

Engagement of Youth Formerly Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups as Children in Peacebuilding: A Case Study of Democratic Republic of Congo



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INTRODUCTION

The involvement and participation of children and youth in armed conflict still continues to capture and engage the world's attention to date. Rightly so, because thousands of children and the youth are being continuously recruited and used in armed conflicts across the world. Of the 34 reported cases of armed conflict globally, 15 of which are concentrated in Africa, nine in Asia, six in Middle East, three in Europe and one in America, children continue to be recruited, absorbed and deliberately used in the planning, execution and the sustenance of these armed conflicts.¹ Besides, the interconnections between armed conflict and terrorism has further exacerbated the toxic array of effects and diverse suffering of children in countries battling with these kinds of insecurity. Undeniably, the use of children in armed conflict is not a new phenomenon. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), between 2005 and 2020 alone, more than 93,000 children were verified as recruited and used by parties in conflict.² It has been estimated anecdotally that the actual number of 'child soldiers' could be much higher than has been reported.³

In the past, young people were engaged and spearheaded the violence that characterized many of the political conflict that were present at the time.⁴ Indeed, what is new is not the visibility of these insecurities, rather it is how deeply rooted and involved children have become in many of these armed conflicts and security uncertainties. In some of the situations, children and the youth have become a unified force and form a substantial portion of the key actors and combatants executing such conflicts. Today, the dynamics of the involvement of children and the youth in armed conflict has become complex, intertwined and embedded in the societal structures and values systems. What is more distressing is that even after more than a decade since the world made commitments to the children of war and matched it with action, cases of the use of children in armed conflict continue to persist in at least 14 countries. These include Afghanistan, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria and Yemen.⁵ Also, extremist groups such as the Islamic State (ISIS), Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab have joined the fray by repeatedly attacking communities and forcibly abducting young children for the purposes of engaging them in extremist and terrorist activities.

The differentiated impact of engaging children in armed conflicts are enormous. Apart from being separated from their parents and displaced from their communities, children (boys and girls) are subjected to extensive forms of violence, abuse and exploitation. Warring parties turn children into fighters, gunrunners, spies, cooks, janitors, guards, messengers and servants. Specifically, injurious to the wellbeing of young girls is the sexual and gender-based violence that girls suffer in the arms of these warring parties.



¹<https://reliefweb.int/report/world/alert-2021-report-conflicts-human-rights-and-peacebuilding>

²<https://www.unicef.org/protection/children-recruited-by-armed-forces>

³Ibid.,

⁴Lubunga, E. (2016). The impact of conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo on women and their response to peace-building. *Stellenbosch Theological Journal*, 2(2), 347-364. <https://dx.doi.org/10.17570/stj.2016.v2n2.a16>

⁵<https://reliefweb.int/report/central-african-republic/10-countries-where-child-soldiers-are-still-recruited-armed>

These violations and exposure to these horrendous atrocities cause psychological harm to children and make them suffer trauma. That notwithstanding, the increasing poverty facing many families in conflict zones has pushed many more children into joining armed groups, and further aggravated the precariousness and lack of protection of these children affected by armed conflict. The situation is further compounded if children associated with armed conflict develop into adolescence or the youth.

Over the years, the international community has responded by signing several treaties and by condemning children's participation in combat; but unfortunately, these conventions have done very little to reduce the number of children and youth participating in conflicts. Understanding the involvement of youth formerly associated with warring parties and armed forces as children requires a structure and normative framework that reflects the complexities of the transition to adulthood in societies under pressure. The youth have demonstrated that they have agency and are an important constituency for the stability of peace and the prevention of violence. The African Youth Charter, the continental framework on youth, peace and security, as well as UN Security Council Resolutions 2250 of 2015, 2419 of 2018 and 2535 of 2020, reinforces the significant roles the youth play in such processes. The Resolutions also call for their increased participation in decision making processes and their engagement in negotiating and implementing peace agreements in conflict or transition settings.

