i am not trash

A CALL TO ACTION FROM CHILD SOLDIERS

WAR child

I AM NOT TRASH

The Lingala term *kotelengana* literally means 'the trash of the army'.

It is used to describe an ex-child soldier who has no fixed abode or no stable means of revenue and who lives on the streets. They are often malnourished, in poor health, poorly clothed, out of school and have no adult protection or support. They often have their own dependants – girlfriends and babies.

These ex-child soldiers are called *kotelengana* because their communities believe the military didn't even consider them good enough to be in the army.

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FOREWORD

There are two words that should never go together: 'child' and 'soldier'.

Yet there are 300,000 children currently serving in armies and militia around the world.

'Child soldier' is a term that we are beginning to hear frequently. But what does it actually mean?

I can tell you, because I was one.

The civil war in Sudan took my family. Government forces destroyed my village. There were no schools throughout the whole of the south of the country, and so the rebels ordered the children to walk into Ethiopia where we could go to school. I was seven when I made that 600km trip. Many of my friends died along the way.

When we reached Ethiopia we were put into a UN camp of 33,000 children. But the rebels would infiltrate the camp, and many of us were conscripted into the rebel forces. We were so vulnerable to their politics, to the promise of taking our land back and getting revenge for our murdered families. They even gave us food.

I was trained how to use an AK-47. But when I was 11, civil war exploded in Ethiopia. More than 12,000 of us trekked back into Sudan. They called us the 'lost boys'. We were a homeless tribe of children, child soldiers: we had many names.

After months of fighting, I managed to escape with about 300 other child soldiers. Another trek.

Negotiating our way through minefields, fending off wild animal attacks, starvation and ambush from the army – only 12 of us survived the trip.

I eventually found refuge. But I was no longer a child soldier – how was I going to survive? People in the town where I was staying were desperately trying to live in the face of acute poverty.

I had no family, no education. It was tough. But I was one of the lucky ones. A friend smuggled me across the border and into Kenya. In Kenya, my friend was able to support my education, and eventually I was able to develop my career as a successful rap artist. But what has happened to the children I left behind? What has happened to the thousands of child soldiers in places like the Democratic Republic of Congo? Children who, like me, have managed to escape from the war, but unlike me have not had help to go to school or get training?

Many of these children know only one thing: conflict. And without the help of a friend, they will turn to desperate measures in order to survive. Sure, they're difficult kids to work with. But they are still children, and they have a right to peace and security. You need peace and security to heal the soul – then you can have a life.

Most child soldiers have been denied their childhoods. We cannot now deny them hope.

So take action. Read this report; it won't take long. Then visit www.warchildmusic.com and subscribe to our monthly e-newsletter. By signing up to our campaign, you are supporting War Child to address the prosecution of war on children.

Thank you.

Emmanuel Jal

Emmanuel Jal's 2005 album 'Ceasefire' was critically acclaimed, while his performance on the Eden Project stage at the Live 8 concert last year brought his work to the attention of people around the globe. Emmanuel recorded 'Gua' for War Child's 'Help: A Day in the Life', the NME's compilation album of the year (2005). 'Gua' describes Emmanuel's astonishing experiences as a child soldier and his hopes for peace in his native Sudan.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO IS LARGER THAN THE WHOLE OF NORTH-WEST EUROPE
- IT IS A COUNTRY THAT HAS NOT HAD FREE AND FAIR MULTI-PARTY AND PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN ITS RECENT HISTORY
- IN ONE WAY OR ANOTHER, WAR HAS RAVAGED DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO SINCE 1998
- THIS WAR HAS INVOLVED FORCES FROM SEVEN OTHER COUNTRIES; FIGHTING CONTINUES IN THE EAST
- FOUR MILLION PEOPLE HAVE DIED AS A RESULT OF THE WAR
- UPWARDS OF 30,000 CHILDREN – BOYS AND GIRLS – HAVE BEEN CONSCRIPTED INTO THE VARIOUS MILITIA
- A MINIMUM OF 35% OF THE CHILDREN THAT WAR CHILD IS WORKING WITH IN NORTHERN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO HAVE BEEN UNABLE TO REINTEGRATE WITH THEIR FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES
- THESE CHILDREN FACE SIMILAR CONDITIONS TO CHILDREN ELSEWHERE IN THE COUNTRY, SUGGESTING THAT AT LEAST 10,000 CHILDREN ARE STRUGGLING TO REINTEGRATE COUNTRYWIDE

There are some 300,000 children involved with fighting forces worldwide. Many of these children live with the same conditions as those children War Child works with in the Democratic Republic of Congo. This suggests that some 100,000 are not successfully reintegrating with their families and communities. War Child's research strongly implies that this is a conservative estimate.

This report presents the findings of research carried out by War Child on the effectiveness of reintegration programmes for children who have been involved with armed groups.

It complements research that has already been carried out in this area by academics and other non-governmental organisations. War Child has been able to add a new perspective on reintegration programmes, because of our ongoing presence in countries, especially the Democratic Republic of Congo, where these programmes have been set up. War Child has been able, for the first time, to examine at first hand the success and failure of reintegration programmes over an extended period. This long-term view informs this report.

War Child has played an important role in disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) projects in northern Democratic Republic of Congo, and this experience forms the basis for this report. War Child's work in this area has raised questions concerning the effectiveness of current efforts at reintegration, especially where family reunification is the accepted measure of success, identifying the lack of long-term follow-up and community support as a key factor. This report focuses on those children who are being failed by current disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration processes, and the policy implications of this challenge.

In addition to being a major child welfare challenge, this problem is also a significant value-for-money issue because of the amount of UK tax payers' money that is invested in supporting disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes across the globe. The effectiveness of DDR programmes is, therefore, the central point of emphasis for War Child's call to action.

RESEARCH METHODS

War Child works with and for children who are marginalised by conflict – street children, children in conflict with the law and child soldiers.

