform in Sierra Leone[141]

During a brutal 11-year civil war in Sierra Leone that ended in 2002, some 10,000 child soldiers were active in the country. Although Sierra Leone has subsequently enacted strict legislation which ensures the army cannot recruit or use children, there is a significant risk of a return to such practices should violence resurface. Its regional neighbours - Guinea, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire and Mali - have all experienced protracted bouts of armed conflict and there is a constant risk of violence spilling across Sierra Leone's borders.

From 2013 to 2017, the Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative (now known as the Dallaire Institute for Children Peace and Security) led a countrywide security sector training programme, based on their three Core Competencies, in partnership with the Sierra Leone Ministry of Defence and the Office of National Security, the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces, the Sierra Leone Police and the Sierra Leone Prisons Service. By framing the issue of children in armed conflict as a specific issue of concern for security sector actors, the Dallaire Institute empowered the military, police and prison personnel to improve security sector interactions with children and develop better policies and doctrine, with the overall aim of preventing the recruitment and use of children as soldiers.

12.2.2 Sensitisation and training

Ensuring that laws and policies pertaining to child recruitment are understood is a key first step in preventing child recruitment.[142] In the case of armed forces, UN Security Council Resolution 2143 (2014) recommends that Member States include child protection in military training and standard operating procedures. In some contexts, when military personnel have participated in training, it becomes clear that they did not know that it was illegal to recruit children. Some may even view child recruitment as a benevolent act that enables impoverished children to eat and support their families.

On the other hand, some NSAGs have expressed an interest in providing better care and protection to children under their area of control, but feel they lack the necessary capacities

and resources to do this. Child protection actors can offer to support training and awareness raising in this area for all actors.

Training should be carried out within a framework that monitors its impact and ensures its sustainability and is adapted to the particular context:

- Child protection training should be mainstreamed into official training curricula, where this exists, with an appropriate allocation of resources, and promotions should be contingent on passing exams in this area.

- The impact of training should be assessed through monitoring and evaluation.

- A network of trainers should be established within the armed force or group to take responsibility for rolling out the training, to promote sustainability and ownership.

Training might engage with topics such as:

- The major legal instruments covering child rights and child protection, and responsibilities and obligations towards children according to these laws; with emphasis on the minimum age for recruitment under national law.

- The Standard Operating Procedures, Codes of Conduct, handover protocols and the Rules of Engagement when encountering children, etc.

- The potential negative impact on children who are associated with armed forces and groups, and the negative impact of conflict on children more broadly.

- Ways to respect and contribute towards child rights during and after conflict, including promoting the idea of the 'good soldier' who respects, protects and promotes children's rights and abides by their Code of Conduct.

- Appropriate relationships with humanitarian agencies in the theatre of operations, according to the principles of humanitarian action. For example, reporting any encounters with children associated with armed forces and groups to child protection actors.

- The prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse of children, whether children associated with armed forces or groups or children in the civilian population.

The argument that children in the ranks are 'a liability'[143]

> "Far from improving the fighting capabilities of security sector actors, the use of child soldiers is a liability: it impacts the effectiveness of police, military, and armed groups, and increases the risk of criminal prosecution. Bringing security sector actors' attention to these tactical, legal, and moral disadvantages can significantly contribute to preventing further recruitment and use of child soldiers."

Save the Children Sweden trained military personnel in Africa in child rights and child protection for eleven years. Lessons they learned from this experience about ways to maximise the effectiveness of training include:[144]

- Involving children who were formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups, or children who have been exposed to armed conflict, to speak about their experiences directly to personnel is a powerful motivator.

- A strong emphasis on visual aids is useful, especially where literacy rates are low.

- Follow up after training through mentoring schemes, refresher training, sessions to reflect on challenging incidents that have arisen, and reinforce relevant rules and regulations.

- Reinforce key messages through military radio programmes, posters and pocket-sized illustrated books.

Key challenges and ways to mitigate these include:[145]

- The risk that communities may view child protection organisations as collaborating with certain armed actors, which may compromise neutrality and impartiality, risk the viability of programmes and staff safety, and risk access to programme locations being denied. These risks can be mitigated through a thorough risk assessment, sustained open dialogue with community members and personnel with clear messaging, and continuous monitoring of the situation. Coordinating work across different child protection actors can enable strategic complementarity.[146]

- The risk that training could contribute to a misguided sense that the military have, to a degree, a mandate to perform humanitarian work. To manage this risk, invest time in communicating clear and transparent messages about different roles and mandates when in discussions with security sector actors and with community members.

- The risk of international humanitarian law and child rights being perceived as a western imposition and not relevant to the communities and culture that personnel come from. To engage with this challenge, it is important to take time to listen and understand different perspectives. It frequently possible to find elements of the local culture or religion which resonate with the principles of international child rights law.

- The risk of failing to secure the buy-in of senior personnel, which is essential to ensure tangible change. Time and patience may be needed through what can be months or even years of dialogue before a breakthrough. In addition, it may be possible to influence senior personnel through a bottom-up approach by facilitating effective training at lower levels.

- Logistical challenges of trying to reach distant and inaccessible areas, of identified trainers leaving or changing roles, and of training being allocated insufficient time or cancelled due to other priorities. These challenges need to be managed on a case-by-case basis, but building time cushions and financial flexibility into programme plans can help.

Example of capacity building secondment to the African Union[147]

Training and sensitisation can be carried out in many ways. It may include the secondment of technical advisers into national or regional security sector bodies.

In 2014, UNICEF and the Dallaire Institute seconded a Child Protection Advisor to the African Union for a period of 12 months, to support relationship building between the African Union Mission in Somalia troops, the Somali National Armed Forces and UNICEF. The specific challenges of this context called for new approaches to child protection. This position also provided an opportunity to work with the Somalia Country Task Force on monitoring and reporting of grave child rights violations through conducting field monitoring and collecting reliable, accurate and timely data.

UNICEF and the Dallaire Institute addressed the gap in training for security sector actors on child protection in Somalia and developed an overall framework to contribute to ending the use of and recruitment of children as soldiers that brings a coordinated approach to engaging the security sector and child protection simultaneously.

12.3 Preventing recruitment and use by non-state armed groups

Engaging with NSAGs is inherently political and risky – risky to children, their families and communities and to humanitarian personnel and organisations. A careful risk assessment should be carried out

Where the actions of a NSAG are affecting children, especially where they have control over a population and act as a *de facto* state, it is important for child protection actors, in close coordination with other humanitarian actors, to encourage them to establish and respect policies and practices that decrease the risk of harm to children, including child recruitment and use.

While there are clear differences between the armed forces, police and international peace-keeping troops and NSAGs, if circumstances permit and it is appropriate, many of the actions suggested in section 12.3 above can be applied to NSAGs.

) See Chapter 6 Risk assessment, Security Planning and Risk-Informed Programming) and close coordination should be maintained with other humanitarian actors.

12.4 Key resources

- Child Soldiers International, 'Louder than Words: An Agenda for Action to End the State Use of Child Soldiers', London, UK, 2012. **Link**

- International Committee of the Red Cross webpage on children, **Link**

- International Committee of the Red Cross, 'Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups', Geneva, Switzerland, September 2013. **Link**

- Jérémie Labbé, Reno Meyer and Jonathon Somer, 'Engaging Non-State Armed Groups on the Protection of Children: Towards Strategic Complementarity'. International Peace Institute, April 2012. **Link**

- The Romeo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative 'Child Soldiers: A Handbook for Security Sector Actors,' Centre for Foreign Policy Studies, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Canada, Revised 3rd Edition, 2017. **Link**

- The Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative, 'Core Competencies for Security Sector Training on the Prevention of the Use of Child Soldiers', Centre for Foreign Policy Studies, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Canada, March 2014. **Link**

- Save the Children, 'Behind the Uniform: Training the Military in Child Rights and Child Protection in Africa', Save the Children Sweden, 2009, **Link**

- Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 'Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse by Our Own Staff', website with tools **Link**

- Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, 'The UN's Children and Armed Conflict Agenda: A Policy Prohibiting Listed Government Forces from Contributing troops to UN Missions', Discussion Paper, August 2014. **Link**

Chapter 13
Advocacy and Awareness Raising

©UNICEF/UN0611871 Sánchez

Introduction

"You can play a key role in supporting children, their families and communities to claim their rights. By doing effective advocacy, you can bring about key changes in policy, legislation and practice that will have a lasting impact on children's lives."

Save the Children[148]

Advocacy means activities designed to influence the policies and actions of others to achieve positive changes. Child protection actors can use advocacy to persuade and influence authorities and policy makers to better protect boys and girls. Based on your experience of working with children associated with armed forces and groups, and on demonstrated evidence, advocacy can help to support legal and policy reform, hold governments and duty bearers to account, increase funding for longer-term sustainable action, improve access to and quality of child protection actions and services, change social norms that support harmful practices, and change recruitment practices.

Broad-based and targeted awareness-raising can be used to sensitise and mobilise people – in government, the military or armed groups, children, parents, in communities – to take action to protect children. It can help people understand the risks, dangers, and consequences of child recruitment and raise awareness of alternative options and supportive services. It can generate empathy for and acceptance of children who have been associated with armed forces and armed groups and can motivate communities to engage in or support prevention and reintegration efforts. It can inform people of what the law says and what sanctions exist for breaking the law.

Drawing decision makers' and public attention to neglected topics, advocacy and awareness raising can positively influence prevention of recruitment. It can lead to short-term changes (such as a moratorium preventing the participation of children in hostilities), address underlying causes (such as supporting meaningful educational or vocational opportunities for children), encourage or support children's exit from armed groups (such as enhancing community acceptance of girls formerly associated with armed forces or groups), suggest direct preventive measures (such as accompanying children on their route to or from school, or being aware of their online social media habits). Advocacy is, therefore, an essential part of programmes to prevent recruitment and reintegration of children.

This chapter provides guidance on advocacy and awareness raising activities related to preventing child recruitment and enhancing reintegration support. It is mainly drawn from three sources: Action for the Rights of Children's Foundation Module 5 on Advocacy; Advocacy matters: helping children change their world, an International Save the Children Alliance guide to advocacy; and UNICEF's guidance document Saving lives, protecting children: advocacy in emergencies. See section 13.6 for links to these resources.

13.1 Advocacy planning

Advocacy to help prevent child recruitment and to support reintegration of children formerly associated with armed forces and groups requires several key steps. It can be a long process, that needs to be sustained over several years to be effective. Good planning will help you to persevere and avoid becoming demoralised when efforts do not seem to be bearing fruit.

FIGURE 1 Developing an advocacy strategy within an emergency programme cycle
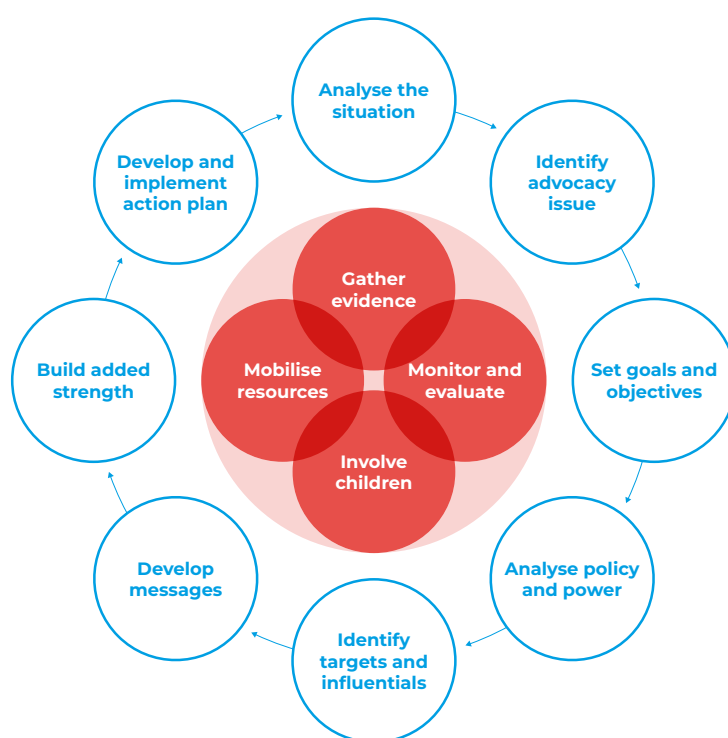
From: Action for the Rights of Children (ARC) 2009, 'Foundation module 5. Advocacy', ARC Resource pack, Study material

Table 13: below provides suggested guiding questions and examples of possible responses to support the planning and design of advocacy activities.[149] These are neither exhaustive nor prescriptive.

TABLE 13.1 Guiding questions for advocacy planning and design related to prevention of child recruitment

Questions	Sample responses
What is the change you want to achieve?	· Legal or policy reform such as age verification for entry into armed forces · Disciplinary or criminal sanctions against perpetrators · Change in recruitment practices · Increased support for children's reintegration · Lower community and family support for enlistment of children in armed forces or groups
Who has the power to influence or make the change?	· Government armed forces or non-state armed groups · Refugee host governments · Donors · Government entities · Judicial authorities · Diplomatic representatives · International or regional organisations · Religious or community leaders · Media · Parents' association · School teachers or directors · Parents · Children and young people

What do they need to hear and understand?	· Evidence of the benefits that the change will bring to children, the community, society as a whole, or to them or the group that they represent
	· The recognition they may gain from making the change, or other consequences from supporting the objective (positive or negative)
	· The potential results or costs of not doing anything, including possible prosecution, censure, or loss of political support
How could the advocacy message be delivered to achieve the change you are seeking?	· Through private discussion with the target audience
	· Through public event(s)
	· Through letters or reports
	· Through a press conference or interviews with the media
	· Through trusted intermediaries
	· Through collective or community-based action or pressure, including with safe child participation
When might be the best time to deliver the advocacy message to achieve the change?	· Anniversary or celebratory dates (eg, Children's Day, Red Hand Day, important relevant national days of commemoration)
	· In connection with the release of new report(s) or after receipt of verified evidence.
	· At international events
	· During high profile visits, for example a visit from a local celebrity, a high-level politician, the UN Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children in Armed Conflict, etc.)
	· In the period leading to the vote for adoption of a law or at the time of signature or adoption of new legal instruments
	· During budget discussions
Who might most effectively deliver the advocacy message?	· Representatives of the Government, UN organisations, NGOs, civil society, or youth groups
	· Community or religious leaders
	· Children formerly associated with armed forces and groups or their parents
	· Celebrities (eg, music or sports starts)
	· Allied individuals or groups who have influence over the targeted individual or group.
	· Diplomatic officials or donors
	· Human rights institutions or credible human rights advocacy organisations
Who will you work with? (See also Chapter 4 on Coordination)	· Different government ministries, human rights institutions, etc.
	· Sympathetic members of armed forces or groups
	· NGOs, religious groups, youth groups
	· Parents, communities
	· The Country Task Force on Monitoring and Reporting, UN Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism focal point
	· Diplomatic representatives, donors
	· Special envoys
	· Media
What resources are available and what do you need?	· Adequate funding
	· Complementary partnerships and alliances
	· Sufficient capacities of staff and partners
	· Credible data and research
	· International or national laws, norms, standards, policies
What are the potential risks? (Also consider mitigation strategies)	· Physical retaliation – to advocates, communities, or supporters
	· Negative effects on operational space or activities
	· Misrepresentation of the message
	· Politicisation of the issue
	· Exposure to stigma
	· Hardening of negative opinions or positions

How will you monitor progress and impact?	· Track changes to policies, laws, norms · Situation and risk monitoring including monitoring of child recruitment · Monitoring of media and tracking public statements of support or opposition. · Interviews with formerly associated children · Discussions with armed actors, when feasible and appropriate · Discussions with parents, families, communities.

13.1.1 Power analysis

To define the targets of your advocacy, and develop appropriate messages, you need to analyse who or what has the power to influence or make changes happen and what their interest and motivations might be. The target's power could be visible, hidden or invisible. See Table 13.2.

TABLE 13.2 Three kinds of power

Power[150]	Examples
Visible power Formal rules, structures, authorities, institutions and procedures, for example: elections, laws and budgets	Governments that pass legislation that authorises recruitment of children from 16 years of age; donors who fund limited budgets that do not cover longer-term reintegration
Hidden power Certain powerful people control the agenda. Less powerful groups are often excluded from decision-making.	Donors to or members of political parties, or militias who influence or control them, may not want tight border controls so that cross-border child recruitment may be possible
Invisible power This level of power shapes values and norms, and thereby people's beliefs and attitudes. Such power perpetuates patterns of domination and inferiority. This level is the most difficult to deal with, because social values are sensitive and personal and frequently deep rooted.	Social norms related to masculinity encourage boys to enrol within armed forces or armed groups; gender norms that discourage girls and women from considering political leadership roles

13.2 Situation analysis and risk assessment

Your advocacy strategy should identify the best ways to influence your target audience, without putting children and their families at risk. A risk assessment and a situation analysis should inform the design of your strategy, these should be regularly updated and your activities adjusted as appropriate.

Potential risks related to advocacy should be carefully assessed so as to avoid harm to children, parents or communities, humanitarian personnel or organisations, and to identify ways to mitigate and manage them. As contexts change, sometimes unpredictably, risks should be regularly reviewed, along with the intended and unintended consequences of advocacy, so that your activities can be adapted as appropriate. Steps that can mitigate risk should be implemented. For example, when using testimonies, keep people's identities and identifying features confidential, changing names and omitting all details that could lead to identification (for example, particular injuries or tattoos they may have, which school they attend, how many siblings they have, where they work, etc.)

⟩ See also Chapter 5 on Situation Analysis and ⟩ Chapter 6 on Risk Assessments, Security Planning and Risk-Informed Programming.

Examples of risks associated with poorly planned advocacy:[151]

- Threats to local population

- Threats to staff and programmes

- Reduced access

- Loss of legitimacy and influence

- Distortion of messages

- Misunderstanding or conflict among partners and internally within the organisation

- Misallocated resources.

13.3 Approaches to advocacy

13.3.1 Evidence-based advocacy
Advocacy includes a combination of tools and tactics, according to the local context, the desired outcome and the sensitivity of the topic. Advocacy must be evidence-based, relying on credible data (eg, from the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism, verified witness statements, etc.) rather than based on opinions or anecdotal information. For more detail, see Chapter 10 on Monitoring Child Recruitment and Use by Armed Forces and Armed Groups).

13.3.2 Coordinated advocacy
While advocacy can be carried out independently, working in partnership makes a considerable positive difference, avoids potentially contradictory messages being sent and enables better risk assessment. Coordination of advocacy allows complementarity in targets, tools and contexts, and enhances the impact by articulating the message through different means according to the comparative advantage of each method and partner.

> **"It is generally recognised that the greater the number of organisations involved, the greater the advocacy voice, and hence the greater the likelihood of advocacy coordination, risk management, and success."**
>
> Action for the Rights of Children [152]

13.3.3 Public or private advocacy
Advocacy can be public (eg, using the media to pressure decision makers and influence public opinion, naming and shaming those who violate children's rights), or informal/ private (eg, through a private conversation, or in a meeting without publicity behind closed doors) depending on the target audience, the context, the objective, and the stage of advocacy on the issue. It can take place at local, national, regional or international levels; or simultaneously at all levels. If concerted action is planned, it is critical to build support and buy-in for the objective and advocacy strategies so that allies are aware and prepared to provide support, and to avoid unintended negative consequences.

13.4 Examples of engagement and advocacy at different levels

Local
- Engaging with local authorities to persuade them not to detain children formerly associated with armed groups or forces

- Holding discussions with local leaders so that they influence armed groups not to recruit children or that they promote acceptance of returning children

- Influencing school directors to allow children formerly associated with armed forces or groups to attend classes

National
- Engaging with national governments to

  – Develop and implement a national strategy to prevent child recruitment, increase spending on social and child protection programmes and establish independent human rights monitoring and reporting
  – Engage appropriate government departments (such as departments of education, social affairs, sports, and labour) in a national strategy to reintegrate children formerly associated with armed forces and groups
  – Strengthen the capacities of security sector actors, including training on child rights and child protection
  – Pressure armed forces/UN peacekeeping troops to provide physical protection for children who are vulnerable to abduction

Regional
- Influencing regional partners to support peace agreements, to demand that parties to conflict release all children from armed groups or forces and cease all child recruitment and use

International
- Advocating with appropriate authorities to maintain the civilian nature of refugee and internally displaced people's camps and comply with international human rights and humanitarian law and standards

- Convincing donors to make direct government funding contingent on government compliance with child protection obligations under international law

13.5 Public awareness-raising

Informing and mobilising people about the issues surrounding the recruitment and use of children by armed forces and groups, and about work to prevent this and to reintegrate children, enables communities to hold the government and other duty bearers accountable to national and international standards.

Public awareness raising can help people understand why children may become associated with armed forces or groups, as well as the harmful consequences of this involvement. You may be able to win support for strategies for prevention of recruitment.

Public awareness raising can also generate empathy for individuals who have been associated with armed forces and groups and can motivate communities to accept them back into local society and to engage in prevention efforts.

Various actors can conduct public awareness-raising campaigns, including governments, national and international organisations and members of civil society. Like advocacy, planning awareness-raising strategies should be built on an analysis of the situation and a risk assessment, helping to define targets, key messages and the best ways to deliver them. Steps to mitigate risk should be in place before awareness raising begins. This might,

for example mean keeping the sources of statements or information confidential and presenting case studies and quotes from witnesses so they do not identify the individual's real name or any other identifying features.

Examples of public awareness-raising strategies might include:

- Organising panel discussions, seminars, conferences and other events to inform the public about issues related to child recruitment and use in their context and specific actions they can take to increase protection of children. This could be targeted more specifically, just at parents or teachers, for example, or have a broad target.

- Alerting parents and children about the risks of recruitment through community sensitisation meetings, discussions in schools and children's or youth groups or clubs, radio announcements, posters, social media, theatre, music, or poetry performances.

- Conducting awareness-raising and sensitisation training for religious leaders on child rights and discussing methods for communicating messages to communities.

- Engaging formerly associated children in information campaigns. (Note: assessing and mitigating potential risk before engaging these children is essential.)

- Using peer-to-peer outreach for community sensitisation, for example by engaging charismatic older children or young adults to act as positive role models for younger children.

- Using technology, such as radio, television, SMS broadcasts or social media.

- Translating and widely disseminating international legal instruments into local languages (eg, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, the Paris Principles), including child-friendly versions.

As the case study below illustrates, where safe to do so, involving children in awareness-raising campaigns can help achieve the goals.

⟩ See also Chapter 14 on Child Participation in Peacebuilding Activities.

Awareness-raising activities with children: an example from Nepal

In Nepal from 2006 to 2010 Search for Common Ground (SFCG) carried out a series of peacebuilding activities with a focus on communities supporting children associated with armed forces and armed groups to return home. These activities aimed at increasing awareness, understanding and acceptance of the experience of children, and reducing the stigmatisation and hostility that they were facing as they returned to their communities. They included:

1. An **assessment** of communities that were heavily conflict affected and had experienced child recruitment, with the objective of understanding the push and pull factors of child recruitment and the attitudes of community members towards child recruitment. The findings informed all the following activities.

1. A national-level **radio drama** series called 'Let's Return Home', which ran over a month and was also distributed on cassettes. The show followed the experiences of a girl and boy, showing how they were recruited, what happened to them while they were with the armed group, the challenges they faced in returning home, such as stigmatisation, and how they eventually overcame many challenges to become leaders in their communities.

- Following this, SFCG with Antenna Foundation Nepal ran selection processes across the country to identify 28 children to be **trained to produce a radio programme** called 'Let's listen, let's talk'. This show ran for 30 minutes every week for two years. It consisted of Questions and Answers with a different panel of politicians and policymakers each week, answering questions on issues raised by children across the country. The children acted as outreach journalists interviewing people in their respective communities and putting forward stories and questions to be shared on the show.

- After each show aired, children's and youth groups supported by SFCG facilitated **reflection and discussion sessions** in their respective communities. An evaluation found that family members also discussed issues raised in the show at home.

- The **Children's and Youth Groups** brought together children from a range of diverse backgrounds, including more privileged children, children from disadvantaged minority groups, children currently in school, children formerly associated with armed groups, etc. This diversity was found to be crucial. Children from different backgrounds and with different experiences had a space to speak with each other, understand each other, and feel greater empathy and compassion towards each other. Those who previously looked down on children associated with armed forces and groups came to have a greater understanding of how they became associated and how hard it was for them to return home. These groups carried out a range of activities, including street theatre performances, followed by community discussions about issues affecting children.

- Children associated with armed forces and groups and other conflict-affected children from the youth groups were supported to go to the capital to **speak with policymakers**, interview politicians, and deliver their messages directly to the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Children and Armed Conflict (SSRG-CAAC).

- **Large flip books of cartoons** depicting situations experienced by children associated with armed forces and groups were developed and used by a range of child protection actors, local NGOs and the youth networks to facilitate inter-generational discussions in communities.

An evaluation conducted in 2009[153] found that despite some challenges, the project was seen as a success. Community members were fully aware of children's need to able to reintegrate into society. However, there were still many issues and problems in the community around the safe and full acceptance of returning children.

Respondents felt that the most important change had been the change in the political situation in Nepal, with the former rebel group now in government, people have started to trust the children who returned home. The second most important element was children receiving support from their peers through counselling, children's clubs, drama and activities.

> **"After I listened to the episode on 'showcasing the hidden talent of children' [of Let's Listen, Let's Talk], I was so impressed that I recorded the episode and took it to my school. I gathered children around and listened with them again. We even had a discussion on the issue. Now, two teachers in my school and children listen to the program regularly."**
>
> Anuragh Yadav, a politician and a chairperson in a local school.

13.6 Key resources

- Paris Principles Steering Group, 'Paris Principles and Commitments Advocacy Aid on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups – Explanatory Note', 2022 **Link**

- Paris Principles Steering Group, 'Paris Principles and Commitments Advocacy Aid on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups – FAQs', UNICEF, 2022. **Link**

- Save the Children, 'Advocating for Change for Adolescents: A practical toolkit for young people to advocate for improved adolescent health and well-being', 2017. **Link**

- UNICEF, 'Youth Advocacy Toolkit', 2021. **Link**

Chapter 14
Child Participation in Peacebuilding Activities
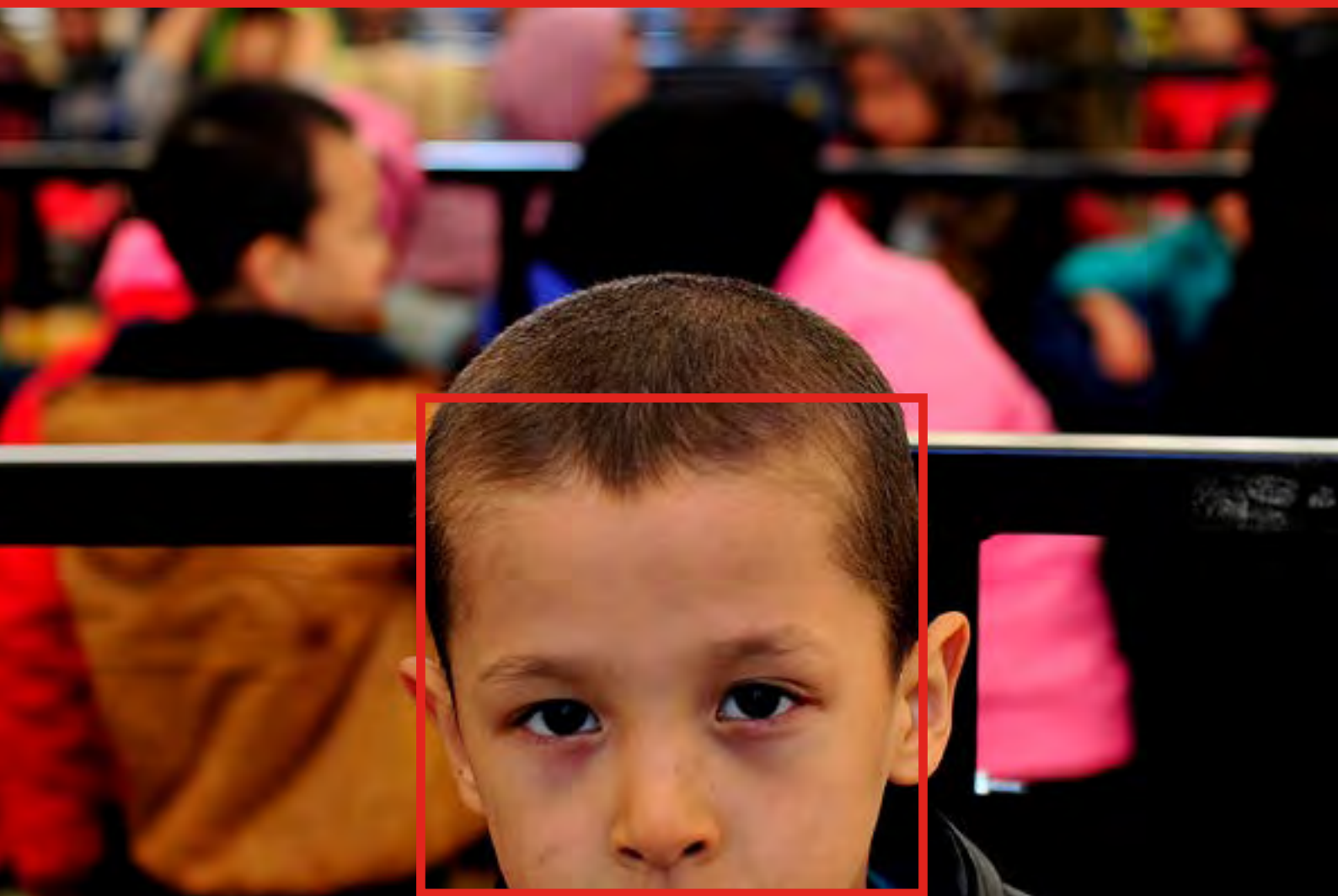
Introduction

Modern armed conflicts rarely end 'cleanly', but instead frequently evolve into protracted complex struggles, often characterised by ongoing low-intensity conflict with small pockets of fragile peace. Countries that have experienced armed conflict may face a significant risk of slipping back into conflict.[154]

The term 'peacebuilding' refers to activities that seek to reduce the risk of a country or area lapsing or relapsing into armed conflict. It acknowledges that armed conflict does not come out of nowhere, and only when the roots of the conflict are understood can effective actions be designed to prevent further conflict.

Peacebuilding activities positively influence relationships between groups of people in armed conflict, fragile peace and post-conflict contexts, to reduce tensions along religious, ethnic, political or other lines, promote social cohesion, and reduce the risk of a country lapsing into conflict.

Peacebuilding activities may vary according to context, and may include working with individuals and groups to strengthen their capacities to manage sources of conflict in non-violent ways, foster reconciliation, normalise relations, promote human rights, reduce vulnerability to triggers that may spark violence, and address root causes of conflict including social, political and economic inequalities and injustices.[155] Peacebuilding activities may be carried out before, during and after armed conflict.

Children and young people have a stake in establishing and maintaining peace as well as making decisions about their futures (for example in participating in decision-making about their reintegration). Several factors can prevent children from being included in peacebuilding, including beliefs that children and young people are less capable than adults or should play a subservient or dependent role, as well as social, cultural, political and economic power differentials between adults and children.

An inclusive approach to peacebuilding, tailored to children's evolving capacities, takes longer than a narrow approach focusing only on written peace agreements, or one with tokenistic involvement of children, and is therefore likely to cost more. However, the time and effort invested can help to move a society closer towards a viable and sustainable peace and, crucially, allow children who feel frustrated with circumstances that encourage fighting and conflict to learn to resolve disagreements without resorting to violence. Furthermore, it gives adults an opportunity to see and appreciate that children can make a positive contribution. It also enhances and promotes one of the key rights of the child: child participation.

Child protection practitioners should therefore not only involve children and young people in programmes for release, reintegration and prevention of child recruitment, but also in overall peacebuilding processes, as appropriate.

This chapter explores approaches to, and examples of, child participation in peacebuilding activities, in contexts where children are being recruited and used by armed forces and groups or there is a risk that they will be.[156]

14.1 How peacebuilding activities can help prevent recruitment and support reintegration

"Indications suggest that participatory programming can actually strengthen the ability of children to resist efforts by armed groups to recruit them. For example, some members of village-based children's clubs in Nepal targeted for recruitment have said that their participation in these clubs helped them assert themselves, negotiate and avoid being lured into dangerous situations."[157]

Children's potential contributions to peacebuilding should not be overlooked. They can play an important role within a wider framework of peacebuilding across generations at community and national levels. Child protection actors who want to prevent and respond to child recruitment and use should promote children's participation in peacebuilding activities for the following reasons:

Children's right to participate. As enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare the Child, children have the right to participate in decisions that affect them, in accordance with their evolving capacities.

Children as key stakeholders in peace. Children represent a large percentage of the population in countries affected by conflict and are the adult population of the near future. As such they have a valuable role to play in shaping the present and the future. It is essential that children feel that they have a stake in helping to establish and maintain peace.

In many contexts it has been observed that the majority of children resist or turn away from violence on their own and start organising activities at a grassroots level to support their communities and to promote peace.

Peacebuilding activities should therefore support children to channel their capacities and energies towards positive and constructive actions.

Children as a key resource. To fail to involve children in peacebuilding is to miss out on a valuable resource. Children are not passive witnesses to conflict but can demonstrate considerable agency. "*Young people are valuable innovators and agents of change, and their contributions should be actively supported, solicited and regarded as essential to building peaceful communities and supporting democratic governance and transition.*"[158] And "*it is increasingly recognised that children have their own very valuable perspectives and priorities – which are often very different to those of adults.*"[159]

When working with girls and boys, "*it is vital to take into account not only the suffering they may have experienced but the skills, insights and knowledge they have acquired.*"[160]

Decreasing the risk of child recruitment: Working to end or reduce the likelihood of armed conflict will reduce the risk of future violations of children's rights, including recruitment and use by armed forces and groups. Furthermore, where children are marginalised and discriminated against in their communities, where they perceive a status quo of injustice, entrenched politics, corruption, lack of employment or social mobility, they may be more susceptible to recruitment by armed forces and groups. Peacebuilding activities can contribute towards decreasing this risk by bringing together children from diverse backgrounds, breaking down traditional lines of exclusion or marginalisation, and offering peaceful ways to explore issues that affect them.

Supporting community-based reintegration: Preparatory peacebuilding activities with community members are a crucial step to addressing tensions that may hinder successful reintegration or even put children at risk of physical and emotional harm when they return to their communities. In addition, activities that promote children's sense of civic responsibility and civilian identity can invite respect, approval and trust from adults. This helps to repair relationships in the community, strengthening children's social reintegration.

Offering alternative, non-violent, behaviour models: It can be particularly beneficial for children formerly associated with armed forces and groups to be included in community-level peacebuilding activities. During their time with an armed force or armed group, children may have been exposed to polarising narratives of 'us' and 'them', and a culture where violence is used to settle inter-personal conflict. Peacebuilding activities can help to reorient these children by demonstrating non-violent ways to resolve issues and promoting inclusive attitudes.

Strengthening peacebuilding through child-led radio shows and theatre[161]

"Search For Common Ground's programs target both norms and behaviour through interactive media and role models to teach youth how to resolve conflicts non-violently. The Génération Grands Lacs (The Great Lakes Generation) radio program, which is broadcast in Rwanda, Burundi and eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), is co-hosted by two youth journalists from two different countries on a rotating basis. The programs are comprised of pre-produced interviews, reporting packages, portraits, sketches, and testimonies, which complement live Q&A sessions with studio guests and interactive discussions with calls from listeners. The radio programs' themes target norms, while having youth co-hosts from different countries demonstrates how youth can work together across conflict lines.

"Similarly, in the DRC, the Participatory Theatre for Conflict incorporates Forum Theatre techniques to teach conflict transformation. This methodology has proven effective in changing the ways that youth deal with conflict by offering a venue to practice positively transforming a conflict and thus lowering the likelihood of violence as a result of that conflict. During the performance, members of the audience are invited to 'replace' the actors to play out the scenario in ways that more constructively address the conflicts."

14.2 Examples of peacebuilding activities with children

Child protection actors can work with children to identify relevant peacebuilding activities in their context. It is important to support children to analyse issues affecting them, so that they can develop critical thinking skills and identify activities to address the root causes of conflict, not just the symptoms.

Peacebuilding activities do not need to be sophisticated. They can consist of facilitating opportunities for young people to come together and get to know each other in a safe and constructive ways, such as supporting them in a joint project to solve a common problem. Fostering attitudes of acceptance, breaking down stereotypes, and increasing problem-solving skills can all be achieved through simple positive social interactions.

More substantial peacebuilding initiatives use conflict analysis to help identify problems and objectives, articulate a theory of change, and consider what are the different spheres of influence that can help to bring about this change (individual, family, community, society, national level policy, etc.). Experience suggests that there is likely to be more success at the local than at national level.[162]

Peacebuilding activities should be designed to:

- be genuinely exciting, enjoyable and engaging for children.

- bring together children or children and adults from different backgrounds and generations, and overcome divisions to enable dialogue.

- build children's skills and confidence.

- promote children's sense of civic responsibility and ability to contribute positively towards their community.

- demonstrate non-violent ways to explore points of difference or tension.

- promote dialogue, rather than debate or argument.

- reduce barriers to people meeting and understanding each other, for example ensuring language barriers are overcome, or that young people with a disability can attend.

14.2.1 Examples of children playing direct roles in peacebuilding activities[163]

- Participating in clubs, groups, associations, or children's parliaments; where children explore how to relate to each other, respect each other, solve problems together and live and work together peacefully

- Creating and sharing poems, songs, dance, drama, debates, street art, puppet shows, magazines, comics, etc., to raise awareness on key issues with peers, family, and the community

- Using local, regional or national level radio or television programmes to raise awareness, spread messages and encourage dialogue on peace and child rights

- Developing and using life skills including leadership skills, communication skills, critical thinking, conflict resolution, peer support skills, peer education skills and non-violent approaches to inter-personal conflict

- Identifying young people who can act as positive role models for other children

- Encouraging all girls and boys to go to school, including children who were formerly associated with armed forces or armed groups, children from minority backgrounds, children with disabilities, etc.

- Participation in peace education, citizenship and child rights through school curricula

- Supporting cultural exchange programmes such as exchange visits with children from different backgrounds

Children's participation in peace talks in Uganda[164]

"Children involved in the thematic evaluation in Northern Uganda have been persistent in advocating for inclusion of children's voices and children's representation in the formal peace talks, and played a catalytic role in ensuring inclusion of girls and boys in civil society consultations on agenda 3 of the peace talks on reconciliation and accountability. On reading a draft report of children's views on reconciliation and accountability, the government delegation extended their own formal consultation process by a day to directly meet with and listen to the views of children's representatives from four districts in Northern Uganda. The ensuing agreement on reconciliation and accountability clearly reflects a commitment to children's participation."

14.2.2 Examples where children participate in wider peacebuilding activities

- Advocating for children's issues to be included in peace processes and peace agreements[165] (for example, the 1999 Lomé Peace Agreement on Sierra Leone, peace talks in Uganda in 2007 and in Colombia 2012-2016, and the involvement of children within the peace process in Colombia[166])

- Community debates, dialogue and awareness-raising sessions

- Peace concerts and rallies

- Capacity building of teachers, parent teacher associations, community-based child protection committees, facilitators of children's groups, etc.

- Informal and traditional processes of justice and reconciliation

- Media interviews

  ⟩ See also Chapter 11, Community-Level Approaches to Prevention of Child Recruitment, for activities designed to reduce the risk of child recruitment, which might be similar or complementary.

14.3 How to promote meaningful child participation in peacebuilding activities

"When girls and boys, especially the most marginalized, have the opportunity to express themselves, to access information and to participate in decisions that affect their lives, they are better able to claim their rights and to hold adults accountable."[167]

Facilitating participation of children in peacebuilding activities is essential but can be harmful if not done well. This section outlines key aspects to consider when facilitating peacebuilding activities for children.

Many of these issues also apply to promoting children's meaningful participation in other programming related to children associated with armed forces and groups.

14.3.1 Ethical and safe child participation

As is always the case, children's participation should be based on free will and never forced. Child protection actors should inform children and their family members about what their participation would involve, and recognise that children may have legitimate reasons to decline to participate in activities.

Ensure participation is ethical and safe. Children should never be forced to participate in any activities, and should always be reminded that they do not have to provide any reason for not taking part, and that neither they nor their families will be penalised in any way if they do not participate. Sensitively giving children the opportunity to express the reasons for their reluctance to participate, if they choose to share them, might provide information about their fears which could then be addressed or mitigated

In situations of armed conflict or post armed conflict, especially when working with groups of children that include children formerly associated with armed forces and groups, it is essential to consider ways in which activities could predictably or inadvertently cause harm and then seek to mitigate these risks. With good facilitation, adapted to their developmental level, children themselves can be supported to identify and understand the potential risks and ways to mitigate them or to decide not to proceed with an activity if it is too dangerous.[168]

Do no harm principles

- Provide a physically, socially and emotionally safe and supportive environment for young people to participate in peacebuilding and post-conflict activities.

- Acknowledge the trauma that many young people have suffered, and offer a safe space to share experiences, including access to psychosocial support, justice and other support services for their rehabilitation and reintegration.

- Be sensitive to divisions and inequalities among and between young people, their peers and their communities, and avoid exacerbating these, reinforcing or aggravating stereotypes, or creating potentially difficult or dangerous situations for young people before, during or after their participation.

- Ensure that facilitators are specifically trained to handle difficult conversations and situations and know where to refer young people who might need specialised services.

- Be cautious about offering too many opportunities and services to young people who have been involved in violence, to avoid incentivising others to turn to violence or engage with armed groups to receive money or support.

Part of the Guiding Principles on Young People's Participation in Peacebuilding developed by the Subgroup on Youth Participation in Peacebuilding of the UN Interagency Network on Youth Development.[169]

14.3.2 Risks of exclusively targeting children associated with armed forces and groups

Peacebuilding activities should not exclusively target children known to be formerly associated with armed forces and groups. To do so risks stigmatisation and reprisals for these children. It can be seen as 'rewarding' those who were associated with armed forces and groups, while discriminating against children who managed to avoid recruitment, thus fuelling tension between these groups. It also excludes those who were formerly associated but who do not wish to be identified as such, and those who are at risk of (re-)recruitment.

Instead children known to be formerly associated with armed forces and groups can be discreetly referred into peacebuilding activities that are designed to reach girls and boys from a wide range of backgrounds, without disclosing their background to other participants.

⟩ See <u>Chapter 21</u>, Planning and Delivering Reintegration Programmes.

14.3.3 Including children from a range of backgrounds

> **"Unfortunately, peacebuilding programs often make one of two mistakes: they either focus exclusively on hardliners or 'at-risk' populations (and have the unintended consequence of rewarding negative behaviors) or they only include people who already support issues like multi-ethnic tolerance (and limit their impact by preaching to youth who already believe in a multi-ethnic society)."**

Mercy Corps[170]

Facilitating dialogue with people from different backgrounds, "bridges geographic and cultural divides, challenges stereotypes, and supports information-sharing and relationship-building"[171] and can help to build a sense of a shared national identity. Children from different cross-sections of society may never have spoken to each other before. Indeed,

"in many conflict environments youth are segregated by race, ethnicity, religion or tribe and rarely interact with youth from other backgrounds, making it difficult to combat the stereotypes and prejudices political elites and militant groups manipulate to garner support."[172]

Activities should include a wide range of girls and boys from different backgrounds, including children with disabilities, particularly children who may feel disadvantaged, powerless or aggrieved.

When involving children in activities, actors should be sensitive to differences, while avoiding labeling, stigmatising or emphasising any points of difference between children, including age, sex, abilities/disabilities, sexual orientation, social, cultural, economic, political, geographic, religious, ethnic, caste, class and educational backgrounds.

14.3.4 Including 'hard to reach' children and overcoming barriers to participation

Activities that favour certain groups of children over others risk reinforcing lines of division and conflict, and fundamentally undermine peacebuilding efforts. A key question to ask is, 'who is not being included?' Time must be taken to support children to overcome their barriers to participation. 'Hard-to-reach' children are typically disproportionately affected by conflict, and are often disproportionately at risk of child recruitment.

Child protection actors must seek out 'hard to reach' children, and work with them to overcome the challenges they face in participating without ever forcing them to participate. These might include for example:

Girls, from all backgrounds, who are likely to face multiple barriers to participation, possibly including the burden of domestic chores and/or cultural preferences for girls to stay in the home. Parents may refuse to give consent for various reasons

- Children who are taking care of their own children or their younger siblings

- Children from minority groups

- Out-of-school children

- Children in care homes, orphanages, etc

- Refugee and internally displaced children

- Children with disabilities, who can often be 'hidden' in the home or be unable to participate without specialised assistance or approaches

- Unaccompanied and separated children

- Children engaged in irregular employment

- Children in remote geographical areas that are costly and time consuming to travel to and from

In some cases, it is difficult for children and young people to participate in peacebuilding due to limited time, perceived or actual risks or other reasons. Practitioners should seek to address these barriers by gathering ideas about how to overcome them from children, families and communities.

The most appropriate ways of overcoming children's barriers to participation will depend on the local context and will be collaborative. Children themselves can often be a great resource in marginalised children in their community. For example, children in school tend to know which of their peers are absent and where they can be found.

Ways to encourage hard to reach children to participate include:

- Meet in places that are easier for children with physical disabilities to access, adapt to their needs and provide appropriate support – eg, sign language interpreters, staff experienced in alternative and augmentative communication, etc.

- Organise a 'buddy' system where more physically able children help less abled children to get to and from the activities.

- Create a childcare system to enable child mothers or children who are responsible for siblings to take part.

- Ensure that meeting times do not overlap with school, work, or times when domestic duties are most required, eg, when girls need to cook meals for their families.

- Use confidence-building measures for children from marginalised religious, ethnic or cultural groups.

- Design activities that fit with children's interests and needs. Mercy Corps has found that offering stipends for participation, and incorporating sports in conflict management training, meant that young people were much more likely to remain engaged.

> "Where many conflict management programs fall short is in their tendency to engage the easiest youth to reach—those in school and/or already engaged with their communities. The youth that pose the largest risk to instability, however, may be those that are difficult to reach for a variety of factors, including earning an income or lack of interest. For example, many youth do not participate in conflict management and youth leadership programs because they are busy trying to provide for themselves and their families. If increasing economic opportunities is a priority, youth will sacrifice participation in leadership and community-based programs in lieu of economic possibilities elsewhere. As a result, Mercy Corps offered stipends in places like Kashmir and Nepal to help young people remain engaged throughout the program. Mercy Corps has also found that sports provide a strong incentive for youth to participate in conflict management trainings. Youth in Liberia were much more likely to remember lessons they learned through sports and were much more likely to finish the training program if there was a sports component."

Mercy Corps[173]

14.3.5 Listening to children

Child protection actors need to listen to children, including when children's opinions differ from the facilitators' own. This is a key principle, and the first step in enabling their meaningful participation. It is important to take time to understand what are the major concerns and priorities for girls and boys, what roles they are taking on in the current context, what protection concerns they face, and what ideas they have for strengthening peace in their communities.

In order to avoid tokenistic participation, space should be created for children to take ownership of activities, to help to shape and lead them. Regular opportunities – not just around peacebuilding – for children and young people to come together in their own groups to share their ideas and develop and implement their own action initiatives should be supported.

Child protection actors should also avoid assuming that there are no grassroots peacebuilding efforts underway. You should seek out children and young people who may already be active in peacebuilding activities in their communities and explore if there is a way to work together. It can be helpful to identify children who hold influential positions amongst their peers and can have a multiplier effect, "young people organise themselves naturally and have leaders who influence their attitudes and behaviours."[174] However, child protection actors should be mindful of strengthening the position of children who already hold dominant roles in the community at the expense of marginalising others. Where there is conflict between children, peacebuilding activities should offer the opportunity to demonstrate peaceful ways of resolving disagreements.

Participatory tools for conflict management and peacebuilding by children[175]

Save the Children Norway has developed a Digital Resource Book of participatory tools that can be used with and by children and young people to analyse conflicts, to develop a vision of peace, and to plan and assess some of their peacebuilding initiatives. The resource book includes animations and short videos.

14.3.6 Listening to families and communities

The buy-in of parents and caregivers – and their explicit consent – and the buy-in of other adult stakeholders in the community is key to the success of peacebuilding activities with children. Activities should look to strengthen dialogue and relationships across generations, particularly where children formerly associated with armed forces and groups and other conflict-affected children are returning to their families and communities after a period of separation. Encouraging girls and boys to participate in peacebuilding activities when their families or communities are not supportive may have the unintended effect of actually increasing tension and inter-personal conflict along generational divides.

"We learned that involving children was easier than adults. They were always excited to be involved and they were doing some great work and mixing well with other children from different backgrounds. We realized that we needed to invest a lot of time in speaking with parents and other adults in the community to convince them that we really did want to work with children and that they had something valuable to contribute."

Search for Common Ground Facilitator, Nepal[176]

Creating space for inter-generational dialogue can be pivotal in terms of promoting social cohesion, particularly in supporting successful reintegration and reducing the risk of future child recruitment. Strengthening relationships between children from different backgrounds is important, but so is strengthening relationships between children and adults in their families and communities. Where dialogue breaks down, it is easy to fall back on negative stereotypes and assumptions. Creating spaces for children and adults to listen to each other's experiences and perspectives can be beneficial in overcoming fear and distrust.

14.4 Key resources

- International Alert, 'Programming Framework', 2017. **Link**

- Search for Common Ground, 'Guiding Principles on Young People's Participation in Peacebuilding', April 2014. **Link**

- Search for Common Ground, 'Children, Youth & Conflict: An Introductory Toolkit for Engaging Children and Youth in Conflict Transformation', Washington, USA, 2009. **Link**

- Mercy Corps, 'Youth and Conflict: Best practice and Lessons Learned', Portland, USA, 2011. **Link**

- United Nations Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development, 'Guiding Principles on Young People's Participation in Peacebuilding', **Link**

- Adriana Grau & Lakshitha Saji Prelis, 'Engaging and Recruiting Girls in Peacebuilding Programs', Search for Common Ground, **Link**

- Michael McGill & Claire O'Kane, 'Evaluation of Child and Youth Participation in Peacebuilding. Nepal, Eastern DRC, Colombia', Global Partnership for Children & Youth in Peacebuilding, July 2015. **Link**

- International Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE), 'INEE Guidance Note in Conflict Sensitive Education', 2013. **Link**

Endnotes SECTION 3

107 Draws on Save the Children Alliance Child Protection in Emergencies Professional Exchange Network, 'Child Protection in Emergencies. Priorities, Principles and Practices', 2007. pp.61–62.

108 United Nations OSRSG-CAAC, United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations and United Nations Children's Fund, 'The Guidelines on the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on Grave Violations against Children in Situations of Armed Conflict,' UNICEF, June 2014. p.7.

109 Personal correspondence with child protection specialist working in the Syria region, February 2015.

110 Personal correspondence with child protection field staff, April 2013.

111 European Union, Guidelines on Children and Armed Conflict, 2003, updated 2008. **Link**

112 Michael Wessells, 'Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection', Harvard University Press, Cambridge, USA, 2006, (hereafter, 'Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection'). p.232.

113 The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 'Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action', 2019. Standard 17 on Community-Based Approaches. **Link**.

114 UNICEF, 'The Paris Principles: Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups', UNICEF, February 2007, (hereafter, 'The Paris Principles'). Principle 6.27.4, p.22.

115 Save the Children, 'Fighting Back – Child and community-led strategies to avoid children's recruitment into armed forces and groups in West Africa,' The Save the Children Fund, London, UK, 2005, (hereafter, 'Fighting Back'). p.1.

116 See for example Matthew MacFarlane, Beth L. Rubenstein, Terry Saw, Daniel Mekonnen, Craig Spencer & Lindsay Stark, 'Community-based surveillance of unaccompanied and separated children in drought-affected northern Ethiopia', BMC International Health and Human Rights, 19, 2019. **Link.**

117 'Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection', p.250.

118 Excerpt from: Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, 'The Role of Communities in Protecting Education from Attack: Lessons learned', 2014. pp. 26, 28.

119 Excerpts from: Hasanthi Jayamaha, 'Sri Lanka: Education provides helps bloom again', World Vision Sri Lanka, 16 February 2015, online.

120 RAND Corporation, National Security Research Division Reprints Series, 'The McGraw-Hill Homeland Security Handbook Chapter 5: Al Qaida: Terrorist Selection and Recruitment', 2006. p.75.

121 'Fighting Back', p.9.

122 Brandon A. Kohrt, Minyoung Yang, Sauharda Rai, Anvita Bhardwaj, Wietse A. Tol & Mark J. D. Jordans. 'Mental Health Status and Risk Factors for Voluntary Participation of Youth in Armed Groups', Peace and conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology, 22(3). 2016 p.209.

123 Personal correspondence with Saji Prelis, Co-Chair of the Subgroup on Youth Participation in Peacebuilding of the United Nations Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development and Director of Child and Youth Programmes at Search for Common Ground, 15 December 2014.

124 'The Paris Principles'.

125 'Fighting Back'.

126 Personal correspondence with child protection worker in Somalia.

127 Save the Children Norway, 'Global Story Book: children and young people as actors in peacebuilding,' Oslo, Norway, 2010. p.21.

128 Personal correspondence with a child protection specialist at the International Committee of the Red Cross, 2014.

129 N. Boothby, J. Crawford & J. Halperin, 'Mozambique child soldier life outcome study: Lessons learned in rehabilitation and reintegration efforts,' Global Public Health, February 2006, p.100.

130 'The Paris Principles', Principle 7.58, p.36.

131 Save the Children, 'Forgotten Casualties of War: Girls in armed conflict', London, UK, 2005, p.18.

132 International Committee of the Red Cross, 'Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups', Geneva, September 2013, (hereafter, 'Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups'). p.5

133 International Committee of the Red Cross, 'Promotion and protection of the rights of children: ICRC statement to the United Nations', United Nations, General Assembly, 68th session, Third Committee, item 65 of the agenda, statement by the ICRC, New York, 18 October 2013.

134 'Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups', p.5.

135 Watchlist with Princeton University, Report of the workshop entitled 'Children and armed conflict: strengthening the implementation of the United Nations children and armed conflict agenda,' 12 and 13 December 2013, Princeton University, USA, p.6.

136 African Union Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration Capacity Program, 'DDR and Children. Operational Guideline', African Union Commission, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 2014, p30.

137 Personal correspondence with UNICEF staff, Chad, January 2015.

138 Paraphrased from United Nations Security Council Resolution S/RES/2151, Adopted by the Security Council at its 7161st meeting, 28 April 2014, §6, p.4.

139 Save the Children Sweden, 'Evaluation of the Save the Children CACD Military Training on Child Rights and Child Protection Project in Kenya, Ethiopia and Uganda, 2008', quoted in: Save the Children Sweden, 'Behind the Uniform: Training the military in child rights and child protection in Africa', 2009, p27.

140 Paraphrased from United Nations Security Council Resolution S/RES/2151, p.4.

141 Personal communication with child protection specialists from the Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative, September 2014 and May 2022.

142 United Nations Security Council Resolution 2143, S/RES/2143, Adopted by the Security Council at its 7129th meeting, on 7 March 2014, § 20, p.6. Following this recommendation, UNDPO has revised their Specialised Training Materials on Child Protection and the African Union Peace and Security Department and African Standby Force has revised their child protection training package, with support from Save the Children.

143 International Peace Institute, Meeting Brief: 'Children and Armed Conflict: Security Sector Preparedness for Prevention and Response in the Field', 26 February 2014.

144 Draws on Save the Children Sweden, 'Behind the Uniform: Training the military in child rights and child protection in Africa', 2009, (hereafter, 'Behind the Uniform').

145 'Behind the Uniform'.

146 Jérémie Labbé, Reno Meyer & Jonathon Somer, Engaging Non-State Armed Groups on the Protection of Children: Towards Strategic Complementarity'; International Peace Institute, April 2012.

147 Personal correspondence with the Roméo Dallaire Initiative, February 2015.

148 Save the Children, Getting it Right for Children: A practitioner's guide to child rights programming, 2007. Chapter 7: Advocacy on Child Rights.

149 Draws on Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, 'The 1612 Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism: A Resource Pack for NGOs', 2nd edition, May 2015. Tool 55, pp.104–106.

150 'Participation and inclusion', p.31.

151 UNICEF Office of Emergency Programmes, 'Saving lives, protecting children: advocacy in emergencies. Framework and technical guidance for discussion and consultation', Working paper, Humanitarian Policy unit, 2008. p.6.

152 Action for the Rights of Children, Foundation module 5. 'Participation and inclusion', 2009, (hereafter, 'Participation and inclusion'). P.22.

153 Rashmi Thapa, 'Final Evaluation Report, Children's Voices: Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups', UNICEF, 2009. p25.

154 United Nations General Assembly, 'Report of the Secretary-General on Peacebuilding in the Aftermath of Conflict', A/67/499 S/2012/746, United Nations, New York, USA, 8 October 2012, §3, p2.

155 This paragraph draws on the work of The Alliance for Peacebuilding.

156 This chapter draws significantly on the 2014 'Guiding Principles on Young People's Participation in Peacebuilding', which were developed by the Youth Participation in Peacebuilding subgroup of the United Nations Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development. These guidelines are highly relevant for organisations working with children as well as youth, while taking into account children's evolving capacities. See the Key Resources section at the end of the chapter for a range of practical resources to support the design and implementation of peacebuilding activities for children.

157 UNICEF and The Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, 'Machel Study 10-Year Strategic Review. Children and conflict in a changing world,' UNICEF, New York, USA, April 2009, (hereafter, 'Children and Conflict in a Changing World'). p.38.

158 UN Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development, 'Guiding Principles on Young People's Participation in Peacebuilding', 2016.

159 Clare O'Kane, 'Children and Young People in Post Conflict Peacebuilding,' in David Nosworthy (ed.), 'Seen, but not Heard: Placing Children and Youth on the Security Governance Agenda,' LIT, Zurich, Switzerland, 2009. p.284.

160 'Children and Conflict in a Changing World', p.40.

161 Mercy Corps, 'Youth and Conflict: Best practice and lessons learned,' Portland, USA, 2011, (hereafter, 'Youth and Conflict'). p.11.

162 Personal correspondence with the Co-Chair of the Subgroup on Youth Participation in Peacebuilding of the United Nations Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development and Director of Child and Youth Programmes at Search for Common Ground, 15 December 2014.

163 This list draws on Clare Feinstein & Clare O'Kane, 'Global report: Adult's War and Young Generation's Peace: Children's participation in armed conflict, post conflict and peacebuilding,' Save the Children Norway, Oslo, Norway. 2008, (hereafter, 'Adult's War and Young Generation's Peace'). pp.109–110.

164 'Adult's War and Young Generation's Peace', p.113.

165 'Adult's War and Young Generation's Peace'. pp.113, 120. See also The Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, 'Practical Guidance for Mediators to Protect Children in Situations of Armed Conflict', 2020.

166 Patricia Nabusco Marticelli, 'Child soldiers as Peace-builders in Colombian Peace Talks Between the Government and FARC-EP'. Conflict, Security and Development, Vol. 18, Issue 5, 2018. pp. 387–408.

167 'Children and Conflict in a Changing World', p.34.

168 Useful resources include the Basic requirements for the implementation of the right of the child to be heard, in: United Nations, Committee on the Rights of the Child, 'General Comment to the Convention on the Rights of the Child No. 12 (2009). The right of the child to be heard', CRC/C/GC/12, 1 July 2009. pp.26–27; and Clare O'Kane, 'Guidelines for Children's Participation in Humanitarian Programming', Save the Children, 2013. Risk Assessment Tool, p.16.

169 United Nations Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development Subgroup on Youth Participation in Peacebuilding, co-chaired by the United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office and Search for Common Ground, 'Guiding Principles on Young People's Participation in Peacebuilding', April 2014. Principle 5, p.2.

170 'Youth and Conflict', p.18.

171 'Youth and Conflict', p.6.

172 Mercy Corps, 'Youth and Conflict Toolkit', Portland, USA, 2009. p.4.

173 'Youth and Conflict', p.2.

174 Search for Common Ground, 'Children, Youth & Conflict. An Introductory Toolkit for Engaging Children and Youth in Conflict Transformation', Washington, USA, 2009. p.10.

175 Save the Children Norway, 'Digital Resource Book' (2014).

176 Personal correspondence with Rashmi Thapa, child protection coordinator, Search for Common Ground, about work in Nepal in 2007–2009, November 2014.

PROGRAMMING FOR RELEASE

Chapter 15
Engaging with Armed forces
and Armed Groups

©UNICEF/UNI334940/Ryeng

Introduction

'Armed forces' refers to the armed forces of a State (Paris Principle 2.2). They are sometimes referred to as 'government security forces'.[177]

'Armed groups' refers to groups distinct from armed forces, as defined by Article 4 of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict. (Paris Principle 2.3) They are often called non-state armed groups.

Over the past few decades, conflicts have become increasingly more complex and changing dynamics involving multiple state and non-state actors. In 2017, the number of non-state armed groups (NSAGs) far exceeded the number of government security forces in the lists of perpetrators of grave violations against children in the annexes of the Annual Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict.[178] Many of the children involved in armed conflict today are found within the ranks of NSAGs.

Humanitarian actors routinely engage and coordinate with States' armed forces, in recognition of a State's authority over its territory and its responsibility to its citizens. In some areas, however, NSAGs may be acting as the de facto State authority and may also have responsibility for the well-being and protection of children. Engaging with NSAGs is essential in these contexts to address the issue of child recruitment and use. However, in some contexts, it may be more appropriate and less risky for child protection actors to support engagement with NSAGs through international peacekeeping operations or political actors such as UN Missions (see Chapter 4 on Coordination).

Child protection actors and humanitarian agencies engage with parties to conflict on the issue of child recruitment to prevent and end child recruitment and use, and to secure the release of children. They may also want to engage with armed forces and armed groups to secure humanitarian access and support children living in the territories controlled by parties to the conflict, including children associated with the armed forces or armed groups, or to prevent or respond to other grave violations against children. In conflicts in which many armed forces and armed groups are supported by third parties (partnered operations and coalition warfare), engagement with those supporting parties may be useful as they may train and influence the armed forces and armed groups to adopt more appropriate behaviour, including taking steps to prevent the recruitment and use of children.

Engagement by humanitarian actors with parties to the conflict should not happen in isolation but should be conducted alongside community-based efforts to understand the push and pull factors of child recruitment (see Chapter 11 on Community-Level Approaches to Prevention of Child Recruitment).

This chapter discusses considerations for child protection actors engaging with parties to conflict and provides practical guidance on how to engage with them and mitigate related risks and challenges.

15.1 Considerations for engaging with parties to a conflict

15.1.1 Legal norms and standards for engaging with parties to a conflict

The engagement of humanitarian actors with parties to a conflict, and the obligations of States and NSAGs towards civilians and humanitarian actors are addressed in international standards, including UN Security Council and General Assembly resolutions. For example, UN Security Council Resolution 1612 mandates representatives of the UN to directly engage with parties to a conflict to end grave violations committed against children in armed conflict in certain situations. See Chapter 3 for an overview of the main laws, instruments and standards in this area.

Humanitarian actors can base engagement with parties to a conflict on a "right of initiative" established by treaty-based and customary international humanitarian law. This means they can offer to provide humanitarian services to all parties to conflict (if the parties agree) and precludes parties from unlawfully refusing the offer.[179]

It is important to note that, in all their engagements with parties to conflict, humanitarian actors must abide by humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence.[180]

International humanitarian law (IHL) relating to obligations to children and civilians applies to both States and NSAGs that are parties to a conflict. More specifically, Common Article 3 to the Geneva Conventions, Additional Protocol II, and customary IHL applicable in non-international armed conflict bind NSAGs as well as States. There is less clarity in relation to NSAGs and International human rights law (IHRL), which traditionally has been understood to apply only to States.[181] However, there is increasing recognition that when NSAGs exert control over large areas of territory, they effectively remove large populations from the protection of legal instruments that bind only States.[182] Therefore, while NSAGs cannot become parties to international treaties and conventions, some argue that in these situations, they have human rights obligations as well as obligations under IHL.[183]

Some NSAGs have voluntarily committed to certain rules that are consistent with international laws and standards. For example, the UN Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism's Action Plans, and voluntary acts of engagement such as Geneva Call's Deed of Commitment or Unilateral Declarations, have been used to enable NSAGs to subscribe to these international norms, albeit with some challenges. Some NSAGs have internal codes of conduct which may reflect international laws and standards to varying degrees,[184] and some groups have made special agreements with other parties to the conflict (including States) that include international law provisions – including on the protection of children.[185]

〉 See also Chapter 10 on Monitoring Child Recruitment and Use by Armed Forces and Armed Groups, and 〉 Chapter 25 on Addressing Impunity for Child Recruitment and Use.

Geneva Call's Deed of Commitment for the Protection of Children from the Effects of Armed Conflict

Designed by the organisation Geneva Call, the Deed of Commitment is "an innovative mechanism that allows armed non-state actors to publicly pledge to respect international humanitarian norms and be held accountable for their commitments". As of April 2021, 28 armed non-state actors have signed the Deed of Commitment for the protection of children from the effects of armed conflict (and 31 have engaged on the thematic areas of work but not signed the Deed of Commitment). The Deed of Commitment may serve as a stepping stone towards the conclusion of Action Plans with the UN. Under the Deed of Commitment, signatory armed non-state actors commit to:

- Prohibit the use of children in hostilities

- Ensure that children are not recruited into, or forcibly associated with, armed forces

- Release or disassociate children in safety and security

- Protect children from the effects of military operations

- Do their best to provide children with the aid and care they need, in cooperation with specialised child protection agencies.