Notwithstanding the above efforts and policies and frameworks on youth, peace and security, the contributions of the youth in peacebuilding remain mostly unnoticed, understated and undocumented. Also, there is an existing wide distrust gap between policymakers on one hand and youth peacebuilders on the other, particularly in fulfilling the Youth Peace and Security (YPS) agenda. To better understand the context of the engagement of youth formerly associated with armed groups and armed forces as children in peacebuilding activities, the paper uses a gendered lens in providing an interpretation, including a nuanced understanding of the dimensions of the many conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The DRC has a long-checked history of violent conflict and political crises involving different national, regional and international actors.

These conflicts and insecurities span more than two decades. The UN has been actively involved in the DRC since 1999, following the establishment of the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO). In 2018, the DRC had its first peaceful transition of political power from the Joseph Kabila-led administration to Felix Tshisekedi. However, violent conflicts are still ongoing in parts of the country, and over hundred armed groups continue to operate in the country's eastern region.

Additionally, the paper provides an analysis of the trajectory of children formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups, who also form the youth, and their significance or political agency. It discusses the key barriers (including social norms, legislative, institutional capacity, political will etc.) to ensuring safe and meaningful inclusion and participation of youth and the mapping of actors with the mandate and capacity to act for inclusion and participation of youth in peacebuilding. The last section concludes and provides clear tangible suggestions for increased inclusion of youth formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups in peacebuilding initiatives.

SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN ARMED CONFLICT

Despite having one of the largest UN peacekeeping forces for over 20 years in the Congo, there are varied historical, political, social and economic reasons behind the conflict.⁶ One of the important countries on the African continent, Congo, is a country endowed with an array of resources. It can boast of extreme riches as it has large deposits of diamonds, copper, gold, silver, manganese, cobalt, uranium, and zinc among others. Apart from these, it also has about 50 percent (50%) of Africa's hard water resources and about 10 percent (10%) of the world hydroelectric capacity.⁷ Collectively, all these resources that could have been used to develop this country for it to become a global giant are what have been used to impoverish it. The problem with Congo is that it is too rich in natural resources that everybody, including foreigners, wants a piece of that country. The agriculture potential alone is such that the DRC can provide the food basket for the continent of Africa. Its location in the heart of the central Africa and having borders with nine countries

⁶Boulden, J. (2013). Responding to conflict in Africa: The United Nations and regional organizations. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan; Michelle, F. (n.d). Congo conflict shows flaws in UN peacekeeping force. Toronto Star (Canada)

⁷Centre, O. E. C. D. D. (2007). African Economic Outlook 2006/2007. Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

to the South, North, East and Atlantic Ocean to the West confers on it a unique geopolitical and geo-economic importance. Any positive or negative happening in the country is likely to have a rippling effect on all its neighbors and the region as a whole. The reality is that Congo is a continent size country. The geographical challenge and effect of having an area of almost two million square kilometers cannot be underestimated. Besides, being one of the world's largest ongoing tragedies, it is a potential political center of gravity for Central Africa and a sedentary African economic powerhouse.

Additionally, in terms of population and size, it has what it takes to become a regional hegemonic powerhouse as it is the third largest and it has the third largest population of about 75 million. But the Congolese crisis is not only resource related; it goes deeper than that. There are other pointers. First, is the local political challenge that dates as far back as the era of King Leopold.⁸ The reality is that the DRC as a country failed right at the moment it was born. Within days of its independence, soldiers of the new country mutinied or were provoked to mutiny by foreign powers against the established political authority.⁹ Consequently, the remnants of the colonial administration departed, leaving behind a collapsed economy and government. The second has to do with the politics in Kinshasa where succeeding governments are unable to urgently reform their own institutions of state to deal with the changing nature of the conflict. Since 1999 the conflict has metamorphosed from one that has grassroots undercurrents to one that is extremely politicized with many political actors. Failure of leadership to effectively deal with the governance challenges, in addition to the weakness of the Congolese state, is what has caused the inconsistency in the fight against all the rebel groups within the country. Third, is the regional complexity where neighboring countries such as Rwanda and Uganda are neck deep in the crises at the eastern part of the DRC.