Our approach has its foundations in an exciting form of participatory action research. As required by Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, all our programme and campaigning work is based on thorough research that places the child at its centre, and gives them a voice. By using focus groups and informal tools, such as floor mapping, we are able to consult children directly on the issues they face and what they believe needs to be done to address them. Where appropriate, we draw key local decision makers into this consultation with the children. The children map out information with these decision makers and analyse it from different viewpoints, developing new ways of conceptualising their problems, and in doing so they identify new ways of overcoming them.

By discussing this with the decision makers they can negotiate and agree on immediate actions. In this way, the participatory action research technique is itself part of the process through which we support the development of a protective environment for the children. This approach also enables us to work closely with groups of children who are very challenging and often dangerous or difficult to engage, such as child soldiers.

The research upon which this report is based was carried out in northern Democratic Republic of Congo over a three-week period, from 25th October to 15th November 2005, with over 400 people taking part.

This research placed children, their families and the community at the heart of the process, encouraging them to raise issues, identify problems and their causes and suggest solutions. We invited participants at every stage of the research to discuss and present ideas and opinions in their own environment, through drawings, tables and diagrams. Structured discussions, floor mapping and the drawing of timelines were also used to enable participants to express their ideas. We sought to verify the findings and test our assumptions through discussions with other organisations and a comprehensive literature review that examined the existing body of research in this area.

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

There are a number of different ways of referring to children who have been involved with armed groups, and who have then returned to the communities they left. This report uses the term 'children formerly associated with fighting forces' throughout.

The term is applied both to those children who served as soldiers themselves and to those who were involved with armed groups in other ways (for example, serving as porters or cooks), but who may have been no less affected by their experiences.

THE PROSECUTION OF WAR ON CHILDREN

THE SCALE OF INVOLVEMENT OF CHILDREN IN CONFLICT

- Two million children have died because of conflicts worldwide over the last ten years – that's a dead child every three minutes
- War is prosecuted on children in many ways, one of the worst being their conscription to armed groups
- It is a war crime to involve children in hostilities of any kind

Involving children in war is, therefore, one of the most serious violations of their rights. Yet there are many conflicts around the world that have involved or continue to involve children.

This is not a new problem: underage soldiers have been used for centuries. But this is a notable characteristic of recent wars. While it is impossible to be exact, the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers estimates that over the last 20 years, more than half a million children – both boys and girls under the age of 18 – have been recruited into armed groups, and 300,000 are still involved today in more than 30 conflicts worldwide. Most of these children are between 15 and 18 years old, though some as young as five are known to be serving in armed units in countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, where militia have been known to abduct and rape young children because they believe this will strengthen their powers as warriors. Children can be found in a wide variety of armed groups: those opposed to central government rule; groups composed of ethnic, religious and other minorities; clan-based or factional groups; or government-backed paramilitaries, militias and self-defence units. And children can be recruited into regular or irregular armed forces in many different capacities, meaning that children formerly associated with fighting forces are not just those who have carried arms. Children are used as combatants, but also as messengers, porters, spies and cooks, as well as for forced sexual service.

BACKGROUND TO WAR IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Independence from Belgium came in June 1960. Conflict between political factions destabilised the country and enabled Joseph Mobutu to take power through a coup in 1965. Mobutu changed the name of the country to Zaire.

With support from western nations, Mobutu remained in power for 32 years. His regime was marked by a level of corruption and state neglect that led the country into deep and entrenched poverty. In the face of failing health and loss of allies – due to conflicts in neighbouring countries – Mobutu was finally ousted in 1997. The rebellion was led by Laurent Kabila with support from Rwanda and Uganda, which themselves were threatened by Rwandan and Ugandan rebel groups taking refuge in Zaire. Kabila renamed Zaire the Democratic Republic of Congo. The alliance with Rwanda and Uganda, however, began to falter as their troops were used to secure the ability of business interests in their own countries to exploit the Democratic Republic of Congo's immense mineral wealth.

On the one hand, Kabila sought to purge all those he suspected of having links with the Rwandan and Ugandan governments and businesses, while on the other he established an autocratic and corrupt regime not dissimilar to that of Mobutu's. Alleging that Rwandan rebels were continuing to hide in the Democratic Republic of Congo and asserting the need to protect Rwandan citizens, the Rwandan government backed an insurrection in the Democratic Republic of Congo, leading the country into civil war.

A ceasefire was signed in 1998, but the wealth that was being generated by Rwandan and Ugandan business interests has not been easily relinquished. Arms have continued to flow freely from both countries into the Democratic Republic of Congo in order to destabilise the area and so enable the exploitation of its mineral wealth. This military assistance has variously supported rebel groups as well as local militia, and it has been used to inflame ethnic conflict.

Kabila was assassinated in 1999 and his son, Joseph, was made Head of State. As the conflict continued, the United Nations deployed the ▸

WHERE WAR CHILD WORKS

Equateur remains one of the most remote regions of Democratic Republic of Congo and the challenges of working there are significant. War Child is currently the only international NGO working in the region.

Human Development Indicators	DR Congo	United Kingdom
Human development index	167	15
GDP per capita ($US)	107	30,253
Life Expectancy at Birth (age)	43.1	78.4
Male	42.1	76
Female	44.1	80.6
Infant Mortality (per 1000 births)	129	5
HIV/AIDS Prevalence (%)	4.2	0.1
Age Structure (%)		
0-14 years	47.1	18.4
15-64 years	50.7	67.8
65 years and over	2.2	13.8
Median Age (years)	16.2	39.3

	DR CONGO	UK
POPULATION	57,549,000	59,668,000

	DR CONGO	UK
LAND AREA (km²)	2,344,858	244,820

DRC IS ALMOST TEN TIMES THE SIZE OF THE UK

world's largest peacekeeping force (currently comprising more than 17,000 troops).

In December 2002 Kabila was successful in negotiating the Pretoria Accord, which sought to establish a government of national unity. A transitional government was set up the following year with Kabila remaining as President. He was also joined by four Vice-Presidents representing the various opposition groups. A constitutional referendum was held in December 2005 as the first step towards multi-party elections, which are planned for 2006.

