

The Marginalization of Girls Associated with Armed Groups

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IFHV Working Paper, Vol. 9, No. 1

Bibliographic information:

Title: The Marginalization of Girls Associated with Armed Groups. A Qualitative Field Study of the Gender-Based Challenges in the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Intervention in North Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo.

Author(s): Astrid Sevrin

Source: IFHV Working Papers, Vol. 9 No. 1

Date: March 2019

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17176/20220622-142356-0>

ISSN: 2199-1367

Suggested citation:

Sevrin, A. (2019). The Marginalization of Girls Associated with Armed Groups. A Qualitative Field Study of the Gender-Based Challenges in the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Intervention in North Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo. IFHV Working Paper, 9(1).



RUHR-UNIVERSITÄT BOCHUM

IFHV Working Paper Vol. 9, No. 1, March 2019

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URL: http://www.ifhv.de/documents/workingpapers/wp9_1.pdf

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Abstract

This working paper examines the challenges in the Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) intervention in North Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), in reintegrating children formerly associated with armed groups into civilian life. The main objective of the research is to investigate factors contributing to the lack of inclusion of girls in DDR. In fact, MONUSCO's statistics reveal that girls make up 40% of all child soldiers in the DRC, yet represent only 7% of the officially demobilized children.

The present study is based on a two-month research stay in North Kivu (July to September 2017). The principal objective of that stay was to gather local perceptions and opinions related to the phenomenon of the use of child soldiers and child DDR intervention. Narratives from participants are analyzed using sociological discourse analysis. The research therefore embraces an emic approach to better understand local perceptions and viewpoints. Priority has been given to local actor's voices, and to children in particular, with a strong emphasis on reintegrated girls, as their voices are often absent from academic literature.

The analysis of the field research, together with a literature review, shows that the DDR intervention in North Kivu faces significant challenges in sustainably reintegrating children who have been part of armed groups into their local communities. In fact, this study suggests that the security-oriented approach of the DDR intervention leads to a lack of emphasis on the reintegration and development phase of the program and to a lack of a gender-sensitive, community-based approach. As a result, the security-oriented approach unintentionally contributes to the risk of re-recruitment of demobilized children, which consequently and paradoxically compromises peacebuilding efforts in the eastern DRC.

Key words: Child DDR intervention, Children associated with armed groups, Girls associated with armed groups, Democratic Republic of Congo, North Kivu, Peacebuilding, Community-based development, Localization, Resilience, Nexus.

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List of Acronyms

| | |
|---------|--|
| ADF | Allied Democratic Forces (Ugandan rebel force) |
| ADFL | <i>Alliance des Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Congo-Zaire</i> (Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire) |
| CAAFAG | Children associated with armed forces and armed groups |
| CAJED | <i>Concert d'actions pour jeunes et enfants défavorisés</i> |
| CTO | Centre of transit and orientation |
| CBO | Community-based organisation |
| CONADER | <i>Commission nationale pour la démobilisation et la réinsertion</i> |
| CNRD | <i>Congrès National pour la défense du peuple</i> |
| DRC | Democratic Republic of Congo |
| DRC | Danish Refugee Council |
| DDR | Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration |
| FJA | <i>Foyer de jeunesse d'autonomisation</i> |
| FARDC | <i>Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo</i> |
| FDLR | <i>Forces Démocratiques de Libération de Rwanda</i> (ex-FAR and Interahamwe soldiers) |
| FRPI | <i>Force de résistance patriotique de l'Ituri</i> |
| ICRC | International Committee of the Red Cross |
| INGO | International non-governmental organization |
| ILO | International Labour Organization |
| IDP | Internally displaced person |
| IGA | Income generating activities |
| LRA | Lord's Resistance Army |
| NGO | Non-governmental organization |
| MNR | National Movement of Revolutionaries |
| M23 | <i>Mouvement du 23 Mars</i> |
| MONUSCO | <i>Mission de l'Organisation des Nations Unies en République Démocratique du Congo</i> (United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo) |
| PAMI | <i>Programme d'appui à la lutte contre la misère</i> |
| PNDDR | <i>Programme National de Désarmement, Démobilisation, et Réintégration</i> |
| PTSD | Post-traumatic stress disorders |
| RUF | Revolutionary United Front |