15.1.2 Deciding who is best placed to engage with a party to a conflict

Careful preparation and coordination between actors is essential before starting to engage with an armed force or armed group, as "poorly planned and executed engagement will be fruitless, and in the worst case counterproductive, damaging and MAY even prompt violence."[186] Proper preparation includes establishing strong coordination between child protection and other relevant actors to ensure that efforts to engage with parties to the conflict are not contradictory or unhelpfully duplicated.

Engagement on the issue of child recruitment and use is likely to be part of a broader dialogue on behalf of many humanitarian actors addressing a wide range of issues, such as humanitarian access for aid organisations. In situations where the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) has been activated, the UN-led Country Task Force on Monitoring and Reporting (CTFMR) has a specific Security Council mandate to engage with parties to the conflict, including NSAGs, on child recruitment issues. This can involve monitoring of action plans to end and prevent recruitment of children. See also Chapter 10 on Monitoring Child Recruitment and Use by Armed Forces and Armed Groups.

Which humanitarian actor may be best placed or suited for this engagement will depend on a variety of factors, and there may be room for 'strategic complementarity' of approaches between different humanitarian actors, depending on the party to the conflict, the issues, or the credibility of the actor. Which entity is best placed to engage may be determined by factors such as:[187]

- whether the MRM has been activated

- organisational mandates

- organisational and individual experience and areas of expertise

- organisational resources and capacities

- pre-existing relationships with parties to the conflict, or their pre-existing attitudes towards different humanitarian or political organisations

- relationships with neighbouring countries or other national/regional actors who are not direct parties to the conflict

- levels of trust and respect from the local community/constituencies towards humanitarian or other organisations

- extent of ability and willingness to mitigate potential risks to humanitarian assistance pro-grammes and other work.

Perceptions of different humanitarian actors

The armed force's or armed group's perceptions and acceptance of humanitarian organisations is a key issue.

For example, the non-state armed group National Democratic Front of the Philippines has stated that, "*the UN is not a forum for national liberation movements to get a fair and objective hearing.*"[188] The State concerned, the Philippines, acknowledged this perception: "*We often favour the involvement of non-violent peace forces [humanitarian and peacebuilding NGOs] which… are impartial and therefore accepted by all parties. Unfortunately, sometimes the United Nations is not perceived that way. It is seen as more on the side of the Government.*"[189]

In some cases, it may be judged that intermediaries are best suited to enter into a dialogue. For example, where armed groups draw their support from the civilian population, community and religious leaders may be best placed to negotiate for children's release, as armed groups may be willing to release children to gain community support.

In situations where a UN mission is present, engagement by UN political bodies may pose less of a risk than engagement by child protection actors concerned about potential impacts on their humanitarian space. Furthermore, in contexts where armed groups are designated by the UN as terrorist groups, humanitarian actors may have very limited or no access because of specific legal restrictions. In such situations, humanitarian actors may work through intermediaries, after undertaking a risk assessment to evaluate and mitigate potential negative impacts on communities and individuals.

The approaches used to engage with armed actors will depend on the local context. There is no single best approach. Engagement may be:

- direct or indirect

- bilateral or multi-party

- formal and high level or less formal and technical level

- public or confidential

- constructive or based on 'naming and shaming'

- ongoing dedicated dialogue or capitalising on ceasefire arrangements, political settlements or peace agreements.

Capitalising on ceasefire arrangements, political settlements and peace agreements

"Incorporating specific commitments in political settlements, ceasefire arrangements, peace agreements and relevant implementation mechanisms can provide important opportunities and entry points for the rapid release of children from armed forces and groups and their reintegration." Several Security Council Resolutions on [children and armed conflict] since 2001 have called for the protection of children, including provisions for the release, reintegration and rehabilitation of children to be specifically integrated into all peace processes and peace agreements. The Special Representative of the Secretary-General [SRSG] on Children and Armed Conflict recommends that "ceasefire arrangements and peace agreements should include explicit demands for the immediate and unconditional cessation of the recruitment and use of children, as well as the swift and orderly release, return and reintegration of children associated with armed actors."[190]

15.2 Issues to discuss with armed forces and armed groups

Child protection actors seeking to address child recruitment and use are likely to engage with armed forces and groups on the key issues suggested below, depending on the context. The list is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive. It is important to find an appropriate entry point for each armed force or group and build up confidence and trust over time.

TABLE 15.1 Issues to discuss with armed forces and armed groups

1. The immediate release of children	While seeking the immediate and unconditional release of children associated with armed forces and armed groups is the most pressing objective, in some cases this may be too sensitive an issue to open dialogue or negotiations, and release may be more likely to happen following a series of smaller confidence-building steps, such as holding respectful meetings, and immediate transfer of very ill children to hospital. In other situations, it may be appropriate to put release of children on the agenda from the start, even if other initial actions may need to be completed before release is achieved.
2. Details of the process of release and reintegration	After a commitment to release children is secured, the details of the process, such as eligibility criteria and time frames, must be negotiated. At this stage, child protection actors also should plan and commit to reintegration support for the children who will be released, in coordination with local authorities.
3. Addressing other violations	The cessation of other types of violations against both children and the wider civilian population, such as the military use of, or attacks on, schools and hospitals may also be an issue. Though the military use of schools is not strictly prohibited by IHL, such use infringes on a number of child's rights.
4. Their responsibilities towards children and humanitarian access	Armed actors' responsibilities towards children in the areas they control can be discussed. These may include: provision of education and health services, protection from enemy attacks, and safe access for organisations providing impartial humanitarian relief.
5. Prevention of future recruitment	Reducing the risk of future recruitment through activities such as: – Support to comply with the legal and normative framework. For NSAGs this may involve non-legally binding voluntary expressions of commitment (see box above on *Geneva Call's Deed of Commitment for the Protection of Children from the Effects of Armed Conflict*), or issuing directives to the commanders within the group or commanders of associated factions and groups. For armed forces this may involve addressing national-level legislation. – Support to develop appropriate policies and practices, eg, proof of age policy, code of conduct, child protection units, etc. – Sensitisation and training, for troops and for constituent communities.) See also Chapter 12 on Prevention of Child Recruitment and Use through National Legal Frameworks and the Security Sector.
6. Action Plans to halt and prevent child recruitment.	Under the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism, Country Task Forces have a specific Security Council mandate to engage with parties to the conflict to negotiate Action Plans to halt and prevent child recruitment and use. See also Chapter 10 on Monitoring Child Recruitment and Use by Armed Forces and Armed Groups.

15.3 Practical considerations when engaging with an armed force or armed group[191]

"You have to take time to build relationships, and 'pick your battles'. I went to speak to one armed group to try to persuade them to stop using children. As I went into the building there was a man beating a child outside. I wanted to say something, but I knew that if I criticized them about that I would lose the chance to talk to them about recruiting children at all."

Humanitarian worker in Syria, January 2015[192]

Table 15:2 may be helpful for humanitarian organisations considering dialogue with armed forces or armed groups.

TABLE 15.2 Approaches and principles when engaging with parties to conflict

Neutrality and impartiality	The principles of neutrality and impartiality should be respected in words and actions. For example, the same key child protection issues and related asks should be put on the table for all parties/influencers with whom negotiations are taking place, to reinforce the principle of equality of belligerents.
Equality of belligerents	Dialogue should be offered to or sought with more than one listed party or influencer at the same time to reinforce both the perception and reality of impartiality and the centrality of the mandate to end grave violations of child rights.
Know the dynamics of the context	Understand the nature of child recruitment and use and the dynamics between different armed forces and armed groups, and the communities from which they may draw support. Study norms (formal and informal), culture and motivations of the armed force or group, and of key individuals within the armed force or armed group, for recruiting and using children.[193] (See Chapter 5 on Situation Analysis.)
Initial high-level contact	In some cases, for credibility or to indicate seriousness, it is essential that initial contact takes place at the highest levels of the UN mission, the humanitarian organisation and the armed force or armed group. It is also important to organise periodic communications to ensure buy-in.[194] It may take time to build the knowledge and confidence necessary for the top leaders on all sides to invest their time.
Individual attributes and skill sets	Consider who is the best representative to liaise with armed forces and armed groups. This may be someone with a similar background (nationality, ethnicity, religion, language), who is very familiar with the cultural sensitivities and practices of the armed force or armed group. It may be someone from a different background to ensure neutrality. Whatever their background, they should possess "exceptional interpersonal skills, the ability to think on one's feet, an acute sense of responsibility and sound judgement."[195]
Build credibility	Credibility can rest on an individual's knowledge and actions, and from their or their organisation's performance in the context. Transparency and honesty are key in building credibility. Managing expectations is essential. Attention should be paid to not misrepresenting a situation or setting unrealistic expectations, such as promising that all children who are released will quickly find employment. If something cannot be determined, it is better to be honest and acknowledge the ambiguity rather than to speculate. It is easy to lose credibility by showing a lack of knowledge about the armed force or group or about the conflict dynamics, or by failing to deliver on commitments.
Consistent messaging	All actors who may come into contact with armed forces or armed groups and their communities/constituencies must be able to communicate clear and consistent messages about their work, their organisation, and their relationship with the armed force or armed groups.[196]
Open attitude, time to discuss	Armed actors are unlikely to enter into dialogue with people who they feel disrespect them.[197] They should be approached with genuine open mindedness and with an interest in understanding their viewpoints. The emphasis should be on talking less and listening more. Why is recruitment taking place? Are they aware of the legal framework? Do they feel justified to break the law in the current circumstances, and if so, why? Is recruitment forbidden but it occurs in lower ranks because the command and control system is weak? Be constructive and help to identify solutions.
Be flexible	It is generally better to encourage a series of small movements in the right direction than to insist on an 'all-or-nothing' approach, which may shut down dialogue and the possibility of moving towards full reform and compliance with international standards.[198]
Consider the hierarchy structure	Many armed forces and armed groups are structured organisations, where high-level decisions are respected, while others may be more decentralised or fragmented. Consider who within the command structure needs to be influenced to influence all members. Agreements with the central command need to be followed up with foot soldiers to ensure awareness, understanding and buy-in.
Keep records	Confidential and secure records of meetings and other dialogue should be maintained to guard against the loss of information, eg, linked to staff turnover, and to be able to confirm that an issue has been discussed.

The better the targeted armed actor and its representatives are known and understood, the greater the chances the advocacy messages will be appropriate and effective. Table 15:3 suggests tips for advocacy with armed groups and forces, built on an understanding of their morals and practices. Again, these are context dependent.

TABLE 15.3 Potential advocacy approaches when engaging with armed groups and armed forces

Pick advocacy points wisely	Focusing on a few clear and narrowly defined objectives is likely to be more effective than promoting many broad messages simultaneously. UNICEF advise: "It may also be wiser to start engagement on less sensitive issues and broaden dialogue as trust is established."[199]
First just aim to sow doubt	The first step may be just to seek to sow doubt about their current views on the use of children, rather than to immediately convince them of a different position. Opinions are unlikely to change overnight.[200]
Appeal to their self-image	Olivier Bangerter of the International Committee of the Red Cross says, "Few members of armed groups see themselves as war criminals serving an unworthy end; most consider themselves to be part of a decent group, fighting for a noble cause. Emphasising this aspect and using arguments that appeal to their convictions may go a long way."[201] In this vein, some may respond to questioning along the lines of why they are using children to do 'adults' work'.
Appeal to their beliefs and values	Elements of the members' moral, religious, cultural or political beliefs may provide arguments in favour of respecting the legal and normative framework, framework, or of protecting all children within the context. Appealing to the values underpinning the law has proven to be efficient at positively influencing behaviour and encouraging individuals to internalise the law.[202]
Appeal to their own policies	Codes of conduct, public declarations or other policy documents may provide arguments for respecting the legal and normative framework.
Appeal on grounds of sound military policy	Frame arguments to appeal to military priorities. For example, while always stressing that it remains a rights violation irrespective of the effectiveness of using children in military operations, note how forced recruitment campaigns can prejudice the 'hearts and minds' of the civilian population against the armed group. You could note how children may be less able to make rational decisions and follow orders in a predictable way, so the military use of children can be understood as a tactical disadvantage.[203]
Appeal on grounds of humanity	Appeal to their concern for the well-being of the affected population – which may also be the communities from which they originate. Ask how they would feel if members of their own family went through the experiences that children in their ranks are going through?
Appeal to their ambition for legitimacy	Many armed actors have aspirations for greater legitimacy on the world stage. Pointing out the harm that their violation of laws on children and armed conflict will have on their reputation can be powerful.
Highlight the risk of national or international prosecution	In some circumstances, it may be relevant to highlight that child recruitment and use may lead to prosecution under international humanitarian law. Be wary as this argument may have unintended consequences if armed actors suspect that the negotiators may be collecting evidence for a future prosecution.
Appeal to their communities / constituencies	Armed actors do not operate in vacuums; the opinions and affiliations of the civilian population can matter. Sensitisation of their constituencies or communities can bring about pressure to change their behaviour.

Engagement for the release of children in Central African Republic[204]

During the armed conflict in the Central African Republic between 2012 and 2015, many children left their homes in the north and travelled to other areas of the country to fight, often motivated by the idea of being 'heroes' fighting for their people. Children described enjoying the status that their role with an armed group brought, and the sense of adventure and camaraderie.

In 2014 Save the Children, working in coordination with UNICEF and MINUSCA, a UN peacekeeping operation, were able to facilitate the release of many children through dialogue with their commanders. Some of the commanders refused to cooperate, but many were surprisingly sympathetic to the idea that children should not be involved in fighting, once it was raised and discussed with them. Some talked about the fact that they care about the well-being of the children and agreed that fighting is dangerous. One influential argument was that this dangerous responsibility should be shouldered by adults, and not children on behalf of adults. During a child protection training session that commanders were invited to, a commander proactively asked Save the Children staff if they could facilitate the release and reintegration of all the girls associated with his group, as he didn't think it was good for them to be there.

When MINUSCA, UNICEF and Save the Children managed to persuade a commander to allow children to be released, they then met with the children themselves. Discussions with children centred around:

- taking time to understand their viewpoint, needs and concerns

- validating their desire to do something to help their people

- raising concern about the risks of being associated with an armed group and the fact that this violates their rights

- exploring possible alternative options to fighting, such as through children advocating for what they believe in using their voice, their creative skills, doing social work for their communities, etc.

Some children decided to leave and pursue helping their communities through non-violent paths, with the consent of their commanders. In these cases, Save the Children was able to provide individual case management support including family tracing services, access to medical services and other types of reintegration support. In other cases, commanders were more obstructive, and children were not motivated to leave the armed groups. Engagement by child protection actors continues to encourage children to leave armed groups.

UNICEF conducted advocacy with another armed group, Union for Peace in the Central African Republic, which resulted in them signing an Action Plan in 2018 for the release of children. Child protection actors such as UNICEF and War Child UK among others are working to support the children's reintegration.

15.4 Mitigating risks and challenges when engaging with an armed force or armed group

Working on prevention and response programmes for child recruitment in volatile contexts presents numerous potential risks to beneficiaries, organisations and their staff, among others. Armed protagonists (armed forces and armed groups) may fear prosecution, criticism, or retaliation, and may respond by threatening or harming beneficiaries, the staff of implementing organisations, or the infrastructure of the organisation. When representing State or de-facto

authorities, they may be able to stop organisations working altogether. They may also react by detaining, hiding, threatening to harm or actually harming children still associated with them, or carrying out reprisals against children who have been released or who have escaped.

To limit these risks, it is essential that a risk assessment and analysis is completed and regularly updated. See Chapter 6 on Risk Assessment, Security Planning and Risk-Informed Programming.

15.4.1 Potential risks[205]

When engaging with armed groups and armed forces, you are exposed to risks, which include, but are not limited to, the following.

- Risks to physical security

- Risk of violating humanitarian principles, including the 'do no harm' principle

- Risk of jeopardising existing programmes (access, relationships)

- Reputational risk (loss of perception of neutrality or impartiality), which may provoke hostility from an opposing party to the conflict

- Risk of raising unrealistic expectations – for example, NSAGs expecting to be de-listed from the Annexes of the Secretary General's annual report after signing and implementing the Geneva Call Deed of Commitment rather than an MRM Action Plan

- Risk of transferring risk to partner agencies, local staff, local communities, or intermediaries

- Risk of politicisation of child protection, that is, parties to the conflict use it as a bargain chip and request advantages in return for release of children

- Risks linked to engaging with armed groups designated by the UN as terrorist organisations (loss of donor funding, legal action)

15.4.2 Suggestions to manage and mitigate potential risks

It is helpful to draw up a context-specific list of risks and decide for each one how likely it is and how significant the impact could be if it occurred.

Appropriate ways to mitigate risk will depend on the specifics of the context, but may include:

- Drawing on local knowledge, or experience gathered in the past or by other actors

- Creating plans to manage context-specific risks

- Coordinating with humanitarian partners as a risk mitigation strategy

- Building trust and establishing relationships within the local community

- Ensuring that expectations of the process and outcomes of engagement are clearly understood and realistic

- Identifying intermediaries who might face lower risk levels and engaging indirectly with the party through them

- Advocating with other actors when necessary, eg, other states or donors

- Engaging with representatives of the party outside the country

- Keeping confidential records of previous engagements

15.5 Potential challenges and ways to overcome them

15.5.1 Challenges accessing NSAGs
Governments may strongly discourage, restrict or deny access to NSAGs operating in their territory on national security grounds.

Governments may deny there is a national armed conflict taking place and refuse to acknowledge an NSAG, instead referring to them as 'criminal gangs' or 'terrorist groups'. This makes it challenging for humanitarian actors to reach out to NSAGs, and prevents application of the MRM to these situations, thus not allowing for the formal monitoring of the six grave violations against children in situations of armed conflict.

International or domestic designation of an NSAG as a terrorist group can trigger restrictions, lead to the criminalisation of humanitarian dialogue with the group, and limit the ability of humanitarian actors to work in areas it controls.[206] (See also Chapter 28 on Recruitment of Children by Armed Groups Designated as Terrorist Groups.)

You may find it helpful to try the following to overcome these challenges.

• Persuade governments (through advocacy, political pressure) to allow child protection actors to engage with NSAGs to secure humanitarian access to populations, deliver aid and release children within their ranks.[207] Explain that this engagement need not confer recognition or legitimacy to the armed group. You can also raise the potential for humanitarian actors to promote behaviour change of NSAGs.

• Pursue a facilitated dialogue through relevant Member States in view of their influence and partnerships over the NSAG and consider leveraging the role of influencers to bring a party to the conflict to the table.

• Detailed discussions may be needed between donors, national governments, the UN and other humanitarian actors, in order to navigate the tensions between counter-terrorism laws and humanitarian action.

• Identify organisations or particular staff who are at lower risk of the potential consequences for engagement with NSAGs.
 – International staff of UN agencies may face lower risks due to UN immunities and privileges.
 – Organisations and staff who are located outside the country can engage with representatives of NSAGs who are living abroad.
 – Organisations who are not implementing programmes inside a country may be able to engage with NSAGs on behalf of organisations who are.

• Where the MRM has been activated, the UN Country Task Force has a Security Council mandate to engage with parties to the conflict. The UN can use this to overcome some access challenges.

• When access to NSAGs is not possible, consider building on the existing capacities of individuals and communities to strengthen resistance and response to child recruitment and use. For example, support building safe spaces for children where the NSAG can't access them for voluntary recruitment; support and guide community members who wish to voice their concerns with the NSAG.

Changing attitudes towards an armed group

Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, an armed group in Colombia), was viewed by the Colombian government as a Non-State Armed Group, a narco-trafficking criminal organisation, or a terrorist organisation, depending on who was in government and on the wider geopolitical context.

For example, the government of President Uribe, who came into office in 2002, repeatedly sought to deny that an armed conflict existed in Colombia, opting to define hostilities instead as part of the international 'war on terror' or 'war on drugs'.[208] He lobbied to keep the FARC on the list of terror groups in the EU and elsewhere.[209]

This perception changed with the Government of President Santos, who came to office in 2010. Santos' government engaged in a peace process with FARC. Key agreements regarding land reform, political participation, and illicit drug production had been reached by 2015. The Santos government also facilitated and actively pursued the involvement of the international humanitarian and civil society.[210]

15.5.2 NSAG compliance with the legal framework[211]

The fact that NSAGs cannot become parties to IHL or IHRL means they are less likely to feel bound by them and may lessen their incentive to respect them. There is a perception amongst some NSAGs that international law is "law defined by states and violated by the same."[212]

It is a source of tension that the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict establishes a higher standard for NSAGs (minimum age for recruitment is 18 for NSAGs but possibly 16 for states under certain conditions), though they cannot be formal signatories to the instrument. (Additional Protocol II, by contrast, establishes the same minimum age of 15 for both States and NSAGS.)

Some of the provisions in IHL or IHRL may be more difficult for NSAGs to comply with than for states, if they lack control over territories, or lack the necessary level of knowledge and capacity (eg, human resources, finances) needed to respect IH/IHRL. This may result, for instance, in a lack of age assessment mechanisms.

Possible approaches to overcome these challenges include:

- Willingness on the part of humanitarian actors to engage with NSAGs, including recognition of the range of profiles of NSAGs and that some are keen to engage in constructive dialogue.

- When seeking respect for IHL and IHRL by armed forces and armed groups, humanitarian actors should identify areas of commonality between IHL and the NSAG's political, cultural or religious belief systems. Humanitarian actors can also offer relevant training, suggestions for alternative approaches, and assistance to the areas under their control.

- Thorough preparation prior to engagement, including learning from other actors' previous experiences, and identifying arguments that address the individual armed group's specific situation.

- Concrete measures to overcome the NSAG's lack of ownership of the norms, such as by voluntarily signing Action Plans, Deeds of Commitment, or making Unilateral Declarations.

15.5.3 Challenges using the MRM to influence NSAGs[213]

While the MRM remains a central process for the protection of children in armed conflict, "there are limitations to its scope and effective implementation—notably when it comes to engaging NSAGs."[214]

Entering into MRM Action Plans, and ultimately being 'delisted' from the Annexes of the Secretary-General's annual report, can be attractive for some NSAGs who want to improve their reputation on the international stage. However, this can also be a reason for governments to try to obstruct dialogue between UN Agencies and NSAGs.

Sometimes NSAGs can be unaware that they have been listed in the Annexes of the Secretary-General's annual report or are effectively excluded from engagement in Action Plans that could lead them to be delisted.

NSAGs tend to implement Action Plans concurrently with the ending of armed conflict.

Approaches to overcome these challenges include:

- Communication by the CTFMR or SRSG on Children and Armed Conflict to NSAGs of the fact that they have been listed in the Annexes of the Secretary General's annual report before this information is made public.

- Use of the mandate provided by the Security Council to ensure that NSAGs are not excluded from engagement in the Action Plans.

- If the reality is that NSAGs are not able to fully participate in Action Plans and related dialogue, this should be recognised and stated.

- NSAGs can take unilateral action to establish codes of conduct, make public declarations about their stand on child recruitment, release all children currently associated, allow monitoring by third parties, etc. These types of interim measures can build trust and capacity towards the eventual implementation of a full Action Plan.

- Where direct communication with NSAGs is very challenging, it may be worth looking at complementary approaches, for example by using third party specialist organisations or influencers to negotiate directly with them.

15.5.4 Fragmentation and evolution of armed groups

Armed groups may fragment and new groups and factions may emerge, leading to a multiplication of ever-changing interlocutors.

Evolution of command structures within armed forces or armed groups can reduce the authority and influence of the individual(s) that have been negotiating with humanitarian actors.

The command structure and leadership needed to ensure that the engagement results in strengthening the protective environment for children may be completely lacking.[215]

Possible ways to overcome these challenges include:

- Close monitoring of the situation and understanding of the command structure.

- Relationship building and re-negotiation with new/multiple actors.

- Multiple negotiations with local-level commanders and societal actors (local and religious leaders).

15.5.5 Armed actors not interested in dialogue

Armed actors may not be interested in engaging in dialogue with humanitarian actors and may ignore or aggressively resist approaches.

Child protection actors may feel that engagement with armed forces or armed groups would put them at direct risk of harm.

You may find it helpful to try the following to overcome these challenges.

- Seek to understand the reasons for their lack of interest. Is it because they don't perceive the international community as neutral? Or because they lack knowledge of IHL/IHRL and the structures of the international community?

- Differentiate between armed forces and armed groups who recruit children because they do not make any effort not to do so and those who purposefully and proactively recruit children.

- Seek to gain their trust and respect by taking time to listen to and understand their reasons for recruiting children. Then engage in dialogue aimed at changing their practices. Share examples of other armed actors who have changed their practices, provide incentives, and identify issues that are important to them. The majority of armed forces and groups have some political goals, and thus care about how they are perceived, for example by local communities or the international community.

- It may be possible to identify one or more individuals within the armed force or armed group to start talking with. Building a relationship with them may then lead to wider engagement.

- Where the international legal and normative framework is rejected in favour of armed actors' alternative frameworks, seeking to discuss areas of tension or complementarity between the two might be more advantageous than simply dismissing their framework and insisting on established international standards.

- Make use of intermediaries, including other national governments, whose profile makes them likely to gain acceptance and have a certain degree of influence.

15.6 Key resources

- Conflict Dynamics International with ICRC and OCHA, 'Humanitarian access initiative'. **Link**

- Federal Department of Foreign Affairs,' Handbook on the International Normative Framework, (Version 2)', FDFA, December 2014. **Link**

- Conflict Dynamics International – Humanitarian Negotiations Initiative, 'Humanitarian Negotiations Information Portal'. **Link**

- Geneva Academy, 'Rules of Engagement: Protecting Civilians through Dialogue with Armed Non-State Actors', 2011. **Link**

- Geneva Call, Resource Documents, online, 2016. **Link**

- Geneva Call, 'Deed of commitment under Geneva Call for the protection of children from the effects of armed conflict'. **Link**

- Geneva Call, 'In Their Words: Perspectives of Armed Non-State Actors on the Protection of Children from the Effects of Armed Conflict', 2016. **Link**

- 'A collection of codes of conduct issued by armed groups', International Review of the Red Cross, Vol. 93, No. 882, 2011, pp.483–501. **Link**

- International Committee of the Red Cross, 'The Roots of Restraint in War', 2018. **Link**

- International Committee of the Red Cross, 'Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups', 2013. **Link**

- International Committee of the Red Cross, 'Guiding Principles for the Domestic Implementation of a Comprehensive System of Protection for Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups', 2011. **Link**

- Jérémie Labbé, Reno Meyer & Jonathon Somer, 'Engaging Non-State Armed Groups on the Protection of Children: Towards Strategic Complementarity'; International Peace Institute, April 2012. **Link**

- UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 'Humanitarian Negotiations with Armed Groups. A Manual for Practitioners', 2006. **Link**

- Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict. website. **Link**

- The Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative, Child Soldiers: A Handbook for Security Sector Actors,' Centre for Foreign Policy Studies, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Canada, Revised 3rd Edition, 2017. **Link**

- Save the Children, 'Civil-Military Relations & Protection of Children', 2017. **Link**

- Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, 'Operational Guidance: Negotiating and Implementing Handover Protocols', 2022. **Link**

- United Nations, Peacekeeping Resource Hub. **Link**

Chapter 16
Undertaking Formal Release of Children

Introduction

"The transition of the child from a military environment and the first step towards reintegration into civilian life begins with their release from armed forces or armed groups."

Paris Principle 7.13

"Taking a child rights-based approach to the problem of children associated with armed forces or armed groups, the [Paris] Principles underscore the humanitarian imperative to seek the unconditional release of children from armed forces or armed groups at all times, even in the midst of conflict and for the duration of the conflict."

Paris Principle 1.5

Formal release of children from armed forces or armed groups involves the planned formal transfer of children to a designated third party for their care and protection. This can be in a number of ways, including:

- as part of an Action Plan with an armed force or armed group

- as part of a larger-scale disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) process which may also include adults.

Such processes should be available to all children (girls and boys) associated with armed forces and armed groups, irrespective of their role(s) during their association, the armed force or group with which they were associated, or the existence of a peace plan, ceasefire or other similar agreement.

Given that formal release of children is a goal of agreed Action Plans with armed forces or armed groups, child protection actors should support advocacy and actions to facilitate and allow the release of children in an appropriate manner and at all times.

Acknowledging that transition to civilian life is a gradual and uncertain path, sometimes with a high risk of re-recruitment, or further exploitation such as child trafficking, activities to support formal release should meet children's different needs and be appropriate and safe for all participants. Children should be treated primarily as victims of human rights violations and every release must be carried out with the safety, security best interests of children as the primary concern.

National governments have formal obligations to facilitate the release of children associated with armed forces and armed groups in their territory within international legal frameworks (see Chapter 3 on The Legal and Normative Framework). In practice, some governments may be unwilling or unable to carry out this role. Child protection actors (and peacekeeping staff, where relevant) therefore often play key roles. Efforts should be made to increase governments' commitment and capacity to facilitate such processes (see also Chapter 12, Prevention of Child Recruitment and Use through National Legal Frameworks and the Security Sector).

The release of children from armed forces and armed groups should not be considered as a 'security' issue, as adult demobilisation is commonly considered, but as a 'rights' issue, as underscored by Paris Principle 1.5. Children shall not be required to hand over weapons as a condition for release. As such, we refer to the release of children, not demobilisation. Furthermore, no child should have to wait until conflict ceases, until a mechanism for adult DDR has been established or for any other condition to be met before they are released.

In situations where boys and girls may be released as part of a large-scale DDR process that also includes the demobilisation of adult combatants, special child-friendly processes should be implemented to safely allow their release. This is in line with Principle 3.12 of the Paris Principles and Guidelines.

The Specific standard on 'Children and DDR' within the Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards (IDDRS) is based on relevant provisions of international law and three decades of field experience and lessons learned by UNICEF and its partners. It, along with the entire IDDRS, provides guidance on how to prepare for and respond to the specific needs of children during formal DDR processes and to ensure that DDR interventions are child-sensitive and seek to maximise the benefit of children, while minimising any harm.[216]

Some children may not be able or willing to participate in formal release processes and may therefore not access the protection and care they needed to assist in their transition to civilian life. Child protection actors should try to identify and address possible obstacles for children's participation in formal release processes.

This chapter provides guidance on how to prepare and undertake the formal release of children from armed forces and groups, and ways to address obstacles for children's participation. Chapter 17 gives guidance on supporting children who experience informal release or exit from armed forces and armed groups.

16.1 Preparing for formal release

Preparation to support the release of boys and girls from armed forces or groups must begin as early as possible, regardless of the type of release, and be guided by a thorough analysis of context and conflict dynamics. Conducting risk assessments (with inputs from informed local actors) before identification and registration processes can help you to anticipate and effectively manage complicated scenarios. As situations change, risk assessments should be regularly reviewed. (See also Chapter 6 on Risk Assessment, Security Planning and Risk-Informed Programming)

Early preparation for release can also help prevent or manage community resentment or aggression towards formerly associated children and assist with reintegration.

Effective coordination between all stakeholders is essential (see Chapter 4 on Coordination). A semi-autonomous body may be established at the national level to coordinate and monitor all aspects of a formal release process. This body might include or coordinate closely with:

- Government ministries and agencies
- Parties to the conflict
- UN agencies
- Peacekeeping operations
- International donors
- Non-governmental organisations, including child protection agencies.

The table below identifies essential preparatory steps for the formal release of children, when it is anticipated that armed forces and groups will agree to release children. Children should be included at all stages when safe to do so.

16.1.1 Essential preparatory steps for the formal release of children

Analysing conditions for release (and reintegration) processes

- Understand the applicable international and national legal framework.

- Understand the socio-political context.

- Gather primary information through site visits and meetings with military leaders, community representatives and others.

- Conduct a risk assessment.

Designing the release process
- Identify budgetary needs and funding sources (see Chapter 4 on Coordination and Chapter 7 on Funding).

- Map all elements of the design and implementation of the release process, including safeguarding measures and processes.

- Outline the timeframe for key milestones. Consider whether release should be staggered in phases: balance the quality of services that can be mobilised to support children and the need to release them as soon as possible.

- Develop eligibility criteria for formal release processes (see below) and reintegration programmes.

- Map likely pathways for children being released, seeking to limit their exposure to armed actors, and to ensure armed actors are aware of their responsibilities towards children.

- Develop contingency plans for possible sudden large-scale releases of children and other scenarios.

- Identify appropriate medical, legal and psychosocial referral pathways for children, families and caregivers.

- Identify strong linkages between reintegration and wider, longer-term recovery and child protection and other services.

- Develop Standard Operating Procedures detailing the roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder.

- Set up or coordinate with existing family tracing processes and identify alternative care options.

- Agree details of the release process with the parties to conflict (eg, timing, eligibility criteria, procedure) and inform them about their responsibilities to protect children under international law.

Preparing the release process
- Recruit and train local caseworkers who can conduct culturally sensitive interviews in the child's native language (see also Chapter 8 on Human Resources and Capacity).

- Match individual boys and girls with the most appropriate caseworkers for them, considering gender, ethnic/religious background and other relevant factors.

- Assign two caseworkers to each interview, to safeguard children and staff, and to allow for a division of responsibilities.

- When interpreters are needed, ensure they are independent and impartial and trained to handle sensitive issues. Verify translations to ensure accuracy.

- Train staff on gender sensitivity, including on working with girls and young mothers, and boys.

Providing accurate and timely information to children, military leaders and family and community members

- Provide transparent information to all stakeholders about the pathways and services. Allow space and time to discuss expectations and concerns.

- Adapt messages for relevant audiences (eg, posters with age-appropriate pictures and wording, radio or TV campaigns, mass briefings and peer-to-peer awareness-raising).

- Ensure messages are inclusive of girls, children with disabilities and other marginalised groups.

- When possible, ask children who have already been through a formal release process for advice on effective communication methods. Such children might speak in radio broadcasts, encouraging others to participate in formal release processes by describing their experiences. Engagement with formally associated children should be carried out by trained staff, and only after a risk assessment.

- Inform children that they do not have to give anything (including sexual favours) in exchange for services, and where they can go to report any concerns.

- Explain to families, caregivers and communities the impact of recruitment and use on a child (see Section 1) and advise them how they can support the children's release and reintegration process.

- Coordinate information-sharing activities with other actors providing similar services.

16.1.2 Visits to sites/barracks ahead of release

It may or may not be possible to visit sites or barracks where children are being held, depending on factors such as the relationship with the command structure, geographical locations, logistical constraints, and the anticipated time frame for release. If visits are possible, they are an opportunity to gain information to prepare for the release process. Staff can make observations, and perhaps ask questions. Careful attention should be given to risks related to the visits and other ethical aspects.

A risk assessment of the safety and appropriateness of speaking with children currently associated with the armed group or force should be conducted in advance of the visit and will need to be validated during the visit. Speaking directly to children may place them at risk of reprisals by members of the armed force or group, and so requires careful consideration and planning, as discussed in Chapter 6 on Risk Assessment, Security Planning and Risk-Informed Programming.

It is unethical to try to engage children in detailed conversation when their basic needs, such as for food or medical care, are not being met, if they believe that they will get such assistance by cooperating.

If it is not possible to gain access to sites ahead of release, child protection actors can use secondary sources of information. For example, formerly associated children who have returned to their communities may be able to provide information about the situation of children currently associated. Again, the risks of speaking to these children must be assessed.

The following are issues to assess when visiting sites or barracks:

- Estimates of numbers of children, or lists of children including name, age and sex.

- Children's concerns and expectations about participating in a formal release process.

- Effective ways to communicate with children about the release process.

- Where relevant, discuss Action Plans with leaders of the armed force or group if it is listed in the Annexes of the Secretary-General's annual report.

- Where armed forces or armed groups do not have Action Plans, reiterate the rights of children to be released safely and without interference

- Safeguarding measures to be put in place during the release process.

- Any other information that can inform programme design. For example:

  - the children's experiences: how they were recruited, how long they have been associated, – what roles they performed, and their attitudes towards their association
  - where the children came from, to help plan family tracing work
  - a sense of the number of children who might require interim care and for what duration
  - types of services that might be needed in areas of return
  - estimates of numbers of children affected by different health or protection concerns
  - information to help sensitise and prepare communities ahead of return
  - information to help prevent the recruitment of other children.

16.2 Eligibility criteria for release

Forced or compulsory recruitment of children – girls and boys under the age of 18 – and their use in hostilities by armed forces and groups are illegal, and recruitment and use of children under 15 are prohibited in all circumstances. All children should therefore be included in formal processes; given that children in these circumstances have a right to release at any time, no preconditions, such as the existence of a peace agreement, are required for them to be released. Where national law allows recruitment by armed forces between the ages of 15 and 18, release processes should include verification of children's age and association with the force was truly voluntary, including whether safeguards were in place and followed. For armed forces, at a minimum, all children under the lawful age of recruitment (and ideally under 18), whether in fighting or support roles, and explicitly including girls, must be eligible for release.

Table 16:1 outlines key issues to consider when establishing eligibility criteria for access to services related to a formal release process.

TABLE 16.1 Key issues related to eligibility for release from an armed force or group

Age-related issues	· The age at which an armed force can lawfully recruit children varies, depending on the treaties to which it is a party as well as on national law. The applicable legal standard should be identified. Some instruments prohibit recruitment and use of children below the age of 15,[217] and others raise that age,[218] some expressly to 18.[219]
	· Recruitment of children of any age by armed groups is prohibited under international law.
	· There is often a time lag between an agreement to release children and the date of release. Some degree of flexibility may be necessary for children who will turn 18 in the intervening period, and for those whose exact age is not known and who may be just over 18 years.
	· There may be young adults who were first recruited as children and spent much of their childhood with an armed force or group. While their needs cannot be addressed through formal child release programmes, seek to coordinate with adult DDR programmes to promote appropriate activities for such young adults, who may have many similar needs to children.

Activity within the armed group or force	· Eligibility must never be conditional on submission of a weapon or proof of familiarity with weapons.
	· Eligibility should not be based on the type of roles boys and girls have had during their association. All children are eligible for release regardless of whether they had roles as combatants or support roles.
	· Eligibility should not be based on any minimum length of association with an armed force or armed group. However, attempts should be made to verify that children were not recruited very recently purely to access reintegration support, or to inflate release numbers while children more valuable to the armed force or group, who have been associated for longer periods and are more experienced, are held back. Context-specific questions can be asked to verify that children have genuinely been associated (such as the name of people in the command structures).

16.2.1 Age assessment[220]

Age assessment is the process of determining someone's age when it is unknown or disputed. Poor rates of birth registration in many countries mean that children often do not know their age and it cannot be determined from registration records. Leaders of armed groups or forces may claim that children are adults for fear of prosecution; children themselves may claim that they are adults, believing they will receive a more attractive support package; or young adults may claim to be children when there is no DDR process for adults.

There is no definitive method for determining someone's exact age, but independent and appropriately skilled practitioners can make educated judgements that can be relied on. A number of approaches have been tried over the years; current practice tends to make use of:

• interviews with children verified with other people who know them

• any available records, such as school, hospital, refugee or other records

• historical timelines: tools that use well-known events in the context as reference points, with questions such as, "were you going to primary or secondary school during the big flood of 2017?", etc.

An age assessment should be undertaken only as a measure of last resort, in cases where serious doubt about an individual's age exists.

Informed consent must be sought from the individual, and they should have a right of appeal to contest the outcome.

Where there is a margin of error this should be applied in favour of the individual.

Assessments must follow the least intrusive method possible, be gender and culturally appropriate, and uphold the dignity of the individual. An independent trusted adult should be appointed to advise and support the child.

Age assessments must be carried out by a child protection specialist who is:

• from the context and speaks the same language as the individual

• mandated to carry out the assessment by a relevant national authority

• trained in conducting age assessments, skilled at communicating with children, and aware of issues affecting children associated with armed forces and armed groups

• trained in how to handle disclosure from children, such as disclosure of physical and sexual abuse, and knows where and how to refer a child for services in the event of a disclosure.

It is helpful to first practice on children and young adults whose ages are known.

Consider potential security risks, such as a backlash on those conducting age assessments by people who do not agree with an outcome.

Biometric age assessments should not be relied on.

Age assessment and advocacy for appropriate care: A case study from Chad[221]

In March 2014, during a routine visit to a prison in Chad, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) identified a group of 248 people from Séléka, an armed group from the Central African Republic, who had been arrested by the Chadian authorities.

UNICEF undertook advocacy with the government to highlight that under the current Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism Action Plan, the government had obligations towards children associated with armed groups of foreign nationalities. UNICEF was granted access to the prison and undertook an age assessment process, using several sources of information:

- The age people had given the Chadian authorities when they were arrested.

- The age the individuals gave ICRC when they first gained access.

- A team of UNICEF child protection staff were trained on methodology for age determination and practised first on children whose ages were known.

- The UNICEF staff interviewed the young people in the prison in detail. No mention was made of any potential difference in outcome for adults and children.

- Where there was any doubt that someone was close to their 18th birthday, they placed them in the category of 'child'.

UNICEF found that 44 of the detainees were children. They worked with the Ministry of Social Welfare to remove the children to a transitional care centre, while family tracing was carried out, mainly by the ICRC, to identify their relatives back in Central African Republic.

16.3 Immediate actions at the time of release

Steps should be taken to ensure boys' and girls' safety and well-being at the time of release.

Ensure access to medical screening and services, including for wounds and injuries from fighting, disabilities, substance use, mental health needs, and reproductive health and maternity needs. In particular, ensure services are available for girls and boys who are survivors of sexual violence. Ensure that children are not required to go through medical screening or other processes without prior or sufficient information or without giving assent, which can create unintended but very real anxiety and fear.

Conduct individual interviews and assessment of needs, including interim care needs. Register children and their key details. (See Chapter 18 on Case Management After Release and Chapter 19 on Alternative Care).

Inform children about the full release and reintegration process, their rights relating to the process, anticipated timelines, available services, and the daily routine within interim care settings. Make no promises or assurances that are not 100 per cent confirmed.

Separate children from adults to help ensure physical safety and disrupt adults' control over children. Female staff should create safe spaces in which to engage with girls, particularly those portrayed as dependents of male combatants, in order to discuss their wishes and their options. This could happen while providing health services, for example. (See also Chapter 17 on Understanding and Supporting the Informal Release of Children from Armed Forces and Armed Groups and the specific case of militarised communities.)

Challenges in separating children and adults: A case study from Chad[222]

Sometimes there can be tension between separating children from adult combatants and seeking to preserve family units.

In Chad in 2014, the children detained in prison with adults from an armed group (see case study above) included a girl of 17 who was the 'wife' of a 45-year-old general and had a two-year-old child. UNICEF staff talked to the girl, separately from the general, to understand her wishes. It was determined that the girl and her child should move to stay with her relatives who lived relatively close to the prison where her 'husband' was being held. She was able to maintain contact with him while awaiting the outcome of his trial.

In another case, a child was identified who had been detained together with his adult relative. After some discussion with the child, the adult and the authorities, it was decided to move the adult relative to another prison that was closer to the transitional care centre where the child would stay while tracing for other family members was carried out. UNICEF supported the child and adult to maintain contact during this period.

16.4 Formal release papers

While the issuing of formal release papers is likely to be determined by a government or military actor, it is helpful to be aware of the potential advantages and disadvantages in your context, so you can advise other actors or support children to make informed decisions.

Potential advantages of release papers:

- Release papers may be valued as proof of separation from an armed force or armed group.

- Children may take pride in showing these to family and community members, particularly in contexts where an armed force or armed group is viewed favourably.

- In some contexts, release papers evidencing a child's period of association with an armed group or force might be useful to show to future potential employers who may value skills children obtained while associated with an armed force or group.

- Children may produce their papers if confronted by members of the armed group or force to show that they were formally released and are not deserters.

Potential disadvantages of release papers:

- Some children may prefer not to have any formal record of their association. They may fear the stigmatisation that this could bring.

- In some contexts, formal release papers may be viewed as an admission of guilt or wrongdoing in the eyes of the law.

- If children were associated with one group and are returning to an area held by another group, they may fear that formal release papers will expose them to risk of reprisals. Consider that during conflict, different armed actors may take control of an area over time.

- Formal release papers might increase the risk of re-recruitment, by identifying children as having military experience and therefore being of more value to an armed force or group.

16.5 Cash payments/material kits

The Paris Principles recommend that cash payments should not be made to children on their release. The risks of doing so have been clearly documented.[223] Members of armed forces and armed groups may recruit children just to put them through the release process then take their money, or put non-associated children onto release lists to gain their money, leaving children who have been previously recruited off release lists. Children may be motivated to join armed forces or armed groups to receive cash.

However, some practitioners argue that the benefits of giving cash have not yet been fully explored, and point to children who sell kits, tools or other materials they are given in order to buy what they deem most important, and highlight the greater dignity children may gain through the self-determination that cash brings. If used, it is preferred that transfers be embedded in existing cash transfer programmes so that recipients do not stand out.

Careful messaging is needed where cash payments are being given to demobilised adult combatants but not to children, as children may feel that their experiences are unrecognised or under-valued if they do not receive equivalent payments.

In some contexts, governments or militaries may independently decide to provide cash payments to children, which child protection actors should not support.

Current recommended best practice is to channel funding towards the community level, focusing resources on local services such as child protection services, schools, youth groups or vocational centres, which can benefit other vulnerable children and families as well as those who are returning.

Child protection actors may also offer a release package, to provide children with essential items and help reduce the burden that their arrival can place on families. Such packages should be designed for the context, basic and appropriate to the needs of the child and family. They might include, for example, civilian clothing and shoes in local styles that do not stand out, personal hygiene items, simple household items, and food. If they are too generous, they are likely to provoke jealousy and resentment. It is important that all agencies take a consistent approach in a given context.

16.6 Safeguarding children from harmful exposure to media or donor visits

There may be considerable pressure to facilitate media and donor access to children at the time of release. While fundraising and advocacy are important, such exposure can be distressing, exhausting and frustrating for children. Media exposure also presents a direct risk of stigmatisation and violent reprisals if strict guidelines are not followed.

Decisions on the appropriateness of exposing children to media and donor interaction should be taken by child protection actors, guided by the best interests of the child, and should respect the dignity and rights of the child. Those closest to the child's situation will be best able to assess the political, social and cultural ramifications of any exposure.

Child protection actors should not hesitate to decline permission for such visits, explaining your reasons for doing so. Respectable journalists and donors will understand these.

Such visits should be kept to a minimum, perhaps combined, if deemed appropriate at all.

Child protection staff must always be present during any visits, to monitor children's wellbeing and the conduct of visitors, and to intervene if necessary.

Visitors must be fully briefed on and agree in writing to a strict code of conduct. This should include the protection of children's identities, such as not taking identifiable photographs, not using real names or publishing details that could identify any children; and the protection of their wellbeing, such as not asking intrusive, degrading or sensationalising questions. Do not publish a story or an image that might put the child, their siblings or peers at risk, even when their identities are changed, obscured or not used.

Pay special attention to each child's right to privacy and confidentiality, to have their opinions heard, to participate in decisions affecting them and to be protected from harm and retribution. Children's informed consent, and the consent of their family or caregiver must be obtained.

When in doubt about whether a child is at risk, report on the general situation for children rather than on an individual child, no matter how newsworthy the story.

See guidelines on media reporting from the Save the Children and UNICEF for more guidance.[224]

A formal release process for children and young people: Case study from Myanmar in 2018[225]

Children and young people identified and verified as underage recruits within the Myanmar armed forces were gathered from their battalions throughout the country to a central discharge centre in a military compound in Yangon, where they would spend six days preparing for release. The main components of the release process were:

A. Preparation for the return to civilian life (two days maximum):

· Life skills training

· Emergency medical treatment if required

· Psychosocial support, assessment of specific needs or concerns the children and/or family members may have

· If required, mediation between the child or young person and their family provided by trained social workers from child protection actors and Country Task Force members, in coordination with the Department of Rehabilitation from the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement.

B. Initial needs assessment (three days maximum):

· Medical check-up by the Ministry of Health

· Documentation process for the application for a Citizenship Scrutiny Card

· Initial needs assessment for long-term reintegration support by social workers

· Assistance with claiming any relevant salary, benefits or compensation

C. Discharge ceremony and family reunification (one day maximum):

· An official discharge ceremony would be organised by the government and the Country Task Force and attended by the children and young people and their parents

· It included presentation of Citizenship Scrutiny Cards by the national registration authorities, official discharge letters by the Myanmar Armed Forces, and family reunification forms by the case workers and the Department of Rehabilitation

- Each child and young person was given a kit containing civilian clothes, hygiene items, mosquito nets etc. and transport costs for two persons

In most cases, family tracing was not necessary because the military knew where the parents of the child were. Child protection actors would then verify the relationship of the family members to the children and their willingness and ability to be reunified.

In rare cases where the whereabouts of a child's family members was not known, the Department of Rehabilitation, UNICEF and child protection partners supported provision of that interim care arrangements. UNICEF would provide a small stipend to help cover the costs of one child and one relative to travel back to their community – which could be a very long and challenging journey, including multiple forms of transport.

In cases where children ran away from the military and were identified by child protection actors in the community, UNICEF advocated with the military for them to be included in an official discharge and seek guarantees that they would not be arrested as deserters. Children would then go to the discharge and the discharge process with other children. Receiving their discharge papers helps protect them from reprisals for desertion or re-recruitment attempts.

16.7 When children do not participate in formal release processes

Even when formal release processes are implemented, it is likely that significant proportions of children do not participate, with girls being disproportionately under-represented in these processes.[226]

) See Chapter 27, Girls Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups, for a more detailed exploration of the challenges faced by girls.

Many children face significant barriers to access formal release processes or have legitimate reasons for choosing not to participate. Some of these are listed in section 16.8.1 below.

Such children may remain 'hidden' within armed forces and armed groups. Others may leave informally, and are rendered 'invisible', having perhaps never even been documented. Children who leave armed forces or armed groups informally may find themselves alone in a conflict or post-conflict zone, facing a host of threats including trafficking, exploitation and sexual abuse.[227]

Child protection actors must make time to try to understand why formal release processes may not be accessible or desirable to some children and to design programmes to respond to their needs and concerns, and to support informal release or reintegration as appropriate. (For more details on informal release, see Chapter 17, Understanding and Supporting the Informal Release of Children from Armed Forces and Armed Groups.

16.7.1 Possible reasons for non-participation in formal release process
Children's perceptions

- Children may lack confidence in the formal release process, or in a wider peace process.

- Children may fear detention and interrogation following release.

- Children may feel confused about what options they have and fearful of what they will find back home. They may be reluctant to begin family tracing, for example, worrying that it will confirm their fears that family members are dead.

- Children may be concerned about their safety while awaiting transportation away from military sites or barracks, or while staying at transit sites.

- Children, particularly girls, may shy away from the spotlight of a formal process, fearing that they will be identified by their community, leading to stigmatisation or reprisals.

- Children may feel hesitant to break established bonds with leaders of armed groups or forces and/or peers.

- Girls may feel it is better to stay with their 'husband' within an armed force or armed group than face the uncertainty of how they will be received by their family and community.

- Some children, including girls, may have gained a new sense of independence and empowerment, and feel reluctant to return to communities that will expect them to resume more subservient roles.

Manipulation by members of armed groups or forces
- Members of armed groups or forces may control the release of children for their own political or military advantage. They may release some children who are considered to be of less value while retaining, possibly hiding, those whom they feel are most valuable.

- They may deny there are any children in their ranks, and instead quietly 'let them out the back door'

- They may refuse to let girls and boys leave due to the valuable roles they play in the day-to-day functioning of the armed force or armed group.

Issues related to eligibility criteria and access
- Some children are not considered to be full members of fighting forces and are formally or informally excluded from formal release processes; particularly non-combatants, girls viewed only as 'wives' of male soldiers, and very young children who may be viewed only as dependents.

- If children are required, or think they will be required, to relinquish a weapon or demonstrate familiarity with weapons, those in non-combatant roles may be excluded from formal release processes.

- Child widows may be ousted from military barracks once their 'husbands' have been killed in battle, and therefore be excluded from formal release processes.

- Children may be unaware of formal processes due to poor communication on the part of the organisers, their geographic remoteness from sources of information, or because their commanders give misinformation.

- Children may struggle to get to a site where registration for demobilisation is taking place, especially if they are in remote areas or areas affected by ongoing conflict.

- Armed groups may be deemed 'criminal groups' by governments and therefore denied funding for formal release processes.

16.8 How to support children's participation in release processes

Child protection actors should ***seek appropriate and confidential ways to communicate with children***, to understand their concerns and challenges, and adapt their release and reintegration programmes accordingly. Often children are not able to clearly articulate what support they need or do not need, and which services they plan to access or avoid and why.

They should also seek to **widely disseminate information to counter misinformation** and help children to make informed decisions. Children should be aware of their rights to leave an armed force or armed group, and of the services and support that they can access if they choose to do so. (see Section 16.1 above).

However**, children should never be pressured to participate in formal release processes** or removed from their communities in order to do so. Their decision to participate should be informed and voluntary. The challenge is to keep working with children to make formal release more accessible and appropriate, while acknowledging that there may be some children who will not feel that what is currently on offer through the formal release programme is safe or attractive.

Where children are being prevented from participating in formal release processes, **pursue robust and persistent advocacy with the relevant political bodies and armed actors**, (see Chapter 15 on Engaging with Armed Forces and Armed Groups and Chapter 13 on Advocacy and Awareness Raising).

16.9 The case of militarised communities

Children whose family and community are associated with an armed force or group may face additional challenges through formal release processes and may be better served by more informal processes. In these cases, families and communities may expect children's participation in some aspect of military activities as a part of their contribution to the family or wider community.[228] Some may be actively involved in fighting, while others may perform support roles, or attend school but be called upon to lend support periodically.

There are examples of such community-based militia groups in the Philippines (see Box below), the Democratic Republic of Congo, Afghanistan and Nepal, where children participate in a variety of ways, as part of their obligations to protect their families and villages.

Arguably children in militarised communities may not be well served by a formal release and reintegration approach. A community development approach based on the best interest of the child is advised. This might include the following elements:

- advocacy towards leaders of armed groups and communities on the rights and welfare of boys and girls

- direct negotiation with leaders of armed groups or forces to end child recruitment and use

- public discussion forums and social behaviour change activities

- strengthening community-level child protection mechanisms

- supporting local organisations that offer viable alternatives for families and children including education and livelihoods support

- community violence reduction activities.

In developing such an approach, attention should be paid to monitoring influences within communities which can pose further harm to children and may result in re-recruitment and further exploitation and harmful influences. Some form of 'release ceremony' may be appropriate in some contexts to encourage a sense of a civilian identity, both in the children's eyes and in the eyes of the community.

Action plan with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front: case study of working with an armed group to disengage children[229]

Action plan with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front: case study of working with a militarised community

In the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in Mindanao, Philippines, all family members were considered part of the group. Children lived at home, attended school, contributed through daily chores, and participated in armed defence on a part-time basis rather than as part of a formal military structure. Children were born into an armed struggle in which their parents and neighbours are already involved and their fluid passage into Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF) and the role of the community influencing children's enlistment posed unique challenges to disengagement.

The UN-MILF Action Plan was signed in 2009 and ended in July 2017 with the disengagement of 1,869 children, and the delisting of the MILF from the annexes of the UN Secretary-General's Report on Children and Armed Conflict. Carrying out the Plan was challenging and required tremendous effort by all involved and needed to account for these unique circumstances.

LESSONS LEARNED

Understanding the context

Limited global experience and guidance on Action Plans in 2008 to 2009 led to the general assumption that children would follow a traditional disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration process. However, given the context, the process became a census-like exercise of all children in communities affected by conflict. This served little use and was discontinued.

Moreover, the term 'reintegration' had proven contentious in past dialogue with the MILF while other components of the Action Plan caused new challenges. For example, the complaints mechanism implied that the armed group was working in opposition to the community and required members to report on cases of child recruitment and use. An alternative operational plan was devised with benchmarks adapted to the local context and based on the provisions of the existing Action Plan.

In addition, communication about the rapid registration process was insufficient to gain the buy-in of base commanders. They were not sufficiently informed about or supportive of the Action Plan and not consulted in the planning and execution of the registration. This resulted in their reluctance to contribute during the preparation phase.

Similarly, it was clear that time invested informing combatants and community members about the purpose of the Plan and gaining their support prior to the identification process was key to gaining necessary acceptance.

Identifying thresholds for engagement

The relationship between the MILF, communities, and families meant many children lived in MILF camps. This made determining the degree of their involvement in the armed groups difficult and risked the unnecessary inclusion of all children in these communities. Guidance provided by the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Children and Armed Conflict and UNICEF (based on the definition of the Paris Principles and jurisprudence arising from the Lubanga judgement[230]) established that a child was associated if they were exposed to a real risk of being a potential target as a consequence of involvement in the armed agenda, including in support roles.

In 2014, when the new MILF Action Plan Panel was established, members acknowledged the organisation did not fully understand what defined a "child soldier" or a "child associated" and had assumed that only a child recruited and used as a combatant in military operations constituted a violation. However, once the definition was understood, the information was repeated through training, messaging campaigns and workshops, resulting in broader clarity. As a result, commanders were able to draw distinction between children associated with the BIAF/BIWAB and those who were not, based on the roles they performed in the base camps and the risks involved. The commanders were consequently able to lead the process of identifying children for disengagement.

Managing expectations

The MILF perception that the Action Plan was a UNICEF undertaking created expectations that UNICEF should dedicate resources for the Action Plan implementation and provide support and services for the disengaged children. In a few base commands, this could have become a security risk for UNICEF staff. In one instance, misinformation provided by field commanders on the objectives of the identification exercise, linking registration to the provision of benefits by UNICEF such as scholarships and money, led to inflated numbers of children added to the list. In another instance, parents reacted negatively to having their children's names removed from the list.

When they had ownership of the Action Plan implementation, the MILF leadership intervened to reinforce the guidelines and reminded commanders to conduct the exercise in good faith and transparently. This helped to manage the expectations of combatants, parents and children and ensured better communication for those eligible for disengagement.

16.10 Key resources

- African Union Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Capacity Program, 'DDR and Children: Operational Guideline', 2014. **Link**

- United Nations DDR Resource Centre, 'United Nations Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards. Module 5.20: Children and DDR', 2021. **Link**

- CAAFAG Task Force, 'Technical Note on Girls Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups', 2020. **Link**

- Terry Smith & Laura Brownlees, 'Age Assessment: A Technical Note.' UNICEF, 2013. **Link**

- UNICEF, 'Principles and Guidelines for Media Reporting on Children', 2019. **Link**

Chapter 17

Understanding and Supporting the Informal Exit and Release of Children

©UNICEF/UN0351788/Tremeau

Introduction

Many children do not exit armed forces and armed groups through formal release processes but leave in more informal ways. Informal exit or release can occur in various ways, with or without the consent of armed groups and forces.

It might occur in locations where there is no child release and reintegration programming or where child protection actors have little access or influence, as well as in situations where there are ongoing established programmes.

Even where formal release programmes do exist, significant numbers of children still leave armed forces and groups informally. Many of these children are invisible to agencies involved in formal release processes, sometimes by choice, and may therefore miss out on critical protection and care to assist them to transition to civilian life. Some children will hide their association with an armed force or group for fear of retaliation, stigmatisation, rejection, etc. Therefore, it is important, that child protection agencies invest efforts not only in formal release processes but also in proactively seeking to identify and support informally released children in a manner that is considerate of their safety and potential need for confidentiality. Child protection programmes that do not specifically target children formerly associated with an armed group or force, should be accessible to children who have left such groups informally, so that children who do not want to be identified as such can be supported.

Child protection actors should seek to understand the ways in which children may informally leave armed forces and groups within the context they are working so that interventions can be designed and delivered appropriately and safely. See also Chapter 5 on Situation analysis.

Whichever way children leave armed forces or armed groups, the process of disengagement is likely to be gradual and uncertain, with potential risks of retaliation, re-recruitment by the same or another armed group or armed force, or further exploitation such as child trafficking.[231]

This chapter explores informal ways children leave armed forces and armed groups, the challenges and opportunities they may face, and how child protection actors can support them.

17.1 Why and how children leave armed groups or forces informally[232]

17.1.1 Ways children informally exit an armed force or an armed group

Informal release or exit of children from armed forces and groups is not well documented, but available evidence suggests that it mainly depends on the context and may be influenced by the way children became associated with the armed group or force in the first place. As with recruitment, children's options to remain with or leave an armed force or group lie along a continuum of coercion ranging from looking voluntary, while still having elements of pressure or manipulation, and being forced. Sometimes children are supported by others, or they may be acting on their own.

There are many different ways in which children leave armed forces; this list is not exhaustive.

- Children escape by running away and use their own ingenuity or support from civilians they come across to try to get back home.

- Children may present themselves to police/military/peacekeepers for help.

- Children may have a loose 'on/off' affiliation with an armed group that wanes over time as their reasons for becoming associated decrease.

- Children may be abandoned or informally released at the discretion of members of the armed force or group; perhaps because they are sick or injured and no longer useful, because the member of the armed force or group fears prosecution, or out of compassion.

- Children may be released as a result of informal advocacy by local community members to armed actors.

- Children may be released during ad-hoc, on-the-spot agreements between peacekeeping or child protection actors and individual commanders. Such opportunities may present themselves when there is a change in the local dynamics of the conflict. For example, an armed group under siege may agree to the evacuation of civilians, and the release of children associated with them may be part of the negotiations.

- Children may be captured by an opposing force or a peacekeeping force during battle.

- Children may be arrested and detained during processes instigated by authorities, particularly those who are associated while living within communities in urban areas.

> **"One escape tactic for child soldiers involves running away after one has asked to go to the toilet and then seeking shelter in a well-concealed hole until one is presumed dead."**
>
> Former Sierra Leonean girl soldier[233]

17.1.2 Reasons why children choose to leave an armed force or an armed group

In many cases children feel forced to remain within armed forces or groups due to real or perceived obstacles to their exit, such as the armed force or group preventing them from leaving, or lack of alternatives to military life. Sometimes the same reasons that led to their recruitment – such as lack of education and employment opportunities, poverty, rejection by their family and community – may keep them in the armed force or group and may be aggravated by their association with armed force or group. They may also fear losing power and status.

An armed group limiting children's ability to escape: example from Uganda

"The Lord's Resistance Army, (LRA) in Uganda… limited escape opportunities by moving the abductee as far as possible from home. More than half of abductees were tied in their first days of capture, and the first day's march would deliberately backtrack and disorient. Abductees were taken to the bases in Sudan as quickly as possible, where escape was nearly impossible because of the distances, disorientation, and the hostile Sudan People's Liberation Army…

"Together, [the LRA's] spiritual, political, and material propaganda were often effective. Thirty-one percent say they once felt allegiance to LRA (or Kony [leader of the LRA]), 11 per cent admitted there was a time they felt like they wanted to stay with the LRA, 5 per cent that they felt safer in the LRA, and 6 per cent admitted that they aspired to become a commander, or wanted to command. Of those abducted more than two months, those figures rise to 63, 26, and 16 per cent."[234]

In some cases, even when armed groups or forces establish strong barriers to prevent children's exit, some children still become disengaged and seek opportunities to leave. Studies suggest that disengagement is gradual and the result of an accumulation of several different events or motives. Common themes leading to disengagement are disappointment or disillusionment with the group's cause, experiences of violence, and family reasons.[235]

Children's decisions to leave

A 2018 study across a range of contexts identified a number of factors that influence the likelihood of children deciding to try to leave an armed force or group.

Individual-level factors: Some become disillusioned with an armed group's ideology or feel that their experience is not what was promised. Sometimes, children disengage from one NSAG in order to join another. Another common individual-level pathway out of an NSAG is when a child seeks medical treatment for injuries. However, such disengagement may be temporary.

Social-level factors: Some children have left NSAGs as a result of intervention by family members. Parents may try to intervene by taking their children to a neighbouring country or sending them away with older siblings or relatives. In such cases, children may be disengaged physically but still identify with the NSAG, and they may look for opportunities to return to the conflict.

Structural-level factors: Structural, economic, military, and political conditions may lead children to disengage from NSAGs. Many children disengage involuntarily when they are detained by security forces or enemy NSAGs, but sometimes, these children have already made the decision to desert when they are arrested. Of 45 Iraqi children surveyed for the report, 30 were arrested in IDP camps, where many claimed to have fled after voluntarily deserting the group.

A number of factors may combine and result in a child's decision to leave an armed force or group. Children sometimes disengage from NSAGs if opportunities in the civilian world become more attractive than continued membership in the group. Having friends or relatives in areas removed from the conflict makes this easier. For example, a Syrian boy who had joined an armed group at the age of 16 and fought for three years, left in order to continue his education after an uncle in Turkey offered to take him in.

In Mali, the number of children known to have disengaged from NSAGs remains small. There are two likely reasons for this. First, most children and young people in Mali become engaged with NSAGs because of community arrangements, and it is unlikely that they would voluntarily stand down during continued instability. Many Malians view external efforts to disengage children from armed groups and reintegrate them into civilian life with confusion and suspicion. Second, it is likely that there are children who were unable to offer proof of their age and so were not eligible for disengagement services targeting children.[236]

It is essential for child protection actors to understand the drivers that lead children to stay or leave armed forces and groups. A clear understanding of these factors can help you raise children's awareness to prevent recruitment, help them to accept the possibility of leaving an armed force or group when they have concerns, and ease their reintegration into civilian life.

17.1.3 Reasons why armed forces and armed groups informally release children
Often, informal release of children happens as a result of a decision made by the armed group or force. Reasons for releasing children vary considerably. They may be related to the

local dynamics of the conflict, a new perspective on children's involvement due to advocacy and awareness raising campaigns, fear of prosecution, compassion for children, or because children are injured or sick and no longer useful.

Child protection actors have an important role to play, both in engaging with armed groups and forces to support such release (see Chapter 15, Engaging with Armed Forces and Armed Groups) and being ready to receive and support children at the moment of their release.