Since 1996 Rwanda and Uganda have invaded Congo twice, supported proxy militias and have fought each other on Congolese soil.¹⁰ Cammaert and Blyth (2013) contend that Congo's influential neighbors, Rwanda and Uganda, have provided massive support for the various armed groups that operate in the country. Unfortunately, the profound ethnic cleavages within

the region have been compounded by the huge numbers of returnees and refugees from these neighboring countries. The complicity of Uganda, for instance, was clearly highlighted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) ruling in 2005 in which Uganda was told that it owes Congo billions of dollars in reparation for invading Congo, plundering its resources and committing crimes against humanity. But all this while, Rwanda and Uganda have gotten away with these crimes because of their close association with certain world powers such as the United States and United Kingdom. Historically, as a result of the Rwandan genocide in 1994, many of the armed groups crossed to DRC with the ultimate aim to drive the then President Mobutu out of power. The genesis of the use of children in armed conflict started when Kabila, in his push for political power, recruited and used children to execute his actions. In 1996, more than 50,000 children were recruited to fight alongside Kabila.

CHILDREN AND YOUTH FORMERLY ASSOCIATED WITH ARMED GROUPS OR ARMED FORCES

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has one of the most complex, challenging, and devastating protracted crises on the continent. The insecurity being experienced continues to be characterized by intense division and inertia. Geographically, the conflict is widespread with regions mainly in the eastern part of the country, particularly in the North and South Kivu, Ituri, Tanganyika, Haut-Katanga and Kasai bearing the full brunt of insecurity. The effect of the presence of armed groups (nearly over a hundred), inter-communal violence, representation of government, inter-ethnic clashes and its associated violence has had serious effects on the security and wellbeing of children. Many of the nearly 120 armed groups have either existed themselves for many years or are splinter factions of other longstanding groups. Till date, children and youth continue to be subject to grave violations, including killing and maiming, abduction, forced and voluntary recruitment by mainly armed groups, rape and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence.

⁸Ngolet, F. (2011). *Crisis in the Congo: The rise and fall of Laurent Kabila*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

⁹Gondola, C. D. (2002). *The History of Congo*. Westport (Conn.: Greenwood.)

¹⁰Great Lakes Region: War of Words. (2013). *Africa Research Bulletin: Economic, Financial & Technical Series*, 50(8), 20080A-20081B

The United Nations reports that it verified 3,470 grave violations against 2,912 children (2,113 boys, 799 girls) between January to December 2020 in addition to 1,786 grave violations against 1,294 children (787 boys, 507 girls) in 2019.¹¹ The violent conflict in the eastern part of DRC creates the enabling environment for the recruitment of child soldiers. All the armed groups in the Congo are liable for the use of children and youth. According to one of the interviewees, more than 60% of the armed groups use children in their activities.¹² Armed groups such as the Mai-Mai Mazembe, Nyatura, Alliance Des Forces de Résistance Congolaises, Nduma Défense du Congo-Rénové (NDC-Rénové), Mai-Mai Apa Na Pale, Coopérative Pour le Développement du Congo (CODECO), Raia Mutomboki, Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda-Forces Combattantes Abacunguzi (FDLR-FOCA) among many others were complicit in these recruitments and use of children in the frontlines.¹³ The roles played by abducted children are gendered. What is more noticeable is that girls play roles that are more pronounced. They serve as spouses for the militia and akin to giving birth for them and raising the new generation of fighters. As was stated by an interviewee:

The presence of the girls boosts the morale of the fighters... which explains why recruiters also specialize in recruiting more women than men in certain situations.¹⁴

Once abducted, the children are brutalized and forced to serve as soldiers, informants, looters, porters, decoys, bodyguards, and in the case of girls, sex slaves. In certain situations, children are used to collect information about the positioning of other armed groups and hostile forces. Yet again they are also used to collect gold and other minerals from the mining pits. As was stated by an interlocutor:

Sometimes children are used as barriers to collect tax because the leadership of the armed groups know that children would not steal. These taxes are taken from the field, bush and market places... they are not government taxes but taxes belonging to the militia.¹⁵