However, as the Democratic Republic of Congo approaches its first free elections in over 40 years, the stability of the country remains in danger as the different factions face the prospect of losing the power they have been sharing over the last few years. Violence has intensified, particularly in the east where elections are likely to radically alter the political landscape. The involvement of Rwanda and Uganda in this has yet to be resolved.

The war in the Democratic Republic of Congo has been marked by the forced conscription of children throughout. In some areas this still continues. The ongoing insecurity, mass displacements and inability to develop the economy and physical infrastructure has aggravated what was already an acutely felt poverty to an extreme level. The Democratic Republic of Congo is now one of the poorest countries in the world.

WHY DO CHILDREN BECOME INVOLVED?

The reasons for children becoming involved with armed forces are manifold. Take Beni, for example. He was a child soldier. He was conscripted into the army during the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo. These are his words:

'When I was 11 the soldiers came to my home and made me join them. They promised to feed and educate me:

They promised my parents they would pay me in dollars to help support my family.

They took me to the frontline and gave me a gun. They sent me ahead as a decoy. Many of my friends were captured, some were killed.

As I got older they made me take many girls. They said it would make me bullet-proof. I fell in love with Marie Agathe. We have a son. His name is Moses.

Last year, when War Child negotiated my release, I came back home with Marie Agathe and Moses.

Now I'm sixteen I want to marry Marie Agathe properly. I want Moses to go to school and eat every day. But it's difficult for me. The army never did pay or educate me. The friends who returned with me are now stealing for a living. No one in our town trusts us. I want to work, I want to start my own business so that I can support my family.'

These are some of the reasons why children become involved with armed groups:

- Enforced conscription
- Separation from their families
- Displacement from their communities
- Widespread poverty and lack of access to food
- Living in conflict zones
- Limited access to education
- To escape abuse at home
- To seek revenge for violence directed against them or their families

These factors make children especially vulnerable to conscription and exploitation by armed groups.

In areas plagued by long-running wars, where there is often a shortage of older male combatants as death tolls rise, armed factions may resort to recruiting children to make up for losses. HIV/AIDS may also decimate the adult population, making children an increasingly attractive resource for armed groups.

Children may be seen as cheap to employ, obedient and easily manipulated, while lighter modern weapons mean that children are able to serve as frontline fighters. In many countries affected by war, children assume adult responsibilities at a much earlier age than they do in the West, and lack of enforcement of existing legislation means that there are inadequate legal deterrents to the recruitment of child combatants.

Moreover, it remains true that the vast majority of children are coerced into armed units.

THE CHALLENGES OF THE DISARMAMENT, DEMOBILISATION AND REINTEGRATION PROCESS

Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration processes form a vital part of peacekeeping operations and strategies for national recovery once conflicts have ended (and in the case of the Democratic Republic of Congo, before they have ended). Their aim is to help restore peace and security by reintegrating combatants into society and providing them with alternative, sustainable livelihoods to prevent them from being re-recruited by armed units or criminal groups. The most common element of the reintegration stage of the process for children is family reunification. In some locations this is supported by education and training.

Although there are 12 countries that have officially established children's disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes since 1999 (e.g. Sierra Leone, Liberia), these programmes are often not appropriate for the specific needs of children or in practice leave many of them out.

Generally, little flexibility is shown in applying disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration processes to children. Programmes for adults tend to be applied to children, but with less overall support. While adults are often given a cash grant for handing in their weapons, for example, as well as further financial support, children are usually returned to their families – after years of separation, and having been denied an education – with nothing. These children represent an additional burden to their families and communities which, in the face of acute poverty and the breakdown of social and economic infrastructure, can be unsustainable. They are inevitably challenging to care for and are therefore easily marginalised, which often leads them into crime or recruitment by an armed group once again.

In some countries, governments do not want to admit that children have been involved with fighting forces and so are not even included in disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes.

THE CHALLENGES OF REINTEGRATION IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Children who are parents themselves are not catered for properly in the reintegration phase because the emphasis is placed on reuniting them with their family when actually they want to establish their own home. Other children who do not fully benefit from reintegration might have a disability or perhaps might not have been frontline combatants. Girls in particular have been disproportionately overlooked: Save the Children have estimated that some 12,500 girls have yet to benefit from formal disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration support in the Democratic Republic of Congo. In many instances, programmes to demobilise and reintegrate children formerly associated with fighting forces fail to gain access to girls and young women who have been abducted during war, to serve as sex slaves.

War Child's research in the northern Democratic Republic of Congo establishes that disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes are struggling to reintegrate many of the children they are seeking to benefit.

Specifically, the research shows that as much as 70% of all children processed through disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes are, in one way or another, struggling to reintegrate.

Although reintegration means different things to different children, War Child's research establishes that of this 70% at least half have been unable to reintegrate with their families and so remain acutely marginalised.

This means that the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration process is not working for at least 35% of children in northern Democratic Republic of Congo. ▸

CHILD SOLDIERS' EXPERIENCES

Henri avoids his son Jean-Pierre, who has returned from the army, because he thinks he is a danger to him and the community. He believes that Jean-Pierre was not trained properly. He knows he was drugged and forced to commit violent crimes and fears he will do this again.

After returning home, Michel got a girl pregnant. Her parents left her at Michel's parents place. Realising that Michel wouldn't be able to look after his 'wife', his father bought on credit a bag of flour and sugar so that the family could prepare for the birth by generating cash through the sale of cakes. This never materialised because their own son, the father-to-be, stole the flour from the house and resold it in town.

Seven months after her demobilisation and reunification with one of her aunts, Sophie still has no friends and remains alone at home where her aunt often mistreats her. She is so lonely that she talks seriously about enrolling in the army once more.

THE WORLDWIDE FAILURE OF REINTEGRATION

War Child's research can be taken as indication of a much larger problem. The conditions faced by the children struggling to reintegrate in northern Democratic Republic of Congo are very similar to those faced by children elsewhere in the country.