17.2 Supporting informally released children

Child protection actors can support children who have informally exited armed forces or groups and increase their safety and wellbeing.

Such activities should be based on an understanding of the context and should aim to:

• support community-based systems to identify, reach out to and support informally released children

• advocate to armed groups and forces for a safe release of all children

• coordinate with all stakeholders to ensure children are identified, protected and supported.

Some children who informally leave armed forces or armed groups may not want to be identified for fear of potential retaliation, re-recruitment, stigmatisation or rejection by their family, etc. Child protection actors should be sensitive to this possibility and present opportunities which support children to identify themselves confidentially. They should not put any child in a position where they have to admit to having been associated with an armed force or an armed group. Building a reputation of trust and confidence is necessary to give confidence to children who are fearful about coming forward.

Even when the means of release may be informal, children's reintegration can be formalised. Chapter 16 on Undertaking Formal Release of Children and Chapter 19 on Case Management contain guidance on identification and registration and should be read alongside this chapter.

One way to support informal release of children is in seeking to widely disseminate information to counter misinformation and help children to make informed decisions. Children should be aware of their rights to leave an armed force or armed group, and of the services and support they can access if they choose to do so.

Child protection actors should seek safe, appropriate and confidential ways to communicate with children, to understand their concerns and challenges, and adapt release and reintegration programmes accordingly. Often children are able to clearly articulate what support they need or do not need, and which services they plan to access or avoid and why.

In all cases, in order to reduce the risks, careful situation analyses and risk assessments should be conducted and updated. Coordination with relevant stakeholders is also essential. For more details on ways to implement such activities, see also Chapter 4 on Coordination, Chapter 5 on Situation Analysis, Chapter 6 on Risk Assessment, Security Planning and Risk-Informed Programming, Chapter 13 on Advocacy and Awareness Raising, and Chapter 15 on Engaging with Armed Forces and Armed Groups.

TABLE 17.1 Ways to support informal release

Targeting children associated with armed forces and groups	Information campaigns designed to reach children still associated, particularly those that are led by children and young people, have in some contexts been a powerful way to influence children to leave armed forces/groups. Public media (radio, television), social media) can provide a platform for children who have left armed forces or groups to speak about the support and services that they have been able to access and their experiences of community acceptance. However, this is a sensitive and high-risk activity. There may be a backlash on children currently associated, or on child protection agencies due to perceived loss of neutrality. A thorough risk assessment is essential.
Targeting community members	· Map where informally released children might go for support, such as community leaders, religious institutions, local NGOs, youth groups etc., and ensure that these community focal points know what to do if a child comes forward and what services they can point children to. · Develop community-wide programmes for vulnerable children in areas with high rates of informally released children, in order to reach children who do not wish to make their experience of association known. · Design information campaigns to inform children of services and support available, not just those specifically for children formerly associated with an armed force/group, but also services for other vulnerable groups, such as out of school children, street connected children, trafficked children, children in contact with the law, children facing violence, abuse, exploitation or neglect, etc.
Targeting armed groups and forces	Advocate with those in command of armed forces or armed groups when opportunities arise, particularly where there is a decentralised command structure and individuals at local levels might be persuaded to release children at their discretion. The safe passage and fair treatment of these children must also be established.
Targeting other stakeholders	· Advocate with government authorities to treat all children formerly associated with armed forces/groups fairly and without discrimination. This includes establishing and ensuring the safe passage and fair treatment of children who have informally exited armed forces or armed groups. · Work with security forces to ensure appropriate treatment of captured children in alignment with agreed handover protocols, including safe treatment and prompt transfer to child protection actors. · Work with security sector actors such as the Department of Peace Operations to develop procedures regarding how to be open to receiving children trying to self-demobilise. For example: reporting the presence of a child within 24 hours, transferring a child to a child protection actor within 48 hours, and avoiding subjecting children to intensive interviews. · Establish confidential referral systems among trusted partners who may meet informally released children through their programmes.

17.3 Key resources

• Bernd Beber & Christopher Blattman, 'The Logic of Child Soldiering and Coercion', *International Organization*, Vol 67(1), 2013. **Link**

• Carl Conradi, 'Child Trafficking, Child Soldiering: exploring the relationship between two 'worst forms' of child labour,' *Third World Quarterly*, Volume 34(7), 2013. pp. 1208–1226. **Link**

• International Labour Organization, 'Wounded Childhood: The Use of Children in Armed Conflict in Central Africa', 2003. **Link**

• Siobhan O'Neil & Kato Van Broeckhoven (eds), 'Cradled by Conflict. Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict', United Nations University, 2018. **Link**

• The Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative, 'Living Within Armed Groups: A Gendered Perspective', Centre for Foreign Policy Studies, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Canada, 7–9 May 2012. **Link**

Chapter 18
Case Management After Release

©UNICEF/UNI263023/Matas
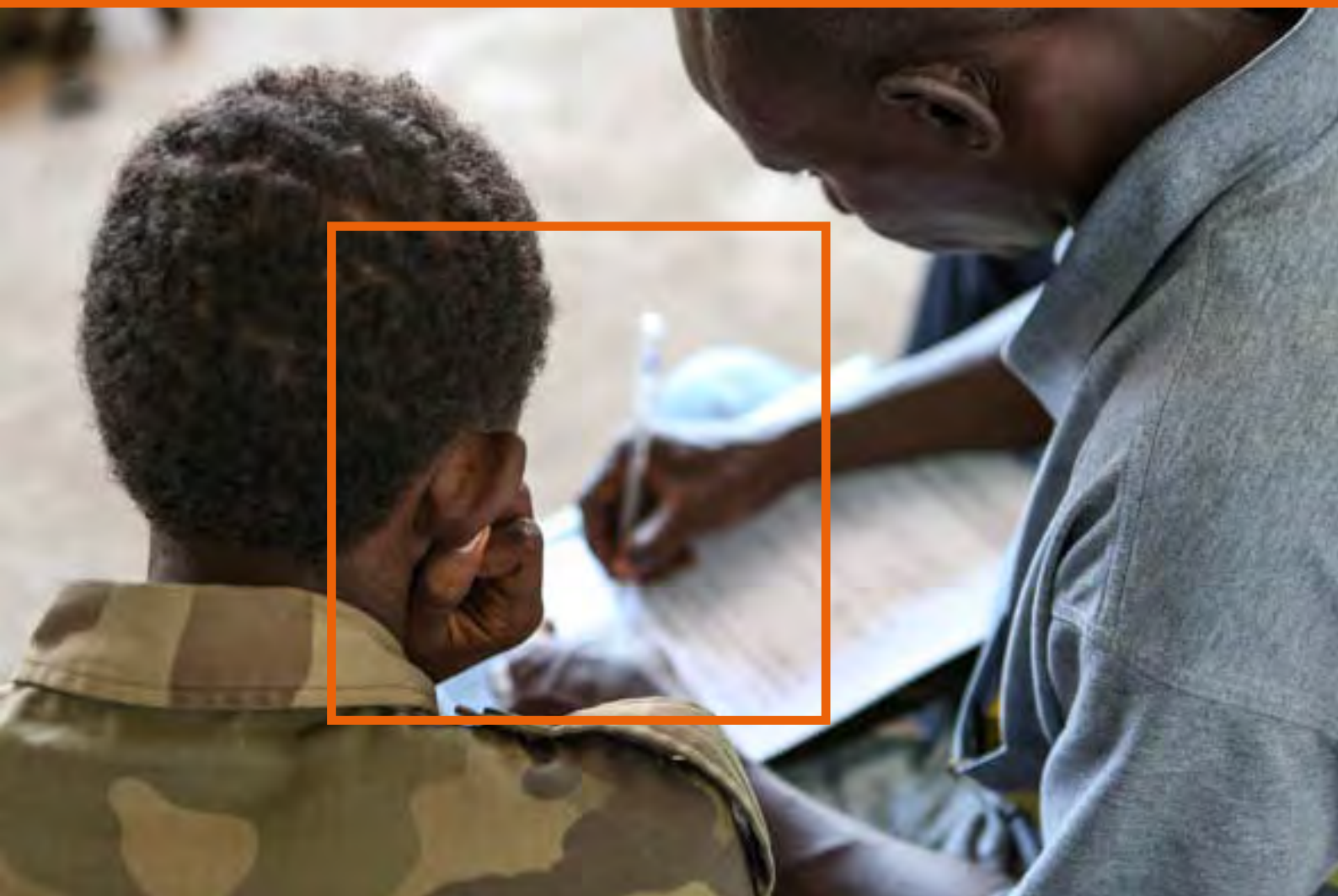
Introduction

Case management is "an approach for addressing the needs of an individual child who is at risk of harm or has been harmed. The child and their family are supported by a caseworker in a systematic and timely manner through direct support and referrals. [It] provides individualised, coordinated, holistic, multisectoral support for complex and often connected child protection concerns."[237] It is a comprehensive, step-by-step, detailed process, based on recognition that every child's situation is different and may require focused support.

Case management services for many children formerly associated with armed forces and groups begins at identification and registration, which are part of a formal release process. For those children who leave armed forces or groups informally, services should be available within communities for them to access confidentially and where other children affected by conflict may also access them. If children are detained following capture, they should also begin during detention.

Case-based support should be available and provided to vulnerable children within communities, including children who have exited armed forces or groups by themselves or through other informal processes, survivors of gender-based violence, and other children at risk. Although organised around an individual child's case, in practice, case management often involves working with families and community members also. This is important when seeking to promote the reintegration of children formerly associated with armed forces and groups, and when addressing factors within children's and families' situations that can lead to them being recruited. Child protection actors should support children and families to identify their existing strengths, capacities and resources, and then build on these.

> Case management has been placed in the reintegration section of this handbook, but case-based support is also a key aspect in preventing recruitment and use.

Detailed guidance on child protection case management can be found in a number of key resources, which are listed at the end of this chapter.

This chapter highlights key considerations when establishing and providing case management services for children formally or informally released from armed forces or groups, including on identification and registration, information management systems, referral to services, and case closure. Some specific protection concerns which may be addressed through case management are also considered in other chapters of this handbook:

〉 Chapter 19 on Alternative Care

〉 Chapter 20 on Family Tracing, Reunification and Follow-up

〉 Chapter 21 on Planning and Delivering Reintegration Programmes

〉 Chapter 22 on Mental Health and Psychosocial Reintegration Support

〉 Chapter 23 on Economic strengthening for Reintegration

〉 Chapter 24 on Education Support for Reintegration

〉 Chapter 26 on Children Associated with Armed Forces and Groups in Justice Systems

18.1 Establishing case management services

Case management is a structured set of steps involving multiple actors, taking place over weeks, months or years to address an individual child's needs. It can be localised or involve cross-border or regional support if family tracing and reunification are required. Following a social ecological approach which provides an integrated view of a child's psychosocial

needs, a case plan addresses a child's individual needs in a comprehensive way, building on and strengthening a child's protective environment, from peers and family to community.

Before establishing case management services, a comprehensive assessment of the existing child protection system should be conducted to determine strengths and weaknesses, gaps in protective services, workforce numbers and capacity, financial resources, access and geographical coverage.

Caseworkers are concerned with the whole person or child situated within a family and community, as well as within societal and natural environments, and should recognise all aspects of a child's life. It is therefore necessary that these elements are also examined within initial assessments of existing case management systems. The type of case management services that need to be established to support children formerly associated with armed forces or armed groups to recover and heal should be determined based on the assessment which should form part of the situation analysis (see also Chapter 5 on Situation Analysis).

Child protection case management is a step-by-step process including: identification, assessment, case planning and implementation (with follow-up throughout), and case closure, as outlined in the diagram below.

There is no single way to address a child's needs. It is not a linear process and some steps might need to be repeated before the case is closed (as suggested by the dotted arrow). For example, there may be multiple follow-up visits, during which the situation will be reassessed leading to the case plan being updated, or new protection concerns may become apparent through the case management process and need to be addressed. The process is often complex and unpredictable, requiring flexibility in approach and a variety of possible options for children. For example, there might be referral to different services at different times, and a possibility of reunification with one relative closing and tracing or mediation work with another relative beginning.

18.2 Key considerations related to children's safety in conflict settings

Children formerly associated with armed forces and groups face considerable risks that should be considered when establishing case management services.

Standard case management practices to address children's safety, such as individual risk assessment and safety planning, confidentiality and data security practices, and caution around the involvement of additional actors, must be strictly adhered to when dealing with children formerly associated with armed forces or groups.

In situations where a government is party to a conflict and is unable or unwilling to offer impartial support to children who have been associated with armed forces or groups, it may be necessary to set up a case management system that is distinct from those overseen by government bodies for this particular group of children. In such situations the government should be kept broadly informed, without sharing any detailed information that might put individual children or their families at risk.[238]

In some situations, it may be inappropriate or unsafe to establish case management services for children associated with armed forces and armed groups, for example:

- when it is likely that services could be suspended abruptly or when planned services are too short term to be able to meet individual case objectives

- when data confidentiality and security cannot be assured – the act of identifying an individual child may put them at risk, particularly when the child returns to a community, and does not wish to disclose his or her history of association

- when staffing levels do not allow the minimum recommended ratio of children to caseworkers (see below), although an approach of prioritising cases might be considered.

In such situations, it is important to explore alternative ways in which children can access the support and advice on services they may need. You could:

- work with communities to build on strengths and opportunities within the community to support children and families

- use community-based centres or other community mechanisms to establish safe and confidential age and gender-appropriate services that are available to all children in the community

- build remote delivery of case management services into the initial design of the project so that it can be implemented in situations in which services may be abruptly stopped due to access constraints.

In all cases, during the planning phase, consider whether the length of the project is sufficient to meet case management objectives or if other support would be more appropriate, and take steps to mitigate possible harm to children and families if case management had to be stopped due to external constraints.

18.3 Safety planning for children

An initial assessment of a child's situation must include an assessment of risk to their safety and security, particularly considering possible interim and longer-term care options, or other living situation (see Chapter 19 on Alternative Care, section 19.2). The case plan should outline how the child's situation will be monitored. The frequency of monitoring visits and case reviews should correspond to the individual child's individual needs and levels of risk.[239]

Where safe to do so, the child and their family or caregiver should both be involved in the development of the plan and be encouraged to ask questions and make suggestions. Where it is unsafe, caseworkers should work directly with children themselves. In all cases, the child's views and inputs should be incorporated. See also Chapter 6 on Risk Assessment, Security Planning and Risk-Informed Programming.

Safety planning for children formally associated with Al Shabab in Somalia[240]

In south-central Mogadishu local organisations used trusted community networks to identify children who had escaped from Al Shabab and are living in the community. Some children are already living at home, but others fear that they cannot go home or move around freely for fear of identification and reprisals by Al Shabab. After assessing the risk to the child in consultation with the child and where safe to do so, their family, an individual safety plan is developed. Some children, for example, could be offered accommodation in safe houses, while there is on-going mediation and facilitated communication with families, and monitoring of the evolving level of risk.

Depending on the child's safety plan, accommodation may need to be made to allow children to participate in vocational and skills training programmes. Some children are able to live at home and attend classes each day. For others it may be assessed to be too risky for them to be seen going in and out of the centre each day and returning to the area where they live in the evening. These children may benefit from a safety plan that allows them to stay in a safe house within the complex where the training is provided for the duration of the course to keep a lower profile and return to their homes at the end of the course.

18.4 Human resource considerations

Case management services are human resource intensive. An effective system requires well-trained frontline and supervision staff who are skilled in communicating with vulnerable children, including those with special needs related to gender, disability, physical or mental health challenges. Guidance is provided on identifying, building capacity and managing human resources in Chapter 8 of this handbook. In addition, some specific human resource issues should be considered when establishing and carrying out case management:

18.4.1 Ratio of children to caseworkers

The Inter Agency Guidelines for Case Management and Child Protection advise there should be a minimum of 1 caseworker to 25 children. Supervisors will often recommend a smaller ratio, due to the complex nature of working with children associated with armed forces and armed groups.[241] Organisations and national child protection agencies should consider the following factors when determining the appropriate child to caseworker ratio:

- the extent to which children are geographically concentrated or dispersed, and the travel time necessary for the caseworker to follow up with each child

- the complexity and urgency of cases

- security, weather, or infrastructure constraints in accessing certain areas

- the amount of time to be spent on administrative work

- the extent to which work by formal caseworkers is complemented by community-based volunteers where safe and appropriate

- the level of family tracing and reunification responsibilities placed on the caseworker (see also Chapter 20 on Family Tracing, Reunification and Follow-up).

18.4.2 Prioritising cases

Prioritising cases generally makes it easier for caseworkers to organise and manage their work more efficiently, particularly if they have large caseloads that can feel overwhelming. Standardised vulnerability criteria for prioritisation will help ensure a consistent and comprehensive response. Such criteria may include: age, separation from family, urgent physical or mental health needs of child or family members, socio-economic situation of child or family, threat of recruitment, re-recruitment or other form of violence or exploitation, and whether the child has children of their own.

When prioritising and assigning cases, it is important to pay equal attention to both complex cases which may need much support and to more straightforward cases. It is important not to prioritise only the more straightforward cases as a way to reduce caseloads, because children with significant or complex protection needs are likely to be especially vulnerable. However, it is also important to handle the more straightforward cases in a timely manner so that protection concerns do not become more serious.

18.4.3 Assigning caseworkers

Assignment of a particular caseworker to a child's case must consider the child's specific situation. For example, boys and girls may feel more comfortable being supported by a caseworker of the same gender and ethnic, social or religious background to themselves. Caseworkers must support the children assigned to them without any bias or discrimination. If caseworkers have specific experience or specialist expertise (eg, working with disabled children), this can also inform which children may be assigned to them.

Keeping the same caseworker throughout the lifetime of a case enables caseworkers to maintain oversight of the history and developments of the case, provide continuity of emotional support to the child, and avoid children having to repeat their story multiple times to new case workers. It also offers a chance to build a relationship of trust, where children can share information and ask questions freely.

If there are reasons why a change of caseworker is needed – for example if the child and/or family relocates, the relationship between the child and caseworker is unhealthy or harmful, or the security situation changes – the importance of establishing a relationship and building trust should be taken into account. A facilitated introduction to their new caseworker is particularly important for children formerly associated with armed forces and groups, who may have valid reasons not trust new adults in their lives.

Building rapport with a child

We started working with a boy who had been a commander in a rebel group. He was old beyond his years, like a 30-year-old man in an 11-year-old body. He found it impossible to settle into a foster family. People treated him like a young child, and he became frustrated and violent. He moved from foster family to foster family, then from centre to centre. Always after some time people would say they couldn't work with him. Even our own staff were starting to give up on him. It seemed an impossible situation.

I decided to make a last effort with this boy. I made time to spend with him. I tried to talk to him on his own level; not as the 11-year-old child that I saw before me, but with understanding of the positions of 'adult responsibility' that he had held. He said that he wanted someone to respect his experience and point of view. He wanted his opinions to be valued. With this approach I noticed that over time he began to be calmer in himself, and eventually he agreed to stay in one of the centres again.

With my continued support and follow up, he was able to live more peacefully alongside other children and the staff in the centre. In fact, he actually came to be seen as a valued asset and resource by the staff and other children. He was given responsibility for organizing cleaning chores, and he would gather children together and help to teach positive life skills. He took great pride in demonstrating responsibility for these activities. This was a centre that he had previously been removed from.

Each child is different, and the most important thing is to understand their minds.

Humanitarian worker in East Africa, November 2014[242]

18.4.4 Supporting caseworkers

As discussed in Chapter 8 on Human Resources and Capacity, caseworkers also need support from managers, supervisors and peers as they may face extremely stressful and challenging cases. Children with particularly complex and traumatic cases may need to be supported by a supervisor as well as an individual caseworker. Given the challenging nature of many cases, it is important that managers and supervisors are skilled in identifying signs and symptoms of stress, trauma, exhaustion and frustration. In some contexts, caseworkers may also establish a peer support network where they are able seek advice or share how they are feeling or coping with specific cases in a confidential manner.

18.5 Identification and registration

Identification and registration are standard first steps in the case management process. They can be carried out during a formal release process, or as soon as contact has been made with a child in their community.

Identification refers to the moment when child protection actors become aware of an individual child with a protection concern. Key sources of identification include:

- formal release

- community members

- service providers

- self-referral (by the child).

Child protection actors should verify that a child's situation meets the criteria of the programme, and if not, consider referring them to alternative services.

Registration refers to the act of capturing basic information about an individual child for the purposes of starting individual case management support. A unique identification number should also be assigned at this stage. Key information includes: name, age, sex, current protection concerns, current address, current caregiver or living arrangement, date and location, name of caseworker. This information should be treated with respect and care, observing pre-established data protection procedures.

18.5.1 Determining if identification and registration are safe and appropriate

Identification and registration of children can itself be a form of protection. Once children are registered, individual case management support can begin.

However, work to identify and register children associated with armed forces and armed groups can be extremely dangerous in some contexts, presenting risk to children, families, and child protection actors. These considerations should be part of the situation and risk analyses that inform programme planning.

Children may be at risk of violent reprisals or forced re-recruitment by parties to the conflict. Children who have escaped are at particular risk of being branded as 'traitors' by the armed actor.

They may also be at risk of stigmatisation by community members if their history of association becomes known. The level of risk depends on whether children formerly associated with an armed force or group are in general viewed as 'heroes' or 'criminals' by community members. In some contexts, girls are even more risk of rejection and exclusion than boys, and this may be intensified if they are pregnant or have a child with a member of the armed group or force.

Children who have exited armed forces or groups informally may have deliberately chosen to avoid formal release in order to not be identified, and may have good reasons for doing so.

In some countries national law obliges child protection actors to report children who have been associated with armed forces or armed groups to security forces. Identification can therefore result in a choice between reporting children to the authorities, and potentially putting them at risk, or placing the child protection actor in legal jeopardy.

Identification and registration of children as formerly associated with armed forces or groups should therefore not be automatic activities. Children who are in situations of risk can still be reached through case management programmes structured to reach vulnerable children in the community. The initial situation analysis done prior to

programming, as well as individualised risk assessment for children, should highlight whether formal identification and registration of children as formerly associated with armed forces or groups is appropriate. Where there are no resources to provide individual case management support and no possibility of referral to other service providers, identification and registration should not be attempted, as these would raise expectations that cannot be fulfilled.[243] Alternative services that can address children's needs should be identified and planned in consultation with children, families and communities.

18.5.2 Supporting children in the community

Where children formerly associated with armed forces or armed groups are already living in the community, care may need to be taken to avoid identifying them for fear of reprisals or stigmatisation. Services that openly target children associated with armed forces or groups may present serious risk, and most likely will not be used.

Possible actions:

- Develop a restricted, confidential referral system among trusted and trained community members and partners who are most likely to come across formerly associated children in the course of their activities.

- Promote participation of high risk and vulnerable children in programme activities such as education, economic and mental health and psychosocial support, through community outreach.

It is crucial that donors accept the fact that it will not be possible to know exactly how many children formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups will be reached by the project.

The challenges of identification in Dadaab refugee camp, Kenya[244]

In Dadaab in 2014, where most people had fled conflicts in Somalia and elsewhere in East Africa, it was extremely dangerous for children to be known as formerly associated with armed groups. This could put children in danger of reprisals by the community, or of being sought out by supporters of the armed groups who would try to send them back to Somalia to fight.

Children were well aware of the risks of being known to be formerly associated and were usually reluctant to discuss their involvement with armed groups, especially with caseworkers employed from within the population of Dadaab. Children who had been associated with armed groups tended also to be unaccompanied or separated. Save the Children supported a large caseload of unaccompanied and separated children. They knew that some of the children had formerly been associated with armed groups but didn't treat these children any differently from the others. If Save the Children became aware that a child has this background, they advised them not to disclose their experiences to members of the community, for their own safety. Children were closely monitored and supported by a trusted staff member. Sometimes it was possible to relocate them further from the Somali border.

Challenges of identification in Lebanon[245]

In 2014 a child protection actor in Lebanon secured funding for a pilot project to provide community-based activities for vulnerable children, among whom there were believed to be children formerly associated with armed groups, who had left informally and did not want to make their backgrounds known in the interests of safety.

It was impossible to know exactly how many such children there were, but the programme managers estimated that approximately a third of the children reached through the programme would be formerly associated, based on trends suggested by Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism data and the organisation's knowledge of the communities.

It was made clear to all children participating in the programme that no one should talk openly in the group about experiences of association with armed groups, but that they were always welcome to speak privately with a social worker. It was also made clear that the child protection staff were neither interested nor willing to gather any military-related information. This was to protect the staff, the project, and the individual children; to avoid word getting about that children were sharing information about armed groups with staff.

Throughout the project, more and more children gradually began to confidentially disclose to social workers their experience of association with armed groups. Some children began to encourage friends who were formerly associated to join the programme. A few children were identified by other service providers and discreetly referred to the programme. In addition, by working closely with vulnerable children in general, staff gained valuable information about the nature of child recruitment and use, to inform future programming including recruitment prevention work.

18.6 Implementing care plans

As a case is opened, case workers should work with children (and their families) to address their protection concerns. This forms the basis of a care plan which will be reviewed and revised, in collaboration with the child and their family throughout the period that a case worker is supporting them. The care plan may cover pre-existing issues that contributed to the child's vulnerability to recruitment which need to be addressed to support sustainable reintegration. It should detail support that both the child and the family require to help successful reintegration, including referrals to other services and making sure that a caseworker with the correct expertise to support their needs is allocated to their case.

18.6.1 Good practice for communicating with children and documenting information

"Information should be gathered from children only in a manner that respects their rights and protects against causing additional distress to the child. It should be regarded as confidential."

Paris Principle 8.12

By communicating with children in a child-friendly manner, over time caseworkers can develop trust between themselves and children. Building trust will allow them to learn more about the children's situations and the kind of support they require. For example, caseworkers can gather information about the manner of their recruitment, including any underlying risk factors, the roles they played and experiences they had during the period of their association, and the ways in which those experience affected them. This could include experiences such as physical injuries, witnessing or experiencing violence including sexual violence, death and family separation, mental health problems or loss of close relationship with friends, family or their communities. Workers can also learn children's views on important matters and their wishes for their future, including regarding family tracing and reintegration support.

It may take longer in developing rapport with younger children, or those who are distressed or have difficulty communicating, and more time may be needed. It is a cumulative process where information is updated on an ongoing basis as a child's situation evolves.

If not appropriately trained, caseworkers may unwittingly pressure children to disclose distressing events when they are not ready, leaving them more distressed or distrusting.

Caseworkers, and all staff in contact with children, should be trained in communicating with children (see also Chapter 8 on Human Resources and Capacity). Given that case-based support is an aspect of psychosocial support, it is also useful if caseworkers, where possible and appropriate, are trained in basic psychological first aid, mental health and psychosocial support services and lay counselling (see also Chapter 22 on Mental Health and Psychosocial Reintegration Support).

18.6.2 Key considerations when providing case-based support to children formerly associated with armed forces and groups

Practical considerations
Sessions with children should be carried out in a quiet, calm place, somewhere that others cannot overhear. In the community this could be done within a centre used for general children's activities, in a manner that allows the child to have privacy from other children and the wider community.

Informed assent or consent[246]
Information should be obtained only with children's informed assent or consent and with consideration of 'do no harm' and the best interests of the child. (See Table 18:1)

Children must understand that they can give assent or consent for information to be used to help them, such as for family tracing purposes, without being obliged to give assent or consent for information to be used for the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism or for justice accountability mechanisms.

Children can also give permission for information to be shared with other service providers, and for some non-identifying information to be shared in reports.

If there is an adult caregiver with the child, their informed consent should also be obtained. When working with younger children, in the absence of a trusted adult, a second caseworker can give informed consent.

Communicating with children
Caseworkers should be trained in communicating in a child-friendly manner and should always encourage the child and family to ask questions and seek clarification so that they can meaningfully contribute to and be satisfied with decisions in their case.

Case management should never be used to collect information for military purposes nor should information obtained through case management be shared with state or non-state armed actors, for example, information relating to military movements, location of weapons or any other military matters.

Caseworkers should explain who they are, why they want to talk to the child, who will have access to the information the child may share, and how it will be used and stored. Any potential negative outcomes that could occur should be discussed.

Children should know that they can ask questions, raise concerns, stop any discussion or change their mind about allowing their information to be gathered and used at any time, during or after meetings.

It is unethical to ask children to disclose sensitive information if this will not be directly used in taking action to help them. The caseworker should ask themselves 'is this something that I need to know in order to help this child?'

If children voluntarily share sensitive information, such as details of violent acts they committed, the caseworker may offer emotional support but should carefully consider whether there is any purpose in documenting this information.

18.6.3 When to get oral or written informed consent or assent

Whether a child's oral or written assent or consent to participate in any activity, including case management, is necessary depends on their age and maturity, the presence of a caregiver, and the child's best interest. The chart below helps to determine when to get written or oral assent or consent, and what to do when there is no caregiver or when it is not in the best interest of the child to involve the caregiver.

TABLE 18.4 When to get oral or written informed consent or assent[247]

Age group	Child	Caregiver	If no caregiver or not in child's best interest to involve caregiver	Means
0-5	-	Informed consent	Other trusted adult's or caseworker's informed consent	Written consent
6-11	Informed assent	Informed consent	Other trusted adult's or caseworker's informed consent	Oral assent, Written consent
12-14	Informed assent	Informed consent	Other trusted adult's or caseworker's informed consent Sufficient level of maturity (of child) can take due weight	Written assent, Written consent
15-18	Informed assent or consent	Obtain informed assent or consent with child's permission	Child's informed and sufficient level of maturity takes due weight	Written consent

18.6.4 Tools for child protection case management

At the global level, there are tools available for those working on case management in emergency situations. The Case Management Task Force (CMTF) of the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action has developed Inter-Agency Guidelines for Case Management and Child Protection,[248] which complement the agreed standard 18 on Case Management in the Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action.[249] The CMTF has also developed forms, guidelines, standard operating procedures training materials and other resources.

Country-level task forces and inter-agency coordination bodies can adapt these resources to your contexts, with periodic reviews to improve and update them. Local caseworkers who will be using the forms should always be involved in the process.

Case management services address the range of protection concerns, and so will necessarily go beyond work with children associated with armed forces and armed groups. As noted above, case management for such children should be provided as part of case management for other conflict-affected or otherwise vulnerable children, to lessen risks to identified children and to build on existing support structures, so the forms should be easily aligned.

Supervisors should conduct regular capacity assessments of caseworkers, observation sessions, case file checks, and case discussions with caseworkers they are supervising, to monitor the quality of the case management services being delivered and to provide guidance and support to caseworkers. The CMTF has developed training materials on coaching and supervision of caseworkers.

18.7 Information management for case management

All case management systems require a method to safely manage information, to track cases, and record, process, store, retrieve, transfer, and archive information.

18.7.1 Electronic and paper information management systems

Case management information systems may include a number of components, including standardised paper-based forms, paper filing systems, electronic databases, electronic data entry devices, data security procedures, and information sharing protocols.

Electronic systems are sometimes daunting for small organisations as they require specific investments and capacities. Unreliable electricity and internet, insufficient bandwidth, lack of computers, mobile devices, servers or other hardware also often limit organisational use of electronic systems. When first setting up case management services, organisations therefore often start with a paper filing system combined with a spreadsheet. However, security of paper-based and spreadsheet files is often poor, and information can get lost or improperly shared.

If using an electronic information management system, it is recommended that caseworkers enter data themselves. This prevents non-casework staff from accessing confidential information. Moreover, evaluations have shown that when data entry is not completed directly by caseworkers, organisations often underestimate the role played by data entry staff, and therefore the numbers of data entry staff and equipment needed.[250] This leads to backlogs in data entry, out-of-date reports, and a database that caseworkers feel is irrelevant to their day-to-day work. Where data entry staff are necessary, they should be trained in child protection, data management and confidentiality, and tasked with alerting caseworkers to any gaps or inconsistencies that they notice while completing data entry.

18.7.2 Individual identification codes

Irrespective of the system used, every registered child must be attributed an individual identification code (ID code). Unique ID codes allow staff to confidentially refer to a child in verbal or written correspondence while guarding their anonymity. They also enable staff to distinguish between children with identical names or similar identifying details and can be used as the basis for structuring a paper filing system or referral system that corresponds to electronic records in a database.

Typically, ID codes are assigned manually at the time of registration, but some electronic information management systems automatically generate numbers.

Child protection actors should agree a code structure, for example: AGENCY/LOCATION CODE/DATE/CASEWORKER INITIALS/SEQUENTIAL NUMBER. It is the combined information that forms the unique code, not just the number. If a child is referred or transferred to another agency their code should not change.

In refugee settings a unique identifier will also be assigned to children during government or UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) registration. This should be documented to help with inter-agency referral and coordination.

18.7.3 Data protection and information-sharing protocols (DPISP)

"Information on children belongs to the children. Those who keep the information do so on their behalf and should use it only in their best interest, and with their informed consent. [...] Confidentiality is in the best interest of a child because it prevents the misuse of information about them for purposes beyond their control,

including for their exploitation, stigmatization and abuse – either intentionally or unintentionally. It also helps to ensure that their views and opinions are heard and respected at all times."

Inter-Agency Guidelines for Case Management & Child Protection[251]

Child protection actors involved in case management for children associated with armed forces and groups will necessarily become custodians of confidential information. This information must be treated with the utmost respect. If this sensitive information falls into the wrong hands, the risks to children, their families, communities, and caseworkers are particularly acute. It is essential that information is kept confidential and secure.

Agencies involved in gathering or managing information from children should have in place data protection and information-sharing protocols (DPISP) with any other entities with whom they intend to share information, such as staff, field offices, other organisations, and governments when appropriate. These signed protocols should define what data will be shared and the conditions and circumstances under which sharing will occur.

They should permit sharing only with appropriate assent and consent, when in the child's best interests, and when required for a specific purpose related to the support for or well-being of a child such as for case or service referral.

It is recommended that information-sharing protocols for child protection case management be discussed in one inter-agency forum involving all case management partners rather than in a series of bilateral agreements. This allows for transparency between organisations about when and under what circumstances data will be shared and ensures that all involved entities adhere to agreed principles. It will thereby increase agencies' confidence that data they may share will be protected. Protocols should recognise children's ownership of their own personal information and make it possible for them to access their files, while accounting for the child's age and maturity.

Staff must be trained in the relevant information management and data protection protocols, and their obligation to adhere to these protocols should be written into their contracts. Consequences for breaking these commitments should also be clear.

In addition to information on individual cases, child protection actors may also want to share aggregate data on trends and other overarching analysis with managers, donors, caseworkers, or field offices. This can help with assessment, planning, and response. However, even sharing of aggregate data can pose risks to children and families, if it points to certain geographic areas for example, or specific types of protection concerns such as recruitment and use by armed forces and armed groups.

Where information relates to refugee children formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups, data protection and information-sharing protocols should be developed in coordination with UNHCR.

18.7.4 Data management software

There are several data management software systems for humanitarian operations. For example, where feasible and appropriate, the International Rescue Committee, Plan International, Save the Children, UNICEF, promote the use of a standard electronic inter-agency child protection information management system (CPIMS+) for the child protection sector.[252] CPIMS+ is a web-based case management solution that provides easy-to-use tools for child protection practitioners and is designed to promote best practice and accountability.

However, other softwares are also in use and may be recommended. When deciding which software to use, engage expert advice. Any software should conform to global principles of data security.

18.8 Referral to services

Child protection actors should seek to establish a functional, integrated multi-sector referral system. They should advocate for services that are age-appropriate for and accessible to children and coordinate to address gaps in services while building on communities' strengths and as much as possible integrating into existing systems and services. Children, families and communities should be made aware of relevant services in their area.

This means that defining a package of minimum essential services, based on an integrated understanding of needs and response, is paramount to enhance children's protection, well-being and resilience. Services offered should aim at strengthening internal capacities (skills, psychosocial abilities) and resources (basic needs, structural opportunities for development).

Typical relevant services for children formerly associated with armed forces and groups include:

- Age-appropriate medical services, including general health, sexual, reproductive and maternal health, treatment and rehabilitation for physical injuries such as physiotherapy and provision of basic assistive devices, support with substance use disorders and services for survivors of gender-based violence

- Psychosocial support, and specialised mental health support

- Life skills training

- Recreational, creative and expressive activities and sports

- Transitional justice and truth and reconciliation processes

- Legal assistance, for example relating to identification documents

- Education and livelihoods

- Economic support for caregivers

- For refugees, refugee protection services, for example related to refugee status determination, durable solutions, and documentation

- Restoration of family links.

Restoring family links

Restoring family links is a term used to describe various activities of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement aimed at preventing separation, restoring and maintaining contact between family members separated by armed conflict, natural and man-made disasters and migration, and clarifying the fate of persons reported as missing. Activities may take various forms depending on the situation and context. They might include, among others: organising the exchange of family news or letters; repatriating families; forwarding official documents such as birth certificates; issuing travel documents, and providing material, mental health and psychosocial support and legal support to families with missing relatives.[253]

18.9 Case closure

Case closure is dependent on a child's situation, and not based on a fixed time, a fixed number of visits, or on the type of support they have received. However, timeframes for action should be clear in order to support caseworker accountability to the child or family.

Context-specific case closure guidelines should be determined at an agency or inter-agency level and be based on an assessment of whether goals and outcomes in the child's case plan have been achieved. They may also include a minimum number of follow-up visits to ascertain that the child's situation is stable before the case is closed.

When case closure is being considered, the decision should be discussed, planned and agreed with the child and his or her family.

Case files should not be destroyed on closure but stored securely in case they are needed in the future. Cases may be re-opened if a child's vulnerability changes. For example, if conflict dynamics change and an armed group starts a campaign to re-recruit previously associated children.

A follow-up visit should be carried out at least three months after the case is closed, to ensure no new problems have arisen.[254] For more guidance, see Chapter 21 on Planning and Delivering Reintegration Programmes.

18.9.1 Typical circumstances in which a child's case can be closed

- The goals of the child's case plan have been achieved. For example, the child has been reunified with his or her family or is in a stable long-term alternative care arrangement, they have returned to education or employment, they are linked with appropriate support services in the area, and there are no additional protection risks or further individual support required.

- The child's case is transferred from one organisation to another, for example if the child moves from one geographical area to another at the time of reunification or is resettled in another country. Consistent with agreed information-sharing protocols and with the consent of the child, the first organisation shares the case with an organisation in the new area; the second organisation receives the case information and referral and takes over case management responsibility.

- The child dies. In this case, consider continuing support to the family, especially if there are siblings who are at risk of recruitment.

Note that cases should not be closed automatically when a child becomes 18 years old. Case management should continue until the child or young person is no longer in need of individual support, or until they can be linked with other available supports for their age group.

18.10 Key Resources

- The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 'Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action', 2019. **Link**

- The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 'Case Management Supervision and Coaching Package', 2018. **Link**

- International Rescue Committee & UNICEF, 'Caring for Child Survivors of Sexual Abuse. Guidelines for health and psychosocial service providers in humanitarian settings', 2012. **Link**

- Child Protection Working Group, 'Inter Agency Guidelines for Case Management & Child Protection: The role of case management in the protection of children: A guide for policy & programme managers and caseworkers', January 2014. **Link**

- Interagency Working Group on Unaccompanied and Separated Children, 'Field Handbook on Unaccompanied and Separated Children', Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 2017. **Link**

- Restoring Family Links website. **Link**

- International Federation of Red Cross Red Crescent Societies, Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support, 'Broken Links: Psychosocial support for people separated from family members: A Field Guide', IFRC, 2014. **Link**

Chapter 19
Alternative Care

©UNICEF/UNI142243/Matas
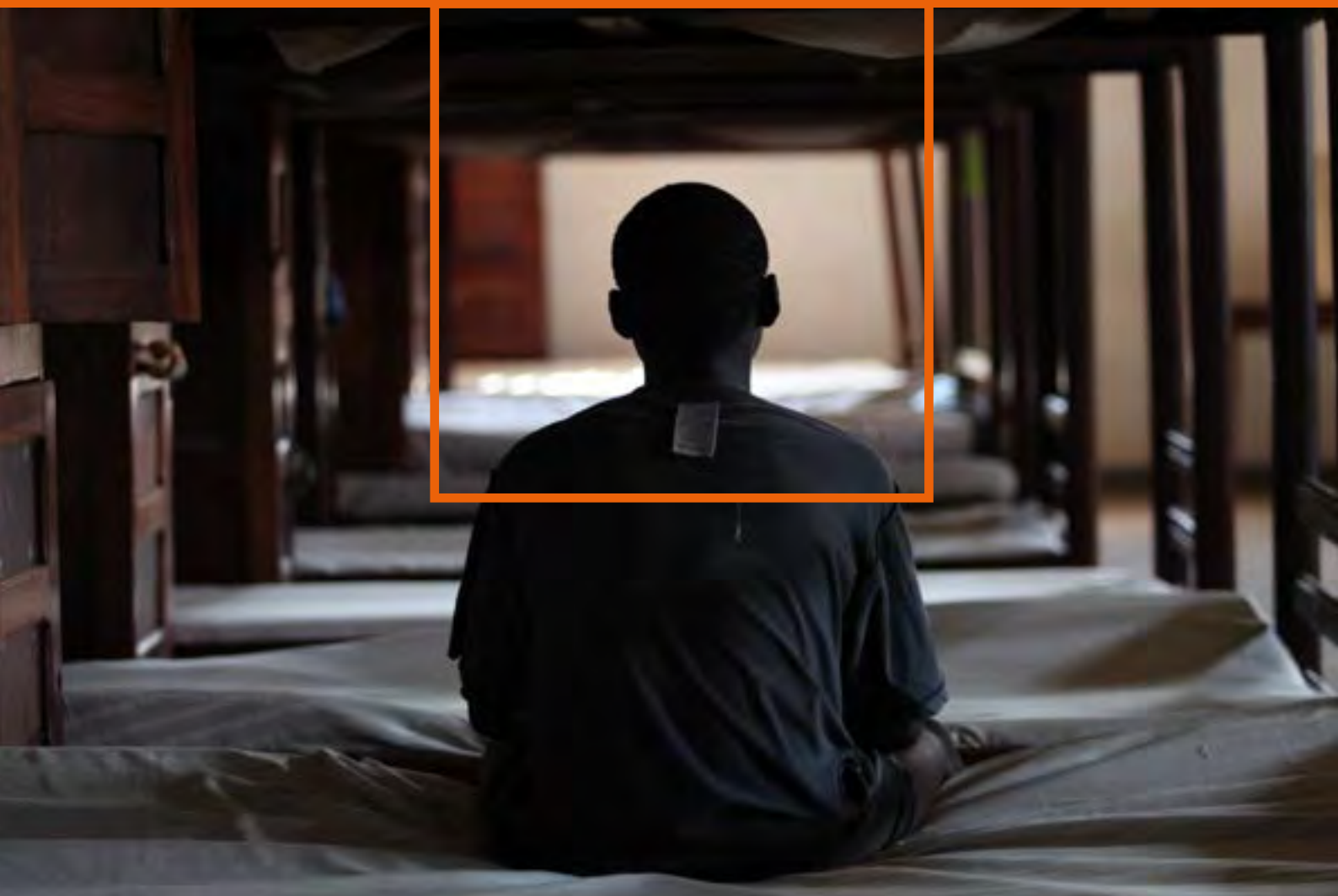
> Alternative care is care provided for children by individuals who are not their biological parents. This care may be informal or formal. It can take the form of kinship care; foster care; other forms of family-based or family-like care placements; residential care; or supervised independent living arrangements for children.[255]

Introduction

Children associated with armed forces and armed groups are often, although not always, separated from their families or usual caregivers when they are released or escape. While being reunited with their family is often possible, and is usually in the child's best interests, this can take time, and children may therefore need temporary alternative care until reunification can take place or another safe long-term care option be found. For a small number of children, for whom family reunification is not possible or not in their best interests, a permanent alternative care arrangement must be identified.

Staying in safe temporary alternative care can give some children time to separate from their previous experience and to gradually establish contact with family members. This is not only true for children participating in formal release processes but also for children who might be found in a community, living without adequate care following informal release. Not all released children require alternative care; some are able to return directly home.

It can be challenging to identify alternative care arrangements for children formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups, particularly when large numbers are released suddenly or when there is stigma attached to a child due to his or her association with an armed force or group. Prospective caregivers often fear that children will display behaviour problems, increase the household's security risks, and have a negative influence on other children. Children with disabilities and girls who are pregnant or have children of their own are likely to face increased stigmatisation, challenges in finding care arrangements that meet their needs, and the risk of abandonment by interim caregivers or rejection by other household members.

Children may stay in alternative care placements for short periods (up to three months, also called 'interim care'), longer periods (3-24 months, also called 'long-term care') or permanently ('permanent care'). Permanent alternative care may be appropriate when reunification with immediate family, previous legal or customary caregivers, or extended family is not possible or not in the best interest of the child. But no permanent alternative care arrangement should be made as long as there is a chance of tracing and/or returning the child to family members. This can take a significant length of time, especially when there may be complex cross-border tracing, restricted access to areas of ongoing conflict, and underlying social and economic barriers to family reunification, among other reasons. (see also Chapter 20 on Family Tracing, Reunification and Follow-up)

The framework for providing alternative care for children is set out in The Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children, adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2010. Standard 11 (Children Associated with Armed Forces and Groups) and Standard 13 (Unaccompanied and Separated Children) of The Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action provide an overview of approaches to alternative care in emergencies. In addition, The Alternative Care in Emergencies Toolkit published by the Interagency Working Group on Unaccompanied and Separated Children offers comprehensive practical guidance.

This chapter compliments these resources by highlighting key issues relating to alternative care of children associated with armed forces and armed groups in particular. It provides guidance on how to determine when interim or permanent care is appropriate, as well as key principles and good practice to arrange safe alternative care.

The UNHCR Best Interests procedure[256]

The Best Interests mechanism is a tool developed by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees for assessment and decision-making for individual children in refugee settings where State procedures are inaccessible or unavailable for refugee children. It has two components: Best Interest Assessment (BIA), and Best Interest Determination (BID).

The Best Interests mechanism is widely recognised to represent a good practice for use as part of case management for unaccompanied children, and can be adapted by other child protection actors for use in non-refugee settings. If it is used in cases of children formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups, great care should be taken to select people trained in child protection and in best interests assessments and determinations, including individuals trained in interviewing children, to gather information for the assessment and to sit on the BID panel.

19.1 Key considerations and safety planning for alternative care arrangements

19.1.1 Best interests of the child in alternative care

The best interests of the child must be the primary consideration in selecting a care option.

When seeking alternative care for a child formerly associated with an armed force or group, decision-makers should assess what care option may be in his or her best interest, looking at the child's individual situation, their background, history, attachments, experiences, needs, wishes, and current and previous care arrangements, among other things. The assessment should be holistic and individualised. Safety must be a top priority.

For example, some children may be able to be accommodated alongside other children in need of care, while those struggling with emotional and behavioural issues, or who are judged to be a risk to themselves or others, may need specialised care arrangements, such as intensive supervision and support from trained professionals. Table 19:1 Key issues to consider when arranging alternative care outlines some key considerations.

All care placements must be registered, and monitored on a regular basis, paying particular attention to children's physical safety and emotional wellbeing. See the 'Alternative Care in Emergencies Toolkit' Toolkit,[257] p 106, for detailed guidance on monitoring care arrangements.

TABLE 19.1 Key issues to consider when arranging alternative care

Context	· **What are the possible care options in the context?** Consider all options, including those that are currently available and those that could be established. What are the typical culturally accepted ways for community members to care for separated children in this community?[258]
	· **What are community attitudes?** It may not be possible for children to find care among a hostile community. Maintain open dialogue with community members. Where safe and appropriate, support communities to play an active role in monitoring and responding to children's needs, for example, by running support groups for foster parents or day-centre activities for children.
Safety	What alternative care options would be safest? Accommodate children away from areas of fighting and areas with a heavy presence of armed actors. Advocate against placing children in detention, even temporarily, including those associated with groups designated as terrorist groups by the UN, and ask for immediate handover to child protection actors. Consider relevant legal frameworks (see Chapter 26 on Children Formerly Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups in Justice Systems).
	Are mechanisms in place for children to report abuse, neglect or other concerns about their wellbeing related to alternative care arrangements?[259] Placements should be monitored by the caseworker managing the case.
	All caregivers should understand and commit to a child safeguarding Code of Conduct.
	Consider security concerns for both children and caregivers and ability for caseworkers to provide support.
	Personal information about a child's circumstances and reasons for being in interim alternative care must be kept confidential.
Practical concerns	· **How much time is available to establish care options?** When a child or children are released suddenly, there may be fewer options and pragmatic decisions will need to be made.
	· **How many children are likely to require alternative care?** It may be possible to plan and support family-based care for 100 children, while it may be more appropriate to look at interim transit centre care if 1,000 children will be released at the same time.
	· **How long do you anticipate the child or children will require alternative care? Have most children remained in touch with their families and know where they are?** Or will they require complex family tracing in areas difficult to access, and extensive family mediation after long periods of separation?
	· **Consider children's ages and sexes.** Younger children and girls should be prioritised for family-based care. Young children should not be separated from their caregivers unless it is in their best interests. This includes young children whose parents or caregivers are themselves under 18 years of age. Similarly, every effort should be made to avoid separating siblings, unless it is in their best interests.
	· **Are relevant services and appropriate activities accessible to the children**, such as medical, mental health and psychosocial, educational, recreational, livelihood services?
	· **What additional support is necessary for services to be equitably provided for children with disabilities?** Seek the opinions of local organisations representing children with disabilities regarding suitable placements and support services.
	· **Consider language issues so that children are cared for by people who speak their native language.**
	· In general, care arrangements should meet minimum standards but not greatly exceed what will be available in children's home areas, as this might create disincentives for family reunification.
Training and support	What training and support should proposed caregivers receive? They will need to be trained in the specific needs that children associated with armed forces and armed groups may have; such as challenges in controlling their emotions, heightened levels of fear and anxiety, substance abuse, and increased vulnerability to sexual exploitation.
	All caregivers should have training on safeguarding and commit to a Code of Conduct.
	All caregivers for children, including those caring for children with disabilities should have access to training in humane and child-centred approaches to caring for children; with emphasis on meeting physical needs, showing affection, engaging with children, and providing stimulating activities. Caregivers of children with different disabilities may be encouraged if they see that children already have the basic tools they need to manage, such as wheelchairs, prostheses or hearing aids.

19.1.2 Safety planning

Placing children outside their own families may expose children to increased risks of violence, abuse and exploitation. To address this, caseworkers, caregivers and children can jointly develop and regularly assess strategies to reduce risk and contingency plans. Such strategies should account for a child's age and level of maturity, avoid causing unnecessary fear, and make sure the child has methods for reporting abuse or other concerns.

It is important to identify particular locations, activities, behaviour or contact with individuals that might pose risk, and discuss appropriate ways to reduce these risks; establish a contingency plan for where children will be moved to if in imminent danger; and establish reporting mechanisms to report abuse or other concerns, including potential abuse from the interim caregivers or those in their close family or community.

Caseworkers and caregivers, with the support of community protection actors, should also monitor the overall security situation closely, such as moving front lines of conflict, and be alert to the risk of changes in control of areas to armed actors who may view children as deserters or enemies. Remember that safety planning should make children not only be safer, but also to feel safer. It is therefore important to support children to think through their fears, in a non-judgmental way, even if their fears appear irrational or unfounded. Often children can come up with practical, realistic suggestions of how they can feel safer.

Children living in alternative care arrangements, may face risks, including:

- risk of attack from their former armed force or armed group, or an opposing one

- risk of attack from community members, especially if the child is of a different ethnic or religious group or has committed acts of violence against the community

- risk of re-recruitment, trafficking, or harmful labour

- risk of sexual exploitation and abuse, including by the caregiver or a person close to the caregiver, making the child less likely to report.

- risk of neglect, for example if the family favours their biological children

- risk of emotional and physical abuse by poorly trained and monitored caregivers

- risk of harmful and debilitating stigma and discrimination if they are discovered to have been associated with an armed force or armed group.

- risk of unlawful detention

- risk of 'husbands' seeking to forcibly return girls to an armed force or group, or to punish them for leaving

- risk of endangering themselves; for example, by running away from the placement

- risks from other children accommodated in the same care arrangement, particularly if they were associated with opposing armed forces or groups.

Safety planning with children: a case study from Central African Republic[260]

In 2014, the French military in Central African Republic came across a seventeen-year-old boy who had been associated with the armed group Séléka. He had been declared a traitor by Séléka and was severely beaten. The French military contacted Save the Children and International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), who referred the boy for medical treatment and psychosocial support, and placed him with a foster family in a town not directly affected by the conflict. The child appeared to develop a good rapport with the foster family, and participated in a short-term vocational training programme.

Meanwhile, Save the Children coordinated with ICRC to carry out cross-border family tracing, as the boy was originally from South Sudan. However, due to the conflict, access was extremely difficult. About six months after the child was placed with the foster family, the conflict suddenly spread towards their town. The town was overrun and it became impossible for staff to visit or have contact with the boy and the foster family. Eventually they learned that the boy had run away. The foster family believed he had feared being identified by Séléka and recaptured. At the time of interview, they were still trying to find him.

This story illustrates the challenges of supporting interim care for children in active conflict zones. It also highlights that children are not passive but will use their own agency to make decisions and take action. On reflection, the chance to better understand the boy's concerns and intentions, and to explore options and make contingency plans with him and his foster family, would have been advantageous. Having robust organisational resources to closely monitor evolving conflict dynamics would also have been beneficial.

19.2 When may interim alternative care be necessary?

Adequate care is when a child's basic physical, emotional, intellectual and social needs are met by his or her caregivers and the child is developing according to his or her potential. In an emergency context this means an absence of abuse, neglect, exploitation, or violence and the use of available resources to enable the child's healthy development.[261]

Interim care is not a necessary step for all children released from armed forces and armed groups. It may lead to an unnecessary delay in children's return to their homes, families and communities, which can be detrimental to the process of re-establishing relationships. Any decision regarding alternative care arrangements should be made on the basis of a careful analysis of the child's individual situation and the context, his or her wishes, the strengths and weaknesses of existing protection mechanisms, options for living arrangements and care. See also Chapter 5 on Situation Analysis, and Chapter 18 on Case Management After Release.

Interim care may not be necessary when:

• Children and their families are already in touch and just need logistical/travel support.

• Some children may know where their families are, and interim care may only be needed for a matter of days to allow for verification and brief preparation before family reunification.

• Children were living with their families and communities during their period of association.

• Some children may choose to opt out of any formal reintegration assistance, including interim alternative care, if they judge that it will pose a risk to them.

• Where children have reached the legal age of majority or a caseworker has assessed them as sufficiently mature to make an informed decision, children should be given information about available services and supported to make a decision that is right for them.

• No matter their age, their views about planned care arrangements should be sought before any decisions are made. Even very young children can express views and feelings about care arrangements, such as how comfortable they feel with certain adults.

Children may require or benefit from interim alternative care when:

- Family tracing, verification or mediation efforts, or efforts to prepare for family reunification, are ongoing.

- Immediate family members have died, or family reunification is not judged to be in a child's best interests, so alternative options are being explored.

- Children are found to be at risk in their current informal/spontaneous care arrangement.

- It is judged through a case assessment, or by medical or mental health specialists, that a short period of interim care would be helpful as a stepping stone towards family reunification, perhaps to aid children's physical or psychological recovery, and enable them to access specialist support. Contact with family members may be facilitated concurrently.

19.3 Options for interim alternative care arrangements

Different interim alternative care options may be considered, depending on the context. Some key principles apply to all types of interim care arrangements:

- The best interests of the child in relation to the type and length of interim alternative care arrangements must be the primary consideration.

- Interim care should be arranged on a temporary basis for an initial period of up to 12 weeks.

- The duration of interim alternative care should be minimised according to the child's best interest; in some cases it may last only days.

- An interim care arrangement must be reassessed before the end of 12 weeks to determine if alternative care is likely to be needed for longer. The reassessment should determine whether it is the most appropriate option for a longer period, if the child should be transferred into a longer-term alternative care arrangement, or if another option is in the child's best interest.

- No permanent alternative care arrangement should be made as long as there is a chance of tracing and reuniting a child with their family members. This can take a significant period of time, especially when there may be complex cross-border tracing, restricted access to areas of on-going conflict, and underlying social and economic or stigma barriers to family reunification.

- While in interim care, efforts should be made for children to be in touch with or visit relatives, attend school, etc.

Interim care options for children exiting from armed forces and armed groups include:

- Kinship care, formal foster or other family-based care, informal family-based care

- Adult-supervised small group care within the community

- Supported independent living within the community, for older adolescents

- Interim Care Centres (also known as transit centres and reception centres)

- Safe houses

After kinship care, evidence has shown that family-based care options, and foster families in particular, are the most desirable option as they offer continuity of socialisation and development. Where this is not possible, small group living or supported independent living within a community is usually preferable to any form of institutionalised care, which is considered to be the arrangement of last resort (see section 19.4).

19.3.1 Kinship care, formal foster or informal family-based care

The Alternative Care in Emergencies Toolkit[262] defies the different kinds of family-based care as follows:

Kinship care	Family-based care within the child's extended family or with close friends of the family known to the child, whether formal or informal in nature.
Formal foster care or formal family-based care	A care arrangement administered by a competent authority, whether on an emergency, short-term or long-term basis, whereby a child is placed in the domestic environment of a family who have been selected, prepared and authorised to provide such care, and are supervised and may be financially and/or non-financially supported in doing so.
Informal care	Any private arrangement provided in a family environment whereby the child is looked after on an ongoing or indefinite basis by relatives, friends or others in their individual capacity, on the initiative of the child, his or her parents and other people, without this arrangement having been ordered by an administrative or judicial authority or accredited body.

Note: In some contexts, family-based interim care is also known as 'transitional family care' or 'host transit families'.

Children formerly associated with armed forces and groups are likely to be better prepared for family reunification if they live in a family setting while in alternative care rather than group or institutional care, as family care offers continuity of and support for socialisation and development. Younger children in particular should be prioritised for such arrangement. Interim caregiver families should be assessed and selected in close collaboration with adults and children from the community, with both helping to draw up eligibility criteria.[263]

Criteria for assessing families wishing to foster children[264]

- Matching culture, language and religion of the child

- Good physical and mental health

- Knowledge of the needs of children and how to meet them appropriately

- The ability and willingness to offer children love and security

- Willingness to care for the children without the promise of compensation

- Satisfactory living conditions in relation to the standards in the surrounding community

- Economic ability and willingness to support another child if material support is not going to be provided as part of the arrangement

- Ability to provide adequate care to the child, given the number and ages of children already in their care, and any other responsibilities the caregiver has. No families with more than three children under the age of five should be accepted. There should be a maximum of eight children in the household (including birth and fostered children)

- Ability to foster sibling groups, where siblings require alternative care

- Ability to provide healthcare, education and other care for foster children and for other children in the household equally

- Willingness to make a longer-term commitment to the child, where this may be required. The minimum foster care commitment would normally be six months.

- Willingness to be monitored by social workers and local authorities.

Foster families should be supported and trained. Lessons learned from experience show that:

- As children associated with armed forces and armed groups may have specific support needs, it can work well to provide care through a network of foster families clustered around a day centre with complementary activities and services.

- It is important to facilitate training and access to support groups for caregivers.

- For caregivers of children with disabilities, significant behavioural issues or other types of major challenges, intensive supervision and support from trained professionals is beneficial.

- Stipends or incentives to foster families can be considered, although this risks recruiting people motivated by financial payments only, and risks increasing community tensions by appearing to favour children associated with armed forces and groups over other children.

Foster family care: a case study from Nepal[265]

In 2008 and 2009, the International Rescue Committee in Nepal worked with a local partner to provide foster family-based care for children associated with armed forces and armed groups.

A network of foster families was recruited, clustered around a central location. The foster families were provided with training, support, small cash incentives, and subject to ongoing monitoring visits. Children staying with foster families were encouraged to attend activities at a day centre, such as life skills workshops and discussions, and were supported to access medical and other services.

The centre also retained a limited number of beds for children to stay in while a foster family placement was being arranged. This interim arrangement was intended to last no more than a few days.

The foster family networks were initially set up in preparation for an anticipated formal demobilisation. However, as informally released children were identified in communities and found to be in need of interim care, they were used for these children also.

Overall, the model was found to be positive. It enabled children to experience family-based care while still having interaction with their peers and more targeted support. Family tracing and mediation activities were carried out concurrently to work towards family reunification.

19.3.2 Adult-supervised small group care within the community

If family-based care cannot be immediately arranged, a good alternative can be group foster care or small-group residential homes, whereby groups of six to eight children are cared for by consistent caregivers within the child's community, in accommodation similar to that of the surrounding community.[266] Lessons learned from experience suggest that:

- Girls and boys should be in separate groups in small group care, but in groups of mixed ages and abilities, to increase their opportunities for attention and stimulation.

- Siblings should not be separated, even if of different ages and sexes.

- Accommodating groups of children with the same ethnicity, religion and language together tends to work best.

- Contextual sensitivities matter (eg, it may not be appropriate to accommodate children who have been associated with opposing forces together).

- Children should not be isolated but integrated into wider community life to the extent that it is possible to do so safely.

- The risk of children within small group care being targeted for re-recruitment must be considered.

19.3.3 Supported independent living within the community

Sometimes, it is more appropriate to support older children to live in small groups with the oversight of trusted adults, particularly if they are already in such arrangements and wish to continue. This may suit children who find it challenging to be subservient to adults after their period of association. It may work best for single sex groups of older children who already demonstrate a level of self-care and independence, including groups of older girls with young children of their own, although single sex groups of children of mixed ages may be possible.

Children may need to be supported on a practical level with daily living skills; for example, how to manage their money, how to share household chores and live together cooperatively.

It is important to identify trusted adult members of the community, typically neighbours or community elders, who are willing and able to provide supervision, mentoring and support. Frequent monitoring visits are essential, as well as regular dialogue with the wider community, as community acceptance can be a particular challenge.

It is essential to carry out a thorough risk assessment, including assessing the risk of children being targeted for sexual violence and exploitation, re-recruitment or trafficking. Community protection mechanisms should be mobilised to help safeguard against those who prey on vulnerable children. Consider also the risk of abuse between children within the group, particularly if power structures were established between children during the period of association. Children themselves must be involved in safety planning, both individually and collectively, so that they feel confident about what actions they can take to protect themselves from harm and seek help from adults.

Supported independent living[267]

> "It has been challenging to find foster family care amongst the refugee population for children formerly associated with armed forces and groups, especially groups of siblings. Refugee families have limited economic resources, and on top of that foster families are also concerned that they may have difficult behaviour, cause problems, or expose them to heightened security risks.
>
> We try to place children with foster families with the same cultural/ethnic background first, with an effort to provide a sense of belonging and continuity in the child's life. When this is not possible, then we opt to support three or four older children to live independently in the community. They are visited weekly by community volunteers and at least quarterly by our staff.
>
> We give them a small stipend that helps them to go to school and to manage their food. It works OK, but not as well as if they were having the care of a family."

19.3.4 Interim Care Centres

Typically, Interim Care Centres (ICC) are used when a large number of children are released in a short time frame, overwhelming the capacity of other community-based interim care options. They may also be used when "the child cannot cope immediately with a family-based setting; or where the child requires specialist centre-based services."[268]

ICCs can offer a temporary safe place for children immediately after release, where they can access services and discuss their options. Ideally, if family reunification has not been possible after a child has been at an ICC for 12 weeks, then alternative care options, such as family-based or adult-supervised care, should be sought, to avoid children getting stuck in an institutional care arrangement.

A disadvantage of an ICC is that the facility tends to be known to community members as a place for children associated with armed forces or armed groups. This may lead to negative perceptions and make them particularly unattractive for girls, who tend to experience greater stigmatisation, or for children who fear retaliation. The risk of children in ICCs being targeted for violent reprisals from the community, from armed forces or groups, or for re-recruitment attempts, must be assessed and mitigated against.

It is important to offer a variety of activities and support for children in ICCs, such as recreation and basic life-skills training, including individual and group sessions to discuss transitioning to civilian life. Where possible, children should be integrated into community-based activities where local children participate. Over time it is often possible to move children into other family and community-based care options, and convert the ICC into a day care centre, with activities for these children and others in the community.

Interim Care Centre: a case study from Central African Republic[269]

In 2009 in Central African Republic, the International Rescue Committee supported the release of children from one of the armed groups. In one context they realised that family reunification would be relatively straightforward as the children had come from nearby communities and there were strong existing networks within the area to use for tracing.

Anticipating that they would only need to provide temporary accommodation for children for a period of two weeks maximum, they built a simple transit centre within one of the communities. From the outside, the transit centre looked just like a collection of houses like others in the community. The types of accommodation, clothes and food provided were the same as those found in the community around the centre.

Children passed quickly through the centre and returned to their families. The transit centre was then handed over to the community and turned into a community centre that was used for livelihoods training, literacy classes, child protection training and community meetings.

19.3.5 Safe houses

In rare and exceptional cases, safe houses may be necessary for children whose lives are in immediate danger and whose safety cannot be guaranteed in community-based care. For example, these could be children facing aggressive re-recruitment attempts, at risk of abduction by traffickers, facing violent threats from community members or armed actors, or an abusive partner.

Staff must be present in the safe house at all times, on a shift basis, and monitoring visits by caseworkers should occur daily. While safe houses offer protection from imminent threats, they also prevent children from moving freely to access education, work, and recreational

or social activities. Therefore, they should be used for as short a period as possible and for no more than a few weeks, until the threat diminishes or until a more preferable option can be found, such as relocating the child to live with a family member in a different part of the country where they are not known.

It is important to help children understand that they are in the safe house for their own protection and to explore viable alternative options with them, as they may feel they are being detained.