The recruitment of children into these armed groups is diversified with each of the armed groups having their own unique peculiarities. For instance, in a community-based armed group, it is very difficult to identify who is a combatant as some of these children are fighters at night and normal children by day. Also, in the eastern region, the underlining driver of the conflict is exploitation of minerals. As such, children are recruited mainly to work in the mining field. Likewise, in the Kasai region (western), the main driver of the conflict is ethnicity and ideology. Children are therefore used to defend their chiefs, political elites and power. Whereas many of the children are forcefully conscripted, in recent times, many of these children join these armed groups voluntarily, mainly as a result of poverty, family pressure, financial and economic difficulties, lack of education, internal displacement, dependency on drugs, revenge and also to defend some ideological beliefs of self-defense groups.

BARRIERS TO ENSURING SAFE AND MEANINGFUL INCLUSION AND PARTICIPATION OF THE YOUTH

Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) Process

One effort the DRC has attempted to reintegrate the youth back into society has been through the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) process. There have been three versions of this process and all three attempts have not fully achieved the intended objectives. The DDR process has always been considered a laudable initiative, and yet The Democratic Republic of Congo cannot be considered a stable Republic. The DDR program requires ex-combatants to undergo sensitization, orientation, and demobilization formalities before they are presented the opportunity to choose between insertion into the Armed Forces or to choose reintegration to re-enter civilian life.

¹¹https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2021/437&Lang=E&Area=UNDOC

¹²Interview with Col Fabien, Kinshasa, September 2021

¹³https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2021/437&Lang=E&Area=UNDOC

¹⁴ibid.,

¹⁵Interview with child protection team, MONUSCO, Kinshasa, September 2021

The Congolese government set up several programs to facilitate the reintegration of ex-combatants associated with armed forces and groups. The first was the Bureau for National Demobilization and Reintegration 'BUNADR and then the Commission for Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration or 'CONADER', also known as DDR I and DDR II.

The BUNADR and CONADER, were greatly characterized by heavy military control, which did not facilitate the smooth implementation of the process. The program was challenged by the lack of the political will to pursue its objectives, embezzlement of funds, and wrongful implementation of DDR policies¹⁶. Another challenge was that ex-combatants who had become new recruits refused new postings which were outside the areas where they had an established chain of command in conflict periods. Their presence in these areas allows for a continuation of the chain of command which existed during the conflict and this does not help the reintegration process.¹⁷

The Program National de Desarmement, Demobilisation et Reinsertion (PNDDR) replaced CONADER. The Program (PNDDR) was implemented by the DRC government with technical support from external sources.¹⁸ In all, the PNDDR demobilized over 100,000 ex-combatants, however it is estimated that only 58% of this number were successful with reintegration. The actual figures are difficult to ascertain due to the absence of reliable data. There were four child-soldier projects that were also established within this broad 'Program'. These projects also provided integration assistance to 12,511 children (61% of target), but only managed to successfully reintegrate 604 children.¹⁹ The inability to reintegrate the children was not fully due to the inadequacy of funds to effectively run the Program, as funding was from the World Bank. The UNDP in DRC, for example, with a budget of \$11.8 million, only managed to place 83 ex-combatants out of a target of 10,000 in reintegration projects.²⁰ These among many others raised serious questions over the implementation of the DDR process and cast doubts and mistrust among the youth over the intention of the Government to truly include them in the future of the peacebuilding process.

With regards to the female ex-combatants, about 30% forms part of the armed groups and in the

reintegration process, many of them opted out of the formal procedure for fear of stigmatization.