The conditions facing the children formerly associated with fighting forces that War Child has been working with in the north are common to other ex-child soldiers throughout the whole of the Democratic Republic of Congo. These conditions include:

- Frustration with the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration process leading to increased marginalisation and, in some cases, re-recruitment by armed groups
- Lack of long-term follow-up and support of children after being reunited with their families
- Acute poverty within the communities that receive them
- Lack of opportunities to make an economic contribution to the families they return to
- Dependence on distant, extended family relatives due to the death of their own parents
- Social exclusion
- Anti-social behaviour

The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers estimates that there are 30,000 children who have either self-demobilised, completed or are going through the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration process in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Most of these children live with similar or even more acute conditions than the children involved in War Child's research.

This strongly suggests, therefore, that at least 10,000 of these children will struggle to reintegrate with their families and communities. This, of course, will not even account for those who have self-demobilised.

The problem facing the reintegration of children formerly associated with fighting forces is not limited to the Democratic Republic of Congo. The UN's Integrated Regional Information Networks reported earlier this year that 5,000 children in Congo Brazzaville who recently went through the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration process have been unable to reintegrate with their families and communities. In 2004, Save the Children found that 25% of demobilised children in Sierra Leone were re-recruited by armed forces in Liberia.

There are 300,000 children currently involved in armed groups around the world. Human development indicators and reports on the social and economic status for the locations in which these children live suggest that they will face similar conditions and challenges to the children that War Child works with in the Democratic Republic of Congo when seeking to reintegrate.

We can expect at the very least, therefore, that some 100,000 children worldwide will struggle to reintegrate with their families and communities. War Child believes that this is, in fact, a conservative estimate for two reasons:

- Firstly, the experience of organisations engaging in child disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes indicates that many children self-demobilise (e.g. as happened in Ituri District in north-eastern Democratic Republic of Congo). Many of these children turn to the streets for survival, a significant cause of the growing street child crisis in conflict and post-conflict areas (e.g. the Democratic Republic of Congo has a street child population of more than 50,000).
- Secondly, this report has highlighted the plight of those children who have been unable to reintegrate with their families and communities. However, War Child's research indicates that while some children do go back to their families, they continue to struggle to reintegrate with them and with their wider community.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

- Having had their childhood ripped away from them some 100,000 children worldwide will live without the care and support of their communities.
- Therefore, these children are continuing to live with poverty, social exclusion and without access to fundamental services such as education and health.
- War Child's research suggests that many of these children turn to crime, which exposes them to further risks and establishes a security threat to the communities in which they are located, leading to further exclusion.
- The political, donor and social service institutions of the countries in which these children live, and crucially, the development partners of these countries, are all signatories to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Collectively, therefore, we are failing these children.
- As one of the most significant development partners of countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo, the UK government is allocating millions of pounds of tax payers' money to support a disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration process that is failing thousands of children. This is, therefore, also a value-for-money issue.

WHY IS IT DIFFICULT FOR THESE CHILDREN TO REINTEGRATE?

Children formerly associated with fighting forces are unable to reintegrate because their

communities and families are unable or unwilling to take them back and because disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes fail to take account of the realities that they face.

COMMUNITY ANTAGONISM

Communities are frequently suspicious of or antagonistic towards children who have been involved with armed groups, often because armies deliberately involve children in crimes in order to detach them from their communities and families and secure their dependency and their service. It is common for initiation ceremonies to involve a rape or murder of a community leader, even a family member, to ensure that the child will not try to escape from the armed unit and return to their community. In other instances, children are forced to shoot another child under threat of being shot themselves. Some may be 'branded' with a physical scar, thus marking them out as affiliated with a particular rebel group or armed faction.

In many cases, children formerly associated with fighting forces are perceived within their own communities at one extreme as evil – referred to as '*les fils de Satan*' (the 'devil's children') – at the other as incapable of conforming to social norms and disruptive to family and community life. This kind of tension is found in many post-conflict zones cross-culturally.

Some of the residents of Businga, an area of northern Democratic Republic of Congo, believe that children formerly associated with fighting forces had returned with supernatural powers ('*des fetishes*') that would protect them from bullets and other forms of violence.

Ostracism by the community depends to an extent on how much is known about the abuses suffered by the children during the war, and whether the child was abducted by the fighting forces (with the abduction being witnessed). Yet even when a child is known to have been taken forcibly by armed forces, with the community doing little to prevent the capture, members of the community generally accept little responsibility for the child's involvement in war or for their subsequent rehabilitation. As one person in Equateur put it:

> **"The army stole our children, but it is giving us back completely warped adults to educate"**

'The army stole our children, but it is giving us back completely warped adults to educate.'

Children sometimes find that the help they receive from non-governmental organisations may even make things worse for them. Community leaders and family members have explicitly stated that the responsibility for these children lies with non-government organisations, such as War Child. With the children being marginalised in this way, and given their experiences of violence and brutality, many of them turn to negative ways of coping – and are subsequently further marginalised.

In many instances, the community treats children formerly associated with fighting forces as dangerous and culpable – not as victims of war, whose basic rights to life, education and protection have been violated, but rather as perpetrators of violence.

Great stigma is often attached to girls formerly associated with fighting forces. Their experiences in armed units, where many are repeatedly raped, contract HIV/AIDS or bear illegitimate children, presents a challenge to their successful reintegration.

In some cases, community members may choose to exact revenge against children formerly associated with fighting forces for what they have done. And children can suffer neglect and abuse when they return to their families – they may be given inadequate food, forced to work long hours rather than going to school, beaten or kept apart from other children.

In January 2006, *The Lancet* medical journal reported that in the Democratic Republic of Congo some 1,300 people every day were dying because of the consequences of war. This appalling death rate means that many children formerly associated with fighting forces have no family to return to or, at best, are introduced to extended family members who they might not know and who will struggle to look after them as they themselves seek to overcome the acute poverty they face. Moreover, children can be particularly vulnerable to abuse when they are living with members of their extended family. Treatment by their carers tends to deteriorate over time, even when there is a happy reunion, as reunification does not necessarily translate into sustainable care and protection.