The act of placing a child in a safe house is an extremely sensitive matter. A risk assessment is essential, including the risk to wider perceptions of organisational neutrality. Child protection actors must ensure they comply with national law and policy. The government or, if more appropriate, a local customary authority, should be kept broadly informed, without disclosing information that could place a child at risk; such as their location and identity.

19.4 Options of last resort

Where none of the above options is possible, you may have to use a less preferable option, such as postponing the release date or using childcare institutions.

19.4.1 Slightly postponing the release date

While it is of the utmost importance for children to be released from armed forces and armed groups as soon as possible, in some contexts it may be judged better to slightly postpone their release, or to stagger release dates, to enable interim alternative care options to be identified or established, if children would otherwise be without interim care on release.

In such cases, the decision of postponing release needs to serve the best interests of the child or group of children. You should minimise the likelihood of causing further harm as much as possible. Strict monitoring by caseworkers should be requested and a temporary shelter set up while interim care options are identified.

19.4.2 Childcare institutions, also known as residential care homes and orphanages

Alternative care arrangements provided in instructions rather than a family setting can harm children's well-being and development and can make family and community reintegration much more challenging. Family based care arrangements are therefore highly preferred. It should only be considered in rare and extreme cases when all other options have been exhausted, and then for as short a time as possible, while alternative options are arranged.

A 2010 report by Save the Children[270] said: "For boys and girls of all ages, residential institutions rarely offer sufficient individual care and can result in physical, social and emotional underdevelopment. Moreover, in many countries the conditions of care institutions are inadequate, lacking basic hygiene and nutrition standards, with cramped living conditions and insufficient numbers of trained staff to care for large groups of children. In the long term, children are more likely to grow up with lower educational qualifications, literacy levels and social skills and may struggle to adjust to living independently as adults. Worse, children in institutions appear to be significantly more vulnerable to exploitation and violence, with a number of studies reporting wide ranging physical, sexual and psychological abuse."

If a child or children are placed in an institution which normally accommodates children on a long-term basis, the temporary nature of these placements needs to be agreed in writing to safeguard against resistance to later transferring children to more desirable care arrangements. Routine processes should be in place to assess the individual situation of children in institutions, including their need to remain in the facility. Caseworkers should conduct regular follow-up and monitoring visits to assess the child's safety and emotional wellbeing.

Smaller institutions with strong links to the wider community are preferable to larger or more isolated institutions. It is important to remember that all residential care facilities must be registered and independently inspected. If the quality of care is unknown, a child should not be placed in the facility until a minimum inspection has been completed.[271] Under no circumstances should new childcare institutions be established for the purpose of housing children associated with armed forces or armed groups.

19.5 Identification of permanent alternative care arrangements

Permanent alternative care options include permanent foster or kinship care, formal permanent guardianship arrangements, national adoption, national kafala,[272] and inter-country adoption.

Permanent alternative care options should be considered if after two years of active work to re-establish family links, family reunification has not been successful or is still not considered to be in the best interests of the child. A move to permanent alternative care must be based on an assessment of a child's situation and care needs and would be guided by a Best Interests Determination. Further information on permanent alternative care arrangements in the context of humanitarian crises can be found in the Inter-agency Alternative Care in Emergencies Toolkit. Note that, while in some cases it may not be possible or in the child's best interests to reunite them with their family, it may still be possible and beneficial to support children to stay in touch with family members while they are in an alternative long-term care arrangement.

Once placed in long-term care arrangements monitoring and follow-up should continue for a period of time, usually at least a minimum of two years, and children and caregivers should know who they can contact for support if a problem arises.

19.6 Key Resources

- UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 'Best Interests Procedure Guidelines: Assessing and Determining the Best Interests of the Child', May 2021, **Link**

- The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 'Child Protection Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Action', 2019. Standard 11 (Children Associated with Armed Forces and Groups) and Standard 13 (Unaccompanied and Separated Children) **Link**

- Inter-Agency Working Group on Unaccompanied and Separated Children, 'Alternative Care in Emergencies Toolkit', Save the Children on behalf of the Interagency Working Group on Unaccompanied and Separated Children, London, 2010 **Link**; including 'Tool 10: Children Associated with Armed Forces and Groups' and 'Tool 8: Children with Disabilities'.

- Save the Children, 'Child Safe Programming and Safeguarding within Interim Care', 2019. **Link**

- International Social Service, 'Factsheet No. 50: Kafalah', December 2007. **Link**

- Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children in Scotland (CELCIS) at the University of Strathclyde, 'Moving Forward: Implementing the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children', International Social Service, Oak Foundation, SOS Children's Villages International, & UNICEF, 2012. **Link**

- United Nations, 'United Nations Guidelines on the Alternative Care of Children', 2010. **Link**

Chapter 20
Family Tracing, Reunification and Follow-up

Contents · Overview · Section 1 · Section 2 · Section 3 · **Section 4** · Section 5 · Section 6 · Section 7

Introduction

Family tracing refers to activities conducted to search for a child's family, legal guardians or other usual caregivers, with a goal of re-establishing contact between them if that is in the child's best interests.

Family reunification is the return of a child to the care of his or her usual caregivers or other family members if the usual caregivers are deceased or missing.

Children associated with armed forces and armed groups are often, although not always, separated from their families or usual caregivers during the period of association. Every child has, "as far as possible, the right to know and be cared for by his or her parents."[273] In most cases, a child's family is the most appropriate and principal protective factor for their reintegration into the community. Family tracing and reunification are therefore of the highest priority when children are released or otherwise exit from armed forces and groups and have lost contact with their families. It is important to note, however, that family reunification does not mark the end of the child's need for support, but rather, where it is required, is the beginning of the reintegration process, during which children and families should receive support based on their circumstances, needs and wishes (see also section 5 on Reintegration support).

In some cases, family tracing may not be needed. Children may have been living at home during their period of association, or with family members who were also associated with an armed force or armed group. Other children may know exactly where their families are and just need access to a phone or the internet to re-establish contact with them. In other cases, the child may not want to be reunited or it may not be in their best interests to carry out family tracing, for example, if their usual caregiver was abusive.

When family tracing is in the best interest of the child, but before initiating tracing activities, it is important to discuss children's wishes with them, jointly explore safe options for each child, and manage children's and, in the case of families looking for missing children, families' expectations. Actors conducting family tracing activities must carefully tailor efforts to the given context to avoid risk or harm to the child.

This chapter provides guidance on several types of family tracing and reunification activities, including verification, mediation, and preparation for reunification. For more detailed and comprehensive guidance, please consult the Inter-Agency Working Group 'Unaccompanied and Separated Children's Handbook', and other references provided at the end of this chapter.

20.1 Family tracing[274]

Tracing is the process of searching for a child's primary legal or usual caregivers and other family members, with the aim of finding a long-term solution that is in the best interests of the child. This often means reunification with parents or other close relatives, although other long-term solutions may be identified, based on the situation and depending on the wishes of the child. Tracing also refers to the search for missing children whose parents are looking for them.

Governments bear the primary responsibility to protect children who are without family care. Accordingly, where appropriate child protection practitioners should coordinate with or support the government to run family tracing services. However, where governments are unwilling or unable to provide support or unprejudiced support to children formerly associated with armed forces or groups, child protection actors may develop and provide family tracing services independently. In such cases, this should be done transparently with the government, without sharing any individual or aggregate data that might put children or their families at risk.

Family tracing activities should be designed in accordance with a meticulous situation analysis, identifying children's needs and existing efforts of and means by which children

and families re-establish contact and reunify, as well as potential risks. See also Chapter 5 on Situation Analysis and Chapter 6 on Risk Assessments, Security Planning and Risk-Informed Programming.

Key guidance on family tracing activities includes:

- Tracing should be carried out on behalf of unaccompanied and separated children with their consent/assent[275] and when in their best interests, as soon as circumstances allow. Prioritisation among cases may be required where there are large numbers of unaccompanied and separated children, but initial steps to document children should be taken as soon as possible.

- Family tracing should be proactive, but the safety of the child and his or her family must be paramount. When sharing information among organisations and when publishing information on children, the basic principle should be to share the maximum information to aid tracing at the minimum risk to the child and family.

- Children should be kept informed of results and involved in tracing as appropriate, depending on their age and circumstances.

20.1.1 Child and community-initiated tracing

Regardless of the actions of child protection agencies, children and family members may be doing everything they can with the resources they have to find each other, particularly in situations where there is no formal release process. Children and family members may search for each other using community networks, mobile phones or the internet, for example. Family members may approach army barracks to enquire about the whereabouts of their children.

Child protection actors may be able to learn from methods used by children and community members.

Child protection agencies should identify and support child and community-initiated tracing. This might include facilitating access to mobile phones and credit, satellite phones, the internet, or radio broadcasts.

However, it is important to raise awareness of any risks involved, such as the risk of sharing too much identifiable information in public spaces or on social media. In addition, care must be taken to ensure that groups of children who are typically marginalised within the community are not excluded from community-based tracing methods.

20.1.2 Organisation-led tracing

In some cases, child protection actors initiate tracing on behalf of children or their families. Below is an overview of different approaches and some issues to consider.

Be alert to the risks

Children formerly associated with armed forces and groups are at significant risk of stigmatisation and violent reprisals. Great care must be taken to use tracing methods that are appropriate to the context and that avoid placing children at further risk of harm.

Where possible and appropriate, agencies should consider coordinating tracing efforts for children associated with armed forces and armed groups alongside tracing efforts for other unaccompanied and separated children, to reduce the risk of making children's history of association known to community members and armed actors.

20.1.3 Case-by-case tracing

Case-by-case tracing is probably the approach most commonly used for tracing family members of children who have been associated with armed forces and groups. It can be very resource intensive and time-consuming but is generally the most successful and safest.

Case-by-case tracing takes an individual approach to each child's case. It usually involves travelling to the family home, the place where the child last saw his or her family, or to the family's intended destination if they were in transit when separated. It can feel like detective work, where small pieces of information shared by the child or gathered from other sources, for example: the name of the family, the name of their village, the fact that they live near a large river, or that the father is a teacher in a school where pupils wear a blue uniform, etc, are used to try to narrow down the search.

Tracing may point towards areas currently affected by conflict, or across conflict lines to areas under the control of a different armed force or group. In addition to the challenges of ensuring the access and physical safety of staff carrying out the tracing, there is a heightened risk of drawing armed actors' attention to a child's association with their opponents.

Your situation analysis should try to identify potential partners to assist with tracing in areas with limited access. The Restoring Family Links network[276] (International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) delegations and National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies) has a mandate to carry out cross-border tracing, owing to their local networks at the community level (see Chapter 18 on Case Management After Release).

20.1.4 Tracing for young children or children with limited information

Some children may struggle to remember and communicate information that can be used to trace their families. For example, children who were young when first recruited, children who have significant mental health issues or other special needs, children who were born in captivity and whose parents have subsequently died, abandoned them or otherwise become separated from them might have difficulty providing detailed information on their families or place of origin.

Tracing for these children is likely to involve a challenging and time-consuming case-by-case approach.

Start immediately, using any information that it is possible to obtain from the child or people around them. Older children or commanders might remember where and when they were recruited, for example.

Even where there is no information on the child's identity, information such as their sex, likely age, likely period of separation, and, if judged to be safe and appropriate, photographs, may aid tracing. If there is some indication of likely towns or areas, enquiries, if safe and appropriate, may be made with community leaders and religious leaders.

Consider where a parent who is missing a child might go for help, such as religious networks, local NGOs and hospitals, and ensure these places know how to link with organisations carrying out tracing work.

Keep in mind that children's families might be in another country.

Keep checking in with the child and their interim caregiver for any newly remembered or shared information.

For children who were born into an armed force or group and whose parents subsequently died, abandoned them or otherwise became separated from them, tracing efforts might centre around seeking information about their mother's family, or, if appropriate, their father's family. However, these relatives may not even be aware that the child exists, and may struggle to accept or welcome them. Permanent alternative care options may be in the child's best interests. If reunification with relatives is deemed to be in the child's best interests, significant preparation and mediation is likely to be needed.

20.1.5 Tracing for children with disabilities

You may need to invest more time and effort in family tracing and reunification programs for children with disabilities. For example, you may need to support the family or caregiver in making the home more accessible and safer for the child, point them to rehabilitation services or familiarise them with assistive devices.

Additional support for family or caregivers of children with disabilities may be appropriate in some cases, such as cash grants or extended training. Child protection actors must regularly monitor all care placements of children with disabilities as they do for all care placements.

20.1.6 Cross-border tracing

Cross-border tracing is complex, challenging, and requires specific safeguards, especially when it involves possible reunification and repatriation to the country of origin.

ICRC and the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies have a mandate to lead in restoring family links and reunifying families across international borders. Other child protection actors should therefore coordinate any potential cross-border tracing activities with the ICRC. In places where the ICRC does not have a presence, consider other options and work with other actors who do have a presence and may be part of a regional family tracing and reunification network.

Cross-border tracing for children who are also refugees must also be coordinated with UNHCR.

Contextual and case-specific risk assessments must be made. Cross-border tracing is more likely to be successful where a limited number of organisations are involved, Standard Operating Procedures are developed, and the relevant agency mandates are respected. See also Chapter 4 on Coordination.

20.1.7 Cross-referencing/database tracing

Cross-referencing/database tracing involves comparing information about children looking for family members with information from family members who are looking for children. This method is used in other situations, such as for unaccompanied and separated children, and it can be tried in certain situations. However, it is often not relevant when working with children formerly associated with armed forces and groups, because family members may not have reported that children have joined the force or group because they fear the consequences of reporting.

20.1.8 Options of last resort

In cases where usual methods of tracing families do not work, child protection actors should consider other options, while keeping in mind the principles of Do No Harm and the best interests of the child. Options could include:

- Sustained efforts to help the child remember or communicate information useful for tracing through the use of various forms of play. For example, mobility mapping (see Box below). Children might remember something previously forgotten or feel more comfortable to share more information as a relationship of trust develops.

- If a child cannot give specific information about the location of their family home, consider inviting a local elder/religious leader who knows the area to speak with the child and assist tracing efforts. Potential risks must be considered before doing so.

- Mass tracing/photo tracing usually involves displaying photographs of children in public spaces where people gather. The public nature poses high risk for children associated with armed forces and armed groups. In general, it is unlikely to be a viable option, but might be considered as a last resort for young children in some contexts. It is important to consider whether the community has positive or negative feelings towards the armed actor that the child has been associated with. Including photos within a display of a

larger caseload of other separated and unaccompanied children might be a possible way to reduce risk. Much will depend on the specific circumstances of the case and the context.

Mobility Mapping: a useful technique to gain information from children[277]

A historical mobility map is a child's mental picture of his or her life before separation translated onto paper. The 'mobility' dimension comes into play by asking a child to show in the picture places where he or she used to go.

Although the actual drawing can be used to identify and decipher tracing clues, the map's primary purpose is to stimulate the child's memory and generate discussion between the child and a tracing worker. Using the map, a tracing worker can explore diverse topics, and, in many cases, draw out information useful for tracing in person or with the assistance of radio broadcasts.

Maps often reveal a child's daily tasks (chores and play) and significant relationships, as well as distinctive local features, structures, or geographic characteristics. They can reveal nicknames, places frequently visited and favourite memories. Even when the information revealed does not lead to reunification, it can provide children with knowledge about where they came from and important emotional connections with their past.

20.1.9 Not recommended: unannounced visits

When carrying out family tracing for unaccompanied and separated children in general, some organisations consider taking the child to their area of origin as a last resort when other efforts have been exhausted. The child accompanies caseworkers on a visit to the general area where they believe their family to be, to try to jog the child's memory, or to enable them to show how to reach their home when they have not been able to communicate an address or directions effectively. However, this approach is not recommended when carrying out family tracing for children formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups. This is because the risk of rejection of the child by the family and the likelihood of significant complications related to the family may be much greater when there has been no warning or preparation for the child returning.

20.1.10 Protracted tracing

Tracing efforts can sometimes stop and start in different directions as one lead closes and another opens up. It is important to try to avoid long delays, manage expectations, and feed information back to children and family members about the work being undertaken. Failing to do this can lead to children becoming frustrated and perhaps setting out on their own to find their families, which can place them at greater risk of harm.

If the period of tracing becomes protracted, the child's care situation must not be left in limbo, but reviewed regularly and changed if necessary (see Chapter 19 on Alternative Care).

When tracing action is temporarily on hold, there should be regular reviews of whether any new information has come to light, or new opportunities to access certain areas have arisen.

20.1.11 Discontinuing tracing

If tracing reveals that reunification with a child's parents or previous primary caregiver is not possible, because they are dead or unwilling or unable to care for the child, tracing for other relatives should be pursued. As a rough guide, child protection agencies should continue tracing efforts for at least two years, but in the case of cross-border tracing, or tracing in conflict zones that are hard to access, a longer time frame may be judged appropriate, as sometimes access to an area can only be gained once conflict ends or the location of fighting shifts.

The decision to suspend active tracing should involve a formal review process by national authorities where possible. Discontinuing active tracing does not necessarily imply the case will be closed, as tracing may be resumed at a later date and, regardless, the child's case should be integrated into the regular child protection case management system.[278] When tracing is discontinued, alternative long-term care options should be sought (see Chapter 19 Alternative Care).

The best interests of the child should be a primary consideration, and the views of the child are critical.

20.2 Verification of family links

Verification is the process of establishing the validity of relationships and confirming the willingness of the child and the family member to be reunited.[279]

20.2.1 Verification of the identity of family members

Verification is a process to safeguard against children being handed over to the wrong person. It is important to remember that while parents are usually children's primary caregivers, in some cases another relative may be their usual caregiver or they may have other legal guardians. Adults may falsely claim a child, either by genuine mistake, or due to malevolent intentions. For children associated with armed forces and armed groups these can include: to re-recruit a child; to take revenge against a child because of their association with an armed actor; to control or 'disappear' a child who is a witness to a war crime; to recapture a 'wife' for continued exploitation, or to seek to benefit from a bride price, etc.

Means of verification of identity of family members include:

- Checking official documentation: such as national ID cards and birth certificates when available.

- Completing verification forms which ask the same questions of the adult and child separately so that their answers can be compared.[280]

- Asking neighbours and community leaders to confirm the relationship.

DNA testing is recommended only in exceptional circumstances, such as when two adults claim the same infant, and only when all other means of verification have been exhausted.[281] Furthermore, determining the implications of DNA testing can be complex. DNA testing provides information about biological parenthood, but fails to provide information about established relationships with non-biological caregivers.

Why children and adults might give false information: an example from Chad[282]

Forty-six children associated with the armed group Séléka from Central African Republic (CAR) were captured by Chadian authorities in Chad and taken to Korotoro prison.

When tracing was carried out in communities in CAR using information the children provided, it became apparent that some had provided false information – giving the contact details of their commanders instead of their relatives. When the adults were interviewed, their stories did not check out – they were not able to answer key questions that parents would know, or they became reluctant to continue to be interviewed, or they simply admitted that they knew the child, but that they were not a relative.

Children were motivated to provide this false information, as they wanted to rejoin Séléka. Some children described being associated with this armed group as a good option in a context of limited economic opportunities. Another child said that he enjoyed the respect he received as the bodyguard of a commander.

In these cases, ICRC and UNICEF were able to advocate with the government to release the children from prison. With the support of UNICEF, a transitional centre was established to provide care and protection to these children. Family tracing and reunification activities were conducted, after which some children were reunited with relatives in Chad, while a number of others ran away and were allegedly re-recruited by Séléka on the other side of the border.

20.2.2 Verification that reunification is in the best interests of the child

The verification process is not only about relationship or identity, it also ascertains the ability and willingness of the family member to care for the child. When determining if reunification is in the best interests of the child, the child's wishes must be taken into account and given due weight according to their age and maturity. "Verification involving infants and others who have difficulty communicating must follow methods specially developed to protect these children".[283]

Verification that reunification is in the best interests of the child may be needed when:

- there is a risk that the family may reject the child, particularly in cases where girls have had a child out of marriage. See Chapter 27 on Girls Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups.

- there is a risk that the reunification will result in the child being separated from a family member or current caregiver who is close to the child or on whom they have become dependent, including children currently living with adult siblings.

- there is a risk to the child of social or economic marginalisation, physical violence, or arrest/detention due to their association with an armed force or group, particularly where children have committed acts of violence against their community.

- the child has significant mental or physical health needs which cannot be met in the area where their family lives, and the family is unable or unwilling to be relocated.

- there is a risk of re-recruitment after reunification, for example, if recruitment by armed actors is ongoing in that area, or if the family/community supports sending children to fight.

- there is significant insecurity in the area where the family lives, including the risk posed by children returning from other armed forces or armed groups.

- there is unwillingness to be reunified on the part of the child or family member, for example, because a parent has remarried or there is a history of abuse.

Note that such issues do not necessarily mean that family reunification cannot still be pursued as a long-term goal, but they do mean that additional time is needed for a process of mediation to explore possible options and prepare. Particularly complex cases may need a detailed assessment and may involve more stakeholders in the decision making through a Best Interests Assessment and Determination procedure.[284]

If family reunification is not found to be in the child's best interests, alternative solutions for long-term care must be sought.

⟩ See Chapter 19 on Alternative Care.

20.3 Family mediation and preparation for reunification

'Going home' may sound like a happy ending to a child's story. However, it is unlikely to be a simple or easy transition when children have been associated with armed forces and armed groups. It is important to discuss expectations and concerns about reunification with children and family members. Potential risks to safety and wellbeing should be identified and mitigated against, including discussing how to reduce the risk of re-recruitment.

Some children and families will not be ready to be reunified immediately. There may be a willingness to try to repair relationships and work towards family reunification, but an acknowledgment that this will take some months. In some cases, it may be helpful to agree a delay and facilitate mediation and gradually increased contact in the meantime. See Chapter 21 on Planning and Delivering Reintegration Programmes for more detailed guidance on family mediation ahead of reunification, as well as sensitisation of community members ahead of children's return, and post-reunification support for children, families and communities.

20.4 Family reunification

When a child and their family feel prepared for reunification, they should be involved in planning for how the reunification will take place. The day of reunification can help set the tone for the following reintegration process, so thought should go into making the reunification as positive and problem-free as possible.[285]

Depending on factors such as the family's ability to travel, the family may come to collect the child, or the child may travel to the location of the family, accompanied by someone who has responsibility for their care en route.

The reunification should be formalised by responsible authorities; usually the authority and family members sign a reunification form or handover certificate. In situations where the state is weak or non-existent, or where their involvement would put children at risk, community leaders should be informed and involved, where it is judged safe and appropriate. In all cases, a handover form, including contact information, should be completed to record when, where and to whom the child was transferred.

In the case of cross-border reunification, clearance from the authorities in both countries is needed. The child and family should be informed about relevant local services and support, know how they can contact the caseworker, and know when the next follow up visit will be.

For guidance on Follow-up, see Chapter 21 on Planning and Delivering Reintegration Programmes. For guidance on case closure, see Chapter 18 on Case Management After Release.

20.4.1 Reunifying children with family living in active conflict areas

When a child's family is living in an active conflict area, the goal of re-establishing family contact or reunification may conflict with the aim of preserving the child's safety. It is important to take time to understand the situation in the area where the family is living, including the dynamics and intensity of the conflict, and the risk of re-recruitment or reprisals by an opposing armed force or group.

Options should be discussed with the family and the child, in a way that is appropriate to the child's age and maturity. It is vital to take steps to understand their wishes and concerns.

In situations where it is extremely unsafe, often parents themselves do not want their children to return. If appropriate, explore alternative options, such as the whole family relocating to a safer area, or the child going to live with relatives in a safer part of the country.

20.5 Follow-up

After a child has been reunited with his or her family or extended family, regular contact should be maintained with the child and family. This could be, for example, by identifying and supporting community members who volunteer to be a point of contact for the child or family to approach if they need help or have concerns, supplemented by regular visits by the child protection actor who coordinated the reunification. At the outset of the reunification, contact should be more frequent, starting weekly and gradually moving to quarterly at a minimum. How long these arrangements continue will depend on the circumstances and context but in all cases the child and their family or caregivers should know of and know how to contact a dedicated individual or organisation if they have concerns.

20.6 Key Resources

- International Committee of the Red Cross, 'Inter-Agency Guiding Principles on Unaccompanied and Separated Children', 2004. **Link**

- The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, Inter-Agency Working Group on Unaccompanied and Separated Children, 'Field Handbook on Unaccompanied and Separated Children', 2017. **Link**

- Save the Children, 'Alternative Care in Emergencies Toolkit', 2010. **Link**

- UNHCR, 'Note on DNA Testing to Establish Family Relationships in the Refugee Context', 2008. **Link**

- UNHCR, 'Best Interests Procedure Guidelines: Assessing and Determining the Best Interests of the Child', 2021. **Link**

Endnotes SECTION 4

177 'Government security forces' and 'national security forces' are terms used in the report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict, in contrast to 'Non-State armed groups'. United Nations General Assembly, A/HRC/37/47, 'Annual report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict', 8 January 2018. pp.8,10.

178 The 2018 report mentions that, in 2017, for 20 situations of conflict in 14 countries, 57 NSAGs and 9 government security forces were listed as perpetrators of grave violations against children and 56 NSAGs and 7 government security forces were listed for child recruitment and use. Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict website. Accessed 21 December 2018.

179 Common Article 3 to the 4 Geneva Conventions of 1949.

180 General Assembly Resolution 'Strengthening the Coordination of the Emergency Humanitarian Assistance of the United Nations' 46/182 (1991) and subsequent resolutions.

181 To date the only instrument of universal Human Rights Law that explicitly addresses NSAGs is the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, which precludes armed groups from recruiting or using in hostilities persons under the age of 18 years.

182 Christopher Thornton, 'Darfur and the flaws of Holder v HLP', *Forced Migration Review*, Issue 37, 2011. p.39.

183 See Annyssa Bellal and Ezequiel Heffes, '"Yes, I do": Binding Armed Non-State Actors to IHL and Human Rights Norms through their Consent', *Human Rights & International Legal Discourse,* Vol. 12(1), 2018.

184 For examples of NSAG codes of conduct, see International Committee of the Red Cross, 'A collection of codes of conduct issued by armed groups', *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 93, No. 882, 2011, pp.483-501. See also Tilman Rodenhäuser, *Organizing Rebellion: Non-State Armed Groups under International Humanitarian Law, Human Rights Law, and International Criminal Law*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK, 2018.

185 Some examples can be found in Child Soldiers International, 'A Law Unto Themselves? Confronting the recruitment of children by armed groups', 2015.

186 'Programme Guidance Note on Engaging with Non-State Entities in Humanitarian Action'.

187 List draws on Jérémie Labbé, Reno Meyer & Jonathon Somer, 'Engaging Non-State Armed Groups on the Protection of Children: Towards Strategic Complementarity'; International Peace Institute, 2012, (hereafter, 'Engaging Non-State Armed Groups on the Protection of Children: Towards Strategic Complementarity'). pp.4-5; and Save the Children UK, 'A Fighting Chance: Guidelines and implications for programmes involving children associated with armed groups and armed forces', International Save the Children Alliance, London, UK, 2004, (hereafter, 'A Fighting Chance'). p.29.

188 National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP) Human Rights Monitoring Committee, Letter to Ms Coomaraswamy, UN Under Secretary General and UN Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict, United Nations, 7 April 2011, online. Accessed January 2019.

189 UN Security Council Report, S/PV.6838 (Resumption 1), 6838 Meeting, 19 September 2012, p.31.

190 United Nations General Assembly, 'Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Children – Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict', A/68/267, 5 August 2013, p.15.

191 Draws on Olivier Bangerter, 'Talking to Armed Groups', *Forced Migration Review*, Issue 37, March 2011, (hereafter, 'Talking to Armed Groups'). pp.7–9.

192 Personal communication with humanitarian worker in Syria, January 2015.

193 International Committee of the Red Cross, 'The Roots of Restraint in War', Geneva, Switzerland, 2018, , (hereafter, 'The Roots of Restraint in War').

194 'A Fighting Chance'.

195 'Programme Guidance Note on Engaging with Non-State Entities in Humanitarian Action'.

196 'A Fighting Chance'.

197 Draws on 'Programme Guidance Note on Engaging with Non-State Entities in Humanitarian Action', p.15.

198 Pauline Lacroix, Pascal Bongard & Chris Rush, 'Engaging Armed Non-State Actors in Mechanisms for Protection', *Forced Migration Review*, Issue 37, March 2011, p.11.

199 'Programme Guidance Note on Engaging with Non-State Entities in Humanitarian Action'.

200 'Engaging Non-State Armed Groups on the Protection of Children: Towards Strategic Complementarity', p.5.

201 'Talking to Armed Groups'.

202 'The Roots of Restraint in War'.

203 The Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative 'Child Soldiers: A Handbook for Security Sector Actors,' Centre for Foreign Policy Studies, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Canada, Revised 3rd Edition, 2017.

204 Personal communication with Save the Children child protection technical adviser, Central African Republic, September 2014.

205 Draws on 'Programme Guidance Note on Engaging with Non-State Entities in Humanitarian Action', p.14.

206 Jessica Burniske, Naz Modirzadeh & Dustin Lewis, 'Counter-terrorism Laws: What aid agencies need to know,' Humanitarian Practice Network, Network Paper 79, November 2014, (hereafter, 'Counter-terrorism Laws: What aid agencies need to know'). p.6.

207 'Counter-terrorism Laws: What aid agencies need to know', p.3.

208 Amnesty International, 'Leave us in Peace: Targeting civilians in Colombia's internal armed conflict,' Amnesty International Publications, London, UK, 2008.

209 BBC, 'EU to keep FARC on 'Terror List',' BBC News Online, 22 January 2008. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/7203206.stm

210 BBC, 'What is at stake in the Colombian Peace Process?' BBC News Online, 24 September 2015. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-19875363

211 Draws on 'Engaging Non-State Armed Groups on the Protection of Children: Towards Strategic Complementarity', p2.

212 'Talking to Armed Groups'.

213 Draws on 'Engaging Non-State Armed Groups on the Protection of Children: Towards Strategic Complementarity'; Geneva Call, 'In Their Words: Perspectives of Armed Non-State Actors on the Protection of Children from the Effects of Armed Conflict', 2010; Geneva Call, 'Annual Report 2016. Protecting Civilians in Armed Conflict', Geneva, 2016; Watchlist on Children in Armed Conflict, 'Action Plans to Prevent and End Violations Against Children: The role of action plans in the UN's children and armed conflict agenda,' Discussion Paper, Watchlist on Children in Armed Conflict, April 2013.

214 'Engaging Non-State Armed Groups on the Protection of Children: Towards Strategic Complementarity'.

215 Personal communication with practitioner from Child Soldiers International.

216 UN Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Resource Centre, 'Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards (IDDRS)', , Module 5.20. 'Children and DDR', Link.

217 Treaties that fix the minimum age for recruitment and participation in hostilities at 15 are notably the CRC (Articles 38(2) and 38(3)); Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions of 1977 (Article 77(2)); and Additional Protocol II to the Geneva Conventions of 1977 (Article 4(3)(2)).

218 The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (OPAC) obliges States Parties to raise the minimum age for the voluntary recruitment of persons into their national armed forces from 15, see Article 3(1).

219 The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of Children fixes a minimum age of 18, see Article 22(2). OPAC prohibits armed groups from recruiting or using persons under the age of 18, see Article 4(1). The International Labour Organization Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour, which addresses the unlawful recruitment of children in Article 3(a), applies to persons under the age of 18 (Article 2).

220 Draws on Terry Smith & Laura Brownlees. 'Age Assessment: A Technical Note.' UNICEF, New York, USA, 2013.

221 Draws on personal correspondence with UNICEF child protection staff, Chad, January 2015.

222 Draws on personal correspondence with UNICEF child protection staff, Chad, January 2015.

223 Save the Children Liberia DDR programme documentation, 2004; See also, IDDRS Module 5.20, 'Children and DDR', section. 8.5.8, Link; and Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 'Toolkit for Monitoring and Evaluating Child Protection When Using Cash and Voucher Assistance', 2021. Link.

224 Cat Carter, Noreen Tehrani, & William Yule, 'Safeguarding Children in our Comms and Media Work: Handbook for Save the Children's media and communications staff', Save the Children, 2017, Link; UNICEF, 'Principles and Guidelines for Media Reporting on Children', Link.

225 Source: UNICEF Myanmar, February 2019.

226 Save the Children, 'Forgotten Casualties of War: Girls in Armed Conflict', 2005.

227 Carl Conradi, 'Child Trafficking, Child Soldiering: exploring the relationship between two 'worst forms' of child labour,' *Third World Quarterly*, Volume 34(7), 2013, (hereafter, 'Child Trafficking, Child Soldiering'). pp.1208–1226.

228 A distinguishing feature of this type of association is that children live with their entire families within the armed force or armed group, as opposed to being recruited with a relative while their other family members live elsewhere. It is often difficult for those conducting monitoring and reporting to capture information about these children.

229 This case study is based on UNICEF, 'Children in Armed Conflict: Philippines. Good Practices and Lessons Learned. Action Plan on the Recruitment and Use of children in Armed conflict. Implemented by the United Nations and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. Process and Lessons Learned 2009–2017', internal document.

230 See Chapter 3 in Section 1.

231 'Child Trafficking, Child Soldiering'.

232 This section draws largely on Siobhan O'Neil & Kato van Broeckhoven (eds), 'Cradled by Conflict. Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict', United Nations University, 2018, (hereafter, 'Cradled by Conflict'). p.74–77.

233 The Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative, 'Living Within Armed Groups: A Gendered Perspective', Centre for Foreign Policy Studies, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Canada, 7–9 May 2012. p.2.

234 Bernd Beber & Christopher Blattman, 'The Logic of Child Soldiering and Coercion', *International Organization*, Vol 67(1), 2013. p.87.

235 'Cradled by Conflict', p.74.

236 'Cradled by Conflict'.

237 The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 'Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action', 2019, (hereafter, 'Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action'). Standard 18.

238 Child Protection Working Group, 'Inter-Agency Guidelines for Case Management & Child Protection: The role of case management in the protection of children: A guide for policy & programme managers and caseworkers', Child Protection Working Group, January 2014, (hereafter, 'Inter-Agency Guidelines for Case Management & Child Protection'). p.38, Link. See also, 'Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action'.

239 'Inter-Agency Guidelines for Case Management & Child Protection', p.52.

240 Personal communication with child protection actor in Mogadishu, September 2014.

241 'Inter-Agency Guidelines for Case Management & Child Protection'.

242 Personal communication with a humanitarian worker in East Africa, November 2014.

243 'Inter-Agency Guidelines for Case Management & Child Protection'.

244 Save the Children Kenya, 2014, internal document, updated in February 2019.

245 Personal communication with a child protection specialist.

246 Consent may only be given by individuals who have reached the legal age of consent. Assent is the agreement of someone not able to give legal consent. See Child Protection Working Group, 'Inter-Agency Guidelines for Case Management & Child Protection'. Appendix 13, 'Management and Child Protection', p.113, for a tool regarding informed consent/assent and client rights statement.

247 Source: International Rescue Committee & UNICEF, 'Caring for Child Survivors of Sexual Abuse. Guidelines for health and psychosocial service providers in humanitarian settings', 2012.

248 'Inter-Agency Guidelines for Case Management & Child Protection'.

249 'Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action'.

250 Christine McCormick, 'Evaluation of the Inter-Agency Child Protection Information Management System', Final Report, IRC, Save the Children and UNICEF, January 2010.

251 'Inter-Agency Guidelines for Case Management & Child Protection', p.108.

252 Child Protection Information Management System, www.cpims.org,

253 Restoring Family Links website, https://familylinks.icrc.org accessed January 2019.

254 'Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action', Standard 15.

255 Inter-Agency Working Group on Unaccompanied and Separated Children, 'Alternative Care in Emergencies Toolkit', 2013, (hereafter, 'Alternative Care in Emergencies Toolkit'). p.9.

256 See UNHCR, 'Best Interests Procedure Guidelines: Assessing and Determining the Best Interests of the Child', May 2021, (hereafter, 'Best Interests Procedure Guidelines'), for more detail. Link

257 'Alternative Care in Emergencies Toolkit'.

258 Additional questions concerning community traditions and community capacities can be found in the 'Alternative Care in Emergencies Toolkit', pp.58–59.

259 Note that reporting mechanisms should include standard protocols for follow up and response before placing children in alternative care.

260 Personal communication with Save the Children child protection technical adviser, CAR, September 2014.

261 'Alternative Care in Emergencies Toolkit', p.9.

262 'Alternative Care in Emergencies Toolkit', pp.11–13.

263 'Alternative Care in Emergencies Toolkit', p.138.

264 Inspired by 'Alternative Care in Emergencies Toolkit', p.139; and UNICEF, 'Technical Notes – Special Considerations for Programming in Unstable Situations'. Chapter 4, 2006, p.194.

265 Draws on personal experience of a Save the Children child protection specialist, September 2014.

266 'Alternative Care in Emergencies Toolkit', p.92.

267 Personal correspondence with a caseworker, November 2014.

268 Louise Fulford, Tool 10: 'Children Associated with Armed Forces and Groups' within Rebecca Smith & Louise Fulford, 'Alternative Care in Emergencies Toolkit,' Save the Children, on behalf of the Inter-Agency Working Group on Unaccompanied and Separated Children, London, 2010, p.2.

269 Personal communication with International Rescue Committee child protection practitioner, CAR, January 2015.

270 Joanne Doyle, 'Misguided Kindness: Making the right decisions for children in emergencies,' Save the Children UK, London, 2010. p.6.

271 'Alternative Care in Emergencies Toolkit', p.23.

272 "Kafala is a form of family-based care used in Islamic societies that does not involve a change in kinship status, but does allow an unrelated child, or a child of unknown parentage, to receive care and legal protection." 'Alternative Care in Emergencies Toolkit', p.12.

273 Article 7 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

274 Draws on 'Alternative Care in Emergencies Toolkit', pp.225–226.

275 Consent may only be given by individuals who have reached the legal age of consent. Assent is the agreement of someone not able to give legal consent.

276 Restoring Family Links. https://familylinks.icrc.org

277 Brigitte De Lay, 'Mobility Mapping and Flow Diagrams: Tools for Family Tracing and Social Reintegration Work with Separated Children', 2002, pp.5–6.

278 Inter-Agency Working Group 'Unaccompanied and Separated Children's Handbook', 2017, p.226.

279 International Committee of the Red Cross, 'The Inter-agency Guiding Principles on Unaccompanied and Separated Children,' ICRC Central Tracing and Protection Division, Geneva, January 2004, p.37.

280 The Task Force on Unaccompanied and Separated Children of the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action uses standardised templates for adult and child verification.

281 For further information refer to: UNHCR, 'Note on DNA Testing to Establish Family Relationships in the Refugee Context', UNHCR, 2008.

282 Draws on personal correspondence with UNICEF child protection staff, CAR, January 2015.

283 Inter-Agency Working Group 'Unaccompanied and Separated Children's Handbook', 2017, p.226.

284 'Best Interests Procedure Guidelines'.

285 Joanna Wedge, Abby Krumholz & Lindsay Jones, 'Reaching for Home: Global learning on family reintegration in low and lower-middle income countries,' Interagency Group on Reintegration chaired by Family For Every Child, October 2013, p.27.

PROGRAMMING FOR REINTEGRATION

Chapter 21
Planning and Delivering Reintegration Programmes

Contents   Overview   Section 1   Section 2   Section 3   Section 4   **Section 5**   Section 6   Section 7

Introduction

> **"Child reintegration is the process through which children transition into civil society and enter meaningful roles and identities as civilians who are accepted by their families and communities in a context of local and national reconciliation. Sustainable reintegration is achieved when the political, legal, economic and social conditions needed for children to maintain life, livelihood and dignity have been secured. This process aims to ensure that children can access their rights, including formal and non-formal education, family unity, dignified livelihoods and safety from harm."**
>
> Paris Principles 2.8, 2007
>
> Reintegration programming can be defined as: "*Any activities that support children to make what is anticipated to be a permanent transition back to his or her family and community (usually of origin), in order to receive protection and care and to find a sense of belonging and purpose in all spheres of life.*"[286]

Rather than being a single event, reintegration is a complex, ongoing and somewhat unpredictable process, typically taking place over years rather than weeks or months. It goes beyond family reunification or return to the community and represents a period of adjustment and transition, during which an individual moves away from a military experience and identity and towards shaping a civilian life based within a family and community. For many children, reintegration will not be a return to a previous life, but rather a process of integrating into a new – or dramatically changed – environment. This reintegration – or integration – should be understood as a dynamic multi-directional experience where the family and members of the child's community are also adjusting to accommodate the child.

> **"Far from being an individual process, reintegration is an intensely social process of gaining acceptance and developing appropriate relationships in families, schools, work lives and civic groups."**
>
> Michael Wessells[287]

Reintegration support is likely to involve a complex web of actions connected to the community into which children are (re)integrating that are tailored to meet their individual needs. It generally includes social, economic and educational programming, and may be comprised of a variety of components, including schooling, vocational training, livelihood support, life skills training, mental health, psychosocial and medical care, recreational activities and other forms of support, not only for the child but for the family and community.

Some children may have significant resilience, strong support networks and minimal risk factors. Others may face significant risks and require more intensive support and specialised services. It is important to recognise and build on the existing strengths, resilience and resources of children, families and communities.
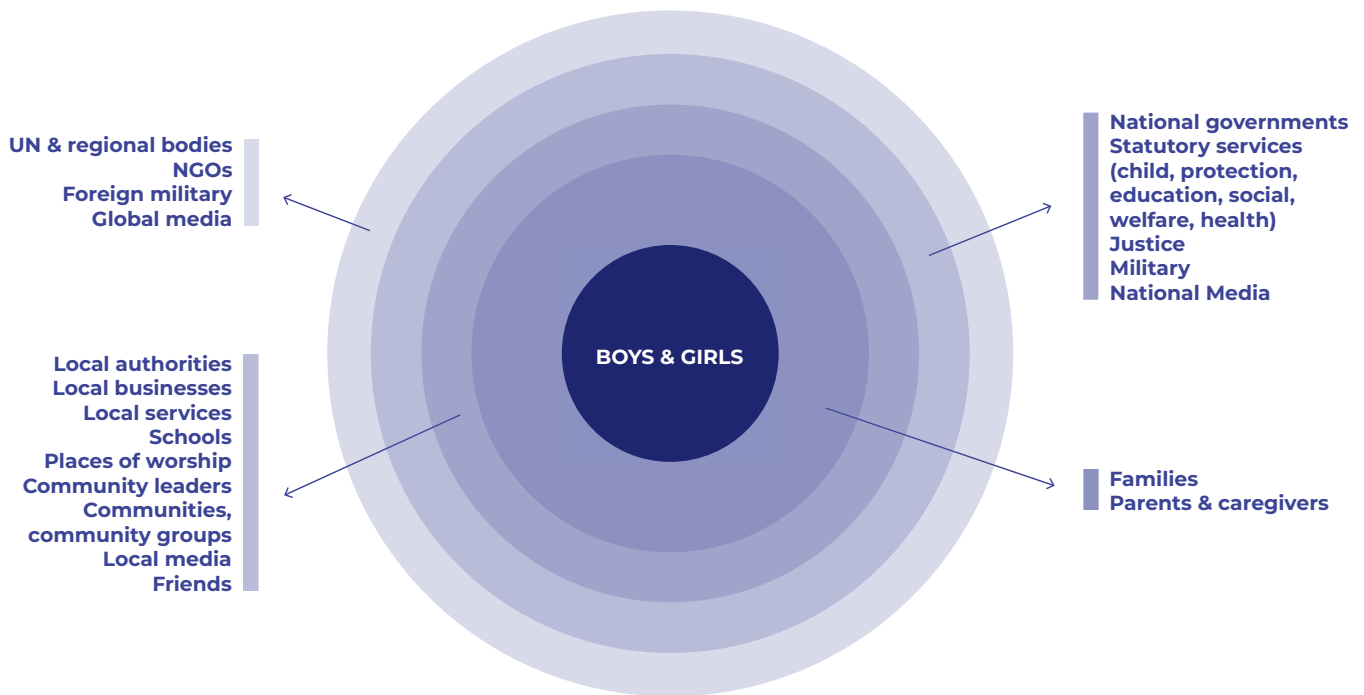
When successful, reintegration can help prevent future recruitment of children, particularly if activities broadly target vulnerable children, by supporting the development of a protective environment among families and communities. By addressing individual and community needs over the longer term and reducing push and pull factors to recruitment, effective reintegration also contributes to a country's long-term recovery and sustainable development, and in building more peaceful societies in general.

Beyond investing in immediate release and reintegration programmes, it is therefore necessary to maintain policymakers' and donors' interest in reintegration programming both during conflict and during stabilisation, recovery and rebuilding. Sustained support for children formerly associated with armed forces or groups is not only consistent with States' legal commitments and obligations, such as those made under the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (OPAC), but also preserves gains and investments that children and communities may have made.[288] Humanitarian, development and peacebuilding actors should all therefore advocate for continued attention to and funding of reintegration support.

> **"One thing that is certain is that young ex-combatants without promising alternatives, including decent jobs, healthy bodies and minds, and a certain pride in what they are doing, remain vulnerable to re-recruitment."**
>
> Irma Specht[289]

Chapters 22 to 24 provide guidance on the design and implementation of such support.

This chapter highlights how to prepare reintegration support and highlights key principles that should guide reintegration programming for children formerly associated with armed forces or groups. It also identifies common challenges and provides evidence-based guidance to address these challenges.

21.1 Preparing for reintegration with children, families and communities

An essential primary step is to conduct a thorough situation analysis (see Chapter 5). This is relevant whether organisations are designing specific reintegration programmes or incorporating reintegration support into existing, broader child protection programmes. Conducting risk assessments and situation analyses will contribute to safe interventions and can help to mitigate and prevent community resentment, attacks or other negative consequences for formerly associated children.

Establishing ways in which children, families and communities can meaningfully participate and take a leading role in the process is essential at the outset. Preparatory steps should include:

• Analysing conditions for reintegration, including stakeholder analysis to identify those who can support and who may hinder reintegration, as well as a gender analysis to ascertain any communal or familial attitudes or lack of support services that may impede reintegration for girls or boys (see Chapter 5 on Situation Analysis).

• Conducting a risk assessment (see Chapter 5 on Risk Assessments, Security Planning and Risk-Informed programming).

• Mapping existing support structures that can support children with particular needs, such as existing women's and girls' groups or child-friendly/focused disability rights groups

• Designing the reintegration approach (see below).

• Informing key stakeholders (children, families, communities, local authorities) of what they should expect from reintegration support, in terms of activities or services and potential challenges.

• Recruiting and training appropriate staff (see Chapter 8 on Human Resources and Capacity).

Where there is an opportunity to work with children and their families prior to reunification and reintegration, child protection actors can help to prepare them for this transition.

〉 See also Chapter 20 on Family Tracing, Reunification and Follow-up.

Different factors will affect the amount and type of support children need, including: the nature of recruitment, the duration of separation, the experiences of the child and of their family and community during the conflict, the age of the child, social norms and expectations, and the range of internal and external resources available for support.[290]

Support should be designed to be simultaneously community based, contextually appropriate and individually tailored, with emphasis placed on the views and existing resources of children, their families and communities. It should be inclusive of the needs of other vulnerable children in the community to avoid stigma, reduce incentives for association, and minimise tensions between returning children and community members.

21.1.1 Preparing for reintegration with children[291]

Child protection actors should work directly with children ahead of reintegration to:

- Discuss with them how they feel about reunification and reintegration: their relationships with their family and the wider community; their aspirations in terms of returning to school and/or pursuing livelihood options; their hopes and fears, etc.

- Encourage children to identify positive things that they can look forward to or feel excited about in their future.

- Encourage them to talk about their expectations and things that might be difficult or challenging and discuss possible ways to overcome these. Conversations with children who have been exposed to significant violence, including sexual violence, should be carried out only by trained experts to ensure that they are not retraumatised.

- Share information about and discuss the situation they will return to, including information about major events or changes that occurred in their family or community while they were gone, information about the conflict, information about any risk of re-recruitment and the risk of violence in the community, etc.

- Outline the types of support and services they will be able to access, including education, livelihood opportunities, healthcare, and recreational activities and where and how to seek help if they need it. Take care not to promise or create expectations for support that you are not completely certain will be delivered.

21.1.2 Preparing for reintegration with families

Where possible, child protection actors should work with family members, including parents/caregivers, siblings, and extended relatives ahead of reunification and reintegration to:

- Discuss their willingness for their children to return and their hopes, concerns and expectations. Support them to identify ways to overcome challenges they may face, starting by identifying the resources (material, financial, personal) that they already have or can access. In doing this, "families are often surprised by the amount of resources at their disposal and feel empowered to use them more effectively."[292]

- Discuss the possibility that children may display difficult behaviour, including violent behaviour, or may be withdrawn, want to be alone, or behave in other ways that they didn't before. Work with them to develop strategies to respond to this (see section 21.2.3).

- Recognise the importance of relationships with siblings; giving siblings age-appropriate information about the experiences of children associated with armed forces and armed groups might help to dispel fear and prejudice.[293]

- Identify any safety risks, including the risk of re-recruitment, and discuss appropriate strategies to mitigate these risks.

- Inform families about relevant services available in their area, including support groups for parents, and what subsequent follow-up and support will be provided. This may be family strengthening or parenting support interventions which child protection actors are supporting.

- Inform families about services that are available for them and their children and what their purpose is so they understand the broader support children can receive.

- Identify and plan to address community or familial social norms that may create stigma or other challenges to sustainable reintegration and how community leaders could be engaged to support the family and child.

In cases where the child has already returned home (for example after informal release), an individual needs assessment should be done prior to any reintegration support (see Chapter

18 on Case Management After Release). This assessment should consider all support already provided by the family and community, build on existing strengths and encourage and empower them to continue investing in and protecting their children.

21.1.3 Working with family members to support returning children

A conducive family environment plays an important role in a child's healing and reintegration. Parents too are affected by the impacts of recruitment of their children and may need support, both for their own well-being and that of their children.

Gender roles may determine how male and female caregivers understand and address the reintegration needs of boys and girls. A gender analysis in the context should help child protection actors to tailor parenting interventions for male and female caregivers to help them provide appropriate care and support to boys and girls of different ages.

Strategies that can be developed with family members to support children who have returned home include:

- **Psychosocial support for caregivers**: Caregivers will have different psychosocial support needs. This may vary between contexts according to whether there is stigma towards families with associated children.

- **Support networks for caregivers**: Such networks may include caregivers whose children have been recruited and others whose children are at risk or simply part of the community.

- **Communicating with children**: Caregivers can show empathy and support their child through day-to-day communication in the household.

- **Problem solving with children**: The experience of recruitment can change how a child interacts with family members on their return. Parenting sessions with male and female caregivers can help parents to work with their child on problem solving at individual, household and community levels. Sessions can also support parents to work with children who have more complex reintegration support needs such as children with disabilities or girl mothers, recognising the agency of the child and working together on solutions.

- **Financial strategies**: In contexts where economic factors are a pull factor for child recruitment, working with caregivers and adolescents on financial planning or livelihoods more broadly can help address risk factors for recruitment and build parent-child connections to work together on financial goals.

Communication strategies can be reinforced through parenting sessions where caregivers reflect on the effects of recruitment on their children, how children's experiences interplay with child/adolescent development and how their communication plays a role in supporting the healing and reintegration of the child.

21.1.4 Preparing for reintegration with communities

Traditionally the word 'community' is used in a geographical sense, to mean a village or urban neighbourhood for example. But it can also be understood in terms of social bonds, networks, ties and structures. A community in this sense might include a child's extended family, friends, school community, religious community, online community, or diaspora community connected through media.

) See Chapter 11 on Community-Level Approaches to Prevention of Child Recruitment for further discussion of community.

Whether community members are sympathetic or hostile can have a huge impact on returning children's quality of life and their ability and willingness to stay in the community.[294] Children who are subject to stigma and discrimination by family or community members are found to have increased "depression, anxiety and hostility over time, independent of their war experiences".[295]

Negative community reactions can prevent children from moving forward with their lives in a meaningful way. For example, they may be unable to find work or access normal cultural rights of passage, including marriage. Girls in particular are often stigmatised as having had inappropriate sexual involvement, which can limit their options for employment and for marriage.[296] Conversely, research has shown that where communities support and accept children, this can mitigate some of the negative mental health effects of their exposure to extreme violence.[297]

The situation analysis and community consultations conducted in preparation for programming will inform actors about the views of adults and children within communities towards boys and girls who have been associated with armed forces or armed groups. People may have mixed views about formerly associated children, with some seeing them as bad influences, or even as evil, and as a means for armed groups to grow their influence in the community. This may lead them to conclude that children should not be accepted back into communities. Others may recognise that these children have suffered and should be supported and accepted.[298] They may feel regret that the community has not been able to protect its children.

If community acceptance is an essential component of successful reintegration, community participation is also crucial. Encourage communities to realise that an investment in young people will support the long-term peace and security of the community.

Child protection actors can conduct sensitisation programmes with community members before children's return. You should identify and strengthen existing structures for child protection at the community level. Focus on the rights, responsibilities and needs of all children, whether conflict-affected or not, rather than focusing exclusively on children formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups, which can increase stigmatisation and resentment. Attention should never be drawn to individual children and confidential information must never be shared.

Strategies to support community-based sensitisation activities include:

- Facilitating open discussion sessions to discuss fears, assumptions and expectations. Help community members to understand what children have been through, and how and why their experiences might mean they may behave differently. Any formerly associated children who have been successfully reintegrated can be influential to encourage greater understanding and compassion.

- Identifying and supporting existing community-based conflict prevention and social cohesion initiatives.

- Involving the most respected community members (such as religious leaders, traditional chiefs and teachers) can encourage more positive attitudes. For example, religious leaders can encourage their congregations to show kindness and patience towards returning children.

- Providing support that benefits the community as a whole can reduce perceptions that certain children are being 'rewarded' with special treatment. Consider framing activities as 'post-conflict support' or 'support to children affected by conflict' as opposed to 'support for children associated with armed forces and armed groups'.

TABLE 21.1 Addressing challenges in communities

When there is widespread hostility towards children:	Where there is a lot of blame and resentment towards children, it may be helpful to use social cohesion interventions and to build on community members' sense of responsibility towards children. For example, ask 'how has the recruitment of children affected our community, our families and our children? How can we recover as a community? How important are children within our community and how can we support them?
	In some contexts, it may be appropriate to encourage communities to use traditional forms of welcome, forgiveness or acceptance, where it is safe and supportive, for returning children and their families. Such ceremonies have been successfully used to address hostility towards returning children, for example in Uganda, where a traditional public ceremony of forgiveness and acceptance known as Mato Oput has been used. However, they are not culturally appropriate or relevant in all contexts.
When communities support child recruitment	Some communities may view returning children as heroes. While this can increase children's feelings of acceptance and self-esteem, it may encourage re-recruitment, or recruitment of other children. And if children have had negative experiences while associated with an armed force or group and are treated as heroes, they may struggle to find acknowledgement for their difficult experiences. Draw on contextually relevant arguments to encourage family and community members not to view recruitment as a legitimate option for children and work with key allies within communities to support culturally and contextually appropriate attitude change towards the engagement of children in conflict.
When there is little sense of 'community'	In some contexts, the very idea of a community may be "more an aspiration than a reality."[299] This is common across many conflict contexts and is particularly exacerbated by tensions over land ownership and access to local resources. Worsening socio-economic circumstances, personal and community experiences of conflict and trust between people may be at an all-time low. Try to understand the way communities see their situation, and look at the broader environment, responsibilities of state, community support, etc. Identify allies within communities who can help exploring positive examples of conflict resolution and social cohesion which can be developed to foster communal acceptance.
When girls face significant barriers to community acceptance	Child protection actors should approach reintegration programming with a 'gender lens' and anticipate the need for intensive and sustained community dialogue and mediation to foster more positive attitudes towards girls. "The stigma facing girls is fundamentally different in kind – it lasts much longer, is critically more difficult to reduce and is more severe."[300] Explore locally appropriate ways to challenge the particular stigma that girls may face.[301] (See Chapter 27 Girls Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups.)

Community-based approaches to social reintegration: a case study from Central African Republic[302]

In 2014, in Central African Republic, Save the Children supported community-based child protection committees to lead community dialogue in schools and community discussion sessions to raise awareness about the experience of children formerly associated with armed groups and challenge stigmatisation and exclusion of such children.

One approach used was to hold screenings of a film, *Ezra*, which told the story of a child recruited into an armed group in Sierra Leone who was forced to kill his own family and attack his village, and who tried to return home after the war.[303] After the screening, committee members encouraged discussion about attitudes of community members towards reintegration. They asked children if they would be friends with a child in Ezra's situation, and asked community members if they would be sympathetic if he approached them for work. The idea of 'forgiving' and 'accepting' children was raised, along with the idea of the community bearing some responsibility for being unable to protect their children during the crisis.

21.2 General principles for programming reintegration support

Use a child rights approach. All decisions should be grounded in the four core principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child: Survival and Development, Non-Discrimination, Child Participation, and the Best Interests of the Child. The best interests of the child should be a primary consideration in all actions.

Understand the local context. As mentioned in Chapter 5, programming for reintegration must be grounded in a comprehensive understanding of the political, cultural, social, economic, military, and security dynamics of the context. It is important not to consider children formerly associated with armed forces and groups in isolation, or only in relation to the armed actor, but to also consider the dynamics between them and their peers, family, community, and wider environment.

> **"Reintegration processes, which focus primarily on children as victims, independent of the systems within which they function, will fail to capitalize on the resilience they bring to their situations, and to develop their capacities to become partners in the peace process."[304]**

Foster local and national ownership. Child protection agencies should be mindful of the legal and customary responsibility of local and national duty bearers. The reintegration experience belongs to children, their families and communities. Any attempts to positively influence this experience must be driven and owned by them.

Facilitate meaningful participation. Supporting key stakeholders to take the lead in assessment, design and implementation will increase the likelihood that interventions will be relevant and sustainable. To the extent that it is safe and appropriate in each context, child protection practitioners should facilitate the participation of children, family members, community members, government bodies and other child protection structures. Children in particular should be recognised as positive active agents bringing varied opinions, capacities and abilities to their reintegration.

Use a community-based approach, through which communities can support vulnerable children, by promoting social cohesion and strengthening capacities that will be available beyond the life of the project. This includes investing in infrastructure and services that benefit the wider community, enhancing community-based protection mechanisms, and linking with broader national policies and programmes. Remember that community can be interpreted more broadly than just referring to the place the child lives, and consider all the communities the child may feel part of.

>) See Chapter 11 on Community-Level Approaches to Prevention of Child Recruitment for a discussion of community.

> **"Families and communities already shoulder the responsibility for most child protection work, and policies and programmes that acknowledge this and are strength-based, are better placed to support locally-led child protection efforts."**
>
> Interagency Learning Initiative[305]

Support all vulnerable children. Community members may not consider children associated with armed forces and groups as the most in need, or more deserving of special assistance. Some children may choose to keep their status secret. And, some children, particularly girls, may not benefit from reintegration support due to community norms. It is therefore essential not to restrict support only to children who have left armed forces

and groups. Other children in the community, who may be affected by the conflict in other ways, and who are vulnerable to a range of protection concerns, should be included.

> **"Ensuring that children can access benefits without having to identify themselves as ex-combatants means that many otherwise invisible children associated with armed forces and groups are able to access services...**
>
> **"The challenge now is for agencies to respect the right of children to remain 'invisible' by refining their delivery of broad-based community programmes, while continuing to ensure that service delivery and advocacy meet the needs of individual cases."[306]**

In some contexts, child protection agencies increasingly prefer to run broader child protection programmes with activities designed to prevent recruitment, support reintegration of formerly associated children and that address a wide range of protection concerns in the community. Fixing a target ratio of formally associated and other children to be supported by such programmes is not advised. Fixed ratios obstruct the need to adapt to the context. Context analysis can help targeting to ensure that formerly associated children are reached. See also Chapter 17 Understanding and Supporting the Informal Release of Children from Armed Forces and Armed Groups and Chapter 18 on Case Management After Release.

Supporting formerly associated children along with other vulnerable children:

- reduces resentment towards formerly associated children, especially where the community may view other children as more vulnerable.

- reduces risk of publicly identifying formerly associated children, and putting them at risk of stigmatisation, discrimination, exploitation or violence.

- supports other vulnerable children who may be at great risk, including of recruitment.

- enables children who feel it would be harmful to be publicly identified as formerly associated with an armed force or group to access support.

- reduces the risk of inadvertently incentivising other children to join armed forces or groups, by appearing to reward formerly associated children.

- avoids creating distinctions between children who were recruited in different ways, performed different roles while associated, were associated for different periods of time, or were released formally or informally.

Determine locally appropriate beneficiary criteria. Criteria defining eligibility for reintegration support programmes should be developed through participatory discussions with community members (and local government if appropriate). Criteria may include age, family responsibilities, physical and mental health concerns (including disability), vulnerability to hazardous labour, exploitation, trafficking, and belonging to marginalised groups (class, religion, ethnicity). Particular attention should be paid to the risk of reinforcing the marginalisation of groups who are typically excluded by the dominant power structures in a community.

Develop a contextualised definition of successful reintegration. Child Protection Minimum Standard 11 states that indicators of 'effective reintegration' need to be defined in country – and this may need to be broken down further to localities within countries.[307] Successful reintegration is usually understood as a situation when the child has (re)gained a positive civilian rather than military role within their family and community that is equal to that of their peers. What this means in a particular location should be determined through participatory discussion with children, families and communities. Elements such as safety, acceptance,

psychosocial well-being, economic and education opportunities, and good health, are often prioritised.

⟩ See also Chapter 9 on Programme Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning.

Promote flexibility in reintegration activities. Traditional reintegration programmes have tended to funnel children into one of two main activities: either education or some form of livelihoods support. It is preferable for children to access different combinations of activities, such as vocational training combined with classes in literacy and numeracy, life and work skills training. Discuss options with children and their families and be flexible to changing needs over time. It is essential that activities and support be appropriate to the age of children who are involved. For example, a focus on education and socio-economic support for families may be more appropriate for younger children. Adolescent girls and boys may express concern about their futures or their lack of skills or opportunities. It is important that reintegration support helps them to address these concerns and provides them with options.

Pay special attention to gendered experiences of reintegration. Reintegration support should be based on a thorough analysis of gender dynamics in a community and recognise that the experiences and needs of girls and boys will differ due to communal social norms and gender inequality. Targeted and specialised support will be required to establish reintegration services that are inclusive and successful for both boys and girls.

⟩ See also Chapter 2 on The Impact of Child Recruitment and Use on Children and ⟩ Chapter 27 on Girls Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups.

Pay special attention to the needs of children with disabilities. Particular effort should be made to identify children living with disability, noting that some disabilities are not visible, and to support them to meet their individual needs. Children with disabilities should be supported to participate in reintegration activities alongside their peers, avoiding any segregation.

Family acceptance of children with disabilities can be encouraged if families see that children already have assistive support they need, such as a wheelchair, prosthesis, or hearing aids. In order to identify resources, it is essential to speak to children, families and caregivers, local disability groups, and local specialist organisations.

TABLE 21:2 Main barriers preventing the inclusion of children with disabilities – and approaches to inclusion

Main barriers	Key approaches
Negative attitudes and stigmatisation leading to children being discriminated against and rendered invisible	Interventions aimed at changing attitudes and reducing sense of shame/taboo preventing the inclusion of children with disabilities - and approaches to inclusion
Institutional barriers: lack of inclusive policies and programmes, no effort made to specifically include children with disabilities, 'disability blindness'	Mainstream considerations throughout policies and programmes. Include awareness and training as necessary.
Capacity issues The feeling that only highly specialist staff and expensive materials can help	Build capacity and if necessary, hire specialist staff Make use of existing specialist local groups/NGOs/INGOs with locally-based solutions
Environmental barriers – lack of access due to physical infrastructure, such as ramps in doorways and ground floor toilets, or lack of information in formats that allow children who are deaf or blind to access the information	Ensure access to physical places (homes, schools, training centres) and to information

Plan for an adequate duration of support and an exit strategy. Experience has shown that reintegration typically takes longer than most child protection agencies' project time frames. Paris Principle 3.25 states: "Reintegration is a long-term process requiring a long-term commitment from states, supported or assisted by child protection actors and donors alike." Any reintegration intervention should include at minimum one follow-up visit three months after the end of assistance, to monitor progress, evaluate the need for additional

support, and to continue to give advice (see also section 18.5 on Case closure in Chapter 18 on Case Management After Release).

Child protection actors have a responsibility to plan an exit strategy and invest in local and national resources that will continue to support children and families beyond the life of the project. This entails linking reintegration to wider post-conflict recovery and development programmes. See also Chapter 4 on Coordination.

21.3 Challenges to reintegration

Most children do not experience reintegration as simply 'going home' or returning to their previous lives. 'Home', as the child previously knew it, may no longer exist. 'Home' may now be in a different town or in a refugee camp. Children may be returning to an ancestral home that they have never seen or do not remember. Members of their family may have been killed, parents may have re-married, or new siblings been born. Friends may have left or be leading very different lives.

Children may also face transitions that involve developing a new identity in a changed or different environment. They may also face other challenges that can have a profound impact on their well-being and the success of their reintegration, such as:

- missing their friends or partners from armed forces and armed groups, or their interim caregivers. In this sense returning 'home' may constitute another separation from people that a child has come to care about and rely upon.

- coping with injury, disability, disease, or substance addiction.

- feeling disempowered, frustrated, angry, anxious, lonely, or depressed, and struggling with their sense of identity and their role within family and community.

- facing stigma, discrimination or rejection by families and communities.

- facing stigma at school, especially if required to join classes with younger children because of the education they have missed.