A young girl will return back into the community and alleged to have been abducted by a group of bandits or a lone man than admit to being held by an armed group for fear of being ostracized by community²¹

In this regard, the new DDR initiative adapted a National Action Plan. This process was implemented by a Program called the DDR National Action Plan Implementation Unit (UEPNDDR) and supported by the Action Plan to Combat the Recruitment and Use of Children and Other Grave Violations of Children by the Armed Forces and the Security Services. This Action Plan was signed on October 4, 2012 between the Congolese Government and the United Nations Task Force on Children and Armed Conflict, a rehabilitation program aimed at the integration of children recruited and used in armed forces and groups. This Action Plan is implemented by a structure called the Joint Technical Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict (GTTC). All these have contributed to the current state of DRC not having any children officially in its National Armed Forces.²²

This Joint Working Group is considering all lessons learnt from previous DDR process in the country to ensure the children do not re-engage with the armed groups, post demobilization. The GTTC therefore focuses on separation and protection of the children as well as a response mechanism with a counter-impunity approach. However, above all, their aim is to prevent children and youth from engaging and volunteering with the armed groups. The GTTC achieves this through continuous training of child protection officers as well as security sector actors on the use of Operational Standards on Age Assessment (SOP).

¹⁶Interview with Congolese UN Civil Affairs Officer, Kinshasa, September 2021

¹⁷Interview with Congolese UN Civil Affairs Officer, Kinshasa, September 2021

¹⁸<https://www.peaceinsight.org/en/articles/ddr-drc/?location=dr-congo&theme=ddr>

¹⁹Ibid

²⁰Ibid

²¹Interview with Human Rights Officers at MONUSCO, Kinshasa, September 2021

²²Interview with Col Fabien, Kinshasa, September 2021

They have also been engaging with transitional host families and reintegration communities to raise awareness and sensitization to ensure they cooperate and support the integration process as this has been a great barrier to the process. The sensitization and awareness creation has been extended to commanders, focal points of armed groups community leaders, mediators on the prevention of child recruitment. This engagement led the leaders of the Armed Groups to sign unilateral declarations in which they pledged not to recruit or commit serious violations of children's rights and also led to the release of hundreds of children.²³

Absence of Universal Coverage of Education

According to UNICEF the DRC has made significant strides towards universal access to primary education over the past few decades. Though the net attendance rate has increased from 52% in 2001 to 78% in 2018, some 7.6 million children aged 5-17 are not in school. The rate for children aged 3-5 is only 5%. These figures continue to create a fertile ground for the recruitment of these children and youth for armed groups in the communities. There are limited mechanisms in DRC to ensure the children are not re-recruited by the armed groups²⁴ The absence of a solid, accessible educational system across the entire country implies that children of school going age are limited in opportunities for engagement and may view joining armed groups as a viable alternative.

The direct costs (registration fees) and indirect costs (school materials, uniforms, etc.) borne by poor households seem to be some of the obstacles to the enrollment of children in school, despite the policy of free primary education promulgated in 2010 by the Government of the DRC.²⁵ UNICEF is working with the government to strengthen national policies, by trying to reduce the number of children out of school. The Organization is effectively implementing free school measures, improvement of pre-primary coverage, comprehensive curriculum reform package and data collection with Governmental counterparts especially at the provincial levels.²⁶

In the midst of the conflict and disaster, education is being used as both a life-sustaining and a life-saving tool. The government has multiple initiatives, however, implementation continues to be its greatest challenges.²⁷ Thus, UNICEF supports

education for peace and the restoration of the capacity of destabilized institutions; and to achieve this and ensure greater effectiveness, it promotes multi-sectoral actions, including child survival and protection, nutrition, water, hygiene and sanitation, and communication for behavior change.

The National Governance

The governance structure of the DRC, is characterized by the tenets of a National Government but ruled through Local Government at the Provincial level, where the representative of government is the Governor. There are also highly entrenched local government structures. The Governor is elected by the Provincial Assembly but he/she is solely accountable to the authorities in Kinshasa (National Government) through the respective Ministry. Thus, there is a disjoint between the allegiance of the Governor to the community they represent. This, coupled with the terrible economic situation in most communities and the road networks, deprives most persons from engaging with the communities outside of Kinshasa. In addition to the disconnect between the leadership at the Provincial level and communities, members of the Province are seen not to be capable to undertake their roles and mandates, including approving budgets and serving as a check on the Executive. They seem to lack the capability to engage on policy related issues. The population perceive them as being mainly interested in personal wealth and income generation for self and associates:

.... The leaders will not engage the youth for anything, the same with the ones here in Kinshasa....during elections, they will coordinate with the leaders in the local communities to mobilize the youth for their rallies.....cause confusion and chaos.....²⁸

²³Interview with Col Fabien, Kinshasa, September 2021

²⁴Interview with Ndeye Kane, Kinshasa September 2021

²⁵<https://www.unicef.org/drcongo/en/what-we-do/education>

²⁶Ibid

²⁷Interviews with UNICEF officers, Kinshasa September 2021

²⁸Interview with National Staff at the MONUSO Headquarters, September, 2021

There is little or no accountability for the work of the local authorities for where many of the youth are reside. Even with Kinshasa, there is a growing case of street children. The solution of the National Government has been to place them into rehabilitation centers several kilometers from the city and engage them in agricultural skills. Thus far, about 2000 such children have been ‘rehabilitated’. The challenge with most initiatives undertaken by the government has been the follow-ups. Post the acquisitions of skills, not much is done to ensure such youth utilize the skills acquired in order for them not to return to the streets.²⁹

The level of power and influence of national and local authorities in the country and their inability to effect positive change has led to severe mistrust of the populace for their leaders. Thus, for the youth, especially those already in the armed groups or on the streets, they accept that as a means to acquire power and influence.

...some of the communities the families encourage their children to join the armed groups as a means for making money or gaining power and control....³⁰

The level of mistrust in the governance system trickles down to security services; especially, the police and the military. These two agencies tend to be the first point of contact with the street children or youth when they are surrendering from the armed groups. When interviewees were asked if during debriefing sessions the FRDC were gender sensitive, all admitted that efforts were being made but there was still room for improvement in the process. The logistics were clearly not there for separate rooms for debriefing, considering the terrain. However, all efforts were being made to ensure male and females were not debriefed in the same vicinity or at the same time, and that children were handled with dignity and proper care at all times. Officials also admitted that the questionnaires used for debriefing did not differ from males to females. Perhaps, there was the need to review the questioning or mode of questioning to ensure the right information was elicited. Most especially, as had been observed, most females will hardly admit to being sexually abused while in captivity unless there is physical evidence to prove so³¹.

In Kinshasa, with regards to the street children, there were reports of the police officers physically and sexually abusing the children in their custody, especially the young girls.³² The continuous lack of control and accountability in the governance system therefore enhances the mistrust of the youth in the government and their quest to keep the gun in their hands and chart their own path.

ACTORS INVOLVED WITH ENSURING PARTICIPATION OF YOUTH IN PEACE BUILDING

The National Government

President Félix Antoine Tshisekedi Tshilombo has been in power since January 2019, after winning election. His predecessor was Joseph Kabila who was in power from January 2001 to January 2019. The President and his government are the main actors responsible for ensuring the active participation of the youth in the peacebuilding process. The Government, currently through its armed forces, screens new recruits to ensure that children are not recruited into the armed forces. In 2020, they were able to separate 53 children before enrolment.³³

Again, the Government mandates its Ministries of Youth and New Citizenship; Education; Gender, Family and Children; Sports and Recreation; Defense; Communication and the Parliament to ensure that youth are captured in their activities. The Ministry of Youth and New Citizenship deals with all youth initiatives aimed at peace and development in the country, whereas the Ministry of Education is concerned with the education of young people in all aspects of national life. The Ministry of Gender, Family and Children looks at the family unit and its two main components of girls and boys, to develop health relationship regardless of their respective sexes. Sports is a unifier in DRC and the Ministry can leverage on that to promote development and peacebuilding within the youth, and together with the Ministry of Communication educate and entertain young people through the media. However, most often, these agencies work in isolation and with very limited budgetary allocation.