Faced with ostracism and unable to go to school, children may be forced to undertake dangerous forms of work (in diamond mines, for example), beg, or resort to the fighting and stealing that they learnt during the war. Girls may be coerced into prostitution or early marriage.

LOSS OF IDENTITY

For many children, moving back into the community after being part of an armed group means a considerable loss of status and identity. Some children still consider themselves, as they are considered by the community, to be soldiers rather than civilians.

Some even resent the fact that they have been forced to disarm. In contrast to their isolation when they return to the community, while they were associated with an armed group they may have had regular meals, a role with responsibilities, a sense of importance, even power.

If children are to be successfully reintegrated into society then disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes must help them to reconstruct their identity within the community to which they are returning. We cannot underestimate how the child's experience of war will have changed them, just as we cannot understate the extent to which the war transformed the communities to which they are returning. Working closely and effectively with these war-torn communities over the long term is, therefore, just as important as working with the children themselves.

ECONOMIC PRESSURES

Average GDP per capita in the Democratic Republic of Congo is US$107 per year, compared to US$30,253 for the UK.

And so children formerly associated with fighting forces trying to reintegrate with their community can be a considerable economic burden. In many cases, with a local economy already ravaged by war, an extra mouth to feed is enough to undermine a family's ability to survive. The children are often referred to as '*une charge en plus*' – an extra burden that the family is unable to bear financially.

Community members and families often do not see children formerly associated with fighting forces as their responsibility. Some families explained that they felt they had been forced to take their child back despite protests that they could not provide for them. So great is the economic burden associated with feeding another mouth, some families call for either the army to re-recruit their child or demand that the international aid community accepts responsibility for their welfare.

Families often have very high expectations that children will return from the army with something to offer because those children who enrolled voluntarily had done so primarily because the army offered the opportunity to earn a living and learn new skills. The reality of army life, however, meant that many children were not paid or offered the skills training they were promised. Therefore, children formerly associated with fighting forces are generally perceived as having nothing to offer their families and as a drain on already meagre resources. So acute is the level of poverty that a new mouth to feed could make their family unit untenable.

WHAT IS AT STAKE?

PEACE AND SECURITY

Unless children are able to reintegrate it is likely that the culture of violence that has been so normal to them will continue into their adulthood. This presents a long-term security threat to the communities in which they live.

But it is more than the welfare of the children and their communities that is at stake in failing to reintegrate them. With 10,000 children formerly associated with fighting forces unable to reintegrate and remaining excluded or on the margins of their communities, their vulnerability to re-recruitment is high. This is a major threat to security and the transition to peace in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Experiences from Liberia and Cote d'Ivoire demonstrate how the failure to reintegrate children formerly associated with fighting forces in one conflict can inflame another. In 2004, Save the Children found that 25% of demobilised children in Sierra Leone were re-recruited by armed forces in Liberia.

So whose responsibility is it to ensure that disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes are working effectively?

The Convention on the Rights of the Child draws a clear line between children and adults, and confers on children certain rights, including protection against violence, exploitation and torture, and the right to be reunited with their families. The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on Children in Armed Conflict also prohibits the direct use of anyone under the age of 18 in armed conflicts and clearly states that the use of children under fifteen is a war crime. The Democratic Republic of Congo and the United Kingdom are both signatories to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and this Optional Protocol.

As signatories to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the government of Democratic Republic of Congo is responsible for securing and maintaining the rights of all children within its jurisdiction, regardless of ethnicity, gender, religion and social or economic status.

Furthermore, Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and Article 7 of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child establish that all signatories who are able to provide financial and technical assistance for 'rehabilitation and social reintegration' of children are obliged to do so. The United Kingdom has the fourth largest economy in the world and is certainly in a position to contribute more effectively to this process.

WHAT ARE WE RESPONSIBLE FOR?

Article 39 establishes that all signatories 'shall take all appropriate measures to promote physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of a child victim of armed conflicts. Such recovery and reintegration shall take place in an environment which fosters the health, self-respect and dignity of the child'.

The UK, as a very significant signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, has a responsibility to try to end the marginalisation of children who have been involved with armed groups. Significant amounts of UK tax payers' money have gone into disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes around the world. As the second biggest provider of overseas aid to the Democratic Republic of Congo, the UK has a responsibility to ensure that its funding is effective.

AS A VERY SIGNIFICANT SIGNATORY TO THE CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD, THE UK HAS A RESPONSIBILITY TO TRY TO END THE MARGINALISATION OF CHILDREN WHO HAVE BEEN INVOLVED WITH ARMED GROUPS

A WAY FORWARD

WAR CHILD'S WORK WITH CHILDREN FORMERLY ASSOCIATED WITH FIGHTING FORCES IN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

War Child's recommendations for improving disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration processes come directly from our experience in the field.

War Child has co-funded a disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programme for children in northern Democratic Republic of Congo from the start of the demobilisation process in September 2004. Approximately 500 children were demobilised during the following six months. With funding from UNICEF, War Child Australia and War Child USA, and in partnership with local non-governmental organisations, we supported these children through transition centres in a number of locations, providing food, counselling, advice, education and training and we worked to trace family members and their communities in order to reunite them. Subsequent to this work, we have focused on those children who were most likely to be excluded after being reunited in order to gain a better understanding from the children themselves of how they become vulnerable, why they are marginalised, and what can be done to ensure that they are better reintegrated in their communities.

Now, with funding from War Child Australia and War Child USA, we are working with child protection community networks that aim to make reintegration more relevant by establishing income-generating activities, giving these children livelihood grants to establish themselves as active members of their communities. Starting with those who have the greatest responsibilities – the children who have returned home with young partners and babies, and those who are turning to street life for survival – War Child is allocating business start-up grants in an effort to give these children agency in a society that has turned its back on them.