- experiencing delays in transitioning to adulthood and the increased social status and empowerment that adulthood brings because of the lack of opportunities including school, work, social rites of passage, and experience.

- feeling anxiety or fear about returning to situations of abuse or neglect that existed prior to their association with armed group or armed force.

- resisting pressure for re-recruitment, including sometimes from within families or communities.

Girls often face additional challenges, in particular when they are pregnant or caring for their own children, with the associated stigma this often brings. Moreover, the stigma related to girls' real or perceived sexual activity during a period of association may result in their being considered unable or ineligible to marry, and other forms of social and economic exclusion. It may also be particularly challenging for girls to move from positions of relative power and respect within the armed group or force to a position of domestic subservience when returning. This stigma can be reversed by working with the community to address gender-based social norms and to identify ways for communities to recognise girls' value and treat them with respect and include them in rites of passage such as the ability to marry.

) See also Chapter 27, Girls Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups.

21.3.1 Challenges families and communities may face

Reintegration is often challenging for families and caregivers:

- Family members may feel hesitant, fearful, distrustful or angry towards their child, and struggle to accept his or her changed attitudes and behaviour. This can result in a clash of expectations whereby children "want to be treated like adults rather than the small children their parents remember."[308]

- Families may feel overwhelmed at the prospect of having to feed another person.

- Family members may feel anxious about whether the child will bring shame on them in the eyes of the community.

The relationship between children and elders may be severely disrupted. Experiencing the power of weapons "flips the power dynamic between youth and elders on its head,"[309] and elders may view children's violent actions as transgressing "traditional concepts of children as submissive and obedient."[310]

Community members may avoid, gossip about, or be openly hostile towards children. They may blame children for any theft or problem that happens in the community, assume they are promiscuous and carrying sexually transmitted diseases, or fear that girls' military 'husbands' will come looking for them and place other members of the community at risk in the process.

Where families are affiliated with armed groups, the passage between armed group and family may be fluid. In such cases, reintegration may be challenging for those family members with links to armed groups. Caregivers might feel fearful and under pressure if they do not re-enrol their children. Reintegration may be similarly challenging in communities where social norms consider children, particularly boys, to be adults by mid-adolescence and thus expect them to participate in or support local armed groups and militias. Strong focus on enabling meaningful alternatives to association, as well as supporting positive social behaviours and attitudes towards children and adolescents, are very important in these situations.

21.4 Context-related challenges to reintegration support

In some contexts, specific challenges may influence the type, structure and management of reintegration programmes. These challenges may become apparent through an initial or updated situation analysis (see Chapter 5 on Situation Analysis).

21.4.1 When support prior to reunification is not possible

It is not always possible to provide support to children, families and communities before reunification occurs. In some cases, children will be released informally or escape and make their own way to their communities. Some children may choose to keep their past experiences with armed forces or groups a secret, explaining their absence as conflict-related displacement. In other cases, the armed force or group may directly return children to their homes as has been observed, for example, in Nepal, Sri Lanka and Myanmar.

Where support and preparation before reunification is not possible, emphasis should be placed on monitoring and follow-up. As outlined above, providing support packs to other conflict-affected or otherwise vulnerable children, enables children who do not wish to disclose their history of association with an armed force or group to receive support.

21.4.2 When going home is not possible

In the majority of cases, families represent the best form of care and protection for children. This means that work to address barriers to family reunification must be prioritised. However, in a minority of cases it may not be possible for children to return to their families or their communities of origin for various reasons. These might include for example:

- Family members may be dead or unable to care for the child due to their own extreme poverty and vulnerability.

- Family or community members may express hostility or threats towards their child, particularly if he or she has committed violence against other family or community members.

- The child may have joined an armed force or armed group to escape an abusive family environment.

- Family members may have arranged for their child to join the armed force or group, and will force them to re-join.

Alternative options to explore include: reunification with extended family members in other locations and perhaps in better economic conditions; supported independent living, perhaps in a city which can afford the protection of anonymity; or resettlement to a third country in the case of refugee children.

>) See Chapter 19 on Alternative Care and) Chapter 20 on Family Tracing, Reunification and Follow-up for more guidance.

Reintegration, or *integration*, support is particularly important for these children, as they will be trying to get to know new caregivers and navigating how to live in a new situation. Caregivers will benefit from intensive support, including one-to-one guidance, peer-support groups and support to access relevant services.

21.4.3 Reintegration during ongoing conflict

"The [Paris] Principles underscore the humanitarian imperative to seek the unconditional release of children from armed forces or armed groups at all times, even in the midst of conflict and for the duration of the conflict." (Paris Principle 1.5). It is relatively common that child reintegration programmes are implemented in situations of ongoing conflict. Table 21:3 Challenges of release and reintegration during ongoing conflict presents some specific challenges of release and reintegration of children during ongoing conflicts that can be overcome by good practice.

TABLE 21:3 Challenges of release and reintegration during ongoing conflict

Challenge	Good practice
Child protection and other humanitarian actors may struggle to access communities.	Advocate for improved and sustained humanitarian access, or 'humanitarian corridors' to allow civilians to leave areas of conflict or for humanitarian actors to travel unimpeded to remote areas.
Case management or other support that identifies children as being associated with armed forces or groups may put children in extreme danger.	· Provide broad and inclusive services for all children, such as facilitating psychosocial support activities through children's clubs, without seeking to identify children who are associated with armed forces and armed groups. · Make sure that strict data protection protocols are in place and implemented for all case management work.
Viable alternatives to association with an armed force or group, such as education and economic support, may be severely constrained or impossible to deliver.	Work with communities to identify and conduct prevention activities to stop further recruitment or re-recruitment.
Some children remain motivated to rejoin their armed force or group at any opportunity.	Advocate with armed forces and groups to cease recruiting or using children, as well as with other influential States who support accountability mechanisms to address grave violations against children including recruitment and use. See Chapter 12 on Prevention of Child Recruitment and Use through National Legal Frameworks and the Security Sector and Chapter 13 on Advocacy and Awareness-Raising.

21.4.4 Reintegration with families who are displaced

Children who are reunified with their families who are displaced, whether internally or to another country, can face additional challenges. Parents or caregivers may feel particularly anxious, stressed or disempowered, and suffer from loss of livelihoods, inadequate shelter, and separation from or loss of other family members. Protection that may have previously been available to children through extended family and community networks is likely to have been disrupted. The loss of both peer support networks and the reassurance of familiar places may have a significant negative impact on children.

Child protection actors should assess conditions of and opportunities for families and their likelihood of further displacement (along with potential re-recruitment) and take additional care and time to foster bonds between people who may not know each other. Supporting establishment of children's groups, parent support groups and community-based child protection mechanisms may be particularly useful. Children and families may also need more information about or more support to access services in an unfamiliar location.

21.4.5 Reintegration when children are returning to locations dispersed over large areas

Providing reintegration support using a community-based approach can be very challenging in situations where small numbers of children are returning to small villages across huge areas, particularly where funding to support them may not be matched with funding to address other broader child protection needs or for other needs such as education, health, or livelihoods.

Child protection actors should consider new practices, including more mobility and partnerships with local agencies and community-based networks, to plan and implement case work, family visits and follow-up.

Providing reintegration support to children dispersed across large areas in Myanmar[312] - A Case Study from 2018

In Myanmar it was very challenging for child protection agencies to support children who were released from the military or armed groups. Children were dispersed over huge areas, but in small concentrations, and separated by long and challenging journeys. With a limited presence of trained social workers in each village, there was added emphasis on strengthening existing formal and informal community structures to support vulnerable children (particularly girls). This approach was useful as it helped identify opportunities and challenges to reintegration such as existing support structures or barriers such as social norms and attitudes towards children. Building trust with key community members was key to complementing the work of social/case workers and a standardised minimum level of support (e.g. monthly visits). UNICEF, together with child protection partners, explored affordable and sustainable ways to operationalise the principles of reintegration in Myanmar. Reintegration coordination committees were set up at national and sub-national levels, co-led by UNICEF and the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement along with all other relevant actors.

At the time, the national Reintegration Committee advocated for a more integrated approach to reintegration services – supporting age-and gender-appropriate case management for children who needed reintegration support (including victims of trafficking, economic and sexual exploitation and abuse). There was also much effort made by UNICEF, the Ministry of Social Welfare and agencies such as Save the Children to develop and strengthen case worker capacity and child protection systems before 2018. UNICEF, government and CSO partners developed a layered approach in supporting reintegration of children.

Note: Following the military takeover in February 2021, engagement with the Ministry-led Reintegration Committees was restricted under the UN guidelines on engagement with de facto authorities (DFA). Instead, UNICEF has accelerated its support for a localization approach, including community-led reintegration efforts. UNICEF and Save the Children trained case workers on the Contextualized Guidance Note on the reintegration of children released by non-state armed groups developed in 2021.

21.4.6 Children who have lived with their families during their association with armed forces or groups

Some children live with their families and communities during their period of association with an armed force or group. Others may have been 'born into' armed forces or armed groups. In such cases, focus should be put on their safety and minimising the harm resulting from their association with the armed force or group.

Emphasis should be placed on offering children and families viable alternatives to association with armed forces and armed groups, such as education and livelihoods opportunities. It is also important for child protection actors to understand family and community attitudes towards association and child recruitment and use, to carry out sensitisation activities regarding the negative impacts of association on children, and seek to change attitudes that promote children's harmful association with armed forces and armed groups. There may be some community members already advocating this view, and their work can be supported and amplified. Child protection actors should also recognise situations where children living with their families in armed groups or armed forces may be as well cared for, loved and educated as other children in the broader community and be careful not to prejudge.

21.5 Ongoing support to individual children and families

The value of staying in touch with children and their families after reunification for the short, medium and longer term, as appropriate, to monitor progress and offer support, is widely accepted, and should be where possible. Follow-up visits should enable general monitoring and oversight of a child's well-being. Key objectives of follow-up visits include:

- to support children and families to maintain a safe and appropriate care arrangement in the best interests of the child.

- to support children and families to access available services including age-appropriate and gender-specific services such as safe space programming, sexual reproductive health services.

Caseworkers should clearly explain to children and families the purpose of follow-up visits and support that is available to them at any stage of the reintegration process. For instance, child protection actors may continue to offer support to children and parents or caregivers by mediating difficult issues, providing individual support and guidance sessions or mobilising peer-support.

The number and frequency of follow up visits varies in each case, depending on the individual child's needs and case goals. At a minimum, a child should receive a visit within the first month of reunification, and again in the third month to evaluate any care or protection issues.[313]

During visits children should have a chance to speak privately without the presence of parents of caregivers, to share any sensitive concerns. Caseworkers should record key findings and action points after each visit and make a plan to address any identified needs.

> ⟩ See Chapter 18 on Case Management After Release.

21.5.1 Preventing re-recruitment

Re-recruitment is a real threat to children as they attempt to reintegrate after a period of association. It is important to remember that children may be returning to a situation that remains affected by the economic, gender, social and political factors that led to their original recruitment. Unless these underlying factors, as well as any new or emerging risk factors, are addressed, children will continue to be at a risk of re-recruitment.

Reintegration programmes must offer children safe, viable and attractive alternatives to life with an armed force or armed group. This may mean having the ability and opportunity for meaningful employment or self-employment, the chance to go to school, the opportunity for psychosocial support from friends and family, and a sense of community acceptance. Furthermore, where there is a risk of forcible recruitment, action should be taken at multiple levels to protect children. In addition, reintegration programmes should consider income and livelihood opportunities for other family members where poverty had been the main factor leading to child recruitment or use.

> ⟩ See Chapter 11 on Community-Level Approaches to Prevention of Child Recruitment for more detailed guidance.

21.5.2 Addressing immediate and longer-term needs

Sometimes the full impact of children's experiences may emerge after some time passes, in a matter of weeks or months, or sometimes even later, in adult life.

It is important not only that children's immediate needs are addressed but that resources are invested in sustainable support that continues long after official reintegration programmes have ended. Existing local support mechanisms should be identified, strengthened and built on. For example, if adults are already accessing peer support through a certain group, this support can be bolstered, or if teachers are already providing

a form of support to students, they can be supported or trained to provide additional support.

Child protection actors should plan programmes so that changes in project funding do not cause an abrupt end to follow-up. Plans should be made to enable follow-up to continue beyond the life of the project, for example, by gradually increasing the role played by community-based child protection committees, local women's groups, or government trained social workers, where this is safe and appropriate.

21.6 Key Resources

- Inter-Agency Working Group on Unaccompanied and Separated Children, 'Field Handbook on Unaccompanied and Separated Children', Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 2017. **Link**

- Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), 'Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings', Geneva, Switzerland, 2007. **Link**

- Save the Children, Resources on Resilience. **Link**

- War Child, E-Learning Modules, "I deal". **Link**

- Child Soldiers international, 'Practical Guide. To foster community acceptance of girls associated with armed forces in DR Congo, 2017. **Link**

- CAAFAG Task Force, 'Technical Note on Girls Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups', 2020. **Link**

- The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 'CAAFAG Programme Development Toolkit', 2021. **Link**

- International Rescue Committee & Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 'Intervention Curriculum: Growing Strong Together: A Parenting Intervention in Armed Conflict Settings'. 2021. **Link**

- UNICEF and The MHPSS Collaborative, 'Resource Package: Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in CAAFAG Programmes', 2022. **Link**

Chapter 22
Mental Health and Psychosocial Reintegration Support

Introduction

The World Health Organization defines mental health as "a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community".[314]

The term 'mental health and psychosocial support' describes "any type of local or outside support that aims to protect or promote psychosocial well-being and/or prevent or treat mental disorder."[315]

Supporting mental health involves addressing any emotional or psychological challenges that someone might be facing, while psychosocial support places emphasis on the relationships between an individual's experiences and their interaction with people in their family and wider community.

The 2007 Inter-Agency Standing Committee Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings are an important resource for the general planning and coordinating integrated activities to address the most urgent mental health and psychosocial issues in emergencies. Standard 10 of the Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, on Mental Health and Psychosocial Distress, provides more child-focused guidance.

Children associated with armed forces and armed groups are likely to have been exposed to particularly disturbing experiences, which can lead to severe distress, difficulties in re-establishing relationships with family members. and challenges with peer relations in the immediate and longer term, even into adulthood.[316] For example, mental health difficulties or high levels of stress may limit children's ability to develop essential coping skills. They may struggle to effectively focus on education, training or livelihood opportunities and to contribute fully in their communities or societies. Adolescents may feel a strong sense of hopelessness about their future. They may also feel a debilitating fear that armed actors will return and recapture or punish them.

The experience of conflict can have a significant negative impact on the mental health and psychosocial well-being of the whole community. Pre-existing problems may be exacerbated while protective mechanisms are often weakened or disrupted. Parents' and caregivers' own mental health and psychosocial well-being can affect their ability and willingness to welcome children back into the community and to understand and support their needs. This can have a negative impact on children's psychosocial well-being, and potentially be a factor that encourages re-recruitment to armed forces and groups.

Therefore, programmes should seek to support the mental health and psychosocial well-being not only of children, but also their parents, caregivers and other family members, as well as other key stakeholders such as teachers.

All conflict-affected children are likely to benefit from some form of mental health and psychosocial support. It is therefore important that support is community-based and inclusive of children with a wide range of experiences. Activities should be implemented with an understanding of relevant local concepts and practices, including the terms used to understand and discuss emotions, distress, spirituality and health, with an appreciation of how conflict has affected the wider community.

It is important to note that not all children will suffer from mental illness because of their experiences, and it is inappropriate and potentially harmful to foster this assumption.

This chapter provides guidance on providing mental health and psychosocial support to children, families and communities affected by conflict, with a focus on children associated with armed forces and armed groups. This support encompasses a range of approaches, from strengthening community-based support to providing specialised services. Different individuals will experience and respond to the conflict in different ways, and agencies must work together to provide a range of approaches to effectively address these different levels of need.

22.1 Understanding mental health and psychosocial support

It is important to understand local concepts of mental health and psychosocial well-being. For example, is a child's individual mental health seen as inseparably linked to the health of the community? What role does spirituality play in promoting reconciliation where the bond between child and family or community has been ruptured? How are acts of violence understood and felt locally? What are appropriate, non-harmful, traditional practices to promote children's psychosocial well-being?

In some cultures, traditional rituals of 'cleansing' and 'healing' are seen as essential gateways for children to be accepted back into a community and to restore peace and harmony between the child and their family and the families and communities affected. Forgiveness ceremonies also hold potential to address the strong sense of guilt many children carry. (See also Chapter 26 Children Formerly Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups in Justice Systems).

Child protection actors should be cautious of trying to adapt mental health and psychosocial support models from other contexts to local cultures, including concepts of trauma and individual counselling which may not be culturally or contextually appropriate. In developing a suitable approach for a child or group of children, child protection actors should consider local concepts of trauma, spiritual health and community well-being and explore religious or traditional approaches to healing. You may also want to involve family and community members, such as elders, teachers, religious leaders or peers, to build the child's social networks and local ownership.

What is key is considering and supporting approaches and opportunities that children themselves feel are important to their recovery and well-being; these may involve a combination of traditional and cultural activities and activities more akin to Western forms of psychosocial support.

Different approaches needed: experience from DRC and South Sudan

Research undertaken by Child Soldiers International on girls in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and South Sudan found that many girls found a number of different opportunities within their communities useful to help them come to terms with their experiences during association.

Many girls reported that the combination of their very distressing experiences during their association with rejection by family and friends left them feeling particularly forgotten and neglected, which increased self-imposed isolation within communities. Many expressed a real need to be able to talk about their experiences and for these experiences to be understood. They reported that simple acknowledgement of their suffering was very important and being able to talk to someone without being judged was invaluable.

Other girls found spiritual support useful, taking comfort from feeling forgiven by God at a time when they were rejected by family and friends. Attending church also gave an opportunity to build social relations which were useful in recovery.[317]

22.2 Providing mental health and psychosocial support to children formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups

Understanding the psychosocial impact of recruitment and use on children is important to planning appropriate programming interventions.

> **"It was infuriating to be told what to do by civilians. Their voices, even when they called us for breakfast, enraged me so much that I would punch the wall, my locker or anything nearby. A few days earlier, we could have decided whether they would live or die."**
>
> Ishmael Beah, formerly associated with armed forces in Sierra Leone[318]

Exposure to armed conflict can create deep emotional wounds that children can carry for a lifetime. Long periods of separation from family and friends, harsh and dangerous living conditions, and exposure to adverse events including witnessing, experiencing or participating in extreme violence such as murder, torture or sexual abuse can all lead to mental health conditions or distress. These may take the form of vivid nightmares; lasting feelings of guilt, anger, sadness and hopelessness; intrusive thoughts and images; or a heightened startle response.[319]

During the process of reintegration, children go through an important period of reimagining their identity, moving from that of association with an armed force or armed group to that of a civilian living within a family and community. Girls may struggle in readjusting to traditional gender roles and respecting authority figures in the family and community, especially if they have experienced power and status within an armed force or group. Adolescents in particular may struggle with the new ways of engaging with others and a loss of power they may have had.

Children who were born into armed groups, as well as those who were abducted at an early age and have spent a long time with the group, are likely to find reimagining their identity even more challenging, as life with the armed force or group is all or almost all that they have known. In this sense, reintegration involves "a reconstruction of the child's place and role in the social world."[320] A child's own understanding and rationalisation of what has happened, their 'personal narrative', is thus key to their mental health and psychosocial well-being.

Research has shown that stigma hinders psychosocial recovery, and that acceptance by families and communities is the most important predictor of successful and long-term reintegration for children formerly associated with armed forces and groups. Children's own self-acceptance and self-esteem are also essential, if a child is to come to terms with experiences, find their place in the family and community and recover. A child's adaption to the environment they return to can be more significant in their recovery than their experiences in an armed group.[321]

Despite the limited research into the social aspects of reintegration, results suggest that a large proportion of children formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups are able to adapt and function successfully in their families and communities. However, children with persistent mental health and psychosocial problems may face a more difficult pathway to social reintegration.[322]

Evidence suggests that, with the exception of those exposed to the most extreme forms of trauma, children formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups experience similar levels of psychological well-being to children who experienced the conflict but were not directly associated with armed forces or groups. This suggests that trauma, violence and loss are widespread in areas of armed conflict and affect both children who were formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups and those who were not.

One of the most devastating outcomes of association with armed forces and groups is the lost educational and economic opportunities, which can make it difficult for children to reach key lifecycle milestones. Many children report these challenges to be more problematic than the actual experiences of the war.

Beyond this broad view of mental health and psychosocial well-being, research also offers a much more complex perspective on the effects of violence on children formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups, by demonstrating various factors and characteristics of children that shape pathways of risk and resilience.[323]

"Those who have spent most of their childhood fighting another group of people know no other way of life. They have no other point of reference to determine their identities. This leaves them feeling abandoned or estranged upon demobilization. Many children miss the camaraderie and lifestyle of the fighting corps. This feeling is especially common among those who believed in the ideology of their group and found that membership gave them a sense of purpose."[324]

In this regard, it is essential to sensitise family and community members so they can better understand what children are going through and support them. During reintegration, children need high levels of care, compassion and acceptance. They will be better able to see themselves in a positive light if those around them are also able to do so.

It is important to understand children's views about their period of association. There is a risk that if humanitarian actors belittle or dismiss the strong ideological beliefs and sense of loyalty and purpose associated with a cause, this can potentially have a strong negative impact on children's sense of identity.

22.2.1 Addressing immediate and longer-term needs

Having survived the war, children must be supported to survive its aftermath. Mental health and psychosocial support should be incorporated into release and reintegration programmes from the earliest possible stages and continued throughout.

In many cases an initial period where children appear to be coping well is followed by a period of deterioration. In a matter of weeks or months, their ability to feel positive, to function with key daily tasks, or to maintain healthy relationships can all deteriorate. If their relationships with parents or caregivers break down, there is a risk of secondary separation and re-recruitment. Sometimes the full impact of children's experiences may resurface in adult life. For example, one study found that adults who had been associated with an armed group as children in Mozambique experienced persistent distress symptoms 16 years later.[325]

22.2.2 Assessing children's capacities and needs

Individual children have varying capacities and resilience, and process events and internalise experiences differently. "Every child has his or her distinct personal characteristics, family background, experiences, support networks and coping strategies. Children will have different reactions and employ different strategies to cope with the events that happen to them."[326]

Children's levels of resilience can also change over time. For example, once forcibly recruited, a girl may demonstrate considerable coping skills by deciding to adopt a fierce persona as a protective measure to discourage harassment and abuse from other members of the group. However, once released, she may struggle to re-establish her sense of identity as someone gentler and find it difficult to socialise positively with peers. This may result in a loss of confidence in her ability to navigate civilian society.

It is also important to consider any underlying mental health and psychosocial well-being issues that may pre-date the experience of association with an armed force or group, or may have been compounded by the experience, such as previous sexual abuse. In some cases, a child may have joined an armed force or group in order to escape abuse, but then been vulnerable to further abuse and exploitation while associated. The child may now feel extremely anxious trying to reintegrate into their community, which does not represent a place of 'safety' to them, but a place where they will continue to feel at risk. If the community stigmatises formerly associated children and is not accepting of returnees, the child may be left both fearing reprisals from the community and mourning the loss of the social support than he/she felt while associated with the armed group.

All this means that children will benefit from different types of mental health and psychosocial support.

22.3 Four layers of mental health and psychosocial support

"Key to organising mental health and psychosocial support is to develop a layered system of complementary supports that meets the needs of different groups."

The Interagency Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings

There are various options for addressing the mental health and psychosocial needs of children formerly associated with armed forces and groups. The Interagency Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings[327] identify four layers of support, forming a pyramid from basic services to specialised services (Figure 2). The logic is that most children will recover if the first three layers are addressed, and only a small percentage will need specialised services.

FIGURE 2 The IASC Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Intervention Pyramid[328] The four layers are:
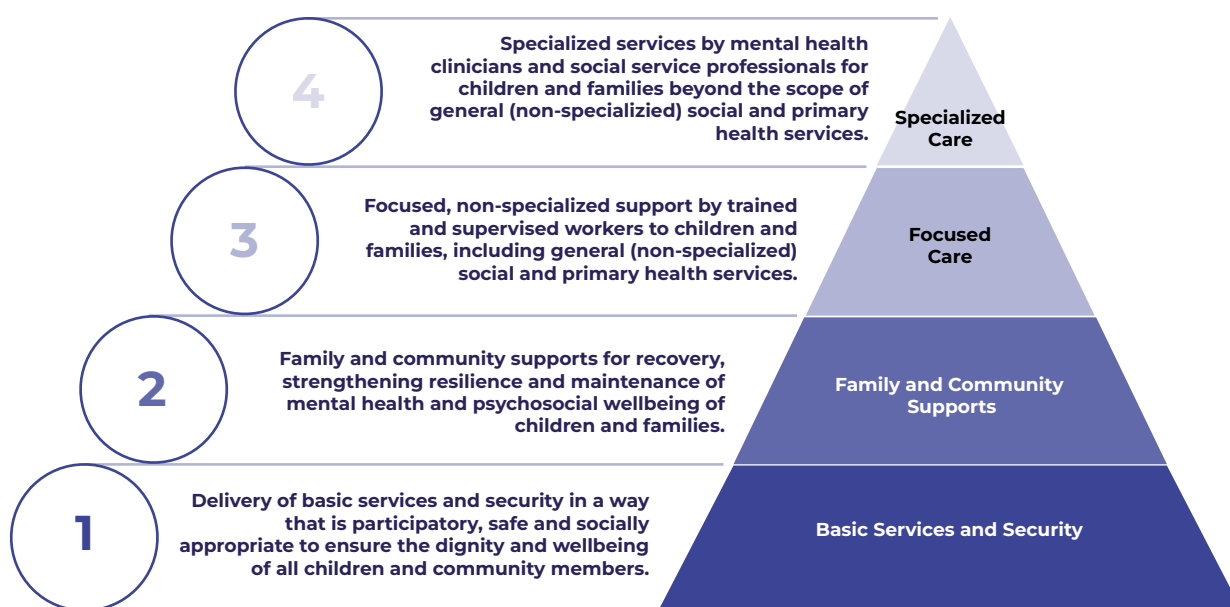
1. **Basic services** (food, health and shelter) and security for everyone in the community

2. **Community and family support** for a smaller number of people who are able to maintain their mental health and psychosocial well-being if they receive help in accessing key community and family supports

3. **Focused, non-specialised support** for the still smaller number of people who additionally require more focused individual, family or group interventions by trained and supervised workers

4. **Specialised services** required for the small percentage of the population whose suffering, despite the supports already mentioned, is intolerable and who may have significant difficulties in basic daily functioning.

This handbook has a particular emphasis on life skills training as part of mental health and psychosocial support for children formerly associated with armed forces and groups. Life skills training usually falls within layer 2 (community and family support) and encompasses two elements:

    i.   promoting social connectedness and soft skills such as positive identity, prosocial behaviour and conflict resolution; and

   ii.   practical livelihood training.

22.3.1 Referral pathways between layers of support

There is a need for complementary forms of support across the four layers and for coordination between providers of that support. Children who require specialised services may also need access to interventions provided at other levels. A two-way referral pathway should be designed between layers, so that children requiring more specialised support can receive services from the lower layers, and other children can be referred to specialised services should the need arise.

An effective referrals process is critical which means that communication between agencies working in this arena is important.

22.3.2 Layer 1: Basic services and security

Services in Layer 1 can generally meet the needs of children who have experienced shock, grief, family and economic losses and other stressors but are relatively resilient and function normally as defined in the social context. The well-being of such children should be protected through the re-establishment of security, basic services and appropriate opportunities for education, work and income generation.

A common misconception is that very few children formerly recruited by armed groups or forces can be adequately supported by Layer 1 interventions. In fact, children who were not in armed groups for long, who suffered less exposure to death and traumatic experiences, or who have strong coping skills and sources of support on return may recover well with support at this level alone.[329]

Safety. Having a sense of safety and access to essential services are foundational components of good mental health and psychosocial well-being. On top of the security concerns that affect the civilian population, children formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups may live with extreme and near-constant fear of imminent danger.

Child protection actors should seek to address any persistent or evolving safety concerns affecting children and develop and update safety plans with the child and their family. Particular attention should be paid to the risks of:

- violent reprisals from community members or armed actors

- abduction or forced re-recruitment

- sexual exploitation and abuse

- harmful and hazardous labour or trafficking

- continued contact with commanders or combatants, including 'husbands' harassing girls

- continued contact with recruiters, including through social media

- children remaining unsupported.

Access to basic services: Child protection actors should seek to ensure that children's basic needs are met, including their need for shelter, food, medicine and basic personal and hygiene items. Children are likely to experience considerable anxiety and be unable to engage in support activities if they are preoccupied with the need to obtain food or medical help, for example.

Key services "should be established in participatory, safe and socially appropriate ways that protect local people's dignity, strengthen local social supports and mobilise community networks."[330]

Paris Principle 7.68 states: "linkages between [...] reintegration processes and existing programmes for dealing with children's health needs should be developed". This should include mental health and psychosocial support services as appropriate.

Information is key for dignified and informed participation and the ability for people to make decisions and take action to help themselves is also a basic need. Good psychosocial support involves increasing an individual's sense of agency and control over their life.[331]

Children and their families should have access to basic information about the evolving dynamics of the conflict and any population displacement, the services available and how to access them, and any specific information relevant to them, such as ongoing efforts to trace missing relatives.

22.3.3 Layer 2: Community and family support

As promoted through an ecological model of support, protective factors within families and communities have an important role to play in supporting children's capacities and needs and should be promoted and strengthened. Families and caregivers should be encouraged and supported to acknowledge and understand the experiences that boys and girls have had during their association. This ranges from initial acceptance of children through support to re-establish relationships within families and communities and explore positive, safe opportunities. This is particularly important for adolescent boys and girls. Support at family level can and should be complemented by inclusive protective factors within communities, again to promote acceptance, address stigma, and provide opportunity.

Recognising the broader impact of conflict on communities, community and religious leaders, community groups and schools have a role to play in supporting formerly associated boys and girls to be accepted (eg, within schools, training and employment opportunities, places of worship, community groups) and enable them build their skills and confidence to participate in activities which build acceptance and social cohesion alongside other children and adults.

Most children will benefit from participating in basic recreational activities with their peers in the community, such as children's or adolescents' clubs/groups activities. These types of activities can provide a useful entry point through which children with more acute needs can be identified and referred appropriately.

Layer 2 represents the types of interventions needed (in addition to those in Layer 1) by a smaller number of children who, despite being affected by conflict, are functioning relatively well but may be at risk of deteriorating if they do not receive appropriate support.

This group might include children who may benefit from specific one-to-one support from case workers to help them address challenges arising from their experiences during association. Such support should also be available to family members to help manage and overcome problems such as community stigma or disruptions in their family system. These children would likely benefit from help in accessing greater community and family supports, context-specific cultural support, and psychosocial activities such as school-based interventions, and work within the community to address their immediate sources of vulnerability.

Layer 2 also includes informal support and social activities. In some contexts, children have already been home for months or even a year or more before receiving reintegration support,

and have already started to reintegrate and heal with the help from family, friends, singing, dancing, and praying in church with other youth, etc. Any situation analysis should map services that already exist, where children receive support, who they talk to, what activities they enjoy. Responses should build on existing support, and not disempower families and communities by undermining it. See Chapter 5 on Situation Analysis.

Structured, age-appropriate creative and recreational activities

> ## "Whenever I am depressed, I play with my friends and when playing the depression leaves."
>
> Girl formerly associated with an armed group in Sierra Leone[332]

Children formerly associated with armed forces and groups may have grown accustomed to relying only on themselves and may find it hard to form bonds of trust with others.[333] However the sense of belonging to a group is a key desire of adolescent children in particular, and something that some formerly associated children might miss from their time of association with an armed force or armed group.

It is important to support children to participate in group activities, re-connecting with old friends or making new ones. Friendships can help children to feel less isolated or anxious, especially friendships with peers who may have similar feelings. Team sports can work particularly well to strengthen cooperation skills and feelings of camaraderie.

Depending on the context, particular efforts should be made to establish links between adolescent girls and established peer groups or mothers' groups, as acceptance into these groups can play a major role in reducing isolation, promoting well-being, and fostering important friendships and social support networks.

> ## "When a 17-year-old girl managed to flee from the rebel group, which she had been forced to join, child club members convinced her to go back to school. They talked with the principal, but he hesitated as he was afraid that the girl could negatively influence the other students. The child club convinced him that this would not happen as she had been in the rebel group by force and she really wanted to continue her studies. Because of all encouragements and support from her friends the girl went back to school."
>
> Child club, Nepal[334]

Children living with disabilities
Children living with disabilities should be supported to participate in activities, and not segregated. They may be at risk of stigmatisation, neglect, abuse, and emotional harm. The importance of activities to positively influence families' and communities' attitudes towards children with disabilities cannot be overstated. (see also Chapter 21 on Planning and Delivering Reintegration Programmes).

Life skills training
Life skills training can provide an opportunity to develop and strengthen key personal and social skills and aptitudes that can equip children to navigate relationships and challenges as they move through adolescence and into adulthood. These skills can also equip children with life-saving and life-enhancing knowledge that can help them to better protect themselves in potentially difficult environments, identify and help build constructive and supportive relationships that can promote resilience, as well as build self esteem.

Life skills may be taught in schools, in other community settings, within children's groups, or alongside training for employment or self-employment. When paired with employment-related programmes, they should be tailored to support children above the minimum legal working-age who need to sustain themselves or contribute to supporting their families, to access to safe and dignified work (see also Chapter 23 on Economic Strengthening for Reintegration and Chapter 24 on Education Support for Reintegration).

Children should be involved in developing the curriculum, with emphasis on relevancy to their lives and the context. Positive skills and knowledge gained during time associated with armed forces and armed groups should be recognised and built upon when appropriate.

Life skills curricula should take into consideration the situations and cultural expectations of girls and boys and should be gender transformative and empowering.

Examples of life skills[335]

Behavioural skills

- Developing self-worth, self-esteem, self awareness and fostering a positive self-identity, developing plans for the future

- How to identify and utilise existing internal and external resources and capacities, including how to engage with and benefit from home life, school and training and livelihood opportunities

- Positive civilian social behaviour at home, in school, at work and in other community contexts

- How to foster a positive and constructive attitude, anger management, and non-violent conflict resolution

- Teamwork, collaboration and negotiation, problem-solving, decision-making and critical thinking, and organisation

- Awareness of the different challenges faced by girls and boys and how to foster positive relationships between genders

- Awareness of adolescent psychology and behaviour

- Interpersonal and public communication skills

Basic good health and hygiene practices

Physical safety information including how to access community-based support

Peer mentors and adult mentors

> **"[Peer mentors] are likely to be other children or youth who have returned from conflict, exploitation or long-term care and settled well into their communities. Their experiences of exploitation, institutional care or conflict and of the reintegration process itself can be extremely useful in supporting other children going through recovery and reintegration."[336]**

It can be helpful to involve children who have previously faced hardship and who are now doing well, to act as peer mentors. Many children benefit from having a mentoring relationship with a trusted adult who they can see regularly, who can give them guidance and support. Adults can help children to regain a sense of care and compassion for others where this has been disrupted, through consistently modelling good behaviour and demonstrating their concern for the child's well-being.[337]

Family supports
Parents and caregivers can be offered training and sensitisation on the mental health and psychosocial difficulties that children may experience, how these may affect children's behaviour, and how they can respond. Teachers, vocational trainers and other key community stakeholders are also likely to benefit from such training. Establishing or strengthening peer support groups for family members can be a very helpful and sustainable source of support.

Social workers can also provide one-to-one opportunities for family members to discuss any specific challenges or mediate between family members to identify and resolve them. If parents and caregivers feel better informed, prepared and supported then they will be better able to play their crucial role in supporting children's reintegration.

22.3.4 Layer 3: Focused, non-specialised supports
Layer 3 of the pyramid represents more focused or intensive services, which will be required by a smaller percentage of war-affected children. This group is likely to exhibit high levels of depression, anxiety and other significant difficulties in daily functioning. Severely abused girls and boys, who may have been exposed to extreme levels of trauma (both as victims and perpetrators) and continue to exhibit distress and impairment would be likely to benefit from Layer 3 services.

Such problems require focused non-specialised services, a higher level of mental healthcare and psychosocial support such as case management (see Chapter 18). These children are likely to need a longer period of mental health and psychosocial care and follow up. This support is likely to be in the form of conversations with trained service providers who seek to provide support based on an awareness of traditional approaches.

A study in Eastern DRC has shown that for girls and women suffering from anxiety and depression as a result of conflict-related sexual violence, therapeutic interventions in a group setting as opposed to individual support may have positive benefits. The incorporation of local understanding of emotional distress, and the use of locally-recruited psychosocial assistants, were also found to be beneficial.[338]

Dealing with indoctrination
When supporting reintegration of children who have strong beliefs, perhaps due to their upbringing, experiences or indoctrination, practitioners should take a holistic approach that addresses all the risks and vulnerabilities that contributed to the child becoming associated rather focusing on changing the child's beliefs or proving them 'wrong.'

It is important not to judge children for having become associated with an armed forces or group, or for actions that they took during their period of association. Children's feelings about their experiences should be heard and understood.

Child recruitment in armed conflict occurs along a continuum of coercion and in some situations, the only option available to the child may be to 'voluntarily' enlist. For many children, the stressors and the coercive pressures they face are so significant that there is almost no chance that they could remain neutral in the conflict.

>) See Chapter 1 for a discussion of how and why children become associated with armed forces and armed groups.

Even along this continuum of coercion, children have and exercise agency. When supporting children, it is important to recognise the child's view of his or her situation and

the influences over them. Nevertheless, ideology is rarely a significant reason for a child becoming associated with an armed group and where present, it is most often one of a number of factors. However, boys and girls may become indoctrinated into ways of acting and perceiving others by armed actors during their association. This may happen as soon as a child joins an armed force or group, in order to break their connection with their family or community, or it may take place more gradually through the normalisation of certain behaviour and beliefs.

It is important that child protection actors recognise internal biases which may influence their ability to treat any child neutrally and with respect. Child protection actors should be careful not to judge the choices that children and families make or to allow their own religious or political views to influence how they treat the child. If at any stage and for any reason you feel you cannot treat a child with kindness, respect and dignity, or remain neutral over their case, you should discuss this with a senior colleague. Where this is a problem, consideration should be given to changing roles or being taken off a particular child's case.

Addressing the harm that violence and the justification or promotion of violence causes to the child is also important. Careful attention should be paid to protecting children from further harm, including within the justice system. Children must be consistently treated as victims, not perpetrators, in line with the special protections to which they are entitled as a child, and their rights not further violated. Often children who have been recruited and used by armed groups are treated harshly, within adult systems, military or intelligence courts and without special measures that respect their rights. This can result in a double victimisation whereby such children are gravely exploited and used by the armed group and neither the children's victimisation nor the coercive environment under which they were living or forced to act is acknowledged or considered.

⟩ See Chapter 26 on Children Formerly Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups in Justice Systems.

It may be useful for children to be connected with other disengaged children who have found non-violent productive ways of living their lives who can share their own pathway from violence to non-violence.

22.3.5 Layer 4: Specialised services

The majority of children and their parents/caregivers will recover well with the types of support already discussed, and effective and sustained case management should go a long way in monitoring and supporting mental health and psychosocial well-being.

However, there is a small percentage of children who may struggle to function on a day-to-day basis, such as children who had pre-existing mental health problems or have endured particularly traumatic experiences. Without specialised support, these children may find it impossible to (re)establish and develop relationships with families or others and to seek out and benefit from education and training and livelihoods supports.

Such specialised support, including assessments to ascertain appropriate supports, must be provided by a qualified psychologist or qualified psychiatrist.

Child protection actors should seek to identify specialist psychological or psychiatric care services to which these children can be referred. See also Chapter 18 on Case Management After Release.

Particular attention should be given to identifying and supporting children or family members who feel suicidal, who may self-harm or who demonstrate particularly worrying behaviour. In settings where specialised mental health practitioners are unavailable, children and/or their families can be supported by trained and supervised non-specialist child protection or psychosocial workers who can create a safety plan and involve trusted family and community members.

Where these services do not exist, child protection actors should lobby for relevant actors to establish these services. See also Chapter 4 on Coordination.

22.4 Challenges to programming mental health and psychosocial support

Humanitarian and child protection actors may encounter challenges related to the design and implementation of mental health and psychosocial support programmes for formerly associated children and their families. The following are some examples and potential strategies.

TABLE 22:1 Challenges and strategies related to psychosocial programmes

Potential challenges	Possible strategies for child protection actors
Human resource challenges: Because of limited resources, trained lay people (rather than professional mental health workers, psychologists or psychiatrists) will likely play a major role in providing psychosocial services.[339]	· Develop a standard operating procedure for identification of cases which require a higher level of mental healthcare. Refer them to more skilled clinicians and ensure proper supervision at each level of service provision. · Provide intensive training and routine group and individual supervision, as well as regular and ongoing mentoring, to lay people providing psychosocial services.
High risk of burn-out resulting from heavy load of emotionally demanding cases and other complex environmental stressors. This may result in low-quality care for children.	· Ensure routine individual and group supervision for staff. · Create opportunities for staff self-care (eg, retreats where challenges and solutions or coping methods can be shared, 'mental health day', staff recognition awards) and for advanced professional training and development. · Make it clear that setting reasonable workloads and respecting staff physical and mental well-being is a management responsibility in your organisation. · Budget for staff well-being services and activities during financial planning and develop a staff well-being plan involving culturally-appropriate activities (eg, in-person or remote counselling support in the appropriate language, staff well-being surveys, etc.) · See also Chapter 8 on Human Resources and Capacity.
Inability of staff to be neutral and risk treating some children without kindness or the respect they are entitled to. This can be a natural and understandable human reaction depending on their own experiences.	· Ensure routine individual and group supervision for staff. · In some cases, identifying a different role for the staff member or taking them off a particular child's case may be required.

22.5 Key Resources

• UNICEF and The MHPSS Collaborative, 'Resource Package: Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in CAAFAG Programmes', 2022. **Link**

• The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 'Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action'. Standard 10 on Mental Health and Psychosocial Distress. **Link**

• International Rescue Committee, 'Intervention Curriculum: Growing Strong Together: A Parenting Intervention in Armed Conflict Settings', 2021. **Link**

• Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), 'Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings', Geneva, Switzerland, 2007. **Link**

Chapter 23
Economic Strengthening for Reintegration

©UNICEF/UN0655745/Mulala

Introduction

When economic vulnerability and the lack of livelihood opportunities are drivers of child recruitment, strengthening the economic situation of families and working-age children becomes a key element of a comprehensive strategy to prevent child recruitment or re-recruitment.

Families of younger children may need economic strengthening to be able to feed and care for their children and pay for schooling. Older children released by armed forces or groups may be unable or unwilling to attend formal school, and their inability to find viable self-employment without support may reinforce a cycle of poverty and exclusion which may have led to their original association and may also expose them to other forms of exploitation, criminality and violence including re-recruitment.[340] In South Sudan in 2014, children told Save the Children staff that they had no choice but to associate with armed groups because there were no other feasible livelihood options for them and their families.

This chapter provides guidance to child protection actors on: (i) the economic strengthening of working-age children (also referred to as economic reintegration of children) and (ii) the economic strengthening of families. This is a complex area of programming, related to both prevention of recruitment and reintegration. It goes beyond the child protection sector and beyond humanitarian responses, requiring commitments from government, UN agencies, civil society and the private sector to invest in communities and families and in longer term, safe, sustainable livelihoods. This chapter highlights key issues to be aware of when facilitating economic strengthening. For detailed guidance on programme planning and implementation, see the Key Resources referred to throughout (and at the end of) the chapter.

This chapter should be read in conjunction with Chapter 11 on Community-Level Approaches to Prevention of Child Recruitment and Chapters, 21, 22 and 24 on Reintegration.

23.1 Challenges to providing economic strengthening programmes for working-age children and families

As discussed in Chapter 21, the reintegration process is lengthy, potentially expensive, and is different for each individual and often unpredictable. When assessing both general and individual situations, it is important to carefully identify the challenges. Chapter 21, section 21.3 lists challenges families and communities may face to reintegration. Table 23.1 below examines some of the particular challenges to providing economic strengthening to working-age children and families.

TABLE 23.1 Challenges to economic strengthening programmes and approaches to overcome them

Challenge	How to tackle it
Profile of the target group	
Children, in particular those released from armed forces and groups, face specific labour market disadvantages. They generally have a low level of education and vocational skills and little to no prior work experience. They may also experience problems resulting from their association with armed forces or groups (such as mental health conditions, stigmatisation, and physical disabilities). Other challenges may include weakened family support networks, or the demands of caring for siblings or their own young children, which disproportionately affects girls.[341]	· Account for the specific needs of children and their context. Where possible, involve adolescent boys and girls during the design, implementation and monitoring of economic reintegration support. · Challenges faced by girls, including caring responsibilities for other children, should be identified and the programmes designed and implemented to address them.

Families of children released from armed forces and groups may be among the most vulnerable in their communities and may not have access to market-based economic interventions such as a microloan. Caregivers often face their own labour market disadvantages that may have contributed to the child's recruitment.	· Account for the various levels of household poverty and the context during the design, implementation and monitoring of economic reintegration support.

Institutional roles

Child protection staff often do not have the necessary expertise or experience to design and implement economic reintegration programming.	· Establish partnerships with organisations that have expertise in economic strengthening and take the local context into account. See section 23.2 on roles and responsibilities.
Where Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) programmes are in place, the technical and financial resources that are made available for economic reintegration of working-age children is often less than those for adults. Yet, children and adults are often competing for the same jobs.	· Where DDR is in place, advocate for sufficient designated funding to provide solid socio-economic reintegration support to working-age children and families of children formerly associated with armed forces or groups and for setting up targeted reintegration programmes for youths. · To overcome competition between children and adults, develop cross-generational linkages between youth- and adult-focused programmes whereby successful adults could mentor young people going through the reintegration process and where young people share their knowledge with adults on subjects that are typically easier for youth, such as learning a new language, digital technology and ICT skills.

Conflict and post-conflict environments

Weak economies and labour markets may be characterised by low demand and high unemployment rates, particularly for youth.	· Take steps to link with programmes aiming at creating jobs by support long-term investment in key labour market sectors (see section 24.6).
Formerly associated children may be competing for the same (few) jobs with other adult ex-combatants, refugees, internally displaced persons and other war-affected populations, who also need economic strengthening.	· Coordinate or jointly plan programmes with actors working on the reintegration of other war-affected groups (see also Chapter 4 on Coordination).
Absence or low capacity of service providers, such as vocational skills training providers, business development services, microfinance institutions, money traders, hawala,[342] remittances/international money transfer companies, mobile banking and traditional banks.	· Where possible, link with programmes working to build the capacity of local institutions and service providers. Alternatively, build the capacity of these service providers as part of project design (see section 24.5). · Base vocational and livelihood support programming on identified labour market needs or key valued livelihood sectors, including agriculture.

Duration of the economic reintegration process

Sustainable economic reintegration requires investment that matches labour market needs or that will allow children to contribute economically to their communities. Programming should be of sufficient duration for the child or family member to be successful and should be rooted in the local context. Where project cycles are short, economic reintegration programming should identify options that can have the most impact in a short time so that children and families are not left frustrated.	· While advocating for longer term funding to allow for longer project cycles, prioritise identifying and supporting development of skills and services that would be valuable in the child's community of return rather than implementing standard vocational skills training across contexts. Any project should put children on the path of reintegration and, as part of the project exit strategy, ensure linkages with other programmes.

23.2 Roles and responsibilities for providing economic strengthening to working-age children and families

While the child protection sector is the lead sector for work with children associated with armed forces and armed groups, the education, health, livelihoods, and other sectors also have key roles to play in preventing and responding to child recruitment and use. The child protection sector's lead role does not mean that it is responsible for delivering every component of reintegration. Coordinating with other sectors and linking children and families with complementary services is one of the most important roles child protection actors can play.

Learning suggests that, since many child protection agencies lack the expertise and other resources to deliver effective, market-based economic programming. Other agencies that specialise in this kind of work may lack expertise in child protection. Each should focus on delivering what they do best and develop partnerships to deliver according to their comparative advantage.[343] Child protection and livelihoods specialist agencies should work together to support economic strengthening, to involve children associated with armed forces and armed groups, other children including those who may be vulnerable to recruitment and their families as programme participants where possible, to create coordination and referral pathways to increase their access, and to build capacity when needed.

An economic strengthening programme contributes to national recovery and development. Where possible, the programme should work with partners that are part of the existing socio-economic structure of the country, rather than relying on national or international NGOs. Efforts to build capacity should be targeted at those national institutions.

Working with private and government sectors to include children who need reintegration support in their ongoing programmes can create synergies and leverage broader sets of resources.

Table 23:2 looks at the roles to be filled when supporting economic strengthening for children and families. Section 24.5 elaborates on the capacity building needs of each of these stakeholders.

TABLE 23.2 How different stakeholders can contribute to economic strengthening

Stakeholder	How can they contribute to economic strengthening for children and families?
Government Leadership to support economic strengthening for children and families	Collaboration between key ministries, such as the Ministry of Social Welfare, the Ministry of Defence or national DDR commissions where they exist and the Ministry of Labour and Commerce (or their equivalents), is necessary to oversee and coordinate support for economic strengthening as part of recruitment prevention, release and reintegration of children. Important opportunities to consider include*:* · government training programmes · labour market and economic assessments · inclusion of young people in economic development planning · inclusion of youth opportunities within private sector development · support for non-formal education · targeting vulnerable children and families in social protection programmes.

National and international NGOs across livelihoods, child protection and education sectors Promoting and support economic strengthening to released children and children at risk of recruitment and their families in given geographical areas	Together with partners, including government, they mobilise resources, design, implement, monitor and evaluate holistic and integrated programmes that provide child protection services and either provide or connect children and families to training and livelihood opportunities. No single implementing partner is likely to have the expertise to provide all services. They may need to collaborate with agencies from other sectors to provide services and strengthen referral pathways. The child protection organisation's role will therefore be to: · seek partners with expertise in economic strengthening, employment and livelihoods for children and families, including in the private sector. If this is not possible, they should seek support to build their or partners' capacity to provide economic strengthening to children and families. · advocate for or facilitate access of the target group to relevant services · coordinate and monitor the provision of reintegration services (social, educational, economic) · support an integrated approach to socio-economic reintegration of children and make the necessary linkages between all those involved.
International agencies including NGOs Responsible for recruitment prevention, release and reintegration programmes for children and supporting and coordinating with local actors	Together with government and local partners, international agencies including NGOs mobilise resources, design, implement, monitor and evaluate child protection programmes, including their economic-strengthening component. They should: · explore partnerships with local, national and international organisations that have expertise in employment and livelihoods matters (such as cooperatives, private firms, INGOs and UN agencies) · conduct an institutional mapping exercise to identify the service providers in the reintegration area and to assess their capacity to provide services to the target group · ensure an integrated approach to socio-economic reintegration of children and support the necessary linkages between all those involved.
Training service providers These can be public or private, formal or informal, organisations or individuals (see section 24.5)	Training service providers provide specific economic services such as career guidance, core skills for employability, vocational skills training, business development services. They should: · ensure that services providers allow equitable access to older boys and girls who have been associated with armed forces or groups, that such children are not stigmatised due their experiences or gender, and that access and eligibility is not dependent on a certain level of formal education.
Other stakeholders These include, among others, chambers of commerce, workers' and employers' organisations, farmers' associations, youth organisations, disabled persons' organisations, village assemblies, money traders, hawala, mobile money, banks, microfinance institutions other UN agencies (eg, the World Food Programme), private firms.	Other stakeholders work in close collaboration with the programme to ensure economic strengthening of children and families. They may not receive direct funding for doing so.

23.3 Economic reintegration of working-age children

23.3.1 What is economic reintegration?

The aim is work. The aim is to ensure that working-age children are able to sustain themselves and their families. This may sound obvious but economic reintegration support has often failed to take local contexts into account and has emphasised occupying children with vocational training for short periods of time in areas of work that may not be relevant to the local market, and without explicit support for them to transition into employment.[344]

Not just any type of work. For prevention efforts to be successful and reintegration to be sustainable, special attention should be paid to securing work for children that is an attractive, safe, meaningful and sustainable alternative to joining (or re-joining) armed forces or groups. It must provide not only income but also status, positive power and a voice to children, contributing to a feeling that they can become a positive and constructive member of the community. Such work must also be safe, with attention to the length and timing of shifts, and must not put children at risk of harm, harassment or violence in the workplace. Children should be fairly remunerated for their work.[345]

Economic strengthening programming for children is different than for adults. Childhood is a stage of life where personal development takes place and childhood experiences can affect whether an individual succeeds or fails later in life. Armed conflict may already have influenced children during their formative years. Their education may have been disrupted and, without support, they may grow up with greater limitations and fewer prospects for decent work.[346] Economic reintegration support can break the poverty cycle and give children access to a dignified life and a more positive future.

All of this has implications for project design (see sub-section on Technical components of economic reintegration support, below), required expertise (see section 23.2 above), project duration and funding (see Chapter 7).

23.3.2 Who is economic reintegration for?

Chapter 21 provides guidance on targeting of programme participants (children formerly associated with armed forces and groups, children at risk of recruitment and other vulnerable children from the community). Only those who have reached the minimum age for employment set by national legislation (usually in the labour code) are eligible for economic reintegration support. The minimum age is usually 15 but some countries permit employment of children from the age of 14.

Participation in career guidance or training programmes in schools or institutions is usually allowed for children below the minimum legal working age. Programmes may therefore include younger children in orientation and vocational training activities to prepare them for inclusion in the labour market when they reach the minimum legal age.

It is important to remember that age is not the only factor that will determine the type of reintegration support children receive. Some children above the minimum age of employment may decide to pursue their education in parallel with or instead of receiving economic reintegration support.

In the case of younger children, economic support for their caregivers may be considered. (See section 23.4)

23.3.3 Technical components of economic reintegration support

There is a range of options for economic strengthening activities, such as vocational skills training or the provision of cash, capital goods, or livestock, including:[347]

- Apprenticeship, traineeship and internship schemes

- Income-generation schemes

- Cash transfers

- Cash-for-work schemes

- Financial education

- Agricultural development

- Loan-led microfinance

- Savings-led microfinance

- Job development

- Food-for-work schemes

- Value chain development

- Small business support

Training is commonly divided into the following three phases:

Pre-training phase

Qualified actors should map employment opportunities and labour market needs and opportunities. Children's needs, challenges, aspirations and skills should be assessed as well as their ability to make an informed decision regarding the type of work they want to pursue.

Training phase

Increasing children's employability requires much more than vocational training. Depending on individual training needs identified, it may include literacy and numeracy skills, entrepreneurship training, financial literacy, and life and social skills.[348]

Post-training phase

After training is completed, children need support to find a job or to start a business, on their own or in groups. It is important to consolidate and reinforce the support provided during the transition into paid work; support should not stop with a training certificate. Structured mentorship should continue, for example through internships, apprenticeships, traineeships, or job matching and placement; or through activities such as: business mentorship, cooperative or business establishment and development (mutual peer-to-peer support and saving schemes development), linkages to business development and financial services providers and regular technical follow up.

The following sub-sections provide top-level guidance on activities to be conducted during each of the three phases. For more detailed guidance, refer to the specialist references and to qualified sector experts in the country.

23.3.4 Pre-training activities

Mapping of local markets and contextually focused career guidance for children are important steps which are often skipped or poorly facilitated, which is arguably the cause of a lot of failed economic support. It is not helpful to train children on how to use sewing machines if at the end of the training they have no way to obtain a sewing machine, for

example.[349] When developing training or other economic strengthening activities, agencies should consider whether the activities provide children with an attractive and meaningful alternative to (re-)joining armed forces and groups.

Market assessment

Agencies designing economic reintegration programmes should review livelihood assessments and market assessments to identify the most appropriate activities for the specific context. As part of this process, they should also seek and consider inputs from children, parents and caregivers and other community members, including, where relevant, private sector actors. This all increases the likelihood that the selected interventions are of value to the community and reflect the capacities and interests of the beneficiaries and the real needs of the labour market.

If the training focuses on strengthening already existing activities in the community rather than introducing new ones (agriculture and animal husbandry are amongst the most common activities around the world), the likelihood for success is far greater. Training that strengthens agricultural productivity and teaches para veterinarian skills will also benefit the whole community and is often more realistic, sustainable and valuable to the community than professional training (such as in tailoring, mechanics, wood working, or bread making) that are often systematically offered through economic reintegration programmes.

Market assessments.

A good tool to use is the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children's resource: The three-part Market Assessment Toolkit for Vocational Training Providers and Youth, 2008. This resource seeks to match young people's interests, skills and available resources to market opportunities for employment and self-employment.[350]

Career guidance

Asking children about their skills, interests and desires is a critical component of designing programmes.

Children need support and guidance to make an informed decision about which area of employment they want to go into, what options are realistic in their context, and therefore what kind of training they will benefit from. Aspects to consider are:

- Recognise skills or experiences gained from children's time associated with an armed group or force that they can transfer into civilian work.

- Give children time to think and to discuss options with friends and relatives, whose opinions and experience can be very relevant.

- There is no 'one size fits all'. Encourage diversification; gaining several skills, enables them to better withstand fluctuations in the market.

- When possible, consider organising trade fairs, job fairs, internships with or visits to businesses or training centres, where children can learn more about different types of work.

Some children will face significant challenges to obtaining viable employment or self-employment. For example, girls, children with physical disabilities, mental health or behavioural difficulties, HIV/AIDS, or substance abuse issues.

Mentors should discuss ways to overcome such challenges with individual children, their families, trainers and employers. For example, this might include options where children can work as part of a small group where labour can be divided depending on people's strengths and weaknesses.

Specific attention needs to be paid to the additional challenges faced by girls as, "in many countries, restrictive gender norms make it harder for girls to access training and employment opportunities."[351] It is important to include girls and their partners, husbands or other key relatives at home in discussions about girls' participation, to try to overcome cultural or market barriers and reduce the risk of provoking jealousy or resentment. It is also important to investigate opportunities for girls that go beyond traditional gender norms, as many may have had leadership or other non-traditional opportunities during their period of association with the armed force or group.

23.3.5 Training activities

A common economic strengthening strategy is training focused on foundational skills related to employment and self-employment rather than to a specific vocation. Hands-on practical experience can ease children's transition into the labour market. In addition to increasing their employability, training can also bolster children's self-esteem and promote their acceptance within the community.

Foundational skills training

Experience shows that increasing the employability of children requires more than just vocational training. Children benefit from a range of complementary skills that provide a strong foundation from which to seek employment or self-employment. For example:

- Entrepreneurship training: how to develop a basic business plan, prepare to face failure, and learn and adapt. It should be practical and interactive.

- Core skills for employability: including communication, teamwork, problem solving, punctuality and professional behaviour.

- Financial training: including bookkeeping, currency conversion and keeping savings. In some contexts it may be appropriate to facilitate children to open bank accounts.

- Basic literacy and numeracy training: in parallel to vocational training, over a longer period of time, rather than in an accelerated package.

- Life skills training: including behavioural skills, civic education, practical skills, and health and safety (See Chapter 24).

- Language training: to be able to interact with customers and colleagues, especially in situations of internal or cross-border displacement.

> **"In violent contexts, youth programs that only focus on the 'technical' skills needed for employment or political participation but do not specifically address issues such as rebuilding trust, dealing with trauma, and gaining skills to deal with conflict, frustration, and intimidation are missing an important part of the picture."[352]**

Vocational training

Vocational training should develop skills that lead to employment or self-employment. Common approaches include vocational training centres and apprenticeships.

- Vocational training may be centre based in urban areas and mobile in more remote communities. Ideally training should be nationally or regionally accredited but this may not be possible in some contexts.

- Where there are no established vocational training centres, consider establishing NGO-run or supported centres.

- Advocate for vocational training centres to avoid fixed start dates and instead have 'rolling' dates of entry to allow for the fact that children do not always leave armed forces and groups or return to their communities at the same time.

- Apprenticeships or 'on the job' training are a dominant way of acquiring skills in most countries. They may be in the formal or informal private sector.

- Employers are likely to be more inclined to offer jobs after they become acquainted with the skills and personal qualities of individual children.

- Placements need to be identified and arranged, with negotiations formalised in an agreement detailing the rights and obligations of both the employer and the apprentice and the type of support provided to each.

- Placements should be monitored to ensure the child is not being exploited or mistreated, and that they are indeed acquiring skills.

- It is important to explore how children can meet their basic needs during the training period, to avoid dropout or misuse of resources.

- Additional material support or access to specialist services may be needed for some children, including those with disabilities.

23.3.6 Post-training support

After participating in training, children should be supported to find a job or to start a business, either on their own or in groups. The primary way of providing such support is through continued, structured mentorship (for a minimum of six months after the training has finished) to allow children the time and support necessary to obtain and maintain employment or self- employment, and to confirm they are not facing any form of exploitation or abuse through their work.

Support for children to gain employment

- Facilitate introductions with employers and negotiate job placements.

- Facilitate partially paid or unpaid apprenticeships which can lead to employment; this might include material support to small businesses to enable growth.

- Help children know where to find advertisements for jobs.

- Support with developing curriculum vitae and job interview skills.

- Support children to open a bank account.

- Affirmative action for adolescents with disabilities and/or girls might be appropriate.

- Regularly visit the child to offer encouragement and advice.

Support for children to become self-employed

- Business training, business mentorship, and business plan development.

- Support to establish and develop cooperatives and/or business associations, to allow for sustainable mutual peer-to-peer support and saving schemes.

- Start-up support – materials, livestock or cash, depending on each child's needs.

- Introductions to business connections, including access to markets and suppliers.

- Information on available resources and services and how to access them, including credit unions, micro-finance providers and business development services.

- Physical and administrative support in setting up a business, such as setting up a bookkeeping system and bank account.

- Regularly visit the child to offer encouragement and advice.

23.3.7 Protecting children from hazardous work

When evaluating training and job opportunities, child protection and other relevant actors should take precautions to protect children from hazardous work.

Hazardous work is work, which, by its nature or by the circumstances under which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety and morals of children. It is one of the worst forms of child labour and prohibited for those under the age of 18 under international law.

Under International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 182, countries' competent authorities should prepare a list that specifies activities that are prohibited to children. The list should include work that involves lifting heavy items, operating dangerous machinery, working with toxic chemicals, working at night and more. In the absence of such a list, ILO Recommendation No.190 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour provides information on types of work defined as hazardous.

Child protection and other relevant actors should:

- Understand and be familiar with national laws and regulations relating to child labour and occupational safety and health.

- Only consider non-hazardous work options when conducting employment opportunities mapping and establish agreements regarding the safeguarding of children with training and apprenticeship providers and employers.

- Work with families, training providers and employers to improve working conditions for children (for example, ensuring a reasonable balance of work, school, domestic work and leisure time).[353]

- Familiarise trainers and children with the dangers of hazardous work for children and basic concepts of occupational safety and health.

- Establish complaints mechanisms and inform children how to make a complaint and seek support.

- Monitor training and job sites for compliance with national and international laws and standards relating to occupational safety and health.

- Consider the risks of hazardous work at all stages of economic reintegration, including during career

- Where possible, identify local resource people with occupational safety and health or health knowledge (eg, labour inspectors, health care workers) and/or provide support to improve their technical expertise on this topic (see 23.8, Key resources).

23.4 Economic strengthening of families and caregivers

The goal of household economic strengthening is to enable families to have a viable livelihood, and to maximise children's chances of staying with their family, accessing education, and avoiding harmful or exploitative labour.[354] Economic reintegration support programmes targeting parents/caregivers can have many positive effects, including

improved household nutrition and hygiene.[355] They may mean the difference between whether children are able to go to school, or participate in training that will lead to them gaining better work in the future, or not.[356]

Injections of capital – cash, capital goods, or livestock – seem to stimulate self-employment and raise long-term earning potential, often when partnered with low-cost complementary interventions. Such capital-centric programmes, alongside cash-for-work schemes, may be the most effective tools for putting people to work and boosting incomes in poor and fragile states.[357] Also, there is evidence that cash transfers, group savings and microfinance associated with gender equality training works to create a safer and more protected environment for children.[358]

Economic strengthening programmes have found success with more comprehensive 'graduated' programming that delivers a grant, training and support, life skills coaching, temporary cash consumption support, and access to savings accounts and health information or services.[359] This approach is expensive and may not be feasible in some contexts.

There are many potential unintended negative consequences of economic strengthening support which should be considered and steps taken to mitigate. These might include, for example:

- parents/caregivers having significantly reduced time to spend caring for children

- tension between men/boys and women/girls if traditional gender roles are subverted by the programme

- changing patterns of movement in and around the community due to new economic activities increasing women's and girls' exposure to protection risks.

- increased risk of child labour for some of the households' children.[360]

Once again, the involvement of experts in the field, careful planning, monitoring and evaluation and adequate funding are necessary.

23.5 Institutional capacity building

Different institutions will fulfil different roles in the provision of economic strengthening to children and families and may require some level of capacity building.

23.5.1 Government, UN, (I)NGOs and other relevant stakeholders

The child protection sector (government, NGOs, UN and INGOS) has overall responsibility for the prevention of recruitment, release and reintegration of children, and needs to develop partnerships in the field of economic strengthening. The aim is not for child protection experts to become labour market or vocational training experts, but rather to acquire a reasonable understanding of the type of services that need to be available to beneficiaries, and the need to involve, partner and coordinate with experts in the field. Basic knowledge and understanding are necessary for the formulation of sound policy documents and for the design, implementation, monitoring, evaluation, accountancy and learning from the economic component of a reintegration programme and for coordination with complementary services.