²⁹Interview with National Staff at the MONUSO Headquarters, September, 2021

³⁰Every interview held in Kinshasa, September 2021

³¹Interviews with UNICEF Official and Col Fabien at Kinshasa, September 2021

³²Interviews with Civil Affairs and Human Rights Officers, Kinshasa September 2021

³³Report of the Secretary-General Children and armed conflict- A/75/873-S/2021/437, May 2021

United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO)

The United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) came out of an earlier UN peacekeeping operation – the United Nations Organization Mission in Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC) – on 1 July, 2010. This was in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 1925 of 28 May 2012 to reflect the new phase reached in the country. At the 8936th meeting held on 20 December, 2021, the Security Council, adopted Resolution 2612 (2021) was for MONUSCO. The Mission has been authorized to use all necessary means to carry out its mandate relating, among other things, to the protection of civilians, humanitarian personnel and human rights defenders under imminent threat of physical violence, and to support the Government of the DRC in its stabilization and peace consolidation efforts.

In protecting civilians, the Mission is to:

take all necessary measures to ensure effective, timely, dynamic and integrated protection of civilians under threat of physical violence within its provinces of current deployment, with a specific focus on Ituri, North Kivu and South Kivu,...., through a comprehensive approach and in consultation with local communities, including by preventing, deterring, and stopping all armed groups and local militias from inflicting violence on the populations, by disarming....in line with the basic principles of peacekeeping, while ensuring the risk to civilians are mitigated before, during and after any military or police operation,.....minimising and addressing civilian harm resulting from the mission's operations, including when in support of national security forces.

Thus, though the Mission has a role to play in protecting civilians, this has to be done in support of the National Forces, as the host nations still had primary responsibility of safety of citizens.

The Mission further has a mandate to provide *“Support to stabilisation and the strengthening of State institutions in the DRC, and key governance*

and security reforms, in order to establish functional, professional, and accountable state institutions, including security and judicial institutions”. One component of this specific mandate is supporting with the Disarmament, Demobilisation, Reintegration (DDR) process of the country. It requires that the Mission provides institutions as well as technical advice and assistance to the national Government, with particular attention to North and South Kivu and Ituri provinces. This is for the implementation of agreed policies for re-integration into a peaceful civilian life that can be complemented by a Community Violence Reduction (CVR) approach through community-based security and stabilisation measures, while utilizing a flexible disarmament and demobilisation approach. It should be done with great attention being paid to the needs of women and children formerly associated with armed forces and groups.

Additionally, the Mission, through its child protection mandate, will support the stabilization process by collaborating with the Government of the DRC to consolidate the gains of the Action Plan to Prevent and End the Recruitment and Use of Children and expedite its implementation. The process will include the aspects related to sexual violence by the FARDC and continued dialogue with all relevant actors in order to work towards the development and implementation of action plans to prevent and end violations and abuses against children.³⁴

UNICEF

The UNICEF has mainly played humanitarian roles in relation to the crisis in DRC. It has been present in DRC since 1963. The UNICEF has tried as much as possible to conduct research-based programs and campaigns. Aside the challenge of sustainable development, DRC's humanitarian crisis has worsened over the years. According to UNICEF statistics, nearly 20 million people need urgent humanitarian assistance, across the country where 11.5 million are children. The Organisation works with the other international and local actors to undertake identification and unification of children. They also focus on integration and not 're-integration' as some communities are not very welcoming to 'their own child'; thus, in some situations, it is best to place the child in a different community. The central idea is to give every child a childhood. Every child deserves an opportunity to thrive and survive; an opportunity to develop and manifest their full potential. Basic amenities are essential to their survival. This is a challenge

³⁴United Nations Security Council S/RES/2612 (2021)- [https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2612\(2021\)](https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2612(2021))

UNICEF encounters in DRC, specifically related to the integration process, as that is not considered an 'emergency' but rather a 'development' component with a funding gap. Without proper integration, the children revert into their militia lifestyle and rejoin the armed groups. Some also are not able to benefit from proper psycho-social support³⁵.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Sub Regional Approach