War Child's research shows that many children who are going through disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes aren't actually being reintegrated. Reunifying children with their families is not the end point in the process of reintegration. Allowing these children to establish their rightful place in the community is much more difficult. There is increasing acceptance that more effort needs to be placed on social and economic reintegration. It is vital that those children who are parents and the most acutely marginalised (very often those turning to the street for survival) benefit from these efforts. Reintegration is a long-term, complex process rather than a single event

WE NEED A LONG-TERM APPROACH

Among many organisations involved in disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration, family reunification has been seen as the main indicator of success in attempts to reintegrate children formerly associated with fighting forces with their communities. But few monitoring and follow-up mechanisms have been put in place. War Child's research and experience of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration highlights the problems faced by the community and by children themselves beyond the moment of reunification.

Indeed, we cannot take for granted the idea that family reunification will be the mechanism of reintegration. Many of these children have never 'gone home' in the traditional sense and several still remain homeless. Some have never been reunited with their families, often because they are orphans and their extended family is unable or unwilling to take responsibility for them. Poverty, economic migration and the effects of war often leave traditional family support networks shattered. Other children are reunited with their families but then leave because of economic pressures or lack of acceptance. It is these children that War Child is drawing attention to in order to gain wider recognition and greater inclusion in reintegration for them because they are falling out of the parameters of many reintegration programmes.

Aged 15, Trésor is head of a small household consisting of his girlfriend, three-year-old son and younger brothers. His girlfriend's mother also recently joined his household in Gbadolite, northern Democratic Republic of Congo. His father died soon after he was demobilised and Trésor was immediately responsible for supporting his small family. Trésor is not originally from Gbadolite and consequently is finding it hard to find a plot of land to cultivate. He therefore has to walk several kilometres to work as a farm labourer for the equivalent of about $1 per day. He had worked as a *tolekiste* (taxi-bike service) to supplement money earned working in the fields, but when he fell ill and couldn't work for a couple of weeks, the owner of the bike replaced him with a new driver. He currently has no other choice but to work long, tiring hours in the fields for little pay in order to earn something with which to feed his family, who are dependent on him for their daily survival.

Many children formerly associated with fighting forces have children of their own: the research indicates that of all the boys who had demobilised in northern Democratic Republic of Congo, 56% had at least one child who they struggle to support because of their continued marginalisation from their family or community. There is, therefore, a significant group of demobilised children – with children of their own – who are living outside the traditional family unit with little or no support, and without hope of establishing their own livelihood.

Gomolo was demobilised last year. First he lived on his own with his partner and small child. His partner's parents, however, have taken the girl and the child home as he cannot afford to pay the bride price necessary to marry her. He works every day in the fields but is also supporting two younger brothers, so cannot save enough to contribute towards the bride price. He is hoping to start up a small business selling items in the market to supplement his income in order to be able to have his partner and child back at home with him. Gomolo is 17.

WHAT THE CHILDREN SAID THEY WANTED

The voice of children formerly associated with fighting forces is loud and clear – and provides hope. War Child's discussions with the children, their families and community leaders identified several things that they felt could address the major problems that led to their ▸

> **"Every evening, we meet up in the main square in town with a bunch of other kids. Most of us are child soldiers but some street kids join us too. We divide up areas of the market where we spread out to steal whatever we can get. We then get back together to go to the Avenue do la Mort where we can drink, smoke weed and find girls"**

A former child soldier presents his disarmament and demobilisation papers

exclusion. These ideas revolve around a combination of economic self-sufficiency and a breakdown of negative attitudes, which they believe will result in the acceptance of the children by their communities. They include:

- Provision of small grants for the children to start their own income-generating businesses, such as a farm project.
- Arranging activities such as sports and local theatre to bring the children formerly associated with fighting forces into contact with other children in the community and so negotiate common behavioural standards, norms and values.
- Holding public reconciliation ceremonies to address issues of blame and forgiveness.
- Developing community initiatives that provide employment for the children while enabling them to contribute to a project that benefits everyone.

ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT = REAL POWER

Although education and training are important, according to the children War Child works with, these are not necessarily the most appropriate starting points. Because the education infrastructure is poorly developed, there are few opportunities to provide teaching to children formerly associated with fighting forces in a way that is relevant and meaningful to their lives.

Many demobilised children have been humiliated by attending classes with children five, sometimes ten, years younger than they are. This in turn impacts upon their identity and feelings of self-worth. The starting point must therefore be geared to the realities facing children who return to their communities.

The sharp end of these realities includes:

- Unemployment
- Lack of respect from educated peers
- No training or opportunities to develop skills
- Unfulfilment of plans, ideas and dreams
- Being perceived as a burden and antisocial
- Personal frustration

The children have told us that they want to make a practical contribution to their community. They feel that this will afford them respect, create new opportunities and enable them to determine their own destinies. To make this happen, they suggested that War Child provides them with small start-up grants to help them make their business ideas a reality.

War Child is responding to this suggestion by providing grants to those children who are now parents themselves or who have turned to the streets for survival. After evaluating this action, War Child will extend this support to similarly marginalised children formerly associated with fighting forces in the area in which we work.

Creating a viable livelihood establishes the child as a responsible member of the community. This is the platform upon which they will overcome their marginalisation and exclusion. This will lead to new possibilities, such as providing more relevant and flexible forms of education for children formerly associated with fighting forces. Ultimately, education is a key socialising process, regardless of age. But this cannot be achieved unless and until the children have attained the respect and support of their community.

"My name is Dieu-Donné. I joined the militia in 2001 when I was twelve and spent four years with them. In 2005, I was demobilised and returned to Gbadolite, a town in northern Democratic Republic of Congo, as part of a national demobilisation programme.

When I left the militia, I felt empty and was worried about leaving the army because I wasn't sure what lay ahead as a civilian. My girl came to live with me in Gbadolite. We have a three-year-old daughter called Liti. After I left the militia, I sold my reintegration kit [basic items that are given to children at the time of demobilisation, such as clothes, shoes and school books] and started up a small business selling cigarettes, biscuits and water in the market so I could support my family and keep them in good health. My work doesn't make much money, though, so my girl has left Gbadolite to look for her parents in the hope that they could provide for her. My daughter is still with me and I am trying to find ways of making more money so that my girl can come back to live with us.