The employment and economic strengthening sector (government, UN, NGO, private firms, workers and employers' organisations)

These partners will need to increase their understanding of child protection issues including:

- the sensitivities and risks of working with groups that include children formerly associated with armed forces and groups, including the need for confidentiality and to avoid asking children to disclose sensitive information.

- the specific needs and challenges faced by vulnerable groups of children trying to find employment or self-employment, including girls, children with physical disabilities, children with mental health needs, and children with a history of substance abuse and addiction.

- how to manage children's expectations effectively to avoid disappointment and frustration.

- preventing exposure to harm in the workplace, such as harsh or dangerous conditions, and exploitation and abuse.

- child safeguarding (see Chapter 8 on Human Resources and Capacity)

- basic awareness to identify protection concerns, be supportive and make appropriate referrals.

23.5.2 Service providers

Recruitment prevention, release and reintegration programmes rely on local institutions, organisations and individuals to provide the reintegration services required, including for economic strengthening. Conflict and post-conflict situations are often characterised by the absence or weakness of government structures, private sector partners and service providers. Their capacity development after a conflict therefore constitutes one of the most important aspects to sustain reintegration.[361]

To address this issue, an institutional mapping should be carried out to identify appropriate economic actors and service providers and their needs in term of capacity building. The needs identified may be considerable and addressing them is likely to be beyond the scope and expertise of the child protection programme. Depending on what other programmes are present in the context, child protection actors might choose to focus on:

- identifying, advocating for and collaborating with other actors to create an enabling environment for job creation

- identifying and supporting expert technical support to service providers, for example to train master craftsmen in entrepreneurship or occupational safety and health or to recruit and train counsellors from the Ministry of Education to provide career guidance

- providing operational support to service providers.

Institutional mapping

The aim of institutional mapping is to identify the government structures, private sector entities and service providers the programme can partner with in a given area, and to assess what support (if any) they need to enable them to provide services to the target group. The mapping should start as soon as possible as it can take several months to upgrade capacities.

TABLE 23.3 Institutional mapping

What services and resources are available?	Career guidance, basic literacy and numeric skills, core skills for employability, vocational skills training, cooperative training, entrepreneurship training, business development services, job placements, financial services
Which service providers, individuals or entities?	Service providers can be public or private, formal or informal, organisations or individuals. They include: · schools, vocational training centres – public and private · informal apprenticeships (eg, master craftspeople) · formal apprenticeships (eg, formal sector enterprises) · employment services (public and private), agricultural extension services (including veterinary services), health services · business development service providers (including mentors) · chambers of commerce · structures for commercialisation of agricultural products · cooperatives, collectives, self-help groups · banks, microfinance institutions, village banks, informal savings and credit structures, money traders, hawala, mobile money providers, remittances and money transfer companies · formal and informal social protection services (eg, insurance) Other relevant organisations include: workers' and employers' organisations, farmers' associations, youth organisations, disabled persons' organisations, other INGOs, village assemblies, etc.
What information is needed about services and resources?	· Profile: mission, field of action, geographic coverage, target groups · Current programmes: duration, cost and quality of training, availability of trained staff, whether a certificate is issued and if it's recognised by competent authorities · Access criteria, eg, age and education level · Capacity: how many people can they support? · Planned actions eg, to open a new course) · Capacity to support child reintegration
Collaboration and coordination	The information may have been collected already, eg, by other programmes aiming at supporting the population. If not, these programmes may be interested in collaborating to collect it and partner in service delivery. See key resources below for guidance on how to proceed.
Key resources	International Labour Organization "How-to" guide on economic reintegration,[362] module 2 on local economic and social environment assessment and coordination International Labour Organization guidelines for the socio-economic reintegration of ex-combatants[363] Women's Refugee Commission and CPC Learning Network: What do we know about economic strengthening for family reintegration of separated children?[364]

23.6 Linkages with broader recovery and development frameworks

> **"Measures to address the structural causes of child recruitment must tackle social exclusion and provide children and youth with education and socioeconomic alternatives. At the national level, measures to reintegrate children must be systematically included in broader recovery and development strategies. The economic dimensions of preventing the recruitment of children and reintegrating them into society need to figure prominently in the peace building, recovery and development agenda of international agencies and bilateral donors."**
>
> Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict[365]

Many reintegration programmes have failed due to their narrow focus and short-term approach. Reintegration, and in particular economic reintegration, should be conceptualised, designed, planned and implemented as part of, or in close cooperation with, the wider recovery and development frameworks.[366]

Close attention should be paid to supporting the transition of reintegration programmes into long-term development interventions, managed by national actors. Targeting children and families for relevant policies and programmes and accounting for their specific needs is part of the transition strategy and will contribute to ensuring its sustainability.

Reintegration programmes focus on enhancing the employability of children and families. They also contribute to creating new jobs by helping beneficiaries to set up businesses, but this alone will not be sufficient.

Reintegration programmes need to connect with programmes and initiatives that prepare communities to absorb young people and create jobs, such as through private sector development programmes and value chain development.

> **"The ILO Value Chain Development approach looks at market dynamics and relationships between the different actors in the chain with the objective of strengthening the whole market system – enterprises, business relationships, financial networks, supporting functions, rules and norms, and the business environment – in a way that ensures greater benefits for the poor from economic growth and development."[367]**

Community-based approach to economic support: a case study from Central African Republic[368]

In 2009, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in Central African Republic identified functional and active local agricultural cooperatives. They discussed the feasibility of including children formerly associated with armed forces and groups and other vulnerable adolescents in these cooperatives. Key members of the cooperatives and community leaders also received training in child protection, psychosocial support for children in distress and how they could best mentor and support conflict-affected children. The cooperatives agreed that in exchange for receiving technical

training, tools and seeds, they would give a certain portion of their harvest to the Child Protection Networks to support the most vulnerable children and families.

218 children and young people took part in this programme, of which 67 were children formerly associated with armed forces and groups, and many others had been affected by the conflict. The adolescents received technical training covering crop production and animal husbandry and had access to community-based literacy and numeracy classes. They also received tools, seeds or animals. In return, they agreed to give something (eg, seeds or animals) to the next group of vulnerable adolescents to take part in the programme. The objective of this was to foster a sense of community, responsibility and leadership. It gave adolescents an opportunity to contribute positively to the development of their communities.

Strengthening and supporting the existing cooperatives resulted in the programme having more buy in from the community. When IRC talked to the communities about this programme, they did not call it a 'reintegration project' but a project that aimed to support children most affected by the armed conflict. The project was received positively by the community and was seen to contribute towards many children and households by improving their livelihoods.
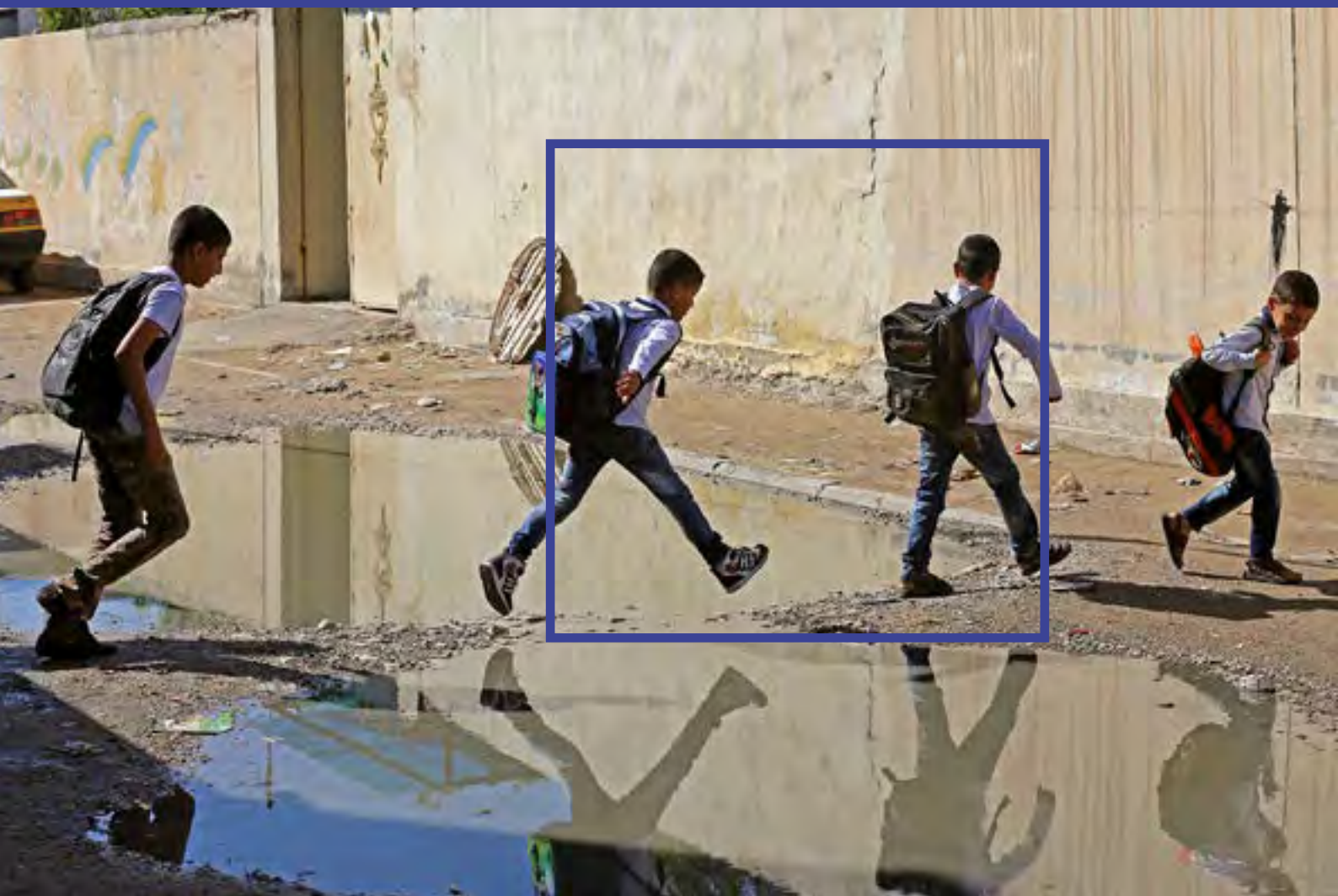
23.7 Key resources

- International Labour Organization, 'Economic reintegration of children formerly associated with armed forces and groups', 2010. **Link**

- International Labour Organization, '"How to" Guide for Economic Reintegration"' 2010. **Link**

Chapter 24
Education Support for Reintegration

©UNICEF/UNI200141/Khuzaie

Introduction

Education is part of the foundation of a successful childhood, and the inability to access education can be a key source of stress for children and their families.[369] Where children are unable to access education in situations of armed conflict, in addition to the negative impact on individual children, there is also a loss of social capital and society's ability to recover from the conflict is undermined.

Experience has shown that children whose schooling is interrupted by conflict are less likely to return to school the longer their period of absence. Where children are able to access education during conflict, it can be a protective, life-saving and life-sustaining intervention. Thus, efforts to provide all girls and boys with access to education must be made continuously throughout armed conflict, rather than waiting until it ends. International humanitarian law contains rules aimed at protecting educational infrastructure, personnel and services so that education can continue safely in situations of conflict.[370]

Access to safe education is an important factor in preventing recruitment, because schools both provide a protective environment for children and provide education to enable boys and girls to access a variety of economic opportunities and to better understand their social and physical environment so that they can make safe decisions.

Access to education can contribute to the effective reintegration of children formerly associated with armed forces and groups into their families, helping connect better within their communities and supporting better opportunities for their future.

In many situations of armed conflict or fragile peace, there are likely to be children who may not have been associated with armed forces or groups but who also missed significant periods of formal or informal education. As outlined in section 25.4 below, efforts to ensure access to education for formerly associated children should be included within broader efforts to invest in schools and communities, while advocating for schools to be inclusive of and accessible to the most vulnerable and marginalised children.

This chapter will highlight the benefits of education, explore key challenges to accessing education, as well as the different options for children to (re-)enter education, and provide guidance with good practice for supporting education reintegration. While the primary focus is on supporting education within reintegration, there is also recognition of the importance of education to prevent recruitment, as referenced in Chapter 11.

The Safe Schools Declaration

The Safe Schools Declaration is an inter-governmental political commitment to protect students, teachers, schools, and universities from the worst effects of armed conflict. It was developed through consultations with UN member states in a process led by Norway and Argentina, and opened for endorsement in May 2015.

The Declaration provides countries the opportunity to express political support for the protection of students, teachers, and schools during times of armed conflict; the importance of the continuation of education during armed conflict; and the implementation of the Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict. As of November 21, 2022, 116 states have endorsed the Declaration.

24.1 Why support education during conflict and post-conflict?

The benefits of education for children in conflict and post-conflict contexts, are many and interconnected. They include:

Personal benefits. Education can help children become critical thinkers, to be able to make informed decisions and to participate meaningfully and productively in society. It can help a child to learn dignity, respect and tolerance, and to reduce their likelihood of engaging in conflict. Structured, relevant, age-appropriate activities can help children to develop intellectual, emotional and social competencies, and reinforce a sense of investing in the future.

> **"I only feel better when I am studying or when my friends and I share ideas together. I usually say that studying is a source of encouragement. I know that if I am educated I will be successful and people will appreciate me."**
>
> A girl formerly associated with armed actors in Sierra Leone[371]

Psychological benefits. There is emerging consensus on the positive impact that education can have in mitigating the negative psychological impacts of conflict.[372] Participating in education following a period of association with armed forces or groups can be a "primary means of supporting resiliency and encouraging positive reintegration into society."[373] While education is not a panacea, it can complement other psychosocial and mental health support in some contexts, by offering children a safe and stable environment, increasing their sense of control over their environment,[374] and facilitating access to important peer support.

Economic benefits. Education can increase future life opportunities, which is key in helping prevention of recruitment as well as supporting reintegration following association with armed forces or groups. Education enables young people to enter the workforce with more to offer potential employers, including literacy, numeracy and social skills. Education can be provided in conjunction with training to access employment or self-employment, with each type of learning positively reinforcing the other. Educated children are more likely to earn a higher income and to use that income to generate wealth, employ others and support dependents. Girls who have accessed education and their children also fare better economically.

Prevention of recruitment. Education can help protect children from recruitment.[375] Children at risk of recruitment are often afforded some level of protection within educational settings; teachers can monitor their attendance and their attitudes towards armed forces and groups and take appropriate action if concerned. In some contexts, schools educate children about armed forces and groups to enable them to recognise attempts to recruit them or to understand the risks of association.

Supporting reintegration. Education can contribute to a child's reintegration into civilian life by allowing them to engage socially with their peers in the educational setting, which may increase community acceptance and reduce vulnerability to re-recruitment. Replacing a child's military identity with that of a civilian student can help ground them in civilian life. Teachers can also provide positive alternative role models to their former commanders.

Access to other services. Schools and temporary learning sites can be locations where children can access or be referred to other services, such as health and nutrition interventions and services such as basic assistive devices and rehabilitative physical therapy, mental health or psychosocial support, and referral for case management or services for gender-based violence.

24.2 Different options for participating in education

Table 24:1 below provides an overview of some different educational opportunities, along with advantages and disadvantages, which will vary according to the context. Children formerly associated with armed forces and groups often require a combination of educational opportunities.

TABLE 24.1 Some options for participating in education, with advantages and disadvantages

Direct return to formal education	Classroom-based education provided by trained teachers. · **Pros**: Known form of education that could lead to formally recognised credentials (usually for children who have missed less than six months of school). May allow the child to access the same education as his or her peers, in a setting acceptable to the community. · **Cons**: May have limited or no specialised support to help children who have been out of school for long periods to readjust. Children might have to join classes with younger students, which may pose challenges for their reintegration. They may miss out on peer activities and life skills appropriate to their level of development if these are not also available.[376]
A catch-up education programme	Short-term transitional programme to prepare children to resume formal education. · **Pros**: Special support can help child settle in as they transition to formal education. · **Cons**: May risk over-emphasis on preparing children for formal education instead of teaching them life skills.[377] May be used as a short-term substitute for returning to formal school education and thereby segregate returning children from their peers.
Accelerated education programme (AEP)	Flexible programme for children whose education was interrupted to receive age-appropriate education in an accelerated format. · **Pros:** Earning certified competencies that are equivalent to those in the formal system in a shorter timeframe (eg covering two school grades in one year); learning may be more tailored to children's specific needs. · **Cons**: Completing an AEP may not lead to formal accreditation. AEPs may struggle to identify or attract qualified teachers. Children may be separated from their peers so that they do not have the opportunity to develop social and peer relationships.
Basic literacy and numeracy classes	Teaching basic reading, writing, spelling or mathematical skills. · **Pros:** Efficient method for equipping children aiming to transition to employment or self-employment with a basic educational background. This is a cheaper form of support that can quickly be set up using trained community volunteers, unemployed teachers, or teachers after school hours. It may be possible to arrange with a head teacher to use classrooms after school hours for free or in return for materials that will benefit the whole school. · **Cons**: Learning content may be too limited for children requiring acquisition of a broader skill set. Because it is a cheaper and quicker alternative to more challenging transitions to other forms of education, it may become a preferred option irrespective of the children's wishes or best interests, and may result in formerly associated children receiving lower quality education.
Life skills training	Training that enables children to acquire the skills to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life, such as communication, problem solving, and peer relationship building. · **Pros:** Opportunity for formerly associated and other vulnerable children to catch up on key learning they may have missed. · **Cons:** Life skills are not a substitute for literacy and numeracy and are insufficient on their own for many children to meet their educational needs and aspirations.
Community-based education during ongoing conflict	Communities taking on educational responsibilities in situations where the government is unable or unwilling to fulfill this role. Single and multi-grade classrooms may be set up and managed by community members, perhaps in small groups in people's homes. Older children (15-17 years old) can organise classes for the younger ones, giving the older ones a sense of self-worth and an alternative to joining fighting forces, while younger ones gain basic literacy and numeracy skills. · **Pros:** Enables children to safely continue education during active armed conflict; complementary to other approaches and offers protection against recruitment. · **Cons**: Possible difficulties in obtaining formal accreditation.

For life skills training, see Chapter 22 on Mental Health and Psychosocial Reintegration Support. For vocational training and 'foundational training' for skills related to employment and self-employment, see Chapter 23 on Economic Strengthening for Reintegration.

24.3 Key challenges to accessing education

Formerly associated children can have difficulties accessing safe, appropriate and quality educational opportunities. The following are some of the most common challenges.

Availability of education: Children may be living in situations of insecurity or continued conflict where schools are struggling to function. School infrastructure may have been damaged during fighting or may be occupied by armed forces or armed groups, or by displaced populations. After schools are vacated, significant rehabilitation may be needed to make them safe and appropriate spaces for learning. Teachers and other school personnel may not be available; they may have fled, joined up with armed forces or armed groups, or the government may be unwilling or unable to continue to pay their salaries or otherwise support education provision.

Access to education: Schools may be unwilling or by law unable to accept children who have missed long periods of education, who lack identification documents or previous school records, or who wish to enrol during the middle of a school year. They may be particularly reluctant to accept children formerly associated with armed forces and groups, viewing them as potential 'troublemakers' who could disrupt classes and put other students and teachers at risk of harm. Teachers and school personnel may feel ill equipped to handle the additional needs these children may have, such as various disabilities, poor mental health, substance addiction or behavioural difficulties.

Schools as unsafe spaces: School buildings can themselves be unsafe spaces for children. Families may be particularly concerned about children's physical safety at school or while traveling to and from school, and therefore unwilling for them to attend. Armed actors may seek to influence teachers to endorse curriculum or pedagogical approaches in line with their ideology, or seek to recruit children from them (forcibly, through enticements or by persuasion).[378] Recruitment of children by armed groups from schools is reported to have taken place in Colombia, DRC, Mali, Myanmar, Nigeria, Pakistan, Somalia, Syria, Thailand and Yemen, amongst other places. Recruitment methods have ranged from selection through indoctrination programmes and incentives at school, to abduction en route, threats and abductions of groups of students at schools.[379]

The Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack found that from 2020-2021, 570 cases of military use of school facilities were reported, more than doubling compared to 2018-2019.[380] Schools have been used in many ways, including as barracks, "fighting positions, prisons or detention centres, interrogation or torture sites and places to store weapons."[381]

Recruitment of children from schools: some examples

"[My] first recruitment was by the class teacher."
Demobilised child soldier, Myanmar, 2014.[382]

"In Somalia, Al-Shabaab militants have systematically used schools as recruiting grounds. They have regularly visited schools and forcibly removed children from classrooms, often at gunpoint. They have lined up students, selected those they deem fit to serve as fighters and suicide bombers, and taken them back to their training camps."[383]

Stigmatisation: Children formerly associated with armed forces and groups may experience stigmatisation from other classmates and teachers. Girls are particularly affected by negative attitudes relating to their presumed sexual activity while associated with an armed force or group. Children with disabilities and those with significant mental health problems are also at particular risk of being ostracised.

Family and economic situation: Their families' social and economic situation may limit children's ability to pursue education. Household poverty may have pushed them towards becoming associated with armed actors in the first place. They may face pressure to work and contribute to the family's livelihood on the one hand, and the costs of school fees, uniforms and books on the other. Girls and boys may come under pressure to get married, and girls to take on full-time domestic roles and not attend school. Girls taking care of their own children may struggle to find childcare or may not be accepted in school.

Physical health conditions: Children may have pre-existing or recently acquired physical disabilities, including injuries from armed conflict and sexual and gender-based violence, which can make it difficult or impossible to navigate the route to school and the school compound, including while using toilet facilitates. Struggles with substance abuse, sexually transmitted diseases, and early pregnancy, may represent further challenges to be overcome to access education.

Mental health conditions: Children formerly associated with armed forces or groups may struggle to master appropriate behaviours and attitudes in the classroom, and may be disengaged or disruptive. They may feel demotivated, and struggle with short attention spans that make it difficult to sit still for long periods focused on a particular task.[385] They may experience overwhelming feelings of guilt, shame, injustice, anger or a desire for revenge. These types of behaviours are not conducive to learning and can affect their own and other students' learning considerably. Some may experience some level of post-traumatic stress disorder. Teachers often lack training in identifying, supporting and referring children in need of psychosocial and mental health support, or these services may be unavailable.

Relationship with teachers and other school children: The relationship between teachers, other school children and children formerly associated with armed forces and groups can be challenging. Teaches and children may feel afraid of or threatened by these children or not understand that their behaviour is a normal reaction to their experiences.

It may be hard for children to accept the authority of the teacher and abide by the social norms of the class. Furthermore, particularly for girls whose experiences of adult men may have been negative, perhaps involving sexual violence and exploitation, schools with few female staff members may feel unsafe.

24.4 Good practice for supporting education in conflict and post-conflict situations

This section highlights some agreed good practices when supporting education in conflict and post-conflict contexts, including for students formerly associated with armed forces and groups. However, what is appropriate in one context may not be in a different context.

24.4.1 Invest resources in strengthening schools as a whole
To promote successful reintegration, help prevent recruitment and re-recruitment, and support all conflict-affected children, all boys and girls should benefit from educational support.

- Support in the form of resources, equipment, refurbishment, teacher training, and support to school governance and management should be directed to established schools or alternative learning spaces.

- Any newly established learning spaces should meet minimum standards but not greatly exceed standards at local formal schools. School-based feeding can be an enabling intervention, but a detailed assessment is necessary to determine what arrangements are appropriate in different contexts.

- In some cases, it may be appropriate to provide support to individual children, such as waiving school fees, but care should be taken to avoid provoking resentment. Such support should not single out children formerly associated with armed forces and groups, but instead take a wider approach targeting the most vulnerable children generally, including those considered vulnerable to recruitment.

Efforts should be coordinated with key stakeholders and duty bearers within existing education systems. These might include: central and decentralised Ministry of Education offices, de facto administrative bodies in areas controlled by an armed group, village councils, clans, community-based organisations, faith-based organisations, NGOs, teachers and education personnel, and children themselves.

When small numbers of children are returning to numerous, widely dispersed communities it can be challenging to determine how to use limited resources. Training and awareness-raising for existing teachers and school principals must be a short-term priority and should cover:

- how to make schools and the journey to and from schools as safe and manageable as possible, for both boys and girls (see Box below).

- understanding the experiences and needs of, and reducing the stigmatisation of, children formerly associated with armed forces or groups

- techniques for teaching multiple grades in one classroom, for teaching 'over-aged' children, and for recognising distress in children and managing challenging behaviour without resort to violent discipline.

24.4.2 Increase school safety

In situations of ongoing conflict or instability, child protection actors should work with communities to explore context-appropriate ways to make schools safer. These measures can protect all children and decrease the likelihood of schools becoming sites of recruitment or abduction.

Save the Children's Safe Schools Common Approach[386]

Recognising the dangers to children's right to education and the protective nature of schools and education during conflict, Save the Children has developed and implements a programmatic approach to improving the protective environment of schools in conflict settings.

Working across child protection and education and based on the socio-ecological framework, the Safe Schools Common Approach is rights-based and encourages interaction between and across different levels of a child's environment, including families, schools, community members and authorities, as well as children themselves. The approach draws on internal and external evidence and experience from delivering a range of similar initiatives such as Schools as Zones of Peace, Violence-Free Schools and Comprehensive School Safety. It supports Save the Children's Quality Learning Framework, in particular supporting physical protection, psychosocial and emotional learning and school management foundations.

Working across child protection and education, the 'whole of school' approach focuses on four key areas:

- Authorities develop and strengthen policies and systems for school safety and protection, including endorsement and implementation of the Safe Schools Declaration.

- School safety management protects children in and around schools.

- School facilities are constructed and maintained to create an inclusive, safe and enabling learning.

- Teachers and children demonstrate self-protection knowledge, skills and behaviour.

A key part of the approach is the generation of evidence to demonstrate effectiveness, scalability and appropriateness for contextual adaptation. Save the Children implements the approach in 12 countries affected by conflict across Latin America, West and Central Africa, East Africa, the Middle East and Europe and Asia. It has also been adapted to non-conflict settings, making it appropriate across the humanitarian and development nexus.

Making schools safe

Establishing policies and procedures

- In consultation with children, parents and teachers, identify internal and external threats to accessing education and options for mitigating these.
- Ban all weapons from schools.
- Create a boundary around the school compound and control who enters and leaves without overly securitizing the premises.
- Set up a multi-purpose room which is safe to access and can work as a shelter in the event of an attack or armed activity in the vicinity of the school.
- Set up evacuation plans and protocols.
- Locate schools away from military zones or installations, and near to the heart of the community, if that is deemed a way to reduce risk in a given context.
- Organise children to travel in groups to and from schools, perhaps with adult supervision. This may be particularly relevant for younger children and for girls.
- Establish contingency plans for how to continue education if schools or alternative learning spaces cannot be safely accessed, eg, classes for small groups of children in people's homes.
- Establish clear criteria for when to close schools for safety reasons and what steps must be taken before re-opening (eg, making sure there is no unexploded ordnance).
- Consider steps to protect the identities of children formerly associated with armed forces and groups so that they are not targeted by armed actors, the authorities or other adults and children within the community.
- Consider establishing 'warden' systems where certain teachers are responsible for monitoring children in the neighbourhoods in which they live, to identify warning signs such as truancy or relationships with armed actors.
- Establish and implement a code of conduct and a child safeguarding policy, with a confidential complaints reporting mechanism, and inform children, teachers and parents how to access this. Particular attention should be paid to the risk of sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse, including the risk of female students being pressured by teachers to exchange sex for grades.[387] Employing female classroom assistants can also help to reduce this risk.[388]

Advocacy and coordination

- Establish agreements with local community representatives about conditions that must be in place for students to learn effectively and safely. Communities having greater engagement with and sense of responsibility and ownership over schools and alternative learning spaces may increase safety, particularly in contexts where armed groups are the dominant threat and schools may risk being seen as government structures.
- Collaborate with other child protection and education agencies (including through the humanitarian cluster system) to engage with the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Defence and other relevant ministries to support the endorsement and implementation of the Safe Schools Declaration.
- Organise early warning systems among the community, through which current security information can be rapidly shared, for example by text messages, to alert students and parents to dangers such as fighting coming closer or the presence of recruiters in town. This information may allow students to stay home, take safer routes, or move to a safer place.
- Coordinate with other stakeholders to identify those best placed to influence armed forces and groups (*see Chapter 15*), and advocate for them to:
  - not occupy schools
  - avoid targeting or shelling near schools
  - not recruit children.
- Remind armed actors that attacks against schools or hospitals, as well as recruitment and use of children by armed groups or forces, are considered grave violations of children's rights. Monitor the situation, contribute to monitoring reports under the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on Grave Violations against Children in Situations of Armed Conflict. See *Chapter 10* for more information on the MRM.

Working with school authorities and teachers

- Train teachers on the importance of monitoring attendance and reporting any unexpected absences, which may indicate abductions or other forms of recruitment.
- If safe and appropriate, train teachers to facilitate discussions on prevention of recruitment with children and parents, and to monitor children's attitudes towards armed forces and armed groups (first assess the risk this may involve for teachers).
- Make sure that schools have safe school or risk management plans which include training for teachers and pupils on safe evacuation procedures
- Seek to de-politicise school grounds, for instance through codes of conduct for teachers and pupils, aiming to ensure that political affiliations or views are kept out of school discussions.
- Provide teachers with knowledge of conflict-sensitive teaching methods, to help them mediate and de-escalate threats or polarising discussions that may arise within the school community.

Gender-based violence considerations

- Support provision of separate male and female toilets, and the presence of both male and female staff, to help reduce the risk of sexual exploitation and abuse. Toilets should include wash points and cubicles behind closed doors, especially for adolescent girls who are menstruating.

24.4.3 Increase participation of children, families, and communities

Promotion of participation of children, families, and communities in various aspects of school life is good practice in general; all children are likely to do better in school if their parents or caregivers are involved and supportive. In contexts where children formerly associated with armed forces and groups are reintegrating into school communities, involving children from all backgrounds, and their parents and communities can significantly reduce anxieties and address concerns. Useful activities could include the following:

- Hold 'back-to-school' campaigns, where it is safe to do so publicly, for all children who are out of school, to highlight the value of education and encourage parents to be involved in shaping that education.

- Establish parent-teacher councils to facilitate regular contributions on various aspects of school governance. Promote the participation of parents, teachers and education personnel of both sexes and from a wide range of backgrounds, including parents of children with disabilities.

- Establish children's groups that can contribute to the development and decision-making of the school. For example, children can speak about where they feel comfortable

studying, what time of day is best for classes, when they feel safe or unsafe, and make practical suggestions. Girls and children with disabilities should be as involved as boys.

- Communicate regularly with parents about their individual child's progress and challenges, using formats that they understand.

- Where appropriate, hold open days at schools and consider other opportunities in which families and community members can learn more about school activities and support them in a safe and appropriate manner (eg, teaching cultural or traditional stories and crafts.

- Hold sports days with other schools or learning centres, especially across communities of different backgrounds, including across host and refugee or internally displaced communities.

- Organise volunteer activities by the children in the community, such as assisting elderly community members, establishing community gardens. Involve children in deciding what problem in the community they want to address as well as the possible ways they can assist.

> **"The idea of going to school for the first time is something that's very exciting for the children. But it will also be challenging to make that shift from their life in the armed group to a schoolroom. When I met them they had a lot of questions about that and you could see that they were anxious, and a little nervous. But mostly there's a lot of excitement. The desire that they have to go to school is very intense and they have expectations. It's important that the children are informed and consulted throughout the process so that their expectations are realistic and become a source of strength as they move forward with their lives."**
>
> UNICEF child protection specialist, South Sudan[389]

Address inclusivity issues

It is important to consider who is and who is not attending school. Without exposing children to risk, collect information about girls and boys who are and are not attending. Consulting children themselves may be an effective way to find this information: often children will know best who is not in school and what can be done to help everyone access education. Reach out to absent children and their families to understand and try to overcome whatever is preventing the child attending school. Potential ways to increase inclusivity might include:

- Sensitising teachers and educational personnel so they *behave with sensitivity, respect and kindness* towards children formerly associated with armed forces and groups rather than with prejudice. Teachers should be encouraged to intervene if they observe bullying or stigmatisation by other students. Adults who were formerly associated with armed forces or groups who have successfully adapted to civilian life can be powerful role models or mentors for children.

- Advocating for children to return to school *at any time of the school year*. This may help children who are released from armed forces or groups or reunified with family members throughout the year, as well as other conflict-affected or displaced children who have been prevented from attending school.

- Advocating for schools to *facilitate access to children without documentation without delay*, and for the replacement of key documents to take place as soon as possible.

To **increase the attendance rate of girls**, involve parents in school life or locate schools or non-formal learning centres in the heart of the community so that people can know what is going on in school. It may be appropriate to explore childcare options for all girls with their own children, whether they were formerly associated with an armed force or group or not.

Children with disabilities should be included in educational activities alongside their peers. Supporting physical adaptations to the school environment to accommodate children with physical disabilities. Allow for a greater ratio of teachers to students if there are significant numbers of children with disabilities. Consider appointing 'champions' from the school staff and the student population to work together to identify and overcome particular challenges faced by students with disabilities. Collaborate with local community organisations, like local disability groups to address barriers to education faced by children with disabilities. Involve parents of children with disabilities in parent-teacher committees and seek their views and the views of their children to understand challenges and suggest potential solutions.

In order to make schools **a safer and more attractive environment for girls, children with disabilities, or children from minority or marginalised groups**, seek to employ teachers or classroom assistants with similar profiles or backgrounds and promote their participation and representation in school management committees.

Carry out school-based, and inter-school **peace-building activities**[390] to promote greater compassion and acceptance between children of different backgrounds.

Consider employing **school-based social workers** to support children who are facing particular challenges in accessing education.

Allow **flexible school shifts** to accommodate children who have work or childcare commitments.

Incentives for teachers

Teachers need to be fairly compensated, or they may become demotivated, the quality of their teaching may suffer or they may seek alternative work. However, payment of teacher incentives by humanitarian actors is often not advised, as this leads to inequalities across different geographic areas and is not sustainable.

Where teachers' salaries are not being paid, consider asking the community for voluntary or in-kind contributions. While this places a burden on the community, this is also more sustainable than meeting them from a temporary project budget, and allows the community to feel more invested in children's learning opportunities.

Curriculum adaptation

School governing bodies or community leaders running alternative learning spaces may consider it appropriate to make changes to the curriculum. Note that humanitarian actors may not be able to advise on certain aspects of curricula. Some areas may be deemed too sensitive in the context of ongoing conflict or fragile peace. Decisions must be made by the Ministry of Education, or the de facto administrative body. Conflict-sensitive curriculum reform requires a process that is gradual, participatory, and informed by the conflict analysis. However we suggest some ways in which humanitarian actors may be able to contribute to changing the curriculum so that it contributes to reintegration:

- Support the development of peace education that promotes constructive, non-violent and inclusive concepts. This can offer children an alternative to ideologies they may have been exposed to while associated with an armed force or group (see Chapter 14 on Child Participation in Peacebuilding Activities).

- Prioritise life-saving and life-enhancing information: messages to keep children safe, and help them feel a greater level of control or agency. Greater emphasis on more formal academic content can be added gradually. (see Life Skills section in Chapter 22 on Mental Health and Psychosocial Reintegration Support).

- Identify and use children's native languages or dialects to teach them. This may be particularly pertinent for refugee and internally displaced children. However, be aware that language can be linked to ethnic and tribal conflict or political power and can also be a source of discrimination.

- Address the issue of formal accreditation: seek national recognition of certificates for educational achievements. These are important to enable children to transition to further education, perhaps in different school systems or in different countries, or for employment or self-employment.

Support capacity building of teachers and administrators

> **"Far too often, educators struggle to overcome the challenges that they and their learners face, including their own emergency-related mental health and psychosocial problems. Training, supervision and support for these educators enable a clear understanding of their roles in promoting learners' well-being and help them to protect and foster the development of children, youth and adult learners throughout the emergency."**
>
> IASC Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support[391]

Teachers' importance in children's lives can significantly increase in conflict and post-conflict situations, during which they can play a key role in promoting children's safety and psychosocial well-being.[392] Teachers can form safe and supportive relationships with students, offering a sense of acceptance and belonging in the classroom. However, teachers will be coping with challenges of their own, and they need support to do this. The table below provides guidance on training and mentoring that can be offered to teachers and education personnel, depending on the context.

Classroom management skills	
Managing large mixed ability and mixed age classes	Teaching large classes with wide age ranges, and students with complex behavioural problems and learning needs, can be daunting and challenging. Train teachers in how to structure lessons to engage large mixed-ability classes with minimal resources, eg, by dividing lessons into several short activities to help sustain children's attention, facilitating parallel group activities, and offering children who are struggling additional support after school.[393]
Positive dispute resolution	Children formerly associated with armed forces and d groups may have a mistrust or fear of adults or feel that violence is expected of them or appropriate. They may display antisocial or disruptive behaviour. Teachers need skills to resolve potentially disruptive or violent outbursts, without resorting to corporal punishment. This might include praising and rewarding good behaviour, not over-emphasising disruptive behaviour, taking the time to listen to the child to understand the situation from their perspective, designating a quiet space that children can choose to go to for non-punitive safe 'time-out' if they are feeling overwhelmed or frustrated.
Flexible timetables	Schools can offer greater flexibility in the timetable, including running additional shifts, which may ease congestion and enable children to meet other commitments, as well as flexibility with exam schedules to give children time to prepare.[394]

Promoting teacher and student well-being	
Teacher well-being	It can be daunting to stand in front of a distressed and disruptive class or individual, or to receive threats. Teachers may be affected by the wider conflict and facing their own stresses outside school. Some teachers may have been threatened or attacked by children or adults associated with armed forces and armed groups. Some teachers may not be well trained or have finished their own education and some may be volunteers helping out during the crisis. Teachers are likely to need significant support, which might include: training and coaching with mentors, peer support groups, support from classroom assistants, and coordination with designated school counsellors. Teachers should be supported to understand the effects that stress can have on them and to identify positive coping skills and sources of support.
Student well-being	Teachers can be trained in psychosocial support concepts and strategies to support children including, for example, understanding the effects of conflict on children's well-being, using semi-structured and unstructured play for children to express themselves and release stress, teaching using a predictable structure, the use of child-friendly teaching methods, promoting children's sense of control and agency, and teaching life skills.
Addressing the needs of particularly vulnerable children	
Reducing stigma	Child protection actors can meet with teachers before children return to communities to discuss their fears and concerns. Help teachers to have greater understanding of and compassion for the difficult experiences that children are likely to have been through. Help teachers consider how they will welcome children back to school and how they will handle potential challenges. Highlight the key role that teachers and other education personnel can play in helping to set the tone, in both the school and the wider community, in terms of attitudes towards children. Train teachers in the skills they may need to support children with various disabilities.
Referrals for specialist support	Support teachers to identify particular needs that children may have and children with particular challenges, and to establish referral systems from schools to other services including health, psychosocial, protection and judicial support services.

24.5 Key Resources

- International Rescue Committee, 'Creating Healing Classrooms: Helping Children cope after crisis', 2011. **Link**

- Safe Schools Declaration, 2015. **Link**

- Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) website. **Link**

  - INEE Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies. **Link**
  - UNESCO/ International Institute for Educational Planning, 'Guidebook for planning education in emergencies and reconstruction', 2010. Chapter 25 – Former Child Soldiers. **Link**
  - INEE Conflict-sensitive Education Pack. **Link**
  - INEE Guidance Notes on Teaching and Learning. **Link**
  - INEE Pocket Guide to Supporting Learners with Disability, 2010. **Link**
  - INEE Peace Education Programme Toolkit, 2004–2008. **Link**

- The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action & Inter-Agency Network For Education in Emergencies, 'Roundtable report. A Framework for Collaboration Between Child Protection and Education in Humanitarian Contexts', Nairobi, Kenya, 15–16 October 2018. **Link**

- Global Education Cluster website. **Link**

- Global Partnership for Education, Resource Library. **Link**

- USAID Checklist For Conflict Sensitivity In Education Programs. **Link**

- USAID Literacy Education in Conflict and crisis Affected Contexts. **Link**

- UNESCO/International Institute for Educational Planning website. **Link**

- Save the Children, Safe Schools Common Programming Approach. **Link**

Endnotes SECTION 5

286 Claire Cody, 'Monitoring and Evaluation of Reintegration Toolkit', RISE Learning Network, 2016, p.12.

287 Michael Wessells, 'Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection'. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, USA, 2006, (hereafter, 'Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection'), p.182.

288 States must provide appropriate assistance for the reintegration of children involved in armed conflict: see in particular Convention on Rights of the Child Articles 39 and 40(1); and OPAC Article 6(3). See also UN Security Council Resolution 2427 (2018), which urges Member States to consider non-judicial measures that focus on rehabilitation and reintegration (OP 21) and encourages Member States to focus on long-term and sustainable reintegration and rehabilitation opportunities for children affected by armed conflict (OP 26).

289 Irma Specht, 'Jobs for Rebels and Soldiers', in Eugenia Date-Bah, ed. 'Jobs after War. A critical challenge in the peace and reconstruction puzzle', International Labour Organisation, Geneva, Switzerland, 2003, pp.73–110.

290 Joanna Wedge, Abby Krumholz & Lindsay Jones, 'Reaching for Home: Global learning on family reintegration in low and lower-middle income countries,' Interagency Group on Reintegration chaired by Family For Every Child, October 2013, (hereafter, Reaching for Home), p14.

291 Adapted from Inter-Agency Working Group on Unaccompanied and Separated Children, 'Field Handbook on Unaccompanied and Separated Children', July 2014, p9 of Verification and Reunification chapter.

292 'Reaching for Home', p.22.

293 Vera Chrobok & Andrew S. Akutu, 'Returning home – Children's perspectives on reintegration: A case study of children abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army in Teso, Eastern Uganda,' Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, London, UK, February 2008, p.18.

294 'Reaching for Home', p.23.

295 Theresa Betancourt et al., 'Past horrors, present struggles: The role of stigma in the association between war experiences and psychosocial adjustment among former child soldiers in Sierra Leone', *Social Science & Medicine* 70, 2010, (hereafter, 'Past horrors, present struggles'), p.24.

296 American Institutes for Research, 'ISSUE PAPER #1: Role of Education and the Demobilization of Child Soldiers,' American Institutes for Research, March 2007, p.6.

297 Stephanie Simmons Zuilkowski & Theresa S. Betancourt, 'School Persistence in the Wake of War: Wartime experiences, reintegration supports, and dropout in Sierra Leone', *Comparative Education Review*, 2014, (hereafter, 'School Persistence in the Wake of War'). p.461.

298 Save the Children, 'Assessment on Children Associated with Armed Forces and Groups in Northern Nigeria', 2017.

299 'Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection', p.208.

300 UNICEF, 'The Paris Principles: Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups', adopted February 2007. **Link** Principle 7.59, p.36.

301 International Alert & UNICEF, 'Bad Blood: Perceptions of children born of conflict-related sexual violence and women and girls associated with Boko Haram in northeast Nigeria, Research Summary', 2016.

302 Draws on personal communication with Save the Children child protection technical adviser, Central African Republic, September 2014.

303 *Ezra* was directed by Newton Aduaka and released in 2007.

304 Julie Guyot, 'Suffer the Children: The psychosocial rehabilitation of child soldiers as a function of peace-building', Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2007.

305 Interagency Learning Initiatives on Community-based Child Protection Mechanisms and Systems. Communiqué. Entebbe, Uganda. November 13–15, 2018.

306 Joanna MacVeigh, Sarah Maguire & Joanna Wedge, 'Stolen Futures: The reintegration of children affected by armed conflict,' Save the Children, London, UK, 2007. p8.

307 The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 'Child Protection Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Action', 2019, (hereafter, 'Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action'). Standard 11.

308 'Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection', p.184.

309 Search for Common Ground, 'Children Youth & Conflict. An introductory Toolkit for Engaging Children & Youth in Conflict Transformation.' Washington, USA, 2009, p.11.

310 Save the Children, 'Forgotten Casualties of War: Girls in armed conflict', Save the Children, London, UK, 2005, p.20.

311 Source: Discussion with Geneva Call, February 2019.

312 Source: UNICEF Myanmar, February 2019 & Save the Children, November 2021. 'Contextualised Guidance Note for practitioners working on prevention of and response to underage recruitment and use of children in Myanmar'..

313 Inter-Agency Working Group on Unaccompanied and Separated Children, 'Alternative Care in Emergencies Toolkit', 2010, p.127.

314 World Health Organization, **Link**

315 Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 'Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings', Geneva, Switzerland, 2007, (hereafter, 'Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings'), p.1.

316 Neil Boothby, 'What Happens When Child Soldiers Grow Up? The Mozambique Case Study'. *Intervention,* Vol. 4, No. 3, 2006, pp.244–259.

317 Child Soldiers international, 'What the girls say. Improving practices for the demobilization and reintegration of girls associated with armed forces and armed groups in Democratic Republic of Congo', 2017.

318 Ishmael Beah, 'The Making, and Unmaking, of a Child Soldier', *The New York Times*, January 2007. Accessed January 2019, **Link**

319 Theresa S. Betancourt, Stephanie Simmons, Ivelina Borisova, Stephanie E. Brewer, Uzo Iweala, & Marie de la Soudière, 'High Hopes, Grim Reality: Reintegration and the education of former child soldiers in Sierra Leone,' *Comparative Education Review*, Volume 52(4), 2009, (hereafter, 'High Hopes, Grim Reality').

320 'Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection', p.182.

321 Joanne Corbin, 'Returning home: resettlement of formerly abducted children in Northern Uganda'. *Disasters*, 32(2), 316–335, 2008; Jeannie Annan, Christopher Blattman, Khristopher Carlson & Dyan Mazurana, 'Making reintegration work for youth in northern Uganda, The survey of war affected youth', 2007; 'Past horrors, present struggles'.

322 Theresa Betancourt et al., 'Psychosocial adjustment and social reintegration of children associated with armed forces and armed groups: the state of the field and future directions,' Psychology Beyond Borders, 2009.

323 'Psychosocial adjustment and social reintegration of children associated with armed forces and armed groups'.

324 'ISSUE PAPER #1', p.7.

325 N. Boothby, J. Crawford & J. Halperin, 'Mozambique child soldier life outcome study: Lessons learned in rehabilitation and reintegration efforts,' *Global Public Health*, February 2006, (hereafter, 'Mozambique child soldier life outcome study'), p.102.

326 Exchange with Claire Cody, Senior Research Fellow, University of Bedford.

327 'Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings', pp.11–12.

328 'Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings', p.12.

329 The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 'Resource Package: Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in CAAFAG Programmes', UNICEF & The MHPSS Collaborative, 2022, **Link**

330 'Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings', p.1.

331 Michael Wessells, 'Psychosocial Well-Being and the Integration of War-Affected Children', in Ilse Derluyn, Cindy Mels, Stephan Parmentier & Wouter Vandenhole (eds), 'Re-Member: Rehabilitation, reintegration and reconciliation of war-affected children,' *Intersentia*, 2012, p.65.

332 'High Hopes, Grim Reality', p.579.

333 'Reaching for Home', p.19.

334 Save the Children, 'We are not too young to build peace. Children and youth as actors in peace building Global advocacy in New York 2012', 2013. p.9.

335 See also Save the Children, 'Life Skills for Success. Supporting people to succeed in work and life', 2018, and Save the Children, 'The Children's Resilience Programme: Psychosocial support in and out of schools' 2012.

336 Christine McCormick, 'Returning to Home and Community: A Study of Reintegration Practices Following Conflict, Institutional Care and Exploitation,' (unpublished) Save the Children, October 2011, p.57.

337 'Mozambique child soldier life outcome study', p99.

338 International Rescue Committee, 'Healing classrooms', online. Accessed January 2019.

339 Involving trained lay people may also build local capacity and help increase the level of skilled individuals who can be absorbed and supported by sustainable systems of care.

340 United Nations Inter-Agency Working Group on DDR, Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards (IDDRS), 'Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards (IDDRS)', (hereafter, 'Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards'.

341 See Karin Heissler & Catherine Porter, 'Know Your Place: Ethiopian Children's Contributions to the Household Economy', *European Journal of Development Research*, Vol. 25(4), 2013; and UNICEF, 'Measuring the determinants of childhood vulnerability', 2014.

342 Hawala is a traditional system of transferring money used in Arab countries and South Asia, whereby the money is paid to an agent who then instructs an associate in the relevant country or area to pay the final recipient.

343 'Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action', .

344 Beth Verhey, 'Going Home: Demobilising and reintegration child soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo,' Save the Children, 2003, (hereafter, 'Going Home'), p.64.

345 Refer to the concept of 'Decent work', that "sums up the aspirations of people in their working lives. It involves opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men". International Labour Organization, 'Decent work', online, Accessed February 2019.

346 'Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards'.

347 Josh Chaffin & Natalie Rhoads, 'Children and Economic Strengthening Programs: Maximizing Benefits & Minimizing Harm', CPC Learning Network, Livelihoods and Economic Strengthening Task Force, 2013, (hereafter, 'Children and Economic Strengthening Programs'), p.1. **Link**

348 International Youth Foundation, 'Implementing Life Skills for Employability', Field Notes 1(6), December 2006.

349 'Going Home'.

350 Women's Refugee Commission, 'Market Assessment Toolkit for Vocational Training Providers and Youth', Colombia School of international and Public Affairs, 2008, p.8.

351 Adolescent Girls Initiative, 'Can skills training programs increase employment for young women? The Case of Liberia', World Bank, October 2012, (hereafter, 'Can skills training programs increase employment for young women?), p1.

352 Sharon Morris, 'Wasteland: Why do so many efforts to stop young people from joining extremist groups fail?', *Foreign Policy*, 4 November 2014, online. Accessed January 2019. **Link**

353 'Children and Economic Strengthening Programs'.

354 'Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action' .

355 'Children and Economic Strengthening Programs'.

356 United Nations, 'World Youth Report 2005. Young people today, and in 2015' Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2005, p.141.

357 Christopher Blattman & Laura Ralston, 'Generating Employment in Poor and Fragile States: Evidence from Labor Market and Entrepreneurship Programs', 2015, p.1.

358 World Health Organization, 'INSPIRE Handbook. Action for implementing the seven strategies for ending violence against children', 2018.

359 Abhijit Banerjee, Esther Duflo, Nathanael Goldberg, Dean Karlan, Robert Osei, William Parienté, Jeremy Shapiro, Bram Thuysbaert & Christopher Udry, 'A multifaceted program causes lasting progress for the very poor: Evidence from six countries', *Science,* 15 May 2015, Vol. 348 no. 6236.

360 Jacobus de Hoop & Furio Rosati, 'Cash Transfers and Child Labor', Policy Research Working Paper, No. 6826. World Bank, Washington, DC, USA, 2014.

361 'Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards'.

362 International Labour Organization, 'Children formerly associated with armed forces and groups: "How-to" guide on economic reintegration', 12 November 2010.

363 International Labour Organization, 'Socio-economic Reintegration of Ex-combatants: Guidelines', 2010.

364 Women's Refugee Commission, CPC Learning Network, The Inter-Agency Group on Children's Reintegration, 'What do we know about economic strengthening for family reintegration of separated children?', 2014.

365 United Nations General Assembly, A/68/267 'Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Children – Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict', 5 August 2013, p.18.

366 'Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards'.

367 International Labour Organization, 'A Rough Guide to Value Chain Development', 5 May 2015. See also: United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), 'Pro-poor Value Chain Development: 25 guiding questions for designing and implementing agroindustry projects.' Vienna, Austria, 2011; Value chain for poor network website; M4P, 'Making Value Chains Work Better for the Poor. A Toolbook for Practitioners of Value Chain Analysis, DFID, December 2008; Oxfam, 'Food, Land & Water. Pro-Poor Value Chains'.

368 Source: interviews with staff from International Rescue Committee, Central African Republic.

369 'Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings'.

370 See for example Additional Protocol II, Article 4(3)(a); Fourth Geneva Convention, Articles 24, 50, 94, 108 and 142.

371 'High Hopes, Grim Reality', p.579.

372 Rebecca Winthrop & Jackie Kirk, 'Teacher Development and Student Wellbeing,' Healing Classrooms Initiative, International Rescue Committee, *Forced Migration Review*, 22 (19-21), 2005, (hereafter, 'Teacher Development and Student Wellbeing'), p.20.

373 'School Persistence in the Wake of War', p.457.

374 'Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings', p.148.

375 'High Hopes, Grim Reality', p.570.

376 Save the Children, 'Accelerated Learning Programmes in Conflict-Affected Fragile States: Policy Brief,' Save the Children, July 2010, p.1.

377 Sue Nicholson, 'Accelerated education as a response in complex emergencies and displacement: Guidance for starting and managing accelerated education programmes', 2013, (hereafter, 'Accelerated education as a response in complex emergencies and displacement'). Unpublished.

378 Kristin Barstard, 'Preventing Recruitment of Child Soldiers: The ICRC approach,' Oxford Journals, *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, vol. 27, no. 4, 4 December 2008, p.143.

379 Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, 'Education Under Attack 2022', (hereafter, 'Education Under Attack 2022').

380 'Education Under Attack 2022'.

381 Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, 'Education Under Attack 2014', (hereafter, 'Education Under Attack 2014').

382 Save the Children Myanmar, unpublished draft evaluation.

383 'Education Under Attack 2014', p.106.

384 Human Rights Watch, 'Maybe we Live and Maybe we Die: Recruitment and use of children by armed groups in Syria,' Human Rights Watch, USA, June 22, 2014, p.25.

385 'Accelerated education as a response in complex emergencies and displacement'.

386 Save the Children' Safe Schools Common Approach, 2019.

387 'Can skills training programs increase employment for young women?, p.1.

388 Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies, 'INEE Good Practice Guide: Inclusive education of children at risk – gender equality / education of girls and women', 2004, p.3.

389 Saudamini Siegrist, 'South Sudan children giving up their guns to go to school,' UNICEF blog, 27 January 2015. Accessed December 2018.

390 Save the Children, Safe Schools Common Approach, 2019.

391 'Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings', p.148.

392 'Teacher Development and Student Wellbeing'.

393 Rebecca Winthrop & Jackie Kirk, 'Creating Healing Classrooms: Guide for Teachers and Teacher Educators' International Rescue Committee, USA, 2006, p.8.

394 'Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings', p.150.

JUSTICE SYSTEMS IN RELATION TO RECRUITMENT AND USE

Chapter 25
Addressing Impunity for
Child Recruitment and Use

©UNICEF/UN0331746/Rose

Introduction

Because the recruitment and use of children during conflict is a grave violation of international law and the individual rights of the child involved, justice requires that society take action against individuals who commit such violations.

Under international law, the recruitment and use of children during conflict may be a war crime and can lead to prosecution of groups or individuals at the International Criminal Court.[395] This can include prosecution of state and non-state actors who have recruited children for use in combat or other roles, who have encouraged individuals within their command to do so, or who failed to prevent others from doing so.[396] Groups and individuals may also be accountable under national law for recruiting or using children in situations of armed conflict.

Accountability measures also require institutions that fail to prevent or actively allow violations to occur to be reformed.

At the individual level, a child may be entitled to remedies for the violation of his or her rights, including access to an effective judicial remedy for harm caused, reparations, and as a survivor, to receive feedback on outcomes of accountability of perpetrators.

> **"Children themselves are rarely afforded opportunities to seek redress for violations committed against them. They generally do not receive due reparations, do not have the opportunity to reconcile with their families and communities and do not witness adequate reform of the systems intended to protect them."[397]**

Children have a right to be heard in all judicial and administrative procedures concerning them, including the right to be heard personally, within accountability mechanisms. This is found in article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Children's participation should be fully informed, safe, survivor-centred and in the child's best interests. Child survivors should be consulted to determine the role they wish to play and in determining the preferred justice mechanism in defining remedies.

These actions have implications for child protection actors and the children they support. This chapter seeks to explain the concept of accountability in relation to child recruitment and use by armed forces or armed groups, and provides guidance to child protection actors about how they can help advance accountability or lay the groundwork for an accountability process, always keeping the best interest of the child as the guiding principle.

25.1 Accountability for child recruitment and use

The word accountability is often used to describe formal processes for holding individuals responsible for wrongdoing. These processes can include criminal prosecutions or civil proceedings conducted in court that can lead to prison sentences or monetary damage awards. These processes are primarily backward-looking measures and aim to establish that the accused has committed a violation under national or international law that deserves punishment, entitles the victim(s) to redress or both.

Holding perpetrators of child recruitment and use to account goes some way to addressing the harm caused by their actions to children, families and communities, and may help to deter future would-be recruiters of children.

In the context of child recruitment and use, accountability includes not only these attempts to assign individual responsibility, but also measures for evaluating institutions, laws and policies, for identifying where and how they have failed to prevent recruitment and use, for providing redress, and for reforming past practices and standards to prevent child recruitment and use in the future.

In practice there is still a long way to go to end the 'culture of impunity' for child recruitment and use. In the majority of contexts there is an 'accountability gap', and "more often than not, perpetrators of violations against children go unidentified and unpunished while potential future perpetrators are emboldened to continue recruiting, raping, abducting and otherwise violating children's rights."[398]

25.1.1 Approaches to accountability

There are various approaches ('accountability mechanisms') for pursuing accountability, both judicial and non-judicial. Some accountability mechanisms are specifically designed to address violations against children (eg, UN Action Plans) while others are intended to benefit children or conflict-affected populations more generally (eg, special tribunals such as the Special Court of Sierra Leone). Some mechanisms aim to help societies reveal and address the truth about the violations, the perpetrators, and what happened to children (eg, truth commissions) and may seek to address the physical, psychological, social, economic and other consequences to children who were recruited and used in situations of armed conflict.

Accountability for child recruitment and use is also sought within the context of 'transitional justice', which refers to the full range of judicial and non-judicial responses that seek to address the legacies of large-scale human rights abuses and international humanitarian law violations. "Transitional justice is not a 'special' kind of justice, but an approach to achieving justice in times of transition from conflict and/or state repression."[399]

All accountability mechanisms offer their own opportunities and challenges, and no one mechanism can address all the needs of conflict-affected children and communities. Pursuing a combination of several complementary mechanisms is usually the most appropriate approach.

Specific mechanisms have the potential to respond to particular needs that victims have and may resonate differently with local notions of justice. But all should ultimately feed into the larger end goal of accountability. For example, a non-judicial mechanism may be more victim-centered and more able to adapt to the local context, whereas a judicial mechanism may hold important symbolic value and act as a significant deterrent to future recruitment. Both can help reshape societal attitudes and behaviours to make them consistent with international norms, standards and laws against recruiting children into the armed forces and using them in hostilities.

25.1.2 The role of child protection actors in supporting accountability

A wide range of approaches and mechanisms have been used to advance accountability in various contexts. As a child protection actor, it is important to understand the different approaches, appreciate the risks and opportunities each brings, and understand what to do to ensure the best outcome for the children you are working with.

Child protection actors should support children to have all the information they need to determine whether they wish to participate in accountability mechanisms, including the risks and benefits of doing so, and if such participation is in their best interest. Where a child does wish to participate, child protection actors should use best practices and standards to support children and their families, including making psychosocial support available to children before, while, and after they participate.

Child protection actors should work with organisations and bodies responsible for accountability mechanisms and processes to make sure that appropriate safeguarding processes are in place and that the best interest of the child principle is adhered to.

Table 25:1 provides examples of judicial and non-judicial mechanisms for pursuing accountability for child recruitment and use, at national and international levels.[400]

Table 25.1 Accountability mechanisms

	National	International
Judicial	· Criminal prosecutions · Civil reparations awarded by the justice system · National-level child protection laws or frameworks · Implementation of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, or the Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions	· Action by the International Criminal Court (ICC), including criminal prosecutions and awarding reparations · Action by ad hoc tribunals and special court**s**

Non- judicial	· Truth commissions[401]
	· Locally-informed, or community-based justice mechanisms
	· Reparations awarded through non-judicial justice mechanisms
	· Institutional reform (of armed forces, police, justice system, child protection policies and frameworks, etc.)
		· The UN children and armed conflict agenda and the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism
		  – UN Security Council resolutions
		  – Mandate of the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Children and Armed Conflict
		· Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism
		  – Listing in the annexes of the UN Secretary-General's annual report on Children and Armed Conflict
		  – Action Plans
		  – UN Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict Toolkit, including referral to UN Security Council Sanctions Committees and the ICC
		· Action by other regional bodies (regional policies and standards, regional human rights courts)
		· Bilateral sanctions between governments
		· International/regional level truth commissions

25.2 National judicial mechanisms

The Charles Taylor case before the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL)[402]

"On 26 April 2012, the SCSL found former President of Liberia, Charles Taylor, guilty of aiding and abetting war crimes committed by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) during the 1991-2002 civil war in Sierra Leone. The Special Court sentenced Taylor to 50 years in prison and this sentence was upheld by the Appeal Chamber in September 2013.

The Court's judgment against Charles Taylor marks the first time that a former Head of State has been convicted of war crimes against children that were committed by an armed group found not to be under his direct command and control but to which he gave his practical assistance, encouragement and moral support."

States bear the primary responsibility for holding the perpetrators of child recruitment and use to account. National-level judicial systems and processes should therefore investigate cases of child recruitment and, where appropriate, prosecute and impose sentences on those responsible.

The opportunities to use national judicial mechanisms may vary based on national contexts.[403]

- They are often more similar to accountability mechanisms found in the societies in which violations have occurred than international judicial mechanisms.

- They can promote a sense of ownership by affected communities, a better understanding of the local context by all the parties involved, potential for processes to be sustainable without external support, and a greater sense of justice being achieved.

- They can send a strong message of deterrence to would-be perpetrators in the country that child recruitment will not be met with impunity.

25.2.1 National judicial mechanisms: Challenges

A major challenge regarding national judicial mechanisms for child recruitment and use is that it may not be possible to prosecute those implicated in child recruitment and use if they have been granted amnesties from prosecution.[404] For example, "In Sierra Leone, the 1999 Lomé Peace Agreement granted combatants amnesty for all crimes committed prior to the signing of the Agreement, including crimes against children. This eliminated hopes of achieving accountability through national level criminal prosecutions."[405] For this reason, the Paris Principles state "no amnesty for crimes under international law, including those committed against children, should be granted in any peace or cease-fire agreement."[406] The International Committee of the Red Cross has also stated that amnesties granted to persons who have participated in an armed conflict shall not extend to those suspected of having committed war crimes (such as some instances of recruitment and use of children).[407] However, to insist on no amnesties may have the consequence of driving perpetrators away from negotiations and prolonging conflict.[408]

Other challenges include:

- Judicial systems may be weak, disrupted or under-resourced and therefore unable either to manage large caseloads or to sustain the length of judicial procedures. This may lead them to a focus on prosecutions of lower-level perpetrators, which may be quicker to conduct, to give the impression of progress, while higher-level individuals are never held to account.

- They are often vulnerable to politicisation, especially if the government is or was a party to the conflict.

- They often have low technical capacity to investigate and prosecute crimes against children.

- Individuals may experience formal judicial processes as too remote, inaccessible or delayed.

- There may be geographical areas where the authority of the state remains contested or where the results of the judicial procedures may be challenged.

- They may deter commanders from engaging in formal release processes for fear of prosecution.

25.2.2 The role of child protection actors

- Where appropriate and safe, liaise with organisations and bodies mandated to gather information and testimonies to build the evidence base for eventual use in judicial processes. When doing so, the safety of all individuals involved shall be of paramount consideration and best practices to support survivors must be used.

- Advocate for, and support governments to:

  - Ratify and implement the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, including amending national legislation to ensure that child recruitment and use is criminalised.
  - Establish a legal framework for enforcing consequences that are commensurate with the seriousness of the crime of child recruitment and use and support the government with institutional reform.

) See also Chapter 12 on Prevention of Child Recruitment and through National Legal Frameworks and the Security Sector, and) Chapter 26 on Children Formerly Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups in Justice Systems.

25.3 International judicial mechanisms

Over time, the international community has worked to establish a system of international justice that can offer an alternative means of holding perpetrators to account when national judicial mechanisms are unable or unwilling to do so. These mechanisms include:

- The International Criminal Court (ICC)

- Ad hoc tribunals and special courts (including international, hybrid, and national courts, such as in Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Uganda's International Crimes Division)

- The European Court of Human Rights

- The Inter-American Court of Human Rights (relating to state rather than individual accountability)

- The African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights

International mechanisms have a different set of advantages from national ones:

- They tend to focus on higher-level perpetrators (those who held decision-making authority in military command structures) and therefore may address violations which affect a larger number of victims.

- They send a strong message that the international community will not tolerate a culture of impunity with regard to child recruitment and use. This may encourage commanders to release children and deter future would-be recruiters.

- They tend to have greater independence and ability to address crimes that are culturally taboo at the national level, such as sexual violence, if adequate support and protection for victims and witnesses are in place.

- Although still largely aspirational, they can deliver justice to victims by ordering reparations. For example, the ICC has a trust fund that can be used to provide reparations to victims if convicted perpetrators are unable to pay.

25.3.1 International justice mechanisms: Challenges

International mechanisms are far removed from local communities and therefore may not resonate as deeply or may not have the ability to reach some victims, witnesses or other stakeholders.

They often focus on a few high-level perpetrators, failing to disrupt the complex networks that often facilitate child recruitment, and are unable to manage large caseloads.

They tend to involve expensive and lengthy processes and in some instances are viewed by locals as externally driven or promoting non-national agendas. For example, from 2002 until mid 2021 the ICC only sentenced two people for the crime of child recruitment and use, Thomas Lubanga Dyilo for crimes committed in the DRC and Dominic Ongwen for crimes committed in Uganda. Two others were indicted of this charge, but not found guilty.[409]

They may deter commanders from engaging in formal release processes out of fear of prosecution.