| | |
|--------|--|
| RCD | Rally for Congolese Democracy |
| SGBV | Sexual and gender-based violence |
| STI | Sexually transmitted infections |
| UNICEF | United Nations Children's Fund |
| UNDPKO | United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations |

I. Introduction

[...] women and girls are not only victims of armed conflict: they are also active agents and participants in conflict. [...] Women and girls may also be manipulated into taking up military or violent roles [...]. [...] they are also targets of specific forms of violence and abuse, including sexual violence and exploitation.

Efforts to resolve these conflicts and address their root causes will not succeed unless we empower all those who have suffered from them – including and especially women. And only if women play a full and equal part can we build the foundations for enduring peace – development, good governance, human rights and justice.
(Kofi A. Annan, UNSC S/RES/1325, 2002, pp. IX-3)

I.1. Background

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has been plagued by political instability and conflicts. It was severely affected by the 1994 Rwandan genocide and has consistently ranked as one of the world's poorest countries—notwithstanding its vast natural resources. For decades, wars, poor governance, corruption, lack of infrastructure, endemic diseases, lack of sanitation and hygiene structures, and natural disasters have greatly increased the vulnerability of the Congolese population. The ongoing conflict is considered the deadliest since the Second World War, with an estimated death toll of 5.4 million people, of which 4.6 million occurred in the east alone (IRC, 2008).¹

The eastern region of DRC remains particularly vulnerable. The Kivu and Ituri provinces have been hotspots of fighting for more than two decades. The proliferation of armed groups in these provinces is difficult to contain due to the region's complex geography and the large size of the country, which makes covering all areas particularly challenging for the Congolese armed forces and MONUSCO.²

Children, who represent the majority of the population, are among the most vulnerable. Due to the pervasive presence of armed groups in the region, child military recruitment remains a current practice that has affected the life of thousands and has been an endless struggle for the country and the international community. Furthermore, in a region where sexual and gender-based violence is rampant, girls particularly remain at risk regarding sexual exploitation. The systematic use of rape and sexual slavery by armed groups as a method of war still goes largely unpunished. Additionally, the limited government capacities hinder prospects for reconciliation, while women and girls are physically,

¹ International Rescue Committee (IRC), *Mortality in the Democratic Republic of Congo: An Ongoing Crisis*, 2007, available at: <https://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/document/661/2006-7congomortalitysurvey.pdf> (last visited 17 September 2017).

² MONUSCO has replaced MONUC (*Mission de l'Organisation des Nations Unies en République Démocratique du Congo*) by UNSC Resolution 1925 (2010). MONUSCO's strength as of 15 September 2017 was 16,071 military personnel, 602 military observers and staff officers, 320 police personnel, 1048 formed police units, and 4,145 civilians. See <https://monusco.unmissions.org/faits-et-chiffres> (last visited 10 November 2017).

emotionally, socially and economically affected by stigmatization and marginalization by their own families and communities.

The use and recruitment of children by armed groups is a worrying phenomenon for the future of DRC and severely hampers peace consolidation efforts in the country. The situation for girls (formerly) associated with armed forces and armed groups is of great concern. Although the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in DRC (MONUSCO) estimates that girls make up 30 to 40% of all children associated with armed groups in DRC, girls represent only 7% of registered children formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups (CAAFAG) at MONUSCO (2015, p. 8). Such estimates reveal that demobilization efforts face significant challenges in reaching girls associated with armed groups in DRC.