If the British government could help me, I would ask them to support my small business so that I could generate more money to support my family, and maybe help me get back into some studies."

THE VOICES OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE UK

The reintegration of children formerly associated with fighting forces is a long-term challenge, especially given the continuing trend of mobilisation of children into armed groups around the world. It is, therefore, an issue that needs to attract concern, commitment and understanding over the long term in order to ensure that it is properly addressed. Gaining the support of young people here in the UK is, therefore, vital.

The interest shown by young people in the UK towards problems facing children in war zones, especially the reintegration of children formerly associated with fighting forces, has been enormous. Between 100,000 and 250,000 visit our websites every month and more than 20,000 receive our newsletter.

Young people are exercising their citizenship by calling for action on this issue. War Child has responded by working with a number of schools in helping young people to participate in the democratic process. It is hoped that this will ultimately lead to positive change for children formerly associated with fighting forces.

For example, War Child has been working with Archbishop Tenison's School in Oval, south London, for the past year. In November, two Year Ten students participated in a War Child presentation to the All Party Parliamentary Group on Street Children. These students called on MPs to undertake a fact-finding mission to the Democratic Republic of Congo. A number of Parliamentary Group members have subsequently agreed and will be visiting War Child's projects in Democratic Republic of Congo in September 2006.

These young people understand the issues faced by children formerly associated with fighting forces. One commented:

'This is a real problem: if their communities don't have any respect for these boys, then you can't blame them for committing crimes.'

Significantly, these students saw parallels with the rhythms of their own daily life.

'There are always kids here too who we're told to ignore – bad crowds that [we're told] if we get involved with them it will affect our school work; excluded kids who will stop us going to university or college. But I guess these kids here in London can get help and they probably aren't as desperate as the ones we're talking about in Congo.'

Meanwhile, the students have a clear grasp of the routes away from the problem.

'But you can see there is hope there. There's one boy who has a wife and young child now and all he wants to do is do the best by his family.'

'This is all about responsibility: who was responsible for Beni joining the army… who is responsible for Beni's child… who is responsible for helping children like Beni.'

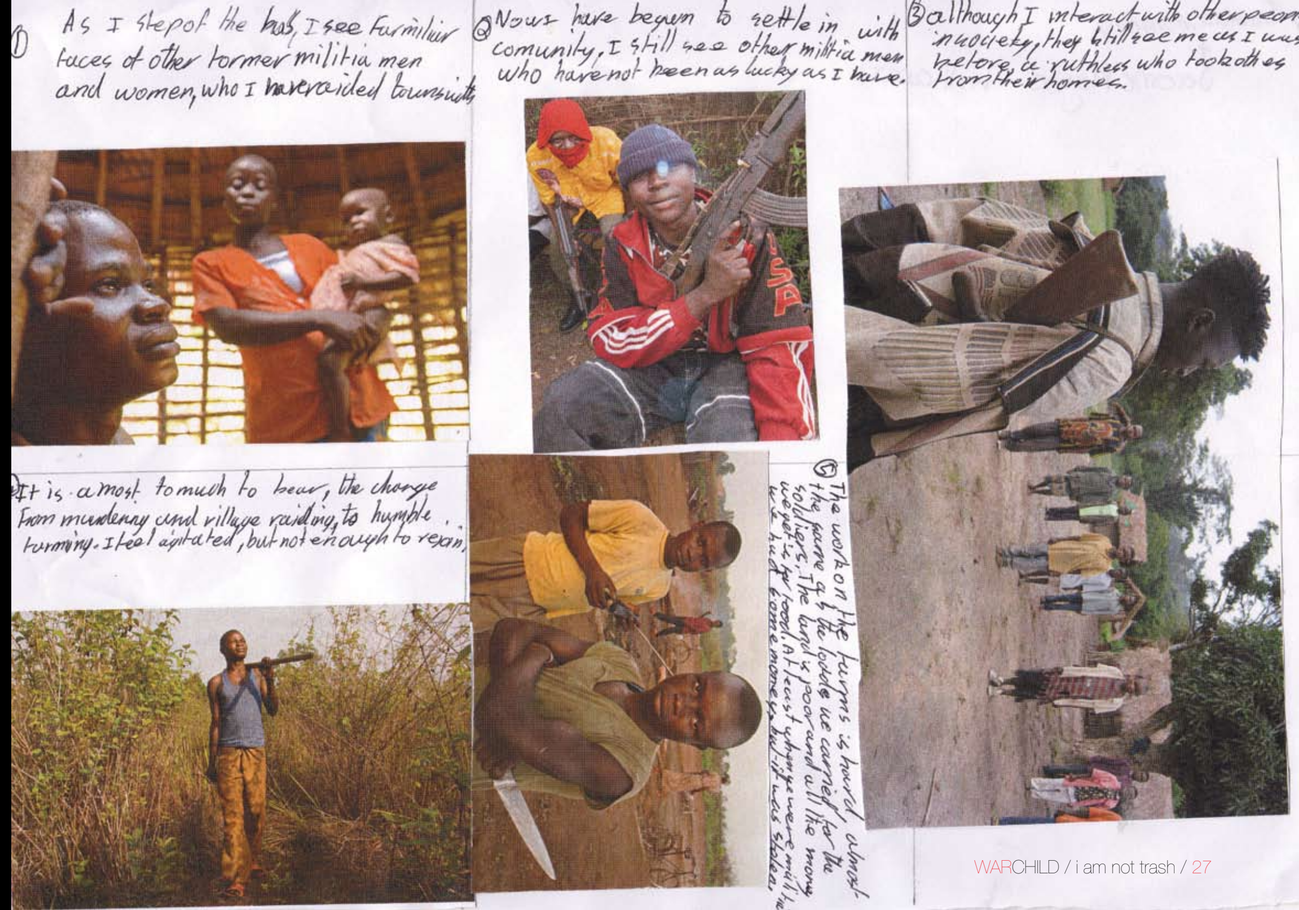
Furthermore, the students identified the role the British public, media, schools and politicians have in the situation.