25.3.2 The role of child protection actors

- Advocate for courts to develop and implement best practices on the involvement of children, such as the ICC Children's Policy.[410]

- Advocate for the recruitment of judges, prosecutors, defence counsel and victims' representatives with experience in child justice and crimes of sexual violence.[411]

- Advocate for violations perpetrated against children, including those involving child recruitment and use, to be included in indictments and arrest warrants.

25.4 National non-judicial mechanisms

Truth commissions and other justice mechanisms that are locally informed or community based can offer a non-judicial route to accountability for child recruitment and use. Such mechanisms can complement formal judicial processes. For example, high-profile perpetrators may be prosecuted at a national or international level, while community-based accountability mechanisms can promote a sense of justice and restitution between community members.

> **"Criminal prosecution of those accused of committing war crimes is a fundamental aspect of a victim's right to justice. However, in armed conflicts where serious violations of the laws of war have been committed on a massive scale, the notion of remedial or retributive justice for victims of war crimes often has to be balanced against the need of the territorial State to deal effectively and progressively with past atrocities and not to provoke or maintain further violence. In these circumstances a restorative justice approach incorporating limited amnesties, focusing on the normative rather than the punitive objectives of criminal law, may be the more appropriate model."[412]**

In some contexts, national human rights commissions and national ombudsmen may also offer non-judicial mechanisms for accountability.

25.4.1 What are truth commissions?

Truth commissions are official bodies established to investigate and report on incidents and patterns of human rights abuses as well as violations of international humanitarian law during a particular conflict or period of authoritarian rule.[413] They try to establish an accurate and impartial historical record.

They are temporary structures that are dissolved after they have served their specific purpose. Their period of operation can range between one and five years, but typically take around two years.[414] Each has a mandate specific to the particular human rights or international humanitarian law legacy under examination. The commission's mandate should empower it to account for the scale and scope of the violations and how children were affected and to recommend measures to address the consequences. Children have participated in truth commission processes, although care must be taken to ensure that their participation is safe, voluntary and in their best interests.

Truth commissions usually publish a final public report of their findings and conclusions at the close of their operations. These usually include recommendations to address the causes of violations, to take steps that may prevent their recurrence, and to provide redress to victims. Recommendations usually suggest a range of measures including actions to strengthen systems to protect children, the provision of comprehensive reparations for victims, and reforms to the security sector, including for preventing the recruitment of children into state forces and non-state armed groups.

The final report issued by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Sierra Leone, for instance, found it "most disturbing that children were the main victims in the following violations: drugging; forced recruitment; rape; and sexual assault". It also noted that "children were compelled to participate in the war as child soldiers and were forced to commit a range of atrocities."[415] It recommended that sections of Sierra Leone's Constitution should be amended to protect children from being used "directly in armed conflict" to prevent violations of rights in any future public emergency.[416]

25.4.2 What are locally-informed or community-based justice mechanisms?

The defining characteristic of locally-informed or community-based justice mechanisms is that they are defined and operated by local people and institutions, and often rooted in tradition and culture. They therefore vary widely. They may involve:

- oversight by community elders, religious leaders, local council members, child rights committees or child protection committees

- a chance for children and adults to speak out about injustices they suffered and/or to apologise for injustices that they perpetrated

- symbolic acts of reconciliation

- assigning acts of service or reparation to be carried out by those who have committed violations, such as: creating memorials for victims, identifying the locations of mass graves, helping victims with work on their land, repairing homes, fetching water, etc., working to repair or rebuild damaged school buildings, medical clinics etc., and payment of goods to victims.

25.4.3 National non-judicial mechanisms: Opportunities and challenges

National non-judicial mechanisms may be more appropriate for children, but they may also involve some risks that child protection actors should be aware of.

They offer a number of opportunities:

- There may be a greater feeling of local ownership and acceptance than for judicial mechanisms.

- They may be less intimidating for children than formal judicial mechanisms.

- They may be able to conclude more quickly.

- They may better address the everyday challenges in children's lives.

- Though not legally binding, these forums can offer a space to: establish facts, voice injustices, proclaim moral condemnations, allow perpetrators to acknowledge responsibility and express remorse, and help restore a sense of dignity for victims.[417]

- Where many people at a community level are implicated in child recruitment, national non-judicial mechanisms may offer a chance to achieve a sense of justice more rapidly, which can help large numbers of children to move on with their lives.

- Assigning responsibility to perpetrators does not necessarily require that they are present or demonstrate acceptance of their responsibility. Community elders' public condemnation can itself go a long way to supporting a sense of justice for victims.

- Community members can acknowledge the roles they played in contributing towards or failing to prevent child recruitment. These reflections can make an important contribution towards a process of healing and reconciliation, especially where children feel adults did not do enough to protect them, or that marginalisation of certain groups of children made them more vulnerable to recruitment. It may also provide a valuable opportunity to learn lessons to lead to behaviour change that prevents child recruitment in the future.[418]

They also pose a number of challenges:

- Drawing attention to children's involvement with armed forces and groups risks increasing stigmatisation or hostility towards them.[419]

- There is a risk of distress or psychosocial harm to children participating in the process, especially if appropriate services are not in place.

- If a truth commission's recommendations are not followed up, this can lead to frustration, disengagement and loss of trust between community members and other national-level stakeholders.[420]

- Locally-informed justice mechanisms are likely to lean on traditions and culture. In some contexts, this may risk perpetuating unjust or discriminatory beliefs and practices. Pre-existing prejudices, such as discrimination against women and girls, or ethnic, religious or socio-economic groups, may be reinforced.[421]

- There may be challenges to discussing and adequately addressing culturally taboo issues, such as sexual violence.

25.4.4 The role of child protection actors

1. Establishment of truth commissions

- Advocate for a framework through which children who participate will be viewed primarily as victims and witnesses. The purpose of their participation should be to establish truth. "It is important that the information and evidence given by a child is regarded as wholly confidential and not used for the purposes of other proceedings. Children need to know that they will not face prosecution because of the evidence they gave."[422]

- Advocate for a framework through which children's rights and best interests are protected according to international human rights and legal standards. For example, participation must be voluntary, age appropriate, and not a condition to accessing

services or support. The child him or herself should be consulted so that they can make an informed choice to participate.[423]

- Advocate that any truth commission processes are child friendly. For example: holding separate closed hearings for children, allowing a trusted adult to accompany the child through the process, allowing only female staff to be present when girls testify about sexual violence, requiring interviews to be conducted only by those trained in interviewing children[424] and producing a child-friendly version of the final report.[425]

2. Locally-informed and community-based justice

- Seek to understand local notions of justice and support locally-informed human rights-compliant justice processes that may already be taking place in communities.

- Educate communities on restorative justice principles, that "symbolically recognize the injustice and provide a means of redressing it"[426] rather than focusing on punitive approaches. Retributive justice principles, which focus on punishment, may put children at risk of significant harm, including beatings, detention, or even death.

Learning from the truth commission in Côte d'Ivoire[427]

A truth commission was established in Cote d'Ivoire following election-related violence in 2010 that resulted in over 3,000 people killed. The International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) and UNICEF combined their respective expertise to promote the safe and meaningful participation of children, including children who had participated in the violence. While the truth commission had not initially planned to include children, it was open to ICTJ and UNICEF's suggestion. Raising the issue of children's participation at the beginning of the process was seen as positive and constructive.

ICTJ developed a tailored questionnaire and accompanying guidelines for interviewing children. ICTJ and UNICEF then worked with the truth commission to develop a methodology for documenting child victims' and witnesses' statements. Techniques include asking open-ended questions rather than leading or yes/no questions and letting children tell their stories without interruption or redirection. Guidance was also provided on choosing a location for interviews, obtaining informed consent, carrying out pre-screening, and building rapport with children. The tools were reviewed and improved by international experts and local child protection actors.[428]

It was agreed that staff already working in child protection with various NGOs in different locations would be seconded to the truth commission to interview children. This would reduce the need for children to travel to an unfamiliar location to give statements and enable local child protection actors to provide continuity of support before, during and after the process.

Despite these positive efforts, the truth commission faced many challenges, including insufficient funding and significant delays. Only 4 of the 25 trained representatives were asked to conduct interviews, working alongside others who had not been trained. They were asked a year after they had been trained, and at short notice, which made it challenging to carry out refresher training. In addition, the truth commission's mandate did not include plans to make the findings public, let alone through a child-friendly version. This lack of public dissemination contributed to the view of the commission as a relatively weak mechanism to enable recognition of wrong-doing and promotion of reconciliation.

When the truth commission stalled, ICTJ and UNICEF supported a more informal accountability mechanism. They worked with pre-existing local children's and youth groups to support their engagement in the truth-seeking process. Young leaders gathered testimonies from their peers about the past conflict and enduring obstacles to peace, to produce a four-part audio report. Excited to be given a platform to air their perspective, the youth leaders organised to form a new association, the Justice and Peace Action Network.

Key learning points: It is crucial to ask whether a particular truth commission can adequately and safely facilitate children's participation. Are the structure, capacity, legitimacy and political will in place to include children effectively? If not, facilitating children's participation may lead to significant frustration and alternative options may offer a better chance of advancing meaningful engagement of children and youth in accountability mechanisms. Even where a truth commission is relatively effective, alternative mechanisms may complement its achievements.

25.5 International non-judicial mechanisms

There are international non-judicial mechanisms designed to achieve a certain level of accountability for violations committed against children in armed conflict, including recruitment and use. Child protection practitioners can engage with these mechanisms in a variety of ways, depending on their mandate and scope of work.

United Nations mechanisms under the Children and Armed Conflict Agenda include:

- The United Nations Human Rights Treaty System, and the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions (see Chapter 3 on Legal and Normative framework),

- The Third Optional Protocol to the CRC on a Communications Procedure[429] (OP3 CRC) – This sets out a complaints procedure whereby children from States that have ratified the CRC can bring complaints about violations of their rights directly to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child if they have not found a solution at the national level. OP3 CRC also sets out an inquiry procedure for grave and systematic violations of child rights (in Article 13).

- The UN Security Council Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism and Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict (see, Chapter 10 on Monitoring Child Recruitment and Use)

- The mandate of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict

- The UN Security Council's use of sanctions

TABLE 25.2 United Nations Security Council and the Children and Armed Conflict Agenda

Mandate of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict[430]	· Resolution A/RES/51/77 of 1997 created the mandate of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict. · The Special Representative serves as a moral voice to raise awareness about the situation of children affected by armed conflict and encourage international cooperation to strengthen their protection. · The Special Representative reports yearly to the General Assembly and Human Rights Council and raises key issues with the Security Council and individual governments. · The Special Representative promotes the collection of information about the impact of war on children and the monitoring and reporting of grave violations of child rights, and takes the lead in the preparation and submission of the quarterly Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism Global Horizontal Notes, country reports on children and armed conflict, and the Secretary-General's Annual Report on CAAC. 〉 See Chapter 10 on Monitoring Child Recruitment and Use.
UN Security Council use of sanctions	The Security Council has committed to considering taking targeted measures against members of armed forces or armed groups, such as travel bans or freezing of assets, if they: · refuse to enter into a dialogue with the Country Task Force · fail to develop an action plan · fail to meet the commitments agreed in the action plan, including halting the recruitment and use of children.[431]

Other non-judicial international mechanisms include:

• Action by other regional systems, such as the African Commission on Human and People's Rights, the African Commission on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, the Arab Human Rights Committee and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights

• Bilateral sanctions between governments

• International or regional-level truth commissions

• International commissions of inquiry and other investigative panels

• International fact-finding missions

• Action plans and other joint commitments between the UN and parties to conflict.

25.5.1 International non-judicial mechanisms: Opportunities and challenges
International non-judicial mechanisms offer a number of opportunities:

• Many mechanisms already exist, so the initial investment has already been made.

• Some mechanisms are specifically designed to consider violations against children in situations of armed conflict, including child recruitment and use.

• The political nature of some mechanisms can be an asset in bringing about tangible outcomes.

• The existence of these mechanisms can be a deterrent to would-be child recruiters.

• UN action plans and other joint commitments offer an important structure to engage with parties to conflict documented to have recruited and used children to change their policies and practices.

〉 See also Chapter 15 on Engaging with Armed Forces and Armed Groups

They also pose a number of challenges:

- Engaging with mechanisms of a more political nature may pose risks of losing humanitarian access or endangering staff or community members.

- Mechanisms may be perceived as externally driven, promoting non-national agendas.

- Public accountability mechanisms may have negative consequences such as armed actors disengaging from dialogue.

- UN action plans create expectations for support of release and reintegration efforts that must be aligned to and supported by adequate long-term funding.

- Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism action plans may face, challenges to implementation.

- Sanctions schemes may be undermined by governments that have other interests and waive bilateral sanctions against state forces involved in child recruitment and use.

25.5.2 The role of child protection actors

- Support activities relating to the monitoring, documenting and reporting of grave child rights violations, including coordinating with Country Task Forces for monitoring and reporting where these are established.

- Undertake advocacy activities related to accountability, such as lobbying governments and/or UN representatives to identify and use the appropriate non-judicial mechanisms to hold perpetrators to account.

- Advocate for the ratification of the Third Optional Protocol to the CRC, which allows individual complaints to be brought against State parties for alleged violations of children's rights.[432]

- If appropriate, safe and in children's best interests, and for States that have ratified the Third Optional Protocol,[433] support individuals to submit complaints to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, in accordance with the procedure set out.[434]

25.6 Reparations[435]

As victims of human rights and international humanitarian law violations, children formerly associated with armed forces and groups may be eligible for reparations to address the harms they suffered. These harms may affect all aspects of their lives and have discernible consequences for their future. In many cases, children associated with armed forces and groups may not know whether they qualify for reparations and if they do, may be reluctant to claim them due to resentment and stigmatisation they may face in their community.

Child protection actors have a crucial role in helping children associated with armed forces or groups to understand their rights and access the support and reparations to which they are entitled. Since child protection actors are often the first point of contact with children who leave an armed group or are released, they are in a good position to communicate information about reparations programmes to children, and to relay key information to individuals and entities in charge of the programmes. Child protection actors can raise awareness of the needs of formerly associated children and advocate for specific reparations measures to address those needs. However, they should not promise or elevate expectations for reparations that they are not absolutely sure will be delivered.

25.6.1 What are reparations?

Reparations may be ordered by courts or created by legislation (usually called 'administrative reparations'). They may exist in post-conflict societies or in societies transitioning from authoritarian rule, either exclusively or in tandem with prosecutorial initiatives. They may be encompassed within the mandate of a truth commission or may arise through the efforts of civil society organisations or government policy-makers.

Article 39 of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child provides a legal right for children to obtain reparations. In 2005, the UN General Assembly adopted a Resolution on Basic Principles on Remedy and Reparations or Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law,[436] which covers all human rights violations, including those related to children. Finally, it is a rule of customary international humanitarian law that a State responsible for violations of international humanitarian law is required to make full reparation for the loss or injury caused.[437]

Reparations take many forms. They can be made to individuals or dispensed collectively.[438] Although many people associate reparations with cash payments, they need not take that form. Reparations can include, for example: cash payments to individuals, pensions, public apologies, restoration of employment, free or subsidised access to education, verification of facts, and the provision of medical, psychological, social or other services.

The form of reparation varies according to the circumstances and the victim's needs. Children formerly associated with armed groups, for instance, may suffer from on-going health or mental health concerns or disabilities due to physical injuries or exposure to severe or repeated violence, exploitation or abuse. Some may have children of their own, often as a result of rape and forced pregnancies.[439] They will need additional support and may be entitled to specific reparations measures.

No matter the type, at the most essential level, reparations are intended as a means of bringing justice to victims. In principle, "reparations are intended to acknowledge the suffering and harm to victims and provide compensation, restitution, and redress for violations, with the aim of returning victims to their previous condition to the maximum extent possible".[440] In reality, however, reparations programmes for children, or the inclusion of children in reparations programmes, are rare.

Table 25:3 provides examples of reparations that may address some of the harms faced by victims of recruitment and use.

Table 25.3 Examples of reparations

Type of reparation	Description
Official public apology	A public apology could be made by a party to the conflict, preferably someone in a leadership position or the individual who exercised command responsibility. Optimally, the apology would acknowledge the violation and express regret for the harms caused, and a commitment that it will not be repeated.
Policy of national armed forces that prohibits violations	Systems can be reformed to ensure effective civilian control of military and security forces. Legislation, policy, and procedures can be adopted and implemented that acknowledge violations and prevent recurrence.
Provision of medical care to children who suffered physical injury due to armed conflict	Free healthcare services may be made available within existing medical facilities, for instance, through a healthcare access card or a system of vouchers for particular medical procedures.
Psychosocial support	Children who were associated with armed groups may suffer from anxiety, depression, distress and other psychological disorders. Confidential and free psychological services could be offered within hospitals or on a more informal basis at the community level. These services should also be made available to victims' family. 〉 See Chapter 22 on Mental Health and Psychosocial Reintegration Support
Education	Given that many former child soldiers will have missed out on years of education, the government could offer educational equivalency and adult literacy programmes. 〉 See Chapter 24 on Education Support for Reintegration

25.6.2 Reparations: Opportunities and challenges

Reparations offer a number of opportunities for children who have been associated with armed forces or armed groups:

- Reparations can have a positive impact, offering symbolic restitution and practical compensation.

- Reparations can provide concrete support to individual victims' needs.

- Non-judicial reparations can "provide social justice in post-conflict societies where access to justice and seeking redress through the courts is not possible".[441]

They also pose a number of challenges:

- Adequate compensation for significant loss of life opportunities such as schooling, social status and family life may be difficult to quantify and restore.

- Children may not have "the information, resources or access to legal counsel and courts to have their views heard and to assert their reparations claims".[442]

- Reparations may have a negative impact on children's relationships with the wider community by appearing to 'reward' children for their time with an armed force or armed group, provoking resentment or incentivising child association.

25.6.3 The role of child protection actors

- Advocate for the inclusion of specific provisions for reparations for children, both individually and collectively, in international and national judicial mechanisms (eg, ICC Trust Fund for Victims), peace agreements and national legislation.

- Provide technical support to develop contextually appropriate and non-stigmatising frameworks for reparations to be made.

25.7 Key resources

- International Criminal Court. The Office of the Prosecutor, 'Policy on Children', November 2016. **Link**

- Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, 'Resource Pack on NGO engagement in the MRM', published in 2014, updated in 2015, available in English, Arabic, French and Spanish. **Link**

- United Nations Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, Working Paper N°1 'The Six Grave Violations Against Children During Armed Conflict: The Legal Foundation', October 2009 (updated November 2013). **Link**

- United Nations Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, Working Paper No. 3, 'Children and Justice During the Aftermath of Armed Conflict,' UNICEF, September 2011. **Link**

- United Nations General Assembly A/Res/60/147, 21, 'Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law', March 2006. **Link**

- United Nations, 'Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on a communications procedure', A/RES/66/138, 19 December 2011, entered into force on 14 April 2014'. **Link**

- Committee on the Rights of the Child, 'Model form for submission of individual

communications to the committee on the rights of the child under the optional protocol to the convention on the rights of the child on a communications procedure', October 2015. **Link**

- Committee on the Rights of the Child, 'Working methods to deal with individual communications received under the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on a communications procedure', October 2015. **Link**

- Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission. 'Witness to Truth: Final Report of the Sierra Leone TRC', 2005. **Link**

- Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, 'UN Security Council Resolution 1612 and Beyond: Strengthening Protection for Children in Armed Conflict ', Policy Paper, 2009. **Link**

From International Committee of the Red Cross

- International Committee of the Red Cross, 'International Humanitarian Law Database. Customary IHL, Rule 153. Command Responsibility for Failure to Prevent, Repress or Report War Crimes'. **Link**

- International Committee of the Red Cross, 'International Humanitarian Law Database. Customary IHL, Rule 150. Reparation'. **Link**

- International Committee of the Red Cross, 'Commentary on the First Geneva Convention, 2nd edition, 2016, paragraph 2845'. **Link**

- International Committee of the Red Cross Advisory Service on international Humanitarian Law, 'Amnesties and International Humanitarian Law: Purpose and Scope', October 2017. **Link**

From International Center for Transitional Justice

- International Center for Transitional Justice, 'What is Transitional Justice?' Factsheet, 2009. **Link**

- Cécile Aptel & Virginie Ladish, 'Through a New Lens: A Child-Sensitive Approach to Transitional Justice' International Center for Transitional Justice, August 2011. **Link**

- Clara Ramirez-Barat, 'Engaging Children and Youth in Transitional Justice Processes: Guidance for Outreach Programs, International Center for Transitional Justice, 2012. **Link**

- UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre & International Center for Transitional Justice, 'Children and Truth Commissions', 2010. **Link**

- Valerie Waters, 'Listening to Young Voices: A Guide to Interviewing Children and Young People in Truth Seeking and Documentation Efforts', International Center for Transitional Justice, January 2018. **Link**

From Conflict Dynamics International

- Julia Freedson, 'Bridging the Accountability Gap: New approaches to addressing violations against children in armed conflict,' Conflict Dynamics International, June 2011. **Link**

- Julia Freedson, Yvonne Kemper and Simar Singh, 'Children in Armed Conflict Accountability Framework. A Framework for Advancing Accountability for Serious Violations against Children in Armed Conflict', Conflict Dynamics International, June 2015. **Link**

Chapter 26
Children Formerly Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups in Justice Systems

©UNICEF/UN0309055/Kokic

"In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration."

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 3 (1)

Introduction

A justice system typically includes criminal and civil justice systems. It can also include informal systems which have a "range of traditional, customary, religious and informal mechanisms that deal with disputes at community levels."[443] All justice systems, including the courts, police and correctional or rehabilitation services, should have special policies, practices and facilities for children and appropriately trained staff to support them through judicial processes and make sure such processes are child focused.

In conflict and post-conflict contexts, children are more likely to come into contact with the justice system than in times of peace, whether as alleged offenders or as victims or witnesses. Children may also need to seek justice as claimants, for example, to seek redress for crimes committed against them, or to deal with important civil matters such as obtaining identification documents, interim care arrangements, or repatriation to a country of origin.

Involvement in justice systems can be difficult for children and young people who have been associated with State armed forces and non-State groups, which may expose them to various risks:

- They may be at risk of biased or discriminatory treatment by the justice system due to their perceived association with an armed force or armed group.

- They may be detained in conditions that fail to meet the minimum legal standards for the administration of juvenile justice and may be at risk of being tortured or subjected to other ill-treatment or coercion when interrogated; for example, to extract military intelligence while in detention.

- They may experience mistreatment by national militaries, police, or peacekeeping operations, and find the justice system unable to protect their rights.

- Whether they are victims, witnesses or alleged offenders, public court appearances may put them at risk of stigmatisation or violent repercussions.

Justice systems must be able to respond competently to all children who come into contact with them, including children associated with armed forces and groups. Child protection actors should support governments, relevant line ministries, children and their families so that children are better served and protected by justice systems and that duty bearers apply international norms and standards applicable to children within justice systems.

>) See Chapter 3 on The Legal and Normative Framework.

All children in contact with the law have basic rights, protections and guarantees, including when they are deprived of their liberty. The principle of the best interest of the child should guide all actions concerning children by both public and private actors and in legislative, judicial and administrative decisions. These standards cannot be lowered even if there are criminal allegations against or administrative decisions affecting the child.[444]

This chapter explores situations in which children associated with armed forces and groups are in contact with the justice system and provides guidance on how child protection practitioners can support them.

26.1 Children as victims and witnesses in judicial processes[445]

Children have rights, including the right to be treated with dignity and compassion, the right to safety, the right to privacy, the right to express their views based on age and level of maturity.[446] Involvement in a state justice system as a victim or a witness may represent an opportunity to achieve justice for children. In some cases, children's testimony may be essential for holding perpetrators to account for recruitment and use of children in armed conflict or other grave violations against children and other civilians.

However, contact with the justice sector often brings so many challenges that children and their families may be deterred, or discouraged or prohibited by others, from seeking justice through the judicial system. They may actively avoid appearing as a witness. Some children may face the risk of violent reprisals by members of an armed force or group, discrimination and exclusion by those in positions of power, or significant negative impact on their mental health and well-being if they proceed. The process may also require children to travel significant distances, which can be expensive, daunting and unsettling.

- The child's best interests must be considered when determining if a child should participate as a victim or a witness in state-run judicial processes. Processes to determine the child's best interests must consider the child's views, possible outcomes of the process, and harm or benefit to the child, among other things.

- Consistent with the child's right to privacy, the justice system should provide guarantees against sharing information on trials, information that identifies individual children, information on the specific offences about which children testified, or information pertaining to a child's specific involvement with a group.[447]

As with all programming, careful situation analysis and risk assessments are essential. Key specific considerations for child participation in judicial proceedings may include the following; this list is not exhaustive:

- Will the principles of the best interests of the child, safeguarding, non-discrimination and dignity be respected throughout the judicial proceedings?

- Are conditions in place to make sure that the child will be able to express their views, taking into account their age, gender, maturity, evolving capacities and any disability?

- What are the risks to the child's health or physical safety, including threats of reprisals and risks of re-traumatisation or stigmatisation, if they participate?

- Are any protective/safeguarding (eg, confidentiality) and support measures (eg,. legal aid and assistance, free interpreters, specialist court and justice personnel trained in working with children and ensuring their best interest) available?

- Can the child be considered competent as a witness?

- Is the child's testimony necessary to ensure accountability for crimes committed?

- Is there a satisfactory balance between the primary consideration of the child's best interest and the right of the accused to a fair trial?

⟩ See also Chapter 5 on Situation Analysis and ⟩ Chapter 6 on Risk Assessments, Security Planning and Risk-Informed Programming.

> **"All feasible measures should be taken to protect the rights of child witnesses and victims who may be called upon to provide evidence of any sort against or on behalf of alleged perpetrators of crimes against them or others."**
>
> Paris Principle 8.4

26.1.1 The role of child protection actors in helping to make judicial systems better for child victims and witnesses

• Encourage national courts to permit the use of video recorded interviews in place of a child giving direct evidence at the trial.

• Establish processes for interviews to be recorded and, wherever possible, filmed, and processes for keeping such recordings secure.

• Coordinate planned interviews to avoid children being required to repeat their testimony several times.

• Train judges, prosecutors, lawyers, court officers and lay members of the court in children's rights and child-friendly and gender-sensitive interview techniques.

• Encourage national courts to set up victim and witness units. These should first and foremost guarantee the child's physical and psychological protection in the short and long term, including through using methods that protect the child's identity and support the child before, during and after the judicial process.

• Provide staff of victim and witness units with adequate training enabling them to implement the United Nations Guidelines on Justice in Matters involving Child Victims and Witnesses (ECOSOC Resolution 2005/20).

• Provide child victims and witnesses with accompaniment throughout process by a trained and trusted support person responsible for conveying all relevant information to the child before, during and after judicial processes and for seeking redetermination of the child's best interests when necessary.

Child protection actors may also assist formerly associated children in accessing appropriate judicial or non-judicial accountability mechanisms

⟩ See Chapter 25 on Addressing Impunity for Child Recruitment and Use.

26.1.2 Children as witnesses[448]

Children's testimonies may play a pivotal role in the prosecution of perpetrators of child recruitment and use. They may feel motivated to testify to contribute towards justice for their family or community. They should be supported when making such decisions and encouraged to think through the possible implications. Crucially, if their anonymity cannot be guaranteed, they or their families may face violent reprisals or debilitating discrimination, especially in contexts where the levers of power remain in the hands of the original actors. Engaging in the process may also be a long arduous experience.

A critical concern for child witnesses who have been associated with armed forces and armed groups is that children may incriminate themselves in the course of their testimony. Children may be granted a specific amnesty if appearing as witnesses in one forum, such as a special court or tribunal, but this may not protect them from being prosecuted in another court, such as the national judicial system. Access to a legal representative who can advise them and protect their rights in this regard is therefore essential.

If children are being interviewed as witnesses, child protection and justice for children international standards and principles and applicable national legislation must be respected.[449]

26.1.3 Children as claimants for rights violations

Children have the right to just and timely remedy for violations of their rights.[451] The State has primary responsibility for providing access to justice for children who have suffered harm and damage as a result of violations of their rights (including grave violations)[452] or of international humanitarian law.[453]

Justice for child victims can be sought through different avenues: through formal judicial processes, where the prosecution of perpetrators is sought; or through informal justice mechanisms which deal with disputes at community levels. See also Chapter 25 on Addressing Impunity for Child Recruitment and Use.

Children seeking justice in conflict and post-conflict contexts often face challenges. The national judicial system may be very weak or non-functioning, while informal and traditional systems of justice may not have the capacity to adequately protect and respect children's rights.

Children should be supported to consider which route is likely to bring the most satisfactory outcome for them, taking into consideration the risks and challenges mentioned above. Things to consider include:

- the remedy or remedies (including reparation where applicable) that are available in a particular forum, the extent to which it enforces or restores a child's rights, and the ability for that remedy to be enforced

- the extent to which the child can participate and feel that their voice has been heard

- the extent to which the crimes against the child will be recognised and acknowledged

- whether prosecution of perpetrators is both possible and in the child's best interests

- the likely deterrent effect of the remedy on future violations.

26.2 Children as alleged offenders

A central question when considering the issue of children as alleged offenders is: Can and should children be held criminally responsible for their association with armed forces and groups or for acts that they may have committed while associated?

To answer this question, it is helpful to differentiate legal from social responsibility. Social responsibility is best understood as responsibility to other individuals and society at large. It is not backed by legal provisions.

The Paris Principles and UN Security Council Resolution 2427 emphasise that children associated with armed forces and groups should be regarded and treated primarily as victims, and urge states to favour reintegration and restorative justice over any punitive measures.[454] The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the Optional Protocol on Children and Armed Conflict and the UN Security Council[455] similarly stress that states should emphasise supporting children's physical and psychological recovery and assisting them with their social reintegration.[456] Moreover, international standards and principles on child protection and justice for children and applicable national legislation must be respected.[457] This includes provisions for minimum age of criminal responsibility.

Taking into account the norms of the underlying binding legal framework, especially from international humanitarian law, the Paris Principles state that children who have been associated with armed forces or armed groups should not be prosecuted, punished, or threatened with prosecution or punishment, solely on account of their membership in the armed force or armed group or for acts that would not be criminal if they were not committed while the child was associated with an armed force or group. For example, a child who fetches wood or cooks for an armed group should not be prosecuted for membership of the group or for supporting the group by fetching wood or cooking.

In cases where a child has committed an act that would be criminal in any circumstances, such as murder, a criminal process which considers mitigating circumstances, such as the child's age and capacity, the coercive environment under which they may have been living, and whether they were forced to act at the time of the offence, may allow for accountability for both the child and his or her victims. Restorative justice mechanisms and reparations for child perpetrators should be encouraged as alternatives to detention. The child should be recognised as a survivor of a human rights violation who may have also committed criminal acts while under threat or other coercion.

Non-judicial justice mechanisms may provide appropriate opportunities for children to consider their social responsibility during their time of association with an armed force or group.

Minimum age of criminal responsibility

The Committee on the Rights of the Child recommends:

- the minimum age of criminal responsibility be no younger than 14 years old and commends parties that have a higher age of 15 or 16 years.

- that if tried, all children who were above the minimum age of responsibility at the time of the alleged offense be tried as children rather than adults.

- that criminal accountability measures shall consider the child's age and vulnerabilities at the time of the commission of a crime, and simultaneously support the child's rehabilitation.[458]

26.2.1 Victim or perpetrator: a false duality

It is widely recognised that children's social identity should not be reduced to the status of victim. If we set aside legal criminal responsibility and consider the notion of social responsibility, a more nuanced picture emerges.

Indeed, there can be negative implications to viewing children only as passive victims. It can be disempowering at a time when they are seeking to build a new life for themselves, can deny their agency and their capacity for resilience, and may contradict how society perceives and treats them.[459]

"The dominant narrative that has shaped reintegration programming has conceptualized child soldiers primarily as passive victims. This has been necessary in order to secure legal protection for this group. Yet, at the social and political level, a victim-only approach imposes a straight-jacket of innocence on former child soldiers that does not allow them to deal with their own possible feelings of remorse or their community's potential resentment." [460]

'Victim' is not always the identity that children ascribe to themselves, or that the community ascribes to them. In many contexts, due to different cultural notions of childhood, communities may view children of a certain age as fully mature and may reject the idea that children had no agency or choice about joining an armed force or group. As a result, children may face stigmatisation, resentment, discrimination or violent attacks from community members. For example, children may complete excellent economic support programmes, but then find that no one will employ them or trade with them. If children's social responsibility and communities' acceptance of them is not addressed, then all other efforts to support children's reintegration may fail.

Furthermore, when children are trying to process and make sense of experiences they have had, it can be a helpful part of the healing process for them to have the space to explore a range of feelings. Sometimes children simply want a chance to say "I'm sorry" to their community, and perhaps to be allowed to carry out a symbolic or appropriate act of service for the community's benefit.

"Research has shown that, for a child, understanding and acknowledging a past wrongdoing plays a crucial role in their psycho-social development and reintegration process. Some form of accountability – based on restorative approaches – can contribute strongly to a child's reconciliation with his community, with the victim and with him or herself." [461]

"We don't think ignoring all responsibility of the child is the most effective way to help them re-integrate into society. So we are currently asking: how can we view children as rights-holders with certain privileges, but also recognize their responsibilities? I think the case that really moved us forward on this issue was Sierra Leone, where the Special Court decided not to hold any children criminally responsible for violations committed—only their commanders. It sent the children a clear message that they weren't going to be prosecuted and encouraged many to come forward and tell their stories to the truth commission. One thing we are looking at is how to move away from this false duality of a child as either a victim or a perpetrator when in fact, the reality is a lot more complicated than that¬" they can be both." [462]

26.3 Judicial measures for alleged child offenders

26.3.1 Prosecution of children by international courts or tribunals

Although children may face prosecution under national law, Article 26 of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court states that the Court shall have no jurisdiction over any person who was under 18 at the time of the alleged commission of a crime.[463] The Paris Principles note that children "should not be prosecuted by an international court or tribunal".

Article 26 of the International Criminal Court prevents the court from prosecuting anyone under the age of 18. This is not because it believes that children should be exempt from prosecution for international crimes, "but rather that the decision on whether to prosecute should be left to States".

The emerging trend of international tribunals addressing conflicts involving child recruitment and use by armed forces and groups has been to decline the prosecution of children and focus instead on the prosecution of those higher up the chain of command. For example, the Statutes of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda did not cite a minimum age for criminal responsibility, but no one under 18 appeared before the tribunals. The Statute of the Special Court for Sierra Leone gave the Court jurisdiction over any person above 15, but the Court's prosecutor decided against indicting children for war crimes because of their dual status as both victims and perpetrators.[464]

26.3.2 Prosecution of children by national judicial systems

Children may be prosecuted by national courts for serious crimes committed while associated with armed forces and groups, such as rape, murder and some forms of significant theft. The age of criminal responsibility is determined by individual states and varies from country to country, ranging from seven to 18 years. In some countries, differing ages of criminal responsibility are established for severe crimes. The Committee on the Rights of the Child has recommended that the minimum age of criminal responsibility should not be below 14 years, and it does not approve of setting exceptions for different crimes.[465]

The Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict makes the case that "if a child under the age of 15 is considered too young to fight, then he or she must also be considered too young to be held criminally responsible for serious violations of [international humanitarian law] while associated with armed forces or armed groups."[466]

All children who face national judicial proceedings for crimes are entitled to be treated to the highest standards and safeguards in accordance with international standards for juvenile justice.[467] Child protection actors should advocate for these standards to be applied to children associated with armed forces and armed groups, recognising that they are often at risk of being mistreated.

26.3.3 International standards for juvenile justice

Article 40 of the UNCRC says that, wherever possible, children in conflict with the law should not be dealt with through formal judicial proceedings, and that alternatives to formal judicial proceedings should be found, an approach known as 'diversion'.[468] For example, instead of prison and a criminal record, children might be invited to participate in truth commissions or enrolled in community-run programmes of community service, insofar as these processes themselves respect children's rights.[469]

Other key components of international standards for children in justice systems include:

- Arrest, detention or imprisonment must be a last resort, and where used, must only be for the shortest appropriate period time.[470]

- Conditions and treatment while in detention should comply with international juvenile justice standards (see below).

- Life imprisonment and the death penalty are prohibited for children the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 37(a)), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the Paris Principles.[471] International humanitarian law also prohibits the death penalty for persons who were under 18 years at the time of the offence for which they have been convicted.[472]

- Children are entitled to basic procedural safeguards such as presumption of innocence, right to notification of the charges, and the right to remain silent (Beijing Rules 7.1), the right to an attorney to represent them (Beijing 15.1), and the presence of their parents or guardians throughout all proceedings (Beijing Rules 15.2).

- Children have the right to confront witnesses testifying against them (Beijing Rules 7.1).

- Children have the right to appeal any sentencing (Beijing Rules 7.1).

- Any form of deprivation of liberty should include the provision of education, vocational, or other rehabilitative services that are age and gender sensitive (Beijing Rules 24.1 and 26.2).

Treating detention and prosecution as last resort options is in the best interests of the child and arguably in the best interests of society, which needs citizens who can contribute positively to their communities after their release. However, the rights of victims must also be recognised, and there may be a tension when weighing the rights of the child and the rights of the victim. Indeed, the victims of children associated with armed forces and groups are often other children.

Given the specific protections due to children under international juvenile justice standards, it is of the utmost importance that age assessment is conducted according to the key principles. This is especially true for the presumption of minority in case of doubt, since being treated as a child offender will greatly affect children's rights during the judicial process and their detention conditions.

> ⟩ See Chapter 17 on Understanding and Supporting the Informal Release of Children from Armed Forces and Armed Groups

In summary, emphasis should be on the criminal responsibility of the perpetrators of child recruitment. As the International Committee of the Red Cross asserts, "those who recruit children for their armed forces or armed groups must be made aware that they are the ones who bear responsibility, for breaking the law by recruiting children and, in large part, for what children may do as soldiers."[473]

26.3.4 The role of child protection actors in improving the treatment of children by justice systems[474]

Map existing justice and social welfare systems, including formal and informal systems, frameworks and actors to identify opportunities that can be relied on and strengthened, and to identify significant protection gaps.

- Advocate for the state to fix a minimum age for criminal responsibility in general, which should not be below 14 years at the absolute minimum, and not below 15 years of age for crimes under international law that were alleged to have been committed by children associated with armed forces and groups.

- Support the government to prevent any child under the age of criminal responsibility from being prosecuted.

- Advocate for the enforcement of criminal liability up the chain of command to disincentivise commanders of armed groups and forces to compel any child, especially those below the minimum age of criminal responsibility, to carry out the worst atrocities.

- Advocate against the prosecution of children simply for being associated with an armed force or group, and for all judicial proceedings against children to demonstrate an understanding of the circumstances and experiences of recruitment and use, including consideration of mitigating factors including coercion.

- Advocate for the use of 'diversion programmes' and support the identification of human rights compliant and protective alternatives to trial and sentencing. Any measures should be rehabilitative rather than punitive in nature.

- Advocate against a legal framework that allows for the imposition of a sentence of capital punishment or life imprisonment without parole for children, and for decriminalising membership of or association with any armed force or group for anyone under 18.

- Advocate for prohibition of use of children by military intelligence, including through interrogation, and facilitate training of appropriate interview techniques for use with children captured from a party to the conflict, to eliminate the practice of harmful interrogation or torture.

- Advocate for and support the establishment of child-friendly, gender sensitive and disability-accessible courts and police stations, and specially trained Child Units within police and judicial bodies. Support the capacity building of actors within these institutions and entities. (See CRC General Comment 24, CRC/C/GC/24 (18 September 2019).

- Advocate for children's earliest possible, and continuing access to multidisciplinary services and legal advice, support and representation as well as child-friendly complaint mechanisms.

- Support gender balance through the deployment of female police and female judicial personnel.

- Monitor, document and analyse patterns of detention, treatment in detention and any child rights violations that occur within the justice system.

- Take action on individual cases, including when children are tortured or detained illegally or in inappropriate facilities.

- Support family and influential people in the child's life to accompany children in any justice process. In this respect, insist on the rights of detained children to establish and maintain contact with their family through correspondence and visits, unless to do so is not in the child's best interests.

- Where there are large numbers of people facing criminal proceedings as a result of armed conflict, advocate for the cases involving children and mothers who have children detained with them to take priority.[475]

26.3.5 Detention of alleged child offenders

Some State authorities may detain children associated with armed groups due to their active participation in hostilities, their alleged commission of a crime, or based on a perception that they pose a threat to national security. However, authorities should detain children only based on law, as a last resort, on an exceptional basis, in facilities that are age and gender appropriate, and for the shortest period possible.[476] The best interests of the child should always be a primary consideration.

Detention is an overly punitive measure for children who are alleged to be associated with an armed force or group. It may amount to collective punishment for children only alleged to be affiliated, and who did not commit any criminal acts. There is also an over-reliance on administrative detention, that is, the deprivation of liberty of children by an executive authority rather than the judiciary, without criminal charge.

Children often suffer irreparable psychological harm when in detention or situations of restricted liberty. They are at heightened vulnerability of violence and torture during detention, with girls facing additional risks. Children should not be held longer than is permitted for the crimes for which they are being charged. They should not be deprived of liberty for protective purposes. Conditional release must be used to the greatest extent and as early as possible. Pretrial detention should only be used in exceptional circumstances, if children are in immediate danger.[477] Children should not be held in administrative detention.

Article 6(3) of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict specifically requires States to support the demobilisation or release of children captured from armed groups and provide them with all appropriate assistance for their recovery and reintegration instead of detaining them.

To facilitate access to these children for child protection actors, the Security Council has stressed "the need to pay particular attention to the treatment of children associated or allegedly associated with all non-state armed groups, including those who commit acts of terrorism, *in particular by establishing standard operating procedures for the rapid handover of these children to relevant civilian child protection actors.*"[478]

In any situation where the deprivation of liberty is exceptionally required, States must adhere to protections including those in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Committee against Torture, as well as protections outlined under the United Nations Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of their Liberty, United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice (the Beijing Rules), United Nations Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of their Liberty, United Nations Guidelines for Action on Children in the Criminal Justice System and other relevant pieces of international law.

In particular, where children are detained, child protection actors should advocate on behalf of the child for support for state-run prison services and other forms of detention, as appropriate, to meet international minimum standards[479] including those highlighted below.[480]

Minimum standards for children in detention

- Incommunicado detention is not permitted for persons below the age of 18.
- Registration and documentation of all children shall be undertaken to help reduce the risk of disappearance while in detention.
- Every child shall have the right to be examined by a physician or a health practitioner on admission and receive adequate physical and mental health care throughout
- Children's legal guardians (usually parents) shall be notified of the child's whereabouts. If the location of the legal guardian is unknown, a temporary guardian who is able to act on behalf of the child shall be appointed.
- The child shall be provided legal counsel and the presence of parents or guardians shall be allowed at all points during a criminal proceeding. There shall be no restriction on the child's ability to communicate confidentially and at any time with his or her lawyer or other assistant.
- The child shall be provided with the right and means to maintain contact with his or her family through correspondence and visits, save for exceptional circumstances which are clearly defined and in the child's best interests
- Authorities shall facilitate such contact with family members and independent legal counsel, as well as medical personnel, International Committee of the Red Cross delegates, and other independent monitoring and inspecting bodies.
- Restraint or force can be used only when the child poses an imminent threat of injury to himself or herself or others, and only when all other means of control have been exhausted. It is never to be used as a means of punishment.
- Solitary confinement should not be used for a child.
- Disciplinary measures in violation of article 37 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child which prohibits torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment shall be strictly forbidden, including corporal punishment, placement in a dark cell or any other punishment that may compromise the physical or mental health or well-being of the child;
- Children shall be accommodated separately from adults, except when they are with adult family members and remaining with those adult family members is in their best interests.

- Girls shall be accommodated separately from boys, though children shall not be separated from their own children.
- Any particular special needs owing to a child's background and situation, including age, sex, religion, ethnicity, language or disability, shall be accommodated.
- Adequate food, water, medicine and personal hygiene materials and opportunities shall be provided. This includes making menstruation hygiene items available for girls.
- Routine access to educational and recreational activities, including time outdoors, shall be provided, noting that a lack of exercise during childhood can lead to stunted physical growth.
- Every child should have the right to make requests or complaints, without censorship and without retaliation, to a proper independent authority, and to be informed of the response on a timely basis.
- No incentives to deprive children of their liberty and no opportunities for corruption shall be allowed.

26.3.6 The role of child protection actors in engaging on the issue of administrative detention

- Advocate for and support detaining authorities to apply the principle of the best interests of the child to identify alternative options so that children are not interred or held in administrative detention.

- Advocate for independent agencies to have access to monitor the use of administrative detention and internment of children related to armed conflict and engage in advocacy on individual and group cases as appropriate.

- Support police, military and peace support operations to increase capacity-building measures including establishment of guidelines and standards to prevent the use of administrative detention of children and if used only in exceptional circumstances as last resort after all other measures have been tried. This would typically include establishing Standard Operating Procedures and/or a concept of operations that contains specific provisions on the handling of children.

- Support the government or other actors to identify alternative care arrangements for complex cases where a child's return home may pose a risk. For example, some form of temporary group care within a safe house managed by trained social workers may be recommended.

Advocating for appropriate care of children associated with armed forces and groups detained by a foreign government[481]

In Chad in March 2014, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and UNICEF identified 44 children detained amongst a group of 248 combatants from Seleka, an alliance of rebel militia groups from Central African Republic. UNICEF worked with the Ministry of Social Welfare to remove these children from the prison and transport them to a transitional care centre where they would stay while family tracing was carried out to identify their relatives back in CAR.

However, there were tensions between the objectives of releasing children from detention, separating the children from adult combatants and preserving family unity.

One 17-year-old girl was the wife of a commander, 45, and had a two-year-old child. UNICEF staff talked to the girl apart from her husband to understand her wishes. A solution was found where the girl and her child were able to move in with extended family members who lived relatively close to the prison where her husband was held, and so were able to maintain contact while awaiting the outcome of his trial.

Another child had been detained together with an adult relative. After some discussion with the child, adult and the authorities, the adult relative was moved to another prison closer to the transitional care centre. UNICEF supported the child and relative to maintain contact.

26.3.7 Non-judicial measures for alleged child offenders

- Non-judicial mechanisms, including mediation, truth commissions or other alternative locally-informed reconciliation mechanisms may provide appropriate opportunities to address the social responsibility of children formerly associated with armed forces and groups. Research has shown that "*When handled sensitively, [such mechanisms] offer the potential for children to acknowledge their responsibility and express contrition, regret or remorse, and also to explain their own victimization and wish to be reintegrated into their families and communities.*"[482]

- UN Security Council Resolution 2427 (2018) urges Member States to consider non-judicial measures that focus on rehabilitation and reintegration (OP 21), and encourages Member States to focus on long-term and sustainable reintegration and rehabilitation opportunities for children affected by armed conflict (OP 26).

- Truth commissions have been used in a number of countries as an alternative to prosecution and judicial trial for children who are accused of committing international crimes. The Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict says that truth commissions "*can play multiple roles, including providing a forum for hearing children who have committed war crimes and establishing the truth of what happened to them and the harms they caused; memorialising events or establishing accountability for perpetrators.*"[483]

- Moreover, some analysis has shown that "*These processes also have the benefit of ascertaining children's agency and resilience. They establish that children bear rights as well as obligations, and that ultimately, consistent with their age and development, they are individuals responsible for their acts, able to actively participate in mechanisms and decisions affecting their lives.*"[484] These forums can also give space for diverse narratives about children's experiences, including stories of how they came to be associated with the group, escaped, and survived. This can help to "*make communities more receptive to returning child combatants by revealing the extent to which, even if they have committed crimes, they are also victims of crime.*"[485] Public recognition by community leaders of the extenuating and coercive circumstances under which children may have committed violent acts can also help foster a more positive and accepting attitude towards them.

- Symbolic acts of reconciliation at a community level may include: public declarations by community elders and leaders that children formerly associated with armed forces or groups should not be harassed or discriminated against; ritualised ceremonies between children and community leaders where forgiveness is asked and granted; traditional cleansing ceremonies; or appointing a child with a mentor or guide, who can provide support and advice throughout their experience of reintegration.[486]

> **"A key conclusion that's come out of our work in Colombia is that there is a need for more consultation with the youth and children themselves, in terms of how they identify the impacts of their experience and their specific demands. For example, one thing we've found is that some children who had been involved in armed groups felt uncomfortable receiving reparations for their status as a victim given that these groups had committed atrocities. Instead, they wanted to do something to help prevent other children from being recruited, or to inform authorities about the location of potential mass graves. They need to feel like they can make amends for some of the things they've done."**
>
> International Center for Transitional Justice[487]

26.4 Key resources

- United Nations, Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), 1989. **Link**

- United Nations, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 16 December 1966. **Link**

- United Nations, Committee on the Rights of the Child, Committee on the Rights of the Child, 'General Comment to the Convention on the Rights of the Child No. 24 (2019) on children's rights in the child justice system', CRC/C/GC/24, 18 September 2019. **Link**

- United Nations Security Council Resolution 2427, S/RES/2427, 9 July 2018. **Link**

- United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) Resolution 2005/20, Guidelines on Justice in Matters involving Child Victims and Witnesses of Crime. **Link**

- United Nations Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of their Liberty ['Havana Rules'], Adopted by General Assembly resolution 45/113, 14 December 1990. **Link**

- United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice ['Beijing Rules'], Adopted by General Assembly resolution 40/33 of 29 November 1985. **Link**

- United Nations Global Study on Children Deprived of Liberty, A/74/136, 11 July 2019. **Link**

- United Nations General Assembly, 'Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law', A/Res/60/147 March 2006. **Link**

- United Nations 'Principles and Guidelines on Access to Legal Aid in Criminal Justice Systems', Adopted by the General Assembly resolution 67/187, 20 December 2012. **Link**

- United Nations General Assembly, A/HRC/40/28 'Protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism', 10 January 2019. **Link**

- United Nations General Assembly, 'Protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism', A/RES/72/180, 30 January 2018. **Link**

- United Nations Common Approach to Justice for Children, March 2008'. **Link**

- United Nations Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, Working Paper No. 3, 'Children and Justice During the Aftermath of Armed Conflict', UNICEF, September 2011. **Link**

- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) 'Handbook for Professionals and Policymakers on the Guidelines on Justice in Matters involving Child Victims and Witnesses of Crime', 2009. **Link**

- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 'Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: The Role of the Justice System', 2017. **Link**

- Cécile Aptel, 'Children and Accountability for International Crimes: The Contribution of International Criminal Courts,' Innocenti Working Paper. 2010–20, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, Florence, 2010. **Link**

- Cécile Aptel & Virginie Ladish, 'Through a New Lens: A Child-Sensitive Approach to Transitional Justice' International Center for Transitional Justice, August 2011. **Link**

- Bureau International des Droits des Enfants, 'Children and Armed Conflict: A guide to international humanitarian and human rights law', IBCR, Montreal, Canada, 2010. **Link**

- The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 'Child Protection Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Action', 2019, Standard 14: Justice for Children. **Link**

- International Committee of the Red Cross, 'Children associated with armed forces or armed groups', September 2013. **Link**

- International Committee of the Red Cross, 'International Humanitarian Law Database. Customary IHL, Rule 150. Reparation'. **Link**

- Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, A Path to Reintegration: The Role of Handover Protocols in Protecting the Rights of Children, December 2020. **Link**

- Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict & Alliance for CPHA, Operational guidance: Negotiating and implementing handover protocols for the transfer of children associated with armed forces and armed groups, March 2022. **Link**

Endnotes SECTION 6

395 Recruitment and use of children under the age of 15 years by any armed actor is recognised as a war crime under the Rome Statute.

396 It is a rule of customary international humanitarian law that commanders and other superiors are criminally responsible for war crimes committed by their subordinates if they knew, or had reason to know, that the subordinates were about to commit or were committing such crimes and did not take all necessary and reasonable measures in their power to prevent their commission, or if such crimes had been committed, to punish the persons responsible. See Rule 153 of the International Committee of the Red Cross's Customary Law study, International Humanitarian Law Database. Customary IHL, online, Accessed February 2019.

397 Julia Freedson, 'Bridging the Accountability Gap: New approaches to addressing violations against children in armed conflict,' Conflict Dynamics International, June 2011, (hereafter, 'Bridging the Accountability Gap'), p.13.

398 'Bridging the Accountability Gap', p.13.

399 International Center for Transitional Justice, 'What is Transitional Justice?' Factsheet, 2009. p.1.

400 This table is based on 'Bridging the Accountability Gap'..

401 In this handbook, the phrase 'truth commissions' applies to a range of mechanisms that can have varied names. Examples include Tunisia's Truth and Dignity Commission, The Gambia's Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission and Morocco's Equity and Reconciliation Commission.

402 United Nations Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations and United Nations Children's Fund, Working Paper No. 1, 'The Six Grave Violations Against Children During Armed Conflict: The legal foundation', UNICEF, October 2009 (Updated November 2013), p.13.

403 These points draw on: United Nations Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, Working Paper No. 3, 'Children and Justice During the Aftermath of Armed Conflict', UNICEF, 2011, p.9.

404 For detail on the purpose and scope of amnesties for war crimes, see: International Committee of the Red Cross Advisory Service on international Humanitarian Law, 'Amnesties and International Humanitarian Law: Purpose and Scope', October 2017, online. Accessed February 2019.

405 'Bridging the Accountability Gap', p.12.

406 United Nations Children's Fund, 'The Paris Principles: Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups', UNICEF, February 2007, (hereafter, 'The Paris Principles'). p.9. **Link**

407 See International Committee of the Red Cross, 'Commentary on the First Geneva Convention, 2nd edition, 2016, paragraph 2845', online. Accessed February 2019.

408 Personal communication with International Center for Transitional Justice child protection specialist, January 2015.

409 Coalition for the International Criminal Court, 'Cases & Situations, Democratic Republic of Congo, Katanga and Ngudjolo Chui Cases', online. Accessed February 2019.

410 International Criminal Court. The Office of the Prosecutor. Policy on Children, November 2016.

411 'Bridging the Accountability Gap', p.38.

412 Yasmin Naqvi, 'Amnesty for war crimes: Defining the limits of international recognition,' International Review of the Red Cross, Vol. 85(851), September 2003, p.583.

413 Elizabeth Salmon, 'Reflections on International Humanitarian Law and Transitional Justice', International Review of the Red Cross, 88(862), June 2006.

414 Personal communication with International Center for Transitional Justice child protection specialist, January 2015.

415 Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission. 2005. 'Witness to Truth: Final Report of the Sierra Leone TRC', (hereafter, 'Witness to Truth'). Vol. 2, Chapter 3, p.175.

416 'Witness to Truth', Vol. 2, Chapter 3, p.129.

417 'Bridging the Accountability Gap', p.14.

418 Personal communication with International Center for Transitional Justice child protection specialist, January 2015.

419 Roger Duthie & Irma Specht, Research Brief, 'DDR, Transitional Justice, and the Reintegration of Former Child Combatants,' International Center for Transitional Justice, February 2010, (hereafter, 'DDR, Transitional Justice, and the Reintegration of Former Child Combatants'). p.1.

420 'Bridging the Accountability Gap', p.14.

421 'Children and Justice During the Aftermath of Armed Conflict', p.23.

422 'Children and Justice During the Aftermath of Armed Conflict', p.44.

423 'The Paris Principles', p.43.

424 For more guidance see: Valerie Waters, 'Listening to Young Voices: A Guide to Interviewing Children and Young People in Truth Seeking and Documentation Efforts', International Center for Transitional Justice, January 2018, (hereafter, 'Listening to Young Voices').

425 'Bridging the Accountability Gap', p.14.

426 Michael Wessells, 'Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection', Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2006, (hereafter, 'Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection'), p.222.

427 Personal correspondence with International Center for Transitional Justice child protection specialist, May 2015.

428 'Listening to Young Voices'.

429 United Nations, 'Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on a Communications Procedure', A/RES/66/138, 19 December 2011, entered into force on 14 April 2014, (hereafter, 'Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on a Communications Procedure').

430 Draws on: Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, 'The Mandate of the Special Representative', online. Accessed February 2019.

431 Draws on Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, 'UN Security Council Resolution 1612 and Beyond: Strengthening Protection for Children in Armed Conflict', Policy Paper, 2009, p.11.

432 'Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on a Communications Procedure'.

433 State parties listed in: United Nations Treaty Collection, Chapter IV, 11.d, online.

434 Committee on the Rights of the Child, 'Model form for submission of individual communications to the committee on the rights of the child under the optional protocol to the convention on the rights of the child on a communications procedure', October 2015. / Committee on the Rights of the Child, 'Working methods to deal with individual communications received under the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on a communications procedure', October 2015.

435 This section draws on 'Children and Justice During the Aftermath of Armed Conflict', p. 24; and Virginie Ladish, 'From Rejection to Redress. Overcoming Legacies of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence in Northern Uganda', International Center for Transitional Justice, October 2015 (hereafter, 'From Rejection to Redress').

436 United Nations General Assembly A/Res/60/147, 21, 'Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law', adopted 16 December 2005.

437 For detail on reparations under International Humanitarian Law, International Committee of the Red Cross, 'International Humanitarian Law Database. Customary IHL, Rule 150. Reparation', online.

438 Collective reparations can cover the harms caused by violations of collective rights, gross violations of rights of members of collectives, and the collective impact of violations of individual rights. See International Center for Transitional Justice, 'The Rabat Report: The Concept and Challenges of Collective Reparations', 2009.

439 'From Rejection to Redress'.

440 'Children and Justice During the Aftermath of Armed Conflict', p.24.

441 'Children and Justice During the Aftermath of Armed Conflict', p.24.

442 'Bridging the Accountability Gap', p.15.

443 United Nations, 'Common Approach to Justice for Children,' UN, March 2008, p.4.

444 UN General Assembly, Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 3(1), Article 40(2)(b)(iii), Article 37(c). 20, November 1989.

445 This section is partly inspired by 'Children and Justice During the Aftermath of Armed Conflict', pp.11–16.

446 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, articles 39, 6, 19, 16, 12. See also, United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) Resolution 2005/20, 'Guidelines on Justice in Matters involving Child Victims and Witnesses of Crime', (hereafter, 'Guidelines on Justice in Matters involving Child Victims and Witnesses of Crime').

447 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, articles. 16 and 40, and General Comment No. 24 (2019), 'Children's Rights in the Justice System, Committee on the Rights of the Child', paragraphs 66–71.

448 This section of the chapter is inspired by Cécile Aptel, 'Children and Accountability for International Crimes: The Contribution of International Criminal Courts,' Innocenti Working Paper. 2010–20, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, Florence, Italy, 2010, (hereafter, 'Children and Accountability for International Crimes'). pp.28–36.

449 See 'Guidelines on Justice in Matters involving Child Victims and Witnesses of Crime'; and see discussion in United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 'Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: The Role of the Justice System', 2017. p.48.

450 See recommendations in 'Children and Accountability for International Crimes'.

451 United Nations, 'Access to Justice for Children – Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights', (2013), A/HRC/25/35, para. 4; United Nations, 'Common Approach to Justice for Children,' UN, March 2008. p.4.

452 'Children and Justice During the Aftermath of Armed Conflict', p.12.

453 States responsible for violations of international humanitarian law are also required to make full reparation for the loss or injury caused by the violation of these rules. See International Committee of the Red Cross, 'International Humanitarian Law Database. Customary IHL, Rule 150. Reparation', online. And United Nations General Assembly A/Res/60/147, 21, 'Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law', March 2006.

454 'The Paris Principles'.

455 United Nations Security Council Resolution 2427, S/RES/2427, Adopted by the Security Council at its 8305th meeting, on 9 July 2018, operative paragraphs 20, 21, and 26. See in particular, paragraph 26: "Encourages Member States to focus on long-term and sustainable reintegration and rehabilitation opportunities for children affected by armed conflict that are gender- and age-sensitive, including access to health care, psychosocial support, and education programmes, as well as raising awareness and working with communities to avoid stigmatization of these children and facilitate their return, while taking into account the specific needs of girls and boys, to contribute to the well-being of children and to sustainable peace and security."

456 Bureau International des Droits des Enfants, 'Children and Armed Conflict: A guide to international humanitarian and human rights law', IBCR, Montreal, Canada, 2010 (hereafter, 'Children and Armed Conflict: A guide to international humanitarian and human rights law'), p.149.

457 See 'Guidelines on Justice in Matters involving Child Victims and Witnesses of Crime'; and see discussion in United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 'Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: The Role of the Justice System', 2017. p.48.

458 Convention on the Rights of the Child, art. 37; United Nations, Committee on the Rights of the Child, 'General Comment to the Convention on the Rights of the Child No. 24 (2019). Children's Rights in Juvenile Justice', CRC/C/GC/24, 18 September 2019, paras. 30-32, 33, 37-39.

459 Personal correspondence with International Center for Transitional Justice child protection specialist, January 2015.

460 Virginie Ladisch, 'Seeing Former Child Soldiers as More than just Victims', International Center for Transitional Justice, 19 November 2013, online. Accessed February 2019, available **here**

461 'Children and Justice During the Aftermath of Armed Conflict', p.28.

462 International Center for Transitional Justice, 'Program Report: Children and Youth,' 9 August 2013. Available **here**

463 International Criminal Court, 2011, Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, **Link**

464 Irin News, 'Should Child Soldiers be Prosecuted for their Crimes?', 6 October 2011, online. Accessed January 2019. **Link**

465 United Nations, Committee on the Rights of the Child, 'General Comment to the Convention on the Rights of the Child No. 24 (2019) on children's rights in the child justice system', CRC/C/GC/24, 18 September 2019, paragraphs 22 and 25.

466 'Children and Justice During the Aftermath of Armed Conflict', p.34.

467 Regarding international standards for juvenile justice, see International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Arts 6, 10,14, 15 and 24); Convention on the Rights of the Child (particularly

Arts 40 and 37); United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice (The Beijing Rules), 1985; United Nations Guidelines for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency (Riyadh Guidelines), 1990; United Nations Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of their Liberty, 1990; United Nations Children's Fund, The Paris Principles: Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups, UNICEF, February 2007, 3.6–3.8, and 8.8.

468 United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice, Rule 11; Child Protection Working Group, 'Child Protection Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Action', Global Protection Cluster, 2012, p.128.

469 'Children and Accountability for International Crimes', p.27.

470 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 37.

471 'Children and Armed Conflict: A guide to international humanitarian and human rights law', p.144.

472 Fourth Geneva Convention, Article 68(4); Additional Protocol I, Article 77(5); Additional Protocol II, Article 6(4).

473 International Committee of the Red Cross, 'Children associated with armed forces or armed groups', September 2013, p.12.

474 The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 'Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action', 2019, Standard 20.

475 'The Paris Principles', Principle 8.10.

476 'Children and Justice During the Aftermath of Armed Conflict'. This is also set out in Article 37(b) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

477 United Nations, Committee on the Rights of the Child, 'General Comment to the Convention on the Rights of the Child No. 24 (2019) on children's rights in the child justice system', CRC/C/GC/24, 18 September 2019, paragraphs 86 –87; United Nations General Assembly, A/HRC/40/28 'Protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism', 10 January 2019, para. 53. See also Manfred Nowak, 'The United Nations Global Study on Children Deprived of Liberty', United Nations, New York, USA, 2020.

478 United Nations Security Council Resolution 2427, S/RES/2427, adopted by the Security Council at its 8305th meeting, on 9 July 2018, operative paragraph 19. See also Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, 'A Path to Reintegration: The Role of Handover Protocols in Protecting the Rights of Children Formerly Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups', (December 2020). **Link**

479 Relevant international legal standards include: United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Articles 37 and 40; The Beijing Rules for the administration of juvenile justice; The Tokyo Rules for non-custodial measures; and The Riyadh Guidelines for the prevention of juvenile delinquency; The Havana Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of their Liberty; and The Bangkok Rules for the Treatment of Female Prisoners and Non-Custodial Measures for Women Offenders; and the Committee on the Rights of the Child, 'General Comment to the Convention on the Rights of the Child No. 24 (2019) on children's rights in the child justice system', CRC/C/GC/24, 18 September 2019, paragraphs 92–95.

480 Draws on: Committee on the Rights of the Child, 'General Comment to the Convention on the Rights of the Child No. 24 (2019) on children's rights in the child justice system', CRC/C/GC/24, 18 September 2019, paragraph 92; and The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 'Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action', 2019 Edition, 2019; and International Committee of the Red Cross, 'Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups,' September 2013, p.9.

481 Personal correspondence with child protection staff at UNICEF Chad, August 2014.

482 'Children and Accountability for International Crimes', p.27.

483 'Children and Justice During the Aftermath of Armed Conflict', p.44.

484 'Children and Accountability for International Crimes', p.27.

485 'DDR, Transitional Justice, and the Reintegration of Former Child Combatants', p.1.

486 'Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection', p.223.