1.2. Study area and research question

The general objective of this study is to examine the child DDR intervention in North Kivu and, more specifically, the factors leading to the lack of access to the DDR program for girls associated with armed groups. The principal research question of this paper is

- *What challenges does the DDR intervention in North Kivu (DRC) face in the effective reintegration of children formerly associated with armed groups into civilian life?*

The study will further attempt to meet a more specific objective, namely investigating the lack of inclusion of girl soldiers in the DDR process, with the following sub-research question:

- *What are the underlying factors leading to the exclusion of girls associated with armed groups from the DDR process in North Kivu, DR Congo?*

1.3. Relevance

The study of the use of child soldiers, and particularly girls associated with armed groups, is an underdeveloped field. Few studies and data are available on the military recruitment of children and on its long-term consequences for both children and civil society.

To date, the actual number of children associated with armed forces and armed groups (CAAFAG) in the world remains unknown. With only estimates available, the number is approximately 300,000 (Briggs, 2017). Fieldwork on this topic is notoriously challenging due to security risks, lack of access to primary data, and the oft-hidden nature of the phenomenon. As a result, literature on this topic is scarce; particularly studies on girls associated with armed forces and armed groups.

Furthermore, data are usually gathered from international, humanitarian and political actors, but local voices are rarely translated into the academic literature. The qualitative participatory methodology chosen for this study will contribute to reducing this gap. As Bodineau has underlined (2014, p. 125), while silence can sometimes be a way for communities and children to go forward after a conflict, breaking that silence can also be paramount to the resolution of conflicts among communities. Moreover, it can promote the reintegration of children who have been associated with armed forces and armed groups. The methodology of this paper aligns with this argument. Regarding ethical

considerations, the research has been done with the full and informed agreement of research participants, obtained by clearly explaining and sharing the aim of the present research, as well as the researcher's role.

The field research took place in the province of North Kivu, an eastern region that has been plagued by conflicts for decades and is severely affected by the recruitment and use of children by armed groups. An estimated 30,000 children are associated with armed groups in DRC (Briggs, 2017). According to the January-March 2017 newsletter of MONUSCO, 789 grave violations of child rights took place, a 90% increase compared to the previous quarter, and 119 children, among which were 49 girls, were abducted in North Kivu (2017, p. 5). Field research has therefore been conducted in North Kivu in order to better identify challenges (with a particular focus on gender-specific challenges), that impede the DDR process in DRC. This research examines the underlying factors leading to the lack of inclusion of girls in DDR programs. In fact, only 7% of demobilized children in DRC are girls although they make up 40% of child soldiers (MONUSCO, 2015, p. 8).

Finally, this study gives priority to local voices, especially to children formerly associated with armed groups, in an effort to take an emic approach to gathered data. In addition, this research particularly emphasizes the importance of localization for more sustainable interventions.³ Localizing response by working closely with civil society, local NGOs, and local communities has the potential to strengthen affected people's resilience.⁴ Furthermore, it allows child protection actors to increase their accountability to vulnerable people targeted by their interventions, improve the quality of their actions and better meet local needs.

The design of the field research was based on a participative methodology that enabled the active involvement and participation of CAAFAG in the research process. Participative methods can empower research participants and have a positive impact on their life. Academics see this approach as going beyond the "Do No Harm" approach of Mary Anderson (Odden and Tonheim, 2013, p. 34).

This research has some limitations. First, the field study draws on a sociological approach to better answer the research questions. However, a larger social anthropological study needs to be conducted over a longer period in order to be able to reach a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of the use of child soldiers in North Kivu. Second, with the sample being rather limited, research findings must be understood within their direct context and cannot be generalized.

³ "Localizing humanitarian response is a process of recognizing, respecting and strengthening the leadership by local authorities and the capacity of local civil society in humanitarian action, in order to better address the needs of affected populations and to prepare national actors for future humanitarian responses." OECD, *Localizing the Response, World Humanitarian Summit, Putting Policy into Practice*, The Commitments into action series, 2017, p. 1, available at: <https://www.oecd.org/development/humanitarian-donors/docs/Localisingtheresponse.pdf> (last visited on 30 September 2017).