The geographic position and history of the DRC is a contributory factor to the protraction of conflict and the use of children in the country. Considering the nature of the conflicts in the countries in the Great Lakes region, there is an urgent need to address the conflict situation in the region. It is noteworthy that the UN Special Envoy to the Great Lakes region has iterated some significant recommendations which are imperative to establishing stability in the area. These recommendations were made at a Security Council meeting on the 20 October 2021. It called for greater commitment in terms of political will, and stated that the plethora of bilateral agreements attests to the emergence of a people who understand the added value of dialogue and cooperation. The peaceful transfer of power coupled with the signing of peace agreements needs to be consolidated.³⁶ There needs to be a sub-regional approach that holistically looks not only at maintaining peace, but also abolishing the trafficking and recruitment of child soldiers. These child soldiers are an integral segment of armed groups and the conflict situation and it is necessary for reform initiatives to be sensitive to their participation, and consideration of their reintegration as an instrument for sustainability and development.

Government Moves Beyond Rhetoric

The essence of national ownership in the protection of child combatants cannot be overemphasized. If the DRC would experience sustained peace and security, it has a lot to do with national initiatives. MONUSCO has played a large role in maintaining peace in the country; however, Resolution 2612 per its mandate has an exit strategy for the Mission. Thus, the government, together with the mission, has to collaborate to consolidate its gains and ensure that the government assumes full leadership in the maintenance of peace and security. The Government, through the FRDC,

needs to continue on the trajectory of eliminating the recruitment of children in the national armed forces. Additionally, it needs to work on eliminating reports of abuses (both physical and sexual) by members of the security agencies against children. There needs to be proper commitment by the leadership towards the implementation of its policies, with the provision of the needed resources.

Community-Based Programs

Community based approaches must be undertaken to sensitize the indigenes on the challenges of encouraging children in armed groups. This can be done with the support of the numerous donor agencies in the country and the NGOs in the local communities. There are many young persons who have integrated into communities; they must be given opportunities to share their stories as a means to deter other young ones from joining armed groups. There should also be support groups in the communities to engage the rehabilitated persons as a follow-up on their journey to return into peaceful civilian life. Many a time, post the DDR process, there are limited follow-up systems for them; having community-based support groups with trained counselors to guide the interactions will help create a sense of belonging.

Secondly, there needs to be the creation of sufficient or long-term economic reintegration packages based to keep the children engaged once they return to the communities. This will eliminate the enticement of the bush. It being long-term will ensure sustainability, and to some extent acceptance, when the children are seen as contributing meaningfully to the community. The absence of acceptance and recognition of their meaningful contribution to the community by its members tends to make the children volatile and pushes them back into the armed groups. Finally, there is the need for systematic sensitization on welcoming the ex-combatants into the communities.

³⁵Interview with UNICEF Officials, Kinshasa September 2021

³⁶<https://ungreatlakes.unmissions.org/un%E2%80%99s-top-envoy-warns-great-lakes-region-%E2%80%98-crossroads%E2%80%99>

The Youth at the Table

Several United Nations reports have asserted that the youth are a great resource for reformation and revolution. The idea of characterizing youth as incapable of making sound judgment on matters has to be discarded. Stakeholders in the DRC must ensure that there is youth representation among policy makers. For a country where the greater portion of the population are under 25, it is imperative to ensure that they are duly represented in the decision-making process. The youth will have to include all categories of youth, both the reformed and rehabilitated. It is important that the integration process is done effectively and proper psycho-social support given to the individual. There is the need for opportunities to be created for either formal or informal education for the youth to be able to utilize their voices.

The challenges of DRC may be many but the resilience of the country and its people surpass those challenges. Over the years, progress has been made, especially with addressing children in armed conflict; however, these efforts need to be consolidated and ownership fully given to the national government to continue the implementation as the UN plans its exit from the country. The future of the country depends on how well the youth are included in the conversations from now.

About the Centre

Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KAIPTC) is an ECOWAS Centre of Excellence that provides globally recognized capacity for international actors on African peace and security through training, education and research to foster peace and stability in Africa.

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About the Project

This paper was written as part of a joint project - Engagement of Youth Formerly Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups as Children in Peacebuilding: A Call to Action. This was between the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre and Save the Children International Regional Programme- Children Affected in Armed Conflict (CAAC)/ Protecting Children in Conflict (PCiC) programme





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