487 International Center for Transitional Justice, 'Program Report: Children and Youth,' 9 August 2013, online.
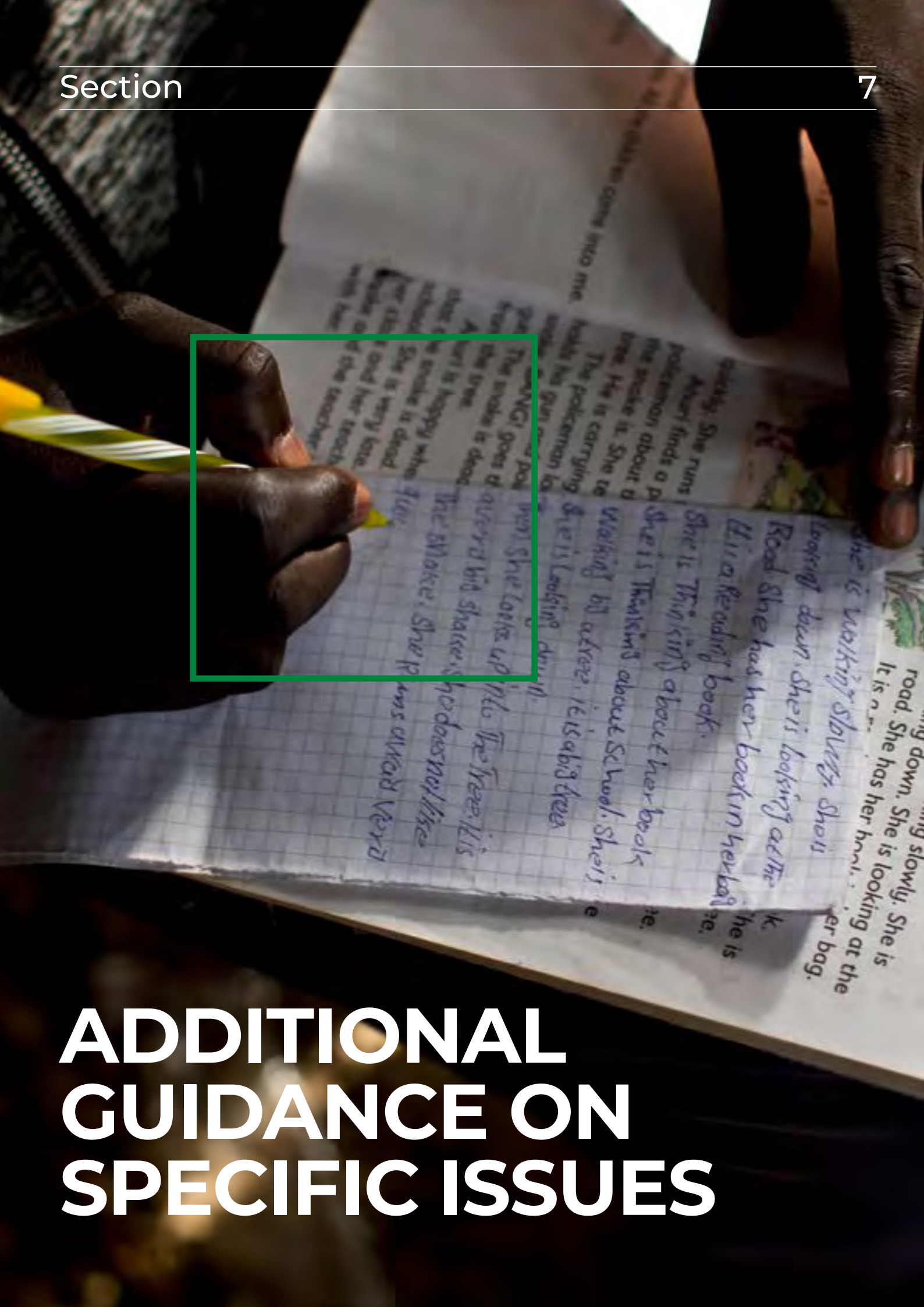
ADDITIONAL GUIDANCE ON SPECIFIC ISSUES

Chapter 27
Girls associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups

Introduction

Girls are estimated to make up somewhere between 10 and 40 per cent of children associated with armed forces and armed groups around the world.[488] They are recruited in several ways, play a variety of roles (including fighting), and face serious risks before, during, and after their association with armed forces and groups. The consequences of their experiences are often significant and lifelong.

Historically, ideas about children involved in armed conflict have tended to cast boys as aggressors and girls as victims. These stereotypes have led to girls receiving less attention, both at a policy level and within prevention, release and reintegration programmes.[489] In addition, the dominant image of 'children associated with armed forces and groups' was a 'child soldier' – a boy with a gun. For these reasons, programmes were designed primarily with boys in mind, largely failing to address girls' specific and varied needs.[490] Combined with the risk of stigmatisation and rejection from communities if identified as formerly associated with an armed force or group, this failure has led girls to actively avoid participating in release and reintegration programmes, viewing them as unhelpful, at best, and potentially harmful, at worse.[491]

There is now growing knowledge about the large numbers of girls who are part of armed forces and armed groups, and better understanding of their experiences, needs, capacities and priorities. Child protection actors are also more aware that, following release, girls are more likely than boys to suffer from rejection by family and community, social isolation, gender discrimination in the workplace, barriers to attending school such as domestic and childcare duties, sexual and maternal health problems, and mental health issues relating to sexual violence.

This chapter explores the varied experience of girls associated with armed forces and groups and provides guidance to support their release and reintegration.

27.1 Girls' experiences of recruitment and use by armed forces and armed groups

Policy-makers and child protection practitioners have historically adopted simplistic stereotypes of the way girls are involved in armed forces and groups that cast girls primarily as victims or dependents of combatants. Closer examination "reveals a complex dynamic where war is experienced differently, both between and within, the genders", according to an article in the journal *Intervention*.[492] In reality, girls play an essential role in conflict, this being the reason for their recruitment, and are sometimes rendered invisible by armed groups and forces.

Many girls are involved in direct combat, some as leaders of their own battalions or units. In many contexts, girls most frequently play support roles that are essential to the operations of armed forces and armed groups. Many are forced or coerced into becoming 'wives' of male fighters; promises of being given a wife can be a key factor in recruiting and retaining men. Underestimation of the value of girls to armed forces and groups – by those designing prevention, release and reintegration programmes, by commanders and by girls themselves – has increased girls' invisibility.

> It is important that child protection actors understand girls' experiences during their association with armed forces and groups as being influenced by broader, gendered power structures that both pre-date and will last beyond the conflict.[493] As emphasised in United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, all actors involved in peace and security efforts must strive to incorporate gender perspectives and to increase the participation of women and girls.[494]

Girls' experiences differ greatly across contexts as well as within the same context, and it is important not to generalise. Girls are different from women and boys, and from each other. However, it is possible to identify some similarities and common patterns in their experiences.

27.1.1 How girls become associated with armed forces or armed groups

Many of the push and pull factors that influence whether girls become associated with armed forces and armed groups are discussed in Chapter 1 on How and Why Children Become Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups and Chapter 11 on Community-Level Approaches to Prevention of Child Recruitment. Key factors include (not in order of importance or prevalence):

'Protection', including escaping gender-based violence or an abusive household: Some girls are motivated to protect themselves and other family and friends, or to take revenge for violence committed against themselves or their loved ones. Studies have observed that, "girls who join fighting forces have often previously been victims of physical, verbal and/or psychological harassment, violence and abuse."[495] In the context of war, where civilians are vulnerable to attacks from all sides, joining an armed force or armed group may seem like the best survival strategy. It has been suggested that during the conflict in Liberia, "civilian girls were left with no other option than to flee or to join the fighting forces themselves, if they wanted to escape the rapes."[496]

Vulnerability to forced recruitment including abduction: Girls may be exposed to forced recruitment when carrying out traditionally gendered chores outside their homes, villages or camps, such as collecting water or firewood.[497] Like boys, girls can also be recruited while traveling to and from school, and during school, as armed forces and groups know where girls go to study in communities affected by conflict.

Family and community pressure: Social norms, including family and community norms, result in internal and external pressure for girls to join armed forces or groups. This can be particularly true for girls living in areas controlled by armed actors, where families rely on armed actors for protection or support, or where forced marriage is institutionalised.

Economic reasons: Girls tend to be disadvantaged in the labour market and overlooked in the distribution of household resources. In some cases, young and impoverished girls have described being seduced by the possibility of obtaining luxury items, and so entered into something that they perhaps did not fully understand; "I saw the new red shoes of my friend. I asked her where she got them from. She took me to these boys. Later on I got involved with one of them. When he was fighting, I followed him."[498]

Empowerment: In very conservative and patriarchal societies, joining an armed force or armed group may represent an opportunity for emancipation and empowerment.[499] In other contexts, girls may be motivated to join an armed group because a community may actively encourage and idealise powerful female fighting units. Such units may be a vehicle for cementing and asserting a communal identity that is seen as more progressive to girls and women than that of advancing 'enemy' forces. In such cases, girls may see joining an armed group as essential to safeguarding their liberty from advancing forces who may harm them or limit their opportunities on the basis of their gender.

> **"My family was very, very strict. I was beaten a lot. My legs were black-and-blue from the beatings. The guerrillas asked me why my legs were like that, and so I told them, and they asked me why I didn't go with them, because they didn't beat people, they didn't treat you badly, they didn't insult you, nothing. And so I told them that I would think about it, and the next day I went off with them. My mum found out, and she came to look for me and told the guerrillas to give me back because I was underage and how on earth could they even have thought about taking me. I said that I wasn't going to go back home, and since then I haven't seen my family. And then, when I was with the guerrillas, I didn't miss them anymore; I didn't need them, or anything."**

A girl in a reintegration programme in Colombia[500]

27.1.2 Girls' experiences during the period of association

Girls have varied experiences during their period of association with armed forces and armed groups. Key factors that influence the nature of their experience include:[501]

- age and maturity

- method of recruitment

- duration of association

- role or roles played during association

- rank and status

- whether they are part of a women's unit or a mixed unit

- the guiding philosophical/ideological or religious beliefs of the armed forces or groups

- the extent to which they are experience or are vulnerable to all forms of abuse (physical, emotional and sexual).

For example, a girl who is abducted by an armed group, forced to 'marry' a fighter and carry out a low-status support role may experience disempowerment and loss of self-esteem. This might contrast with a girl who was motivated to enrol to protect her community, has joined an armed group together with friends or family members, and who experiences respect and recognition on the battlefield or in another leadership role.

Reflecting their position in society, girls often play support roles, carrying out tasks such as cooking, cleaning, administering first aid, or carrying ammunition and camp supplies. However, girls may also be fighters on the front line, and some have leadership roles such as commanders of battalions. The fact that girls are often not suspected of being 'soldiers' can be used to the advantage of the armed force or group: "girl soldiers may interact with security forces so as to distract them or to obtain information from them – they are particularly well-suited to these interactions, as women tend to be seen as more unassuming than men."[502] For this reason, girls are often asked to be messengers or spies. In certain contexts they are also increasingly being exploited and killed by armed groups which use them to carry body-borne explosive devices.

Even if not in a direct combat role, girls are often witnesses to or forced to participate in violence, putting them at risk of death, injury and great emotional distress. For example, "accounts from interviewees and civil society also suggest that women and girls abducted by JAS [also known as Boko Haram, in Nigeria] are used for cooking and sometimes also forced to participate in attacks. One former abductee explained to Watchlist that while she never participated in combat, she was told to carry live ammunition and raid hospitals for drugs during attacks. JAS also asked her to slaughter a man abducted by the group."[503]

Even during times of peace, adolescence is a dynamic period for young people as they move towards an adult identity and develop a sense of their place in the world. Association with an armed force or group may pose additional profound challenges for girls. They may internalise some of the force or group's ideology, including on gender and social norms, in order to survive or adapt. Militias in Sierra Leone often shaved off girls' hair, "to rob them of their femininity and create an impression of unity within the militia."[504] Some girls describe how they adopted a fierce personality as a protective strategy, then struggled to let go of that identity once separated. In addition, some girls have described a sense of empowerment through subverting traditional gender roles while associated, and struggled to reconcile that identity with the roles their family and community expected them to perform when they returned home.

27.1.3 Sexual violence

The World Health Organization defines sexual violence as "any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic a person's sexuality, using coercion, threats of harm or physical force, by any person regardless or relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work."[505] Sexual violence takes many forms, including rape, sexual slavery and/or trafficking, forced pregnancy, sexual harassment, sexual exploitation and/or abuse, and forced abortion.[506]

Sexual violence is often at the core of girls' physical insecurity within an armed force or group. Their age, the lower status of their gender, and their physical weakness compared to men and boys all make them vulnerable to sexual abuse and exploitation.[507] This vulnerability is likely to be even higher for younger girls and those not in fighting roles or who are captured against their will.[508] Girls may be raped repeatedly by an individual that they are forced to 'marry', or by multiple men.

In contrast, some girls report that the rules of their armed force or group largely protected them from sexual violence, such as with the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) in Liberia, where rape was punishable by death, although this was sometimes ignored by senior commanders.[509] Other examples are the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka and Women's Protection Units (YPJ) in Syria. Some girls manage to avoid sexual violence by gaining respect and status as a fighter. Others have described choosing the 'least worst option', such as attaching themselves to one man and resigning themselves to being abused by him, in order to avoid being harassed and raped by many other men.

A level of confusion can sometimes arise over girls' own interpretations of the nature of their sexual relationships with men while associated with armed forces and groups. For example, in some cultures, if a man has sex with a woman and then provides for her, that is understood to be a marriage in customary law. Some girls describe how they decided to 'love' or 'marry' men who had initially raped them as an adaptive coping strategy. Some girls may view exchanging sexual favours for material goods, protection or financial security as normal.[510] This may also speak to the challenges that young girls can have in being able to distinguish between a positive relationship and an abusive or exploitative one, particularly when they have grown up in contexts of protracted conflict with endemic sexual violence and where girls and women have little power in their society.

As a result of sexual assault, girls may experience physical injuries, permanent disabilities or even death, sexual infections including HIV/AIDS, and/or unwanted pregnancy, miscarriage, forced termination or childbirth. Frequently they have no access to appropriate medical care including antenatal care. Babies born as a result of rape may be at risk of being abandoned or may suffer from discrimination.

Sexual violence also negatively affects girls' mental health and psychosocial well-being. Girls may experience lasting depression, other mental health and psychosocial issues, and challenges to forming trusting and loving relationships. The psychological impact is often compounded by feelings of guilt and shame, especially in cultures that disapprove of any form of sexual activity before marriage.

Often sexual violence traverses both war and peace.[511] Girls may be vulnerable to sexual violence and abuse before being recruited. Indeed, seeking protection from sexual violence or revenge for sexual violence can be factors for their association. After experiencing sexual violence during their period of association, girls may continue to face challenges when trying to reintegrate into their communities, such as sexual harassment, being pushed towards sexual exploitation as a means to obtain an income,[512] or the continuation of exploitative links with former commanders.

27.1.4 Girls' strengths and capacities

> **"Limiting our understanding of the roles these girls play to those of victims, 'sexual slaves', or 'captive wives' should be avoided as it leads to conceptual, policy and programmatic errors."[513]**

It is incorrect to define girls associated with armed forces and groups as only victims of sexual violence. To do so overlooks the way in which girls can demonstrate considerable agency in how they interact with their environment; it also ignores their multi-faceted experiences and risks perpetuating stereotypes of girls as passive victims at a time where there may be an opportunity to revisit long-standing gender inequalities.[514]

In some contexts, especially in very conservative and patriarchal societies, girls may have learned skills and performed roles that were previously considered beyond their capabilities or not suitable for them. An article for International Center for Transitional Justice reported that "In Nepal, for some girls who took up arms with the Maoists, demobilization represented a step backwards in terms of their capacity to shape their own future. Returning home meant facing a possible forced marriage or a life of indentured servitude."[515]

Furthermore, girls may hold a dual position of victim and perpetrator, as they commit or are complicit in acts of violence against others. Acknowledging these complexities can be more helpful to their recovery than characterising them solely as passive victims.

> ⟩ See also Chapter 26 on Children Formerly Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups in Justice Systems.

27.2 Preventing the recruitment of girls by armed forces and armed groups

The complexity of girls' association with armed forces or groups means that a socio-ecological approach to preventing their recruitment is required. A thorough situation analysis with a strong gender and conflict sensitivity analysis is necessary to identify and explore risks to girls at individual, family and community levels and to develop approaches to prevention. See Chapter 5 on Situation Analysis and Chapters 11 and 12 on preventing recruitment.

27.3 Supporting the release of girls from armed forces and armed groups

The services that girls provide may form an essential backbone to the armed force or group's operations. "Recognizing this means that we should anticipate that girls and young women will be among the last to be released by the fighting forces."[516]

27.3.1 Factors preventing girls from participating in formal release processes and reintegration services

As discussed in Chapter 16, the ratio of girls to boys among formally released children is often very low compared to their expected presence within armed groups and forces. Barriers to girls participating in formal release programmes include the following; the list is not exhaustive:

- Girls may fear the stigmatisation they might face on returning to their community, including exclusion from their family and community and from social and economic opportunities.[517] This may be a particular concern for girls who have children of their own, or who have acquired sexually transmitted infections such as HIV/AIDS. Their previous life or their family may have changed radically, through the death of parents, for example.

- Girls may exclude themselves, assuming that once they return home their domestic responsibilities will preclude them from participating in the education, livelihoods or social activities offered by the programme.

- Girls may not believe they have the right to be released because of their 'marriage' to a fighter. They may have accepted the role of 'wife' and in some contexts, social norms prevent them from leaving their husband.

- Even when offered the chance to participate in formal release programmes, girls may feel that an armed force or group represents their best chance to meet their daily needs of food and shelter, or their best chance of protection from other forms of violence and abuse, including reprisals from community members, from other armed forces or groups, or attacks from their own armed force or group for deserting.

27.3.2 External barriers preventing girls participating in formal release processes

- Commanders may exclude girls from lists of children to be released because they are not considered 'real soldiers', or because they are too valuable to the armed force or group as they carry out essential support services that enable the force or group to function.

- Commanders may not pass the message to girls that release is taking place and that they are eligible, so girls are not even aware of the support available.

- Girls may face significant challenges in separating from 'husbands' or 'boyfriends'. Where girls are seen as 'wives' or partners, especially of adult men who are not being released, the groups may claim that they are not eligible for release and reintegration.[518]

Girls who do not participate in formal release processes may end up staying indefinitely within an armed force or group, or they may simply drift away after some form of informal release or escape. They may try to make their way home or to a new community in search of services and support, perhaps within a small group of girls. They are likely to remain largely invisible to child protection actors, may struggle in accessing support services and may therefore be more vulnerable to a range of protection concerns.

27.3.3 How to make release and reintegration processes more accessible and attractive to girls

Child protection actors and policy makers must ensure that formal release processes are designed to be accessible for girls. This starts with a careful situation analysis and risk assessments involving girls See also Chapter 5 on Situation analysis, Chapter 6 on Risk Assessment, Security Planning and Risk-Informed Programming, Chapter 4 on Coordination, and Section 4 on Programming for Release. Using a gender lens throughout the information-gathering and analysis process is critical. In addition, conducting a gender analysis specifically to assess and mitigate the risks girls face is highly recommended.

> **"Programmes to assist girls associated with armed forces or armed groups need to strike a careful balance between seeking to identify them in order to ensure their particular needs are met and not stigmatizing them further."[519]**

Before starting work on programme design, it is important to talk to girls and understand their needs, concerns and ambitions. Make sure you understand what would make a release and reintegration programme more, or less, appealing to them, and to adjust your plans accordingly. Where it is not safe or possible to talk to girls who are currently associated with armed forces or groups, it may be possible to talk to girls who were previously associated.

Where girls are aware of a formal release process, there is often a short and critical period before the process begins in which they decide whether to try to participate in the process, whether to quietly leave through the back door, or whether to stay with the armed force or group.

This is the time that clear messaging must reach girls so that they can make informed decisions.

Use different methods to reach girls, using channels, locations or activities that engage them within the local context, and refine your messaging to address their particular concerns. As discussed above, girls may have major worries about returning to their families. Key messages therefore might be about the availability of family tracing, family mediation and preparation for return, alternative care options if necessary, opportunities for education and livelihood training, and simply the availability of support to think through possible options no matter when they leave the armed force or group. It is important that girls also hear about how to access services through informal processes in case they decide to pursue that option.

Messaging can also be carried out to try to reach girls associated with armed forces and groups even when there is no formal release process in place. This can be through mediums such as radio. This messaging can give girls information about their rights and options both formal or informal, including the services available to them, and of the experiences of other girls who have left armed forces and armed groups.

Advocate to armed forces and armed groups for the release of girls. Make sure they understand that release and reintegration processes are not only for girls who participate directly in fighting. The Paris Principles state: "the use of girls as "wives" or other forced sexual relations, actual forced marriage, and the use of girls for domestic labour or logistical support in armed conflict constitute acts of recruitment or use."[520]

Where there are all-female fighting units, strong ties can develop between girls and their commanders. It can be hard to break these, especially if there are no other adults in a girl's life who are taking on the role of providing for or supporting her. Where large groups of adults and children are being demobilised at the same time, influential female commanders may be able to positively influence girls, encouraging them to participate in reintegration programmes and demonstrate a positive transition to civilian life.[521] However, risk assessments must be done before engaging such leaders as they might not always be positive influencers.

Include female staff at all stages of a formal release process, including identification activities at cantonment sites, with a specific role to interact with girls.[522] They should seek to inform girls of their rights and opportunities, discuss their needs and challenges, and help them think through their options. Girls should also be given information about how to access services and supports should they decide to exit an armed group informally.

Knowing that girls may not feel able to speak freely, female staff should create opportunities to speak to girls alone, for example as part of medical care.

Remove any precondition for participation in a release process or reintegration, such as proof of relinquishing a weapon, to make programmes more inclusive of children who performed other roles.

Separate girls from boys and men and promote their physical security during transport to sites and within cantonment or transit sites.[523] Many girls have expressed a reluctance to participate in formal release programmes due to the fear of sexual violence and exploitation during the process, or because of the fear of being abducted and receiving harsh punishment.[524]

Be alert to the risk of sexual exploitation and abuse by humanitarians and peacekeepers, including child protection actors facilitating the release process. Safeguarding procedures should be in place to prevent incidents of sexual exploitation and abuse, and a zero-tolerance policy should be enforced where any incidents occur.

⟩ See Chapter 8 on Human Resources and Capacity and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee website for more information.[525]

Set up referral pathways to allow for immediate access to medical and mental health and psychosocial support services. Embed specialist case management services for survivors of sexual violence in health facilities whenever possible. Availability of and access to menstruation hygiene items at cantonment sites is also important.

Rejection and support: one girl's story, Nigeria[526]

Maimuna* was 14 when she was captured by Boko Haram in Northeast Nigeria. She clearly remembers the day in 2015 when insurgents attacked her village. Everybody fled into the bush and somehow she ended up trapped.

Maimuna was abducted and forced to marry an older man, a local Boko Haram leader. During fighting between the insurgents and the Chadian military in 2017, her 'husband' was killed. Widowed at 16, she was forced to marry another older man who was a member of the armed group, who was killed shortly afterwards. She was married for a third time, and this time she became pregnant.

Maimuna was desperate to leave her third 'husband'. She fought him and cried over everything. Finally, one day, she managed to escape. Some Fulani men helped her to reach safety, avoiding the main roads and giving her cow's milk. They arrived in Niger, but the villagers feared that Boko Haram would follow Maimuna to their village and put them all at risk. Maimuna pleaded with the villagers to let her stay, but they put her on a donkey and sent her back to the Nigerian border. From there, she proceeded to her home village, hoping her father would accept her. Sadly, he was also scared and asked her to leave.

In June 2018, Maimuna found herself in Maiduguri, alone and pregnant in a host community for internally displaced people. One woman was kind enough to host her, but this relationship did not last because Maimuna started fighting with another young girl who was working at the house. Frightened by her behaviour, the host reported her to a social worker, who interviewed her and referred her to a transit centre.

At the centre, Maimuna received psychosocial support and prepared her to become a mother. She delivered her baby at the Maiduguri hospital and received a special maternity kit, all vaccinations, and support with birth registration. She was released from the transit centre but returned to take classes at the temporary learning centre. Thanks to the support she received, Maimuna slowly recovered from the experiences she has had and regained the strength to build her life again, one day at a time.

*Name changed to protect her identity

27.4 Supporting the reintegration of girls formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups

27.4.1 Challenges to reintegration of girls

Girls are particularly vulnerable to a range of negative experiences and long-term consequences from association with armed forces and armed groups.

Stigmatisation: In many contexts, although not all, girls experience stigmatisation, marginalisation and rejection by their families and communities on their return. Because girls are traditionally seen as submissive, obedient and less capable of significant violence, the concept of girls who have been members of armed forces and armed groups can be challenging to accept. Because of this prejudice, but also due to the lack of structures and services that can effectively support children's mental health and psychosocial well-being, communities and families may fear that these girls will be engage in criminal behaviour, negatively influence other girls in the community, and disrupt traditions and culture. Community members may also fear that they will bring insecurity to the community if followed by their 'husbands', who may seek to reclaim them and/or their children or punish them for escaping.[527]

Community members may view girls as 'unclean' and 'promiscuous', and fear that they will spread sexually transmitted infections. In many conservative cultures, "if a girl has had sexual contact with a man outside marriage – voluntarily or not – she is considered to no longer have value in society."[528] Even where girls have managed to avoid sexual violence, the fact that they were away from the family home for a period of time exposes them to negative assumptions and judgement.

In some cases, families may publicly reject their daughters due to societal pressure. Being viewed as impure and unmarriageable can prove a real challenge to obtaining acceptance from family and community members; "girls formerly associated with fighting forces, particularly those that return with children, appear to have higher rates of rejection by community members than their male counterparts."[529]

Key factors in how girls will be received include traditional gender roles, attitudes towards the armed force or group, and whether their recruitment is perceived to have been forced or voluntary. In many cases, mediation prior to and after their return can positively influence families' and communities' acceptance of girls.

Girls who are mothers: Girls who have become mothers are likely to need additional support. Not only may they be struggling with the stress of parenting with little or no support, they may also have the practical burdens of providing for their child and securing childcare so that they can participate in reintegration activities.

They may also struggle with their own feelings towards the child – particularly if they are born out of rape. Girls' ambivalent feelings toward their children may affect the mother-child relationship and lead to aggressive parental behaviour. Conversely, motherhood may also represent a source of hope and purpose that can help girls to overcome challenges and feel motivated to move forward and seek to improve their circumstances.[530] In addition, the burden of stigma on return to her community may contrast negatively with the girl's experience in the armed force or group, which may have provided physical protection or material support that a girl, on her own, may not be able to secure. Child protection practitioners should be wary of making presumptions and seek to understand the complex realities each individual girl is experiencing.

Mental health and psychosocial well-being: Girls may face significant challenges in trying to come to terms with their experiences, and with their changed circumstances in life. At a young age they may find themselves to have become mothers or widows; they may have acquired a disability or sexually transmitted infection; they may have participated in violence and killing; they may be recovering from extreme and sustained sexual violence; and they may now be facing the prospect of being 'unmarriageable'. These challenges are often compounded by isolation and loneliness due to stigmatisation and rejection by family and community.

It is helpful to recognise that although technically children, many girls, especially those who have their own children, have needs, ambitions and responsibilities that extend beyond western notions of childhood,[531] such as the need to provide for their children, and the desire to be recognised and accepted as women and mothers by their community members.

Mental health: the number one challenge for girls formerly associated with armed forces and groups

"The number one challenge for girls that we see in Kenya who have run away from armed forces and groups is major depression mainly resulting from severe trauma. Sadly, a lot of these girls have completely given up on life. Most have children of their own or are pregnant when they arrive, and many have very difficult, painful and complex sexual health problems. They feel completely rejected by society and see no hope for the future. When we place **them** with families or in specialist centers,

many of them can't cope. They lack the social skills to be able to interact with other people. They often become aggressive, violent, withdrawn, or engage in risk taking behaviours. If they break the rules too many times they are kicked out and then end up living in the street; where they face further health problems and physical safety issues.

"One such girl has been in Nairobi for the past six years waiting for her resettlement claim to be processed. In that time, she has been placed with more than ten families and been in and out of numerous institutions. When she arrived, she had one child, now she has another. She has undergone psychological counselling but her trauma is very severe, having been used as a wife by numerous armed militants in very unpleasant circumstances from the age of nine years.

"In my opinion, psychosocial support is still a major gap in the support that we can provide to children formally associated with armed forces and armed groups, especially young girls who need a more comprehensive and long-term support. It is also very difficult for children who need intensive or specialist psychiatric care. It's almost impossible to find funding for antipsychotic support and treatment, which are expensive and need long-term management. Donors have been reluctant to fund mental health interventions especially those with long-term effects and costly implications. We need more awareness and understanding about these issues in order to not fail these children. Realising the special needs and level of vulnerability of this group of children, and given the competing challenges that come with sexual and gender based abuse and violence, a more comprehensive package that caters for their social, psychological, medical and livelihood needs would be more effective and would go a long way in ensuring a more dignified life."

Humanitarian worker, East Africa[532]

Traditional gender roles: Girls may struggle to adjust to traditional gender roles and to respect authority figures in the family and community, especially if they have experienced power and status with an armed force or armed group. "As civilians, higher- ranking girls face a society which – unlike the military – neither recognizes their past achievements nor offers them other ways to prove themselves equal to men. It seems almost impossible to retain as civilians the independence and status which they acquired as fighters."[533]

Economic challenges: Girls are likely to face multiple layers of disadvantage when seeking to support themselves or contribute towards their or their families' livelihoods. They are likely to have to navigate pre-existing gender discrimination in their society, meaning that they are less likely than boys to attend school, and less favoured than boys in competitive employment markets. Stigmatisation may manifest in girls being shunned by employers and customers alike.

Where girls cannot access economic reintegration support, or when this fails, they may be pushed towards lower-paid and lower-skilled work at best, and fall into illegal, dangerous and exploitative work at worst, including sexual exploitation as a survival strategy.[534] Some girls described deliberately taking 'a boyfriend' with whom they would have sex in exchange for money for school fees. This increased their risk of pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases and social stigma, and had a negative impact on their mental, emotional and physical well-being.[535]

Where viable economic opportunities are made available to girls, they are likely to be extremely motivated to make the most of these. For example, a child protection practitioner working with girls formerly associated with armed groups in the Central African Republic commented that, "Some of the girls we were supporting were doing really well. They seemed very mature, particularly the ones who had children themselves. It was like they understood the value of the opportunities they were being offered. The livelihoods training, literacy classes, agricultural kits, etc. They really seized them with both hands."[536]

Children of girls associated with armed forces and groups: Children of girls formerly associated with armed forces and groups may also face stigmatisation, particularly when their mothers were associated with armed groups considered as enemies. They may struggle to build their own identity, as it may be associated with violent acts their father committed. Research conducted in Uganda shows that children born out of captivity of the Lord's Resistance Army "face significant stigma from communities, peers, and even at times from family members, including violent abuse from stepfathers, so they employ strategies to keep their identities secret... Support from family members is vital to their sense of well-being, especially with their mothers whom they love deeply. Many children lost siblings in the bush... live with memories and trauma... are unlikely to access their land inheritances, and they feel hopeless".[537] Lack of birth certificates or other civil documentation can prevent these children from accessing essential services. Some mothers struggle to register the birth of children born as a result of rape in the absence of the father.

27.4.2 The role of child protection actors in supporting girls' reintegration

For most girls who leave armed forces or armed groups, their goal is to be accepted, respected and treated no differently from other girls.

Building on the detailed discussion in Chapters 21 to 24, the following types of support could be considered. All activities should be carried out within the context of broad community-based support, in order to avoid identifying and stigmatising girls formerly associated with armed forces or armed groups

· **Mitigate risks to girls' physical safety:** Depending on the context, this might include for example, provision of lights in camps, organising large groups of people to go to collect water or firewood together, or action taken by community leaders, religious leaders or police to demonstrate that harassment or assault of girls and women will not be tolerated.

· **Provide access to immediate and essential medical care:** Girls should have access to medical care; particularly maternal health and sexual health care, and guidance on family planning and birth control. Their children should have access to paediatric care including early childhood vaccination.

· **Offer family and community mediation:** support girls and their family members to resolve difficulties before and during the reintegration process. Work with community members to promote compassion and acceptance for girls.

· **Identify the most appropriate care arrangement:** girls may be unwilling or unable to be reunified with family members. They may prefer to live alone with their child/ren, or with a partner or their partner's family. They may also wish to live with another family that agrees to support them. Work with girls to identify an appropriate care arrangement in the short-term, and ways to move towards a preferred care arrangement in the longer term.

· **Support opportunities for girls to contribute to their communities:** The ability to be useful and offers girls the chance to gain respect and acceptance of family and community members, to be seen in a positive role, and to move away from feeling like victims and towards feeling accomplished and self-confident.[538] This might be achieved through community service or work.

· **Promote recognition of the role of perpetrators in recruitment of children:** Publicly establishing that the perpetrators of child recruitment and use are most at fault, rather than children themselves, can help to promote acceptance. This might be through community-based mechanisms, or formal prosecution of perpetrators. See also Chapter 25 on Addressing Impunity for Child Recruitment and Use.

· **Support to address underlying issues:** It is important to understand the original root causes, often multiple, complex and intertwining, that led to a girl becoming associated with an armed force or armed group, and to support her to overcome or address these causes. For example, if a girl was pushed towards association because of abuse in her home, then superficial 'family reunification' will not address this underlying issue.

- **Support girls to meet their economic needs:** Design reintegration plans that allow girls to meet their (and their children's) immediate needs, such as food, water, shelter and protection, to reduce their vulnerability to harmful, hazardous or exploitative labour. Support girls to establish and maintain viable, safe and appropriate employment or self-employment. In addition to the obvious material benefits, this can mean their families view them as valuable contributors, rather than as burdens. Because these activities help to increase feelings of self-worth, self-confidence and hope, girls are able to make a more positive contribution to the social dynamics in the household.

  In some cases boyfriends, husbands or parents can become resentful – in such cases it has proved helpful to invite these to sit in on training activities so that they can feel included and invested.

- **Education support:** Support girls to access education, including those with their own children. This can be done in various ways: by increasing school safety, campaigning to demonstrate the utility of education, involving parents in school life, or locating schools or non-formal learning centres in the community so that people know what is going on in school. It may also be appropriate to facilitate the exploration of childcare options for all girls with their own children, whether they were formerly associated with an armed force or group or not. See also Chapter 24 on Education Support for Reintegration.

- **Support girls to acquire relevant life skills**: Life skills should include topics such as infant health and development, mother and child bonding, parenting skills and sexual and reproductive health as well as leadership skills, gender-based violence and decision-making.

- **Promote opportunities for social support:** Facilitate opportunities for girls to access psychosocial support through social networks and support groups. Community-based clubs and peer groups can offer girls a chance to listen to each other, realise that they are not alone in how they feel, solve problems collectively, develop friendships and extend their social networks and access practical and emotional support. Child protection actors can help to identify a space for girls to meet, encourage girls to come, and perhaps provide initial funds for materials, but should encourage girls to lead. Through these groups, girls may also find it possible to tackle community problems of concern to them with community leaders, such as discrimination.[539]

  Considering that girls may have been deprived of guidance from adult women while associated with an armed force or group, finding ways to link girls to women's groups can tap into the significant resources that these women may have, including educating young girls about positive social norms and values that empower them, fulfill their rights and help them access support.

- **Address childcare challenges:** Lack of childcare is likely to negatively affect girls' ability to participate in important activities, such as education. At a minimum, it may be possible for girls to take turns caring for each other's children.

- **Support the integration of children of girls in armed forces and groups.** Children whose mothers were associated with armed forces or armed groups are likely to suffer stigmatisation and to be singled out. This stigma affects both the mother and the child. It is key to support the integration of children born out of war returning with their mothers. This requires a long-term commitment that should be coordinated with longer-term child protection programming. (*See Section 21.5.2 on Addressing immediate and longer-term needs in reintegration programmes*)

27.5 Key resources

- The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 'Girls Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups: Lessons learnt and good practices on prevention of recruitment and use', December 2021. **Link**

- United Nations Inter-Agency Working Group on Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration, 'The Integrated DDR Standards', **Link.** Module 5.20 on Children and DDR (2021). **Link**

- Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 'Guidelines for Integrating Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action. Reducing risk, promoting resilience and aiding recovery', 2015. **Link**

- GBV Area of Responsibility, Global Protection Cluster, 'Handbook for Coordinating GBV Interventions in Emergencies', 2019. **Link**

- International Rescue Committee, 'Caring for Child Survivors of Sexual Abuse Guidelines', online. **Link**

- Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 'Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse', website. **Link**

Chapter 28
Recruitment of Children by Armed Groups Designated as Terrorist Groups

Introduction

Children have been recruited, used and abused by armed groups in conflict, including armed groups which espouse so-called 'extremist' views or are designated as terrorist groups, for generations.[540] The motivations of groups designated terrorist and their methods of recruiting children are similar to those of other armed groups. The factors that make children vulnerable to recruitment are also similar, for example poverty. During association, boys and girls experience, witness and are forced to commit violence, just as they are with a wide variety of groups around the world. The experience of children recruited and used by armed groups designated as terrorist groups is similar to the experiences of children recruited and used by other groups, and their right to rehabilitation and reintegration support is the same.[541]

In the last several decades, the UN and regional bodies as well as nation States have designated certain armed groups as 'terrorist organisations'. As States seek to prevent individuals and armed groups from carrying out acts of terrorism, new terminology, policy laws and frameworks have emerged that can make engagement with such groups for release of children risky or impossible. The full legal implications of designation for practitioners are beyond the scope of this handbook, but see section 28.4 for some discussion.

The phrases 'violent extremism' and 'radicalisation' have become widely used, despite there being no universally agreed definition or conceptualization of either phrase.[542] Although they may be used to signal that an individual or group is fundamentally different (in motivation or threat posed) from other types of armed groups or violent perpetrators, empirical evidence suggests that this is an unnuanced approach. Nor does it fully recognise the needs and rights of children affected by and recruited and used by such groups.

Recruitment and use of children by armed groups labelled as 'terrorist' or 'violent extremist'[543] is not fundamentally different from recruitment and use of children by other armed groups throughout history or in other conflict settings. Programming for prevention, release and reintegration of such children should therefore be similar to programming for children associated with other armed groups. As with all other contexts, the starting point should be a situation and context analysis that covers security and other considerations, including the drivers for child association, children's varied experiences while in the group, and how best to support their reintegration.

Children who have been recruited and used by armed groups designated as terrorist have experienced grave violations of their rights. Over-reliance on security-based frameworks rather than human rights frameworks and child protection approaches risks compounding those violations while failing to address their needs and to consider their best interests. As the UN Secretary-General has stated: "Terrorism is fundamentally the denial and destruction of human rights, and the fight against terrorism will never succeed by perpetuating the same denial and destruction… When we protect human rights, we are tackling the root causes of terrorism."[544]

28.1 Definitions and use of the terms 'Terrorism', 'Violent Extremism' and 'Radicalisation'

There are no commonly agreed definitions of the terms 'terrorism', 'violent extremism' or 'radicalisation'. They are often used inconsistently and sometimes interchangeably.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines terrorism as:

> **"The unlawful use of violence and intimidation, especially against civilians in the pursuit of political aims."**

Some governments and regional bodies have developed expanded definitions, with recognition of political or ideological motivations. For example, NATO's definition is:

"The unlawful use or threatened use of force or violence, instilling of fear or terror, against individuals or property, in an attempt to coerce or intimidate governments or societies, or to gain control over a population, to achieve political, religious or ideological objectives."

'Acts and offences of terrorism' are defined by various international instruments, and where a State is party to these conventions, they should domesticate the relevant offences and adopt definitions that are consistent with the conventions, consistent with international law and standards, and adhere to the principles of legality, necessity and proportionality. Conduct prohibited as a terrorist act must be defined with enough precision for people, including children, to know what specific conduct is illegal in a way that is not overly broad or inclusive of permissible conduct. Penalties for prohibited conduct must be proportionate to their seriousness.[545]

In practice, in many States, national legislation is often vaguely conceptualised or uses very broad definitions of terrorism, if any at all. Often 'association with' a designated group is criminalised, including acts that are not otherwise criminal, such as cooking or driving. This results in children being "criminalised for association with terrorist groups, even for marginal involvement, rather than treated as victims of grooming and calculated indoctrination by recruiters."[546]

The phrase 'violent extremism' is also used by different actors in a variety of ways to describe a stance of legitimising violence because of political, ideological, ethnic, tribal or religious reasons, but again has no universal definition.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines radicalisation as: "the action or process of causing someone to adopt radical positions on political or social issues". Yet it is not clear what a 'radical' position is or who defines it and how it can be proven that someone holds such a view. Furthermore, holding a 'radical' position does not automatically' predispose a person or group to violence or conflict, and criminalizing the holding of 'radical' positions has implications for freedom of thought, expressions, association, and religion.

The lack of an internationally agreed definition is again problematic. Colloquially, the term radicalisation suggests a linear process that leads an individual from embracing beliefs along a path that ends with engaging in violence on behalf of an armed group or cause. There is a presumption that ideology is the main motive for a child to associate with a particular group. However, like adults, children may be engaged in armed groups for a wide range of personal and collective reasons. Indeed, UN research has found that the factors that influence child involvement with armed groups – including those characterised or listed as violent extremist or terrorist – are numerous, multi-dimensional and different for each child.[547]

28.2 Not just ideology: Addressing the real reasons why children join armed groups designated as terrorist groups

Ideology is often a proxy for more important factors that are overlooked, such as family, community, grievance, significance, and status. Evidence suggests that ideology is not the primary, or even a significant, driver for children to join groups. Rather, psychological distress, social isolation, traumatic experiences and losses, ostracism and discrimination are key factors driving child association with armed forces and groups.[548] Although ideology can be a post hoc justification, when present, it is only one of several factors. Just as for children associated with armed groups that are not labelled as terrorist, each child has an individual combination of interconnected risks and needs as well as resilience factors, influenced by the social and structural context they live in, that combine to make up the push and pull factors that results in their association. These factors might include insecurity, poverty, a lack of education or employment opportunities, the influence of family and peer networks, issues related to identity and status, abuse, a desire for revenge, or manipulation or coercion.

Where ideology – whether religious, political or other – is a factor, children's commitment to an ideology is likely to change and fluctuate over time. They may be less committed initially but become more committed over time through indoctrination or to justify acts they may have committed or their association with the armed group. Evidence shows that, as with most armed groups, terrorist groups work to indoctrinate children during their association, but the assumption that all children who become associated with such groups adopt their beliefs is false. Many do not. Therefore, focusing on the narrow factor of ideology to prevent or end association is unlikely to address the child's needs or address the risks of their continued engagement with the group.

The United Nations University recommends that efforts to prevent and respond to child recruitment and use by armed groups should "only incorporate ideological components where individually necessary and where they can be embedded into larger, holistic efforts to address the needs and risks of children."[549] In particular, programmes should focus on restoring the child's well-being and enabling integration and acceptance into a community. An effective response must consider the totality of the individual's experience, particularly the multiple drivers for their association with the group, their experience while in the group, their exit process, or thereafter, rather than only initial motivations.[550]

> **"In Nigeria… Boko Haram… conflated its religious ideology with a rejection of the Nigerian state, the latter of which may be the greater driver of association with Boko Haram for Nigerians who have experienced state oppression and violence."[551]**

Using a 'deradicalisation' approach conceptualised around changing an individual's ideology may also increase stigma and isolation, which can hamper reintegration. The politicised nature of these terms and the related stigma may disincentivise participation in such programmes and undermine the humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence. Moreover, such programmes may also create risk to programme providers who could be viewed as politically aligned with a particular party to conflict.

Accepting the prevailing view that ideology is at the root of children's association with armed groups designated as terrorist organisations also leads states, child protection actors and organisations, donors, children's families and communities to have unrealistic and inaccurate understandings about the types of interventions necessary to prevent and respond to recruitment and use of children by such groups and to support children's reintegration and their outcomes.

The United Nations University's report Cradled by Conflict "cautions against viewing today's conflicts and the groups fighting them – particularly those labelled as terrorist, violent extremist, or jihadist – as exceptional and thus exempt from comparison with other contexts and/or necessitating unique responses.[552] In particular, demarcating armed groups like Islamic State, Boko Haram, and Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb as exceptional, solely based on the ideology they promote, oversimplifies their relationships with ideology and obscures the totality of the dynamics that render them challenging to address programmatically (e.g., territorial control, integration with organized crime). Numerous findings reinforce the conclusion that there are enough similarities with previous conflicts to warrant applying lessons from past conflicts and programming experiences."

28.3 Implications of labelling armed groups as terrorist

Research suggests there are strong similarities between the motivations of armed groups designated terrorist to recruit and use children and those of other armed groups.[553] Importantly, the violation of children's rights is clearly evident in all contexts. However, if a group is designated as a terrorist organisation, whether by the United Nations or by a regional body or a State, specific legal frameworks or regimes may apply.[554] These may criminalise interaction with members of the armed group, making engagement for release of children exceptionally risky, or they may contain 'material support' provisions that can

be broadly interpreted to prohibit provision of basic humanitarian assistance to certain individuals, including children.

Labelling of a group with which children are associated as terrorist has serious implications for the children concerned. Penalties under counter-terrorism laws tend to be harsher than a state's standard criminal law. The State may have additional powers, and procedural protections in the justice system, including provisions specific to children, are frequently over-ridden. Criminal processes may be conducted by military or intelligence rather than civilian courts, for example, and independent oversight may be limited. Often individuals are held for indeterminate periods of time without family contact, and children are detained rather than handed over to child protection authorities.

Children associated with armed groups are treated through a security lens rather than a child rights or child protection lens, leading to the risk that legal and protection standards are diluted and that their specific needs, rights and best interests are not considered. This is considerably more so in the case of children associated armed groups designated as terrorist groups.

Further, children are rarely differentiated from adults under counter-terrorism legislation, counter-terrorism law may have supremacy over other penal code or procedural provisions applicable to criminal cases and the minimum age of criminal responsibility may be lower for such offences. Of the national legislation reviewed in CRIN's 2018 research, five countries[555] allow prosecution for counter-terrorism offences from the age of seven (the average was ten years), often irrespective of whether a child had been forced or coerced into becoming associated.[556] This is not consistent with the Committee on the Rights of the Child's guidance which, in General Comment 24, recommends that the minimum age of criminal responsibility should be no younger than 14 years and commends parties that have a higher age of 15 or 16 years.

The best interests of the child should be a primary consideration in all decisions, policies and practices involving children, including design and implementation of counter-terrorism laws and policies. Law enforcement should exercise maximum restraint in any use of force against children and should use detention only in exceptional circumstances, as a last resort and for the shortest period of time.[557] States have a duty to uphold human rights while developing their counter-terrorism strategies.

The United Nations Security Council has stated: "States must ensure that any measures taken to combat terrorism comply with all their obligations under international law, and should adopt such measures in accordance with international law, in particular international human rights, refugee and humanitarian law."[558] References to compliance with international human rights, refugee, and humanitarian law are also typically included in Security Council counter-terrorism Resolutions,[559] but often with insufficient guidance as to how a rights-based approach can be ensured in practice.

Despite all the protections to which children are entitled under international law, when suspected of association with a terrorist group, states often feel less obliged to uphold children's rights, to treat them primarily as victims and to ensure that their best interests are prioritised. Adolescent boys often suffer the most in this respect.

28.3.1 How 'association' is defined in the context of groups labelled as terrorist organisations

'Association' with an armed group designated as a terrorist organisation is often defined in a broad manner. Children with even a casual links with such a group, such as those living in areas under their control, or those whose family members may be associated, can be at risk of being detained or prosecuted for association. Again, this concept is based on misunderstandings of international child rights, what constitutes association (as per the Paris Principles), the reasons why children become associated in the first place and often mistaken assumptions that they are likely to be fully aware of and have adopted the armed group's objectives. Depending on the national legislation, children who serve in support roles, such as performing domestic duties, and those who show support such as by re-

sharing posts on social media all could be included in some definitions of "association".[560] Expressions of support for particular groups, acts, or ideologies that do not rise to the level of incitement to discrimination, hostility, or violence, or to committing terrorist acts, should not constitute criminal offences, particularly in the context of the manipulative recruitment strategies that such groups employ.

> Pursuant 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.
>
> Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups, paragraph 2.1.

As securitisation increases so does surveillance, putting children associated or formerly associated with such armed groups, their families and their friends as well as those who work with them at greater risk of suspicion, stigmatisation or labelling (for instance, through placing children on watch lists – which raises concerns in terms of data protection and privacy). In some contexts, these individuals may be required by the state to assist in sharing or gathering information. In addition to violating a child's rights, it can violate professional standards, disrupt therapeutic relationships, and create new sources of grievance, all of which can affect a child's prospects for successful reintegration.

28.4 Principles of programming for children associated with groups that commit terrorist acts

The United Nations University's 2018 report on child involvement with armed groups in contemporary conflict proposes five principles to guide decisions on when and how to adjust prevention and release and reintegration efforts for children in the face of shifting dynamics of contemporary conflicts, including for designated terrorist groups:[561]

- ***Avoid programmes focused primarily on ideological factors*** – each context and each child is different and "one-size-fits-all ideological interventions are more likely to be one-size-fits-none",[562] See Chapter 5 on Situation Analysis and Chapter 18 on Case Management After Release. Instead, programmes need to be developed from an understanding of the realities of children's reasons for association and experiences during association with the armed group and reflect the various and non-linear processes of their leaving it.

- ***Only incorporate ideological components where individually necessary and where they can be embedded into larger, holistic efforts to address the needs and risks of children***, as stated in Paris Principle 7.30. See Chapter 21 on Planning and Delivering Reintegration Programmes, in particular section 21.3 on supporting children known to be formerly associated with armed forces or armed groups alongside other vulnerable children.

- ***Ensure all interventions are empirically based*** on a thorough understanding of the particular context, including why and how children became and have remained associated, and of the risks involved in programming. See also Chapter 5 on Situation analysis and Chapter 6 on Risk Assessment, Security Planning and Risk-Informed Programming.

- ***Rigorously assess interventions over the long term*** – do not be afraid to adapt if circumstances on the ground change and if interventions are proving inappropriate and/ or ineffective. See also Chapter 9 on Programme Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning.

- **_Engage children not just as beneficiaries, but as partners_**, as stated by Paris Principle 3.14 on child participation and respect for the views of the child. See also Chapter 5 on Situation Analysis and Chapter 15 on Child Participation in Peacebuilding Activities.

Table 28:1 provides some suggestions when developing programmes for children associated with groups that commit terrorist acts. They are neither prescriptive nor exhaustive and more detailed guidance can be found in the Cradled by Conflict: Implications for Programming Technical Note.[563]

TABLE 28.1 Suggestions for programming with children associated with groups that commit terrorist acts

Focus on children's rights and best interests in securitised operating environments	· Develop engagement strategies to reclaim and uphold the child's best interests, through dialogue with community actors, local authorities, state and non-state actors, and, where possible, armed groups. · Explore how children could demonstrate to the community that they do not pose a threat, without joining a self-defence force or the community's preferred armed group. Are there potential risks and stigma involved? · Local actors, including children, parents and families, peers, teachers, civil society and others should be considered key actors from the earliest stage of programme design, as they will be best placed to identify which actions might be useful. · Engage with state and non-state authorities where it is safe to do so to prevent and mitigate unlawful and/or harmful detention of children. · Protect child protection actors, at-risk children and data.
Rethink assumptions about neutrality	· Align the expectations of donors, programme managers and local stakeholders, including children, with the realities of what is possible given the difficulty children face in remaining neutral. · Focus on community-based prevention and preparations for reintegration. Consider what barriers there may be to acceptance and reintegration and how these can be addressed. · Emphasise that children should be treated primarily as victims and that this should be reflected in any criminal proceedings against them, which should adhere to principles of juvenile justice, due process and fair trial. The coercion to which any child may have been subjected should be considered in any justice processes. · Be age- and gender-sensitive in conducting context and situation analysis and in assessing security risks.

Be cautious about the role of ideology	· Following a careful risk assessment, carry out a comprehensive situation analysis of the conflict to understand the multiple factors that lead to children associating with armed groups, including those designated as terrorist organisations. Consider overlapping roots of potential exclusion such as gender, disability, religion, ethnic group, tribe, political affiliation, or other divisions that may affect children's ability to recover.
	· Promote an individual case management approach where possible and understanding of each child's individual context and the factors that led to their association, while not singling out or stigmatising individual children.
	· Avoid simplistic ideology-oriented prevention and response programmes.
	· Incorporate targeted activities and/or interventions related to ideology only when:
	  – there is a nuanced, evidence-based understanding of what ideology means in the local context and for individuals involved in the conflict;
	  – there are clear indications that an ideological component might have a preventive or reintegration effect; and
	  – any ideological components to programming can be embedded into larger, holistic programming.
	· Engage in dialogue with States at national and global levels to deconstruct the simple treatment of 'ideology' to demonstrate its complexity, particularly interrelated factors.
	· Use terminology that does not perpetuate negative stereotypes or discrimination against associated groups when discussing specific ideologies

Understand and positively build on children's pro-social motivations	· Programmes should reinforce children's sense of self-worth and need for belonging to something larger than themselves.
	· As some armed groups have successfully tapped into children's need to express their agency and control, programmes should encourage child-led and peer-to-peer approaches whenever possible, and at all stages of programme design and implementation.
Support children's long-term and non-linear exit processes from armed groups	· Engage with parents, local leaders and media to develop shared understandings of the difficult and long-term nature of exit and reintegration. Such engagement should help to increase tolerance and contribute to supporting sustained, locally-driven efforts to support reintegration and prevention. Propose meaningful alternatives to mitigate the risk of children becoming again associated with an armed group.
	· Consider the potential role of peer networks in the release and reintegration of children from armed groups. A careful risk assessment of the impact on and threats to peers should be conducted.
	· Provide children with individualised, holistic support through the process of exit and reintegration within an overall community-based approach, which may include mentoring and peer-to-peer support activities.
	· Engage with states and donors funding reintegration programmes to explain the complex and long-term process of exit, to adjust their expectations, and to gain their buy-in for innovative, long-term programmes funded over several years.
Be cautious about the 'violent extremist' lens	· Carry out in-depth situational and conflict analyses, as localised as possible, to examine the full spectrum of structural, social, and individual factors that influence child recruitment and use, including vulnerability and resilience factors.
	· Coordinate approaches at the national and local levels, including a joint approach to language and messaging during advocacy by child protection actors with relevant government bodies or States and while designing programmes for communities, ensuring that all are formulated in line with established child rights standards.
	· Use the evidence on children's actual pathways to recruitment – generated by research, situation analyses, monitoring, evaluation, and learning from programmes – to inform messaging and to promote greater nuance in public, donor, and partner understanding of the drivers of current conflicts and individual involvement in them.
	· Engage with government actors to discuss the potentially damaging implications of the use of terms such as 'violent extremist' and 'terrorist' in characterszing and engaging with local armed groups.
	· Advocate for States not to enact rules that would prevent humanitarian actors engaging with non-State armed groups, even when they are labelled as 'terrorists', because this would prevent any possibility of supporting children.
	· Consider the terminology you, your organization, other NGOs, etc. use. Using terms like 'terrorist' or 'violent extremist' may reinforce the assumption that these groups are different and require exceptional responses. Consider using the terms 'children associated with armed forces or armed groups' or a broad shorthand (eg, associated children), which works regardless of an armed group's designation or characterization.
	· Conduct an in-depth analysis of the armed group and engage with them where possible (see below).
Consider the often ongoing nature of conflict	· Consider the increased risks for children and programmes in contexts where the conflict is ongoing and there is no agreement with the armed group.
	· Undertake comprehensive and frequent conflict and security assessments.
	· Recognise that the risk of reoffending is higher in contexts where the conflict is ongoing.
	· Recognise that children are more vulnerable to retribution and stigmatisation in contexts where the conflict is ongoing.
	· Recognise that the potential for reintegration is more restricted in contexts where the conflict is ongoing. Local communities may be more reluctant to accept returning children.
	· Recognise that national governments may be undertaking counter-terrorism activities in the same areas as reintegration is taking place.
	· Recognise that national security agencies are often dominant actors, and work actively to include civilian actors and civil society organisations.

28.5 Key Resources

- Siobhan O'Neil & Kato Van Broeckhoven, 'Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict', United Nations University, New York, USA, 2018. **Link**

- Dr Claudia Seymour, Technical Note: 'Cradled by Conflict: Implications for programming – Preventing and Responding to Child Recruitment and Use in Contemporary Conflicts', United Nations University, New York, USA, 2018. **Link**

- The Global Counterterrorism Forum, 'Neuchâtel Memorandum on Good Practices for Juvenile Justice in a Counterterrorism Context', 2015. **Link**

- OHCHR, 'Protecting Children's Rights in the Context of Counter-terrorism' A/HRC/40/28, 2019. **Link**.

- Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, Policy Note: 'A Path to Reintegration: The Role of Handover Protocols in Protecting the Rights of Children', December 2020. **Link**

- Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, Policy Note: 'Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism: The Erosion of Children's Rights in Armed Conflict', January 2020. **Link**

- Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict and Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, Operational Guidance: Negotiating and Implementing Handover Protocols, March 2022. **Link**

- International Alert & UNICEF, 'Bad Blood: Perceptions of children born of conflict-related sexual violence and women and girls associated with Boko Haram in northeast Nigeria', 2016. **Link**.

- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 'Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: the Role of the Justice System', 2017. **Link**.

- United Nations Office of Counter Terrorism, UN Counter-Terrorism Center, Handbook: 'Children Affected by the foreign-fighter phenomenon: Ensuring a child rights-based approach, 2019'. **Link**.

Endnotes SECTION 7

488 "Of the 299 UN-verified cases of recruitment in Central African Republic in 2017, 34% were girls. In DR Congo, the UN mission reported in 2015 that between 30 and 40% of those recruited in the previous six years were girls. Meanwhile, 32% of child recruitment cases in Nigeria involved girls in 2017, where there has been an alarming spike in the use of girls as 'suicide bombers' by Boko Haram". Child Soldiers International, '5 child soldier myths – most child soldiers are boys', online, accessed January 2019.

489 Irma Specht, 'Red Shoes. Experiences of girl-combatants in Liberia', International Labour Office, Geneva, Switzerland, 2006, (hereafter, 'Red Shoes'), p.103.

490 Save the Children, 'Forgotten Casualties of War: Girls in armed conflict', Save the Children, London, 2005, (hereafter, 'Forgotten Casualties of War'). p.1.

491 See generally, Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 'Girls Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups: Lessons learnt and good practices on prevention of recruitment and use, release and reintegration', December 2020, (hereafter, 'Girls Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups'). **Link**

492 Irma Specht & Larry Attree, 'The reintegration of teenage girls and young women', *Intervention* 2006, Vol. 4(3), p.220.

493 Myriam Denov & Alexandra Ricard-Guay, 'Girl soldiers: towards a gendered understanding of wartime recruitment, participation, and demobilisation', *Gender & Development*, Vol.21, Issue 3, 2013, (hereafter, 'Girl soldiers'). p.473.

494 Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women, 'Landmark resolution on Women, Peace and Security', online. Accessed January 2019. **Link**

495 'The reintegration of teenage girls and young women', p.221.

496 'Red Shoes', p.11.

497 The Paris Principles: Principles and guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups, UNICEF, February 2007, (hereafter, 'The Paris Principles'). Principle 6.30.3. **Link**

498 'Red Shoes', p.11.

499 'Girl soldiers', p.477.

500 Yvonne Keairns, 'It's Not How They Say It', *Harper's* magazine, 2005.

501 Draws on 'The reintegration of teenage girls and young women', p.221.

502 The Romeo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative, 'Living Within Armed Groups: A Gendered Perspective', Centre for Foreign Policy Studies, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Canada, 7–9 May 2012, (hereafter, 'Living Within Armed Groups: A Gendered Perspective'). p.8.

503 Watchlist on Children in Armed Conflict, 'Who will care for us? Grave violations against children in northeastern Nigeria,' September 2014. p.26.

504 'Living Within Armed Groups: A Gendered Perspective', p.5.

505 World Health Organization, 'World Report on Violence and Health', 2002.

506 Interagency Standing Committee, 'Guidelines for Integrating Gender-based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action. Reducing risk, promoting resilience and aiding recovery', 2015, p.322.

507 'Girl soldiers', p.478.

508 'The reintegration of teenage girls and young women', p.222.

509 'Red Shoes', p.50.

510 'Red Shoes', p.12.

511 'Girl soldiers', p.485.

512 Bureau International des Droits des Enfants, 'Children and Armed Conflict: A guide to international humanitarian and human rights law', Montreal, Canada, 2010, p.131–132.

513 Susan McKay & Dyan E. Mazurana. 'Where are the girls? Girls in fighting forces in Northern Uganda, Sierra Leone and Mozambique: Their lives during and after war', 2004, (hereafter, 'Where are the girls?), p.121.

514 International Center for Transitional Justice, 'Accountability, Reintegration, and Reparations for Former Child Soldiers: Expert Roundtable Meeting Concept Note', p.2. See also, The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 'Girls Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups: Lessons learnt and good practices on prevention of recruitment and use, release and reintegration', December 2020.

515 Virginie Ladisch, 'Seeing Former Child Soldiers as More than just Victims', International Centre for Transitional Justice, 19 November 2013, online. Accessed January 2019.

516 'Where are the girls?', see p.121

517 'Forgotten Casualties of War', p.12.

518 'Forgotten Casualties of War', p.12.

519 'The Paris Principles', Principle 7.60.

520 'The Paris Principles', Principle 6.30.1.

521 'Red Shoes', p.14.

522 United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), 'Getting it Right, Doing it Right: Gender and Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration', 2004, (hereafter, 'Getting it Right, Doing it Right'). p.6.

523 'Getting it Right, Doing it Right', p.7.

524 'Red Shoes', p108.

525 Inter-Agency Standing Committee, Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse website. Accessed January 2021. , Accessed January 2021. **Link**

526 Story documented by a UNICEF child protection specialist, Maiduguri, Nigeria, 2018.

527 'Forgotten Casualties of War', p.20.

528 'Forgotten Casualties of War', p.12.

529 'Girl soldiers', p.481.

530 'Girl soldiers', p.484.

531 'The reintegration of teenage girls and young women', p.220.

532 Personal correspondence with a humanitarian worker in East Africa.

533 'Red Shoes', p.13.

534 'Girls Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups'.

535 Stephanie Simmons Zuilkowski & Theresa S. Betancourt, 'School persistence in the wake of war: Wartime experiences, reintegration supports, and dropout in Sierra Leone', *Comparative Education Review* 58.3, 2014, p.467.

536 Personal correspondence with International Rescue Committee child protection practitioner, Central African Republic, January 2015.

537 Beth Stewart, 'We are all the same': Experiences of children born into LRA captivity', JRP Field Note, 2015. p.vi.

538 Draws on Susan McKay et al.,'Community-based Reintegration of War-Affected Young Mothers: Participation Action Research (PAR) in Liberia, Sierra Leone & Northern Uganda', Par Girl Project, 2010, (hereafter, 'Community-based Reintegration of War-Affected Young Mothers') p.23.

539 Draws on 'Community-based Reintegration of War-Affected Young Mothers', p.33.

540 See Graça Machel, 'Impact of Armed Conflict on Children' A/51/306, **Link;** and Michael Wessells, 'Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection', Harvard University Press, 2006.

541 Siobhan O'Neil & Kato Van Broeckhoven (eds), 'Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict', United Nations University, New York, USA, 2018, (hereafter, 'Cradled by Conflict')**Link**; Theresa S. Betancourt, Ivelina Borisova, Timothy P. Williams, Sarah E. Meyers-Ohki, Julia E. Rubin-Smith, Jeannie Annan & Brandon A. Kohrt, 'Research Review: Psychosocial adjustment and mental health in former child soldiers – a systematic review of the literature and recommendations for future research', *J Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, October 2012.

542 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, University Module Series: 'Counter-Terrorism; Module 2: Conditions Conducive to the Spread of Terrorism', 2018.

543 While international humanitarian law defines what constitutes 'acts of terrorism' in an objective legal sense (notably acts of terrorism can be perpetrated by both State and non-State forces), by contrast the designation of people or groups as 'terrorist' or 'violent extremist' is undefined by international humanitarian law and international human rights law, and accordingly these non-legal terms are often used subjectively, are often stigmatizing, and their use can mask slippages in the application of the law.

544 UN Secretary-General, Speech at SOAS, University of London, on 'Counter-terrorism and human rights: winning the fight while upholding our values', 16 November 2017, online. Accessed January 2019.

545 OHCHR, 'Human Rights, Terrorism, and Counter-terrorism', Fact Sheet no. 32. **Link**

546 See Child Rights Information Network (CRIN), 'Caught in the Crossfire, An international survey of anti-terrorism legislation and its impact on children', 2018, (hereafter, 'Caught in the Crossfire'), p.4.

547 'Cradled by Conflict', p.17.

548 'Cradled by Conflict',.

549 'Cradled by Conflict'.

550 'Cradled by Conflict'.

551 'Cradled by Conflict', p.17.

552 'Cradled by Conflict', p.19.

553 'Cradled by Conflict'.

554 In particular, for example, UN Security Council Resolutions 2178 (2014) and 2396 (2017).

555 Grenada, India, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Trinidad and Tobago.

556 'Caught in the Crossfire', p.8.

557 United Nations General Assembly, A/HRC/40/28 'Protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism', 10 January 2019, paras. 60, 58.

558 United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee, S/RES/1456 (2003), 'Declaration by Foreign Ministers on combating terrorism', 6, p.3.

559 See for example United Nations Security Council Resolution 2396, S/RES/2396, 21 December 2017, preambular paragraph 7, which reaffirms "*that Member States must ensure that any measures taken to counter terrorism comply with all their obligations under international law, in particular international human rights law, international refugee law, and international humanitarian law* [...]"

560 'Cradled by Conflict', pp.42, 220.

561 Cradled by Conflict', pp.20–21.

562 Ibrahim Sesay (with his permission), 'Prevention and Response to Child Recruitment and Use by Contemporary Non-State Armed Groups Engaged in 'Extreme Violence''', Expert Level Working Meeting, Abuja, 4–5 July 2017, quoted from 'Cradled by Conflict', p.20.

563 Dr Claudia Seymour, 'Cradled by conflict: implications for programming. Preventing and responding to child recruitment and use in contemporary conflict. Technical Note.' United Nations University, 2018. **Link**

PARIS PRINCIPLES

OPERATIONAL HANDBOOK

December 2022

PARIS PRINCIPLES STEERING GROUP