⁴ "Resilience is the ability of an individual, a household, a community, a country or a region to withstand, cope, adapt, and quickly recover from stresses and shocks such as violence, conflict, drought and other natural disasters without compromising long-term development." ECHO Factsheet, Resilience, 2016.

1.4. Paper outline

This paper begins by providing the theoretical background of the study on the use of child soldiers and the interventions that attempt to address it. The second chapter lays out the research methodology for the field research, and is followed by a context analysis of the use of children by armed groups in North Kivu, DRC. The fourth chapter proceeds to the sociological discourse analysis and suggests alternative solutions to identified challenges. The paper concludes by highlighting the main issues impeding the successful reintegration of children associated with armed groups and the inclusion of girls in the DDR intervention in North Kivu and suggests some points for intervention to address those challenges. The conclusion also proposes some issues for further investigation.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. The phenomenon of child soldiers

2.1.1. General Overview

The first widespread use of children in armed conflicts in contemporary history dates back to the Second World War (Mulira, 2007, p. 3). In the aftermath of the Cold War, the number of civil conflicts has dramatically escalated, leading to a sharp increase in the use of children in armed conflicts. More than 49 countries in the world are currently plagued by armed conflicts with children growing up in harmful environments (Dupuy et al., 2017). In the context of civil conflicts, children are at a higher risk. In fact, the violent character of such types of wars can lead to brutal fighting between friends, families, communities and neighbors, and to the use of rape and maiming as practices to dehumanize the enemy (Yanacopulos and Hanlon, 2005, p. 7). In such volatile situations, children are considered to be the most vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, trafficking, prostitution, discrimination, life on the street, malnutrition, and recruitment into armed groups. More than twenty million children have lost their lives as a result of their participation in armed conflict since the Second World War (Mulira, 2007, p. 1).

Child military recruitment and the use of child soldiers have been facilitated by the nature of contemporary warfare, which is often motivated by a desire for control over resources and ignited by ethnic, religious and cultural tensions, social injustice, bad governance, and the illicit trade of light weapons, which can be carried easily.

Academic literature suggests that as many as 300,000 children are currently serving as soldiers in armed conflicts in ten countries around the globe: Central African Republic, DRC, South Sudan, Somalia, Nigeria, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen and Myanmar⁵ (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008), and that children have participated in hostilities in at least 18 conflict situations since 2016.⁶ Estimates suggest that 40% of all children associated with armed forces and armed groups are active on the African

⁵ Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/central-african-republic/10-countries-where-child-soldiers-are-still-recruited-armed> (last visited on 10 September 2017).

⁶ Child Soldiers International Website, World Index, available at: <https://childsoldiersworldindex.org/> (last visited on 26 May 2018).

continent (Dudenhoefer, 2016). Achvarina and Reich conclude that “since 1975, Africa has become the epicenter of the problem, providing the largest concentration of both conflicts and child soldiers” (2010, p. 56 cited in Dudenhoefer, 2016).

Despite the high estimates, the hidden nature of the phenomenon suggests that engagement in these activities is actually much higher. CAAFAG are generally difficult to reach out to as they often hide in the bush. In some armed groups, girls are estimated to make up 30 to 40% of all child soldiers, such as in the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone, in the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) in North Uganda, and in armed groups active in eastern DRC (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2011).

2.1.2. International legal instruments

For two decades, the international community has mobilized to raise the issue of children’s participation in hostilities to its top priorities agenda. Since 1998, the UN Security Council has turned its attention to the fight against the use and recruitment of children by armed forces by issuing several reports and resolutions calling for condemnation of the practice in international law, namely UNSC Resolutions 1261 (1999), 1314 (2000), 1379 (2001), 1640 (2003), and 1539 (2004). Former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan described the recruitment and use of children in armed conflicts as a “despicable and damaging practice.” (SG/SM/8226, 2002). By 2002, the UNSC had launched a “naming and shaming” policy, establishing a list of armed groups and armed forces recruiting children. Pope John Paul II also condemned the use of child soldiers, declaring it a “horrible form of violence”, by which children “undergo a scandalous double aggression: they are made victims and at the same time protagonists of war, overwhelmed in the hatred of adults” (Catholic News, 2004).