'Inaction leads to rejection, crime, fear, corruption, hate: your help equals family love, possessions, respect, rights, responsibility and opportunity.'

And in a letter to their local MP, students drew attention to the amount of UK tax payers' money that is being spent on disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration processes and questioned whether this money was being spent efficiently, when efforts at reintegration were so often failing.

'On behalf of all the students in Archbishop Tenison's School, we want to inform the public of how their money is being spent in the Democratic Republic of Congo. We want to know this in case there is corruption. We don't know if our money is being put to good use. There is money spent on freeing child soldiers but none spent on reintegration so they can be allowed back with their families… you need to talk to your friends in the government to take more action in this cause.'

Young people in the UK want to see something done about this problem. They want a clear and targeted call to action.



A CALL TO ACTION

- A NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO. THIS MUST EXPLICITLY FEATURE THE NEED TO ENSURE THE GENUINE REINTEGRATION OF CHILDREN FORMERLY ASSOCIATED WITH FIGHTING FORCES.
- DONOR SUPPORT FOR THE DEVELOPMENT AND MONITORING OF THIS STRATEGY, AND ESPECIALLY FOR THE STRENGTHENING OF LOCAL CAPACITY TO DELIVER IT.
- INCREASED PUBLIC AWARENESS AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE CHALLENGES FACING THE REINTEGRATION OF CHILDREN FORMERLY ASSOCIATED WITH FIGHTING FORCES, AS A BASIS FOR INFLUENCING THE POLICIES OF RELEVANT POLITICAL AND DONOR INSTITUTIONS.

WHAT WAR CHILD WILL DO

We will:

- Work with donor institutions in the Democratic Republic of Congo to influence the development of a more flexible and effective reintegration process for widespread application.
- Raise awareness, understanding and concern for the plight of children formerly associated with fighting forces among one million young people in the UK through our websites, events and coverage by media partners, and use this to influence politicians to make positive changes to policy.
- Lead a delegation of British politicians to the Democratic Republic of Congo on a fact-finding mission in order to generate political commitment to addressing the marginalisation of children formerly associated with fighting forces.
- Co-fund and support the work of the All Party Parliamentary Group for the Great Lakes and Prevention of Genocide in order to raise awareness of the scope and scale of the problem and the need for leadership across UK political institutions to address it.

THE UNITED NATIONS

We are calling for the United Nations to establish and maintain a database that tracks the current status of the number of children processed through disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes. This database must track the proportion of children formerly associated with fighting forces who have been unable to reintegrate, ascertain why this is, where they are located and then use the information to inform the nomination and monitoring of the authority responsible for securing their sustainable and meaningful inclusion. The database must also seek to define what reintegration actually means and use this as a basis for establishing minimum standards for its application.

UK GOVERNMENT

- The UK government is required to submit five-year reports to the Committee on the Rights of the Child. In these reports we are calling for the UK government to explicitly report on its efforts to provide the financial and technical assistance needed by countries such as the DRC in overcoming the marginalisation of children formerly associated with fighting forces.
- More specifically, we are calling for the UK government to support the emerging government of the DRC to develop a comprehensive national strategy (as laid out in the General Measures of Implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child) that includes plans to address the long-term reintegration of children formerly associated with fighting forces. The national strategy should have clear reporting mechanisms and robust indicators of genuine inclusion.
- We are calling for the Department for International Development to ensure that their Country Strategies explicitly recognise the need to establish relevant structures and means of working with local actors and the international community to drive a coordinated and coherent response to securing the rights and wellbeing of children formerly associated with fighting forces.
- We are calling for the Foreign Affairs Select Committee to investigate the current effectiveness of the use of UK tax payers' money in reintegrating children formerly associated with fighting forces. We are specifically asking the Select Committee to emphasise the importance of an effective engagement with these children and in so doing recognise that this is not merely a resourcing issue.
- We also ask that the role of UK diplomatic missions be considered as a potential platform upon which local coordination with the international community and local authorities, media and grassroots non-governmental organisations can be led toward a coherent response to working for the effective re-integration of children formerly associated with fighting forces.

GOVERNMENT OF THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

We are calling for the government of the DRC to:

- Ensure that it reports back to the Committee on the Rights of the Child on the effectiveness of the national strategy it is developing for the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and especially how this addresses issues of reintegration.
- Engage donors in a way that champions the rights and needs of children, by negotiating for resources, technical assistance and the commitment to support more effective approaches that promote the reintegration of children formerly associated with fighting forces over the long term.
- Ensure that there is a clear recognition across the key government agencies responsible for disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration in their various terms of reference, targets and indicators for the need to effectively reintegrate children formerly associated with fighting forces and recognise that this is a long-term endeavour requiring a long-term planning and resourcing commitment.

INTERNATIONAL NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS

We are calling for like-minded international non-governmental organisations to work with us in establishing an inter-agency body that ensures the coordinated:

- Lobbying of government both locally and in the UK
- Awareness raising and advocacy locally, as well as here in the UK
- Sharing of experience and development of best practice examples

THE MEDIA

We are calling for local and international media partners to:

- Report on the scale of the problem facing the reintegration of children formerly associated with fighting forces, and how this affects their lives and the security of their communities.
- Report on the need to ensure more effective investment of resources and specific policies and service delivery mechanisms to address this problem.
- Raise awareness about the responsibility of communities, families and the children themselves to ensure effective reintegration.
- Establish the UK government's obligation to act, even lead, on this issue as a major signatory to the Convention of the Rights of the Child.
- Report on the ways forward that are being developed and piloted by the various actors in conflict and post-conflict programming to establish the possibility of success in reintegrating children formerly associated with fighting forces.

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