Articles 1, 2 and 4 of the *Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict* (2000) prohibit recruitment of children under the age of 18 into armed forces or groups. Article 3 of the *International Labour Organisation’s Convention N°. 182 (1999) on the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour* states that “forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict” is among the worst forms of child labour. The *Geneva Conventions* of 1949 and its 1977 *Additional Protocol I* (Article 8) and *II* (Article 9) prohibit the recruitment and use of child soldiers under the age 15 in armed conflicts. The *African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child* (1999) bans recruitment and the use of children under the age of 18 in both international and internal armed groups under Article 22 (2). The *Rome Statute* (1998) of the International Criminal Court (ICC) states that “conscripting or enlisting children under the age of 15 and using them to participate actively in hostilities” is a war crime. UN Security Council Resolutions 1539 (2004) and 1612 (2005) call for the monitoring and reporting of child rights abuses in conflict areas. UNSC Resolution 1612 (2005) has stated six grave violations against children in armed conflict: killing and maiming of children, recruitment and use of children by armed forces and armed groups, sexual violence against children, attacks against schools and hospitals, abduction of children, and denial of humanitarian access for children. These six violations are generally committed by armed forces and groups that hide children among their ranks.

However, as Mulira points out, “making laws is not the same as finding ways to enforce them” (2007, p. 1). The development of a vast array of international legal instruments is essential, but not enough to stop the use of children in conflict settings. The phenomenon remains a worrying trend that impedes peace consolidation efforts around the globe. The global struggle against the recruitment, use, and exploitation of children into armed forces and groups remains a huge challenge.

Under the pressure of the international community, the main political armed groups have officially committed to stop using child soldiers but often still recruit children (Nzambi, 2016, p. 31). According to the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, governmental armed forces in more than twenty countries were still recruiting children between 2001 and 2004, including Burundi, Myanmar and the DRC (ibid, p. 13).

Some governments have not directly recruited children but have backed militias and self-defense armed groups, such as the Mai Mai in DRC, that use children on the front lines in combats and use them to commit atrocities against civilians. Children associated with armed forces and armed groups are therefore directly confronted with the dangers of war and risk violent reprisal from enemies. The recruitment of children in armed groups generally takes place in weak states with fragile justice systems. Some CAFAAG have thus been condemned to death following trials at military tribunals, such as in DRC (Nzambi, 2016, p. 110). Many others were killed during military operations or simply disappeared.

Modes of recruitment of children into armed forces and armed groups vary. Some are forced to join by being abducted, but others join on a voluntary basis while seeking protection. Children can perform multiple and non-exclusive combat and support roles and can be used as combatants, cooks, spies, messengers, and sex slaves. Many can take a direct part in hostilities. Consequently, children associated with armed forces and armed groups can be exposed to acute levels of violence as witnesses, direct victims or participants.⁷ Regarding girls associated with armed forces and armed groups, their gender and place in society make them particularly vulnerable to rape and sexual violence, which can result in stigmatization and marginalization from their community.

Children’s participation in armed conflicts can have a severe impact on their physical and emotional well-being. As a result of being subject to abuse and witnessing death, killings and sexual violence, children can suffer from long-term psychological traumas that may impede their reintegration into civilian life. Therefore, in order to reintegrate children formerly associated with armed groups into their communities, a preparation for a return to civilian life is necessary. Sensitization, education, training, psychological support and health care are essential aspects of reintegration programs. Sensitization and reconciliation efforts with families and communities are also key to children’s sustainable reintegration.

According to the 2007 Paris Principles on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict “a child associated with an armed force or armed group refers to any person below 18 years of age who is, or who has been, recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in

⁷ Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, available at: <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org> (last visited on 2 November 2017).

any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls, used as fighters, cooks, porters, spies or for sexual purposes”. The 1997 Cape Town Principles defines a child associated with armed forces or armed groups as “any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers and anyone accompanying such groups, other than family members. The definition includes girls recruited for sexual purposes and for forced marriage. It does not, therefore, only refer to a child who is carrying or has carried arms” (1997, p. 12). For this very reason, the term “children associated with armed forces or armed groups” (CAAFAG) is preferred rather than “child soldiers” as this term can be inaccurate considering that many children do not have armed roles when associated with armed forces or armed groups.

These definitions mostly derive from an age-based understanding. However, the definition of a child can differ from one culture to another and from one context to another and might challenge definitions based on universal values. In the post-modern theory of constructivism, the social phenomenon of childhood is seen as a social construct within a specific context. Hart and Tyrer (2006) argue that what constitutes a child can vary between cultures, as it is a social construct. In the same vein, Brett and Specht warn against the risk of comparing between Western and non-Western settings, as expectations towards children and their respective roles sometimes differ from one culture to another (2004, p. 1). Autesserre (2010, p. 25) further argues that, in the specific case of the DRC, programs are shaped by a universal culture that often goes against local values and perspectives. Children’s vulnerability and immaturity are often taken for granted, partly because of universal values and considerations. This results in the victimization of children (Bodineau, 2015, p. 117), making them voiceless. Contrary to universal perspectives, such as the views of INGOs, many local actors consider children as full actors in the conflict, whose involvement entails a responsibility rather than innocence. For this reason, many programs fail to successfully reach out to children or reintegrate children who used to be associated with either armed forces or armed groups within their community by not considering them as full social actors.

Regarding the specific rights of girls in international law, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) establish a strong framework for the protection and promotion of girls’ rights. As a regional instrument, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) addresses girls’ rights as well. Nevertheless, Plan International’s report “Girls’ Rights are Human Rights” highlights the poor protection of girls in international law. Although the CEDAW and the CRC form a cornerstone for girls’ rights, many challenges girls face are disregarded by the conventions. For instance, the CRC covers “violations that typically affect boys (e.g. child soldiers) [...], but not those predominantly affecting girls (e.g. child marriage)” (Plan International, 2017, p. 6). Plan International’s study reveals that “the majority of international policy documents are gender- or age-neutral” or that girls are mixed up in the categories of “children”, “women”, “youth”, “adolescents” (ibid, p. 7). As a result, girls

are more invisible in international law as their rights are not clearly distinguished but relegated to “the margins of children’s or women’s rights”.⁸

2.2. Root causes of the use of child soldiers

This section serves to analyze the underlying causes that lead to the increasing use of child soldiers, as well as the reasons why some children are particularly vulnerable to becoming associated with armed groups. Analyzing root causes leading to their enrolment into armed groups is vital to understanding why some children become involved in armed conflicts, why some adults recruit children, and conversely, why children volunteer to join armed groups or armed forces and why some are re-recruited.

Most scientific research has focused on push/pull factors to explain underlying causes of such a phenomenon (Wessels, 2006, p. 46). Three leading theories have been commonly cited: the changing nature of warfare, the notion of “failed states”, and the breakdown of traditional social and familial structures (Singer, 2005, p. 96). Academics also examine causes depending on whether the recruitment was forced or voluntary.

The use of children in armed conflicts, whether the recruitment was forced or voluntary, is argued to be a by-product of the recent changes associated with warfare. According to Singer, three factors can explain the increasing use of CAAFAG in armed conflicts (2005, p. 38; Lischer, 2010, p. 144).

First, as a consequence of social disruption and the failure of development, fighting no longer takes place in well-delineated battlefields. Instead, it breaks out in civilian areas. Children are therefore much more exposed to the risk of abduction from schools, buses, churches, and villages. In the course of the last century, the estimated percentage of civilian casualties in armed conflicts has increased significantly from 5% to 90% (Hart and Tyrer, 2006, p. 4). Since the end of the Cold War, the nature of conflicts has become more internalized and localized and in such settings, where conflicts are grounded in nationalistic, ethnic, and religious motivations, the protection of children from human rights abuses has become challenging (Mulira, 2007, pp. 4-5). According to Lischer, children face a higher risk of becoming combatants in “greed wars” (2010, p. 159).

Second, contemporary conflicts usually break out at the very heart of civilian societies. As a consequence, means of warfare have become much more brutal, such as the widespread use of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) as a “method” of war (Singer, 2006, p. 104).

Third, the technological improvements in weaponry have resulted in the proliferation of light weapons that have provided children with the opportunity to be armed and actively partake in hostilities (ibid, p. 38). The post-Cold War weapons surplus of over 500 million small arms has quickly proliferated in a worldwide traffic of small and light weapons and has consequently increased the use of CAAFAG, as such arms are relatively cheap, light enough to be carried by children as young as ten, and easy to handle as they are ultra-light automatic weapons. Trade of such arms goes largely unregulated and is even more

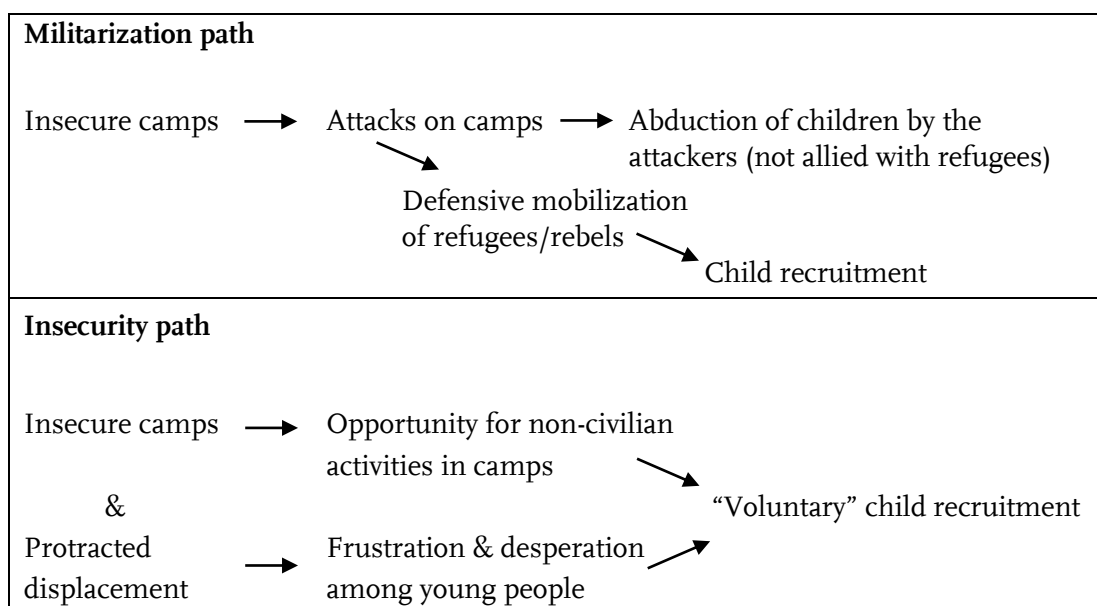
⁸ Plan International, Girls’ Rights Platform Website, “What are Girls’ Rights?”, available at: <https://www.girlsrightsplatform.org/node/72510> (last visited on 21 February 2018).

complicated, as their production remains in the hands of private companies, thus escaping government's control, and embargoes are rarely respected.

Another important factor is the protracted length of conflicts, which makes recruiting children appear to be a solution to a shortage of manpower. According to academics, it is generally recognized that the longer a conflict, the higher the percentage of child recruitment into hostilities since the “stock” of adults decreases (Odden and Tonheim, 2013, p. 19). Moreover, the longer a conflict goes on, the worse the crisis becomes as increased poverty and repression can motivate civilians, including children, to join armed groups.

Other factors can also explain why some children are more vulnerable to becoming associated with armed groups. In a 1996 UN report on the “Impact of Armed Conflict on Children”, children separated from their families during a conflict are considered one of the most-at-risk categories for becoming associated with armed forces or armed groups (Lischer, 2010, p. 143). The United Nations General Assembly has recognized that displaced and unaccompanied minors are particularly vulnerable to “neglect, violence, forced military recruitment, and sexual assault” (ibid, p. 144). Displacement camps often become areas of recruitment due to the lack of protection, desperate circumstances, lack of economic opportunities, and social disruption. Achvarina and Reich have argued that “large numbers of children congregated together in easily identifiable locations, if left unprotected, make an easy target as recruits for belligerents” (ibid.). Poorly protected camps are extremely vulnerable to raids, and the abduction of children for military purposes is a high risk for displaced children. Moreover, informal displaced camps, where access is limited because of insecurity and logistical impediments, are on the rise in contemporary conflicts. The political scientist Sarah K. Lischer has identified two main patterns that lead to the recruitment of children into armed groups in refugee IDP camps: the militarization path, which results in more voluntary recruitment, and the insecurity path, which leads to forced recruitment. The following figure illustrates these processes.

Figure 1: Militarization and insecurity paths



Source: Lischer, 2010, p. 145

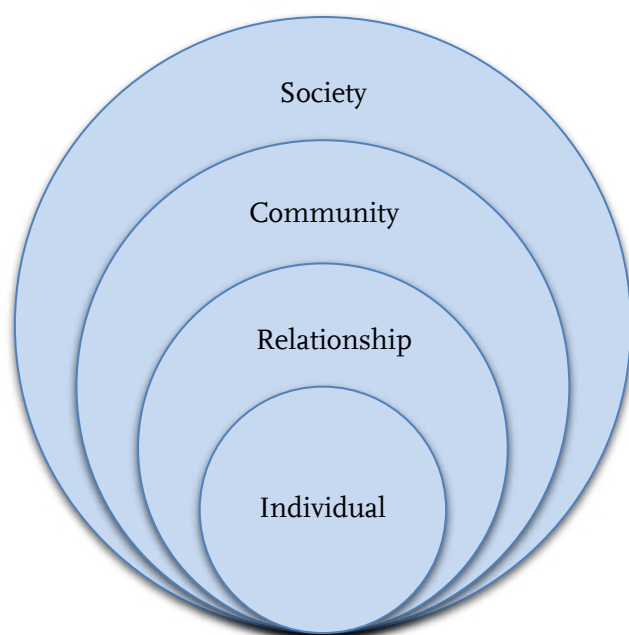
Other factors may also increase the vulnerability of children to recruitment. Children living in a civil war environment “surrounded by violence” are usually living in extreme poverty, which can largely impact child recruitment (Singer cited in Lischer, 2010, p. 146). Paul Collier has also pinpointed the high risk that a post-conflict society relapses into conflict, increasing the risk of recruitment as children live in a constantly threatening environment (Gates and Reich, 2010, p. 250 cited in Dudenhoefer, 2016).

2.2.1. Voluntary recruitment

The increased use of children in armed conflicts is rooted in a variety of disparate but interlinked factors, such as poverty, lack of economic and educational opportunity for youth, and the spread of disease and outbreak of war (Mulira, 2007, p. 4).

Many studies have focused on the supply side to explain child soldier recruitment, i.e. “the number of children available for recruitment” (Andvig and Gates, 2011, p. 16). However, as suggested by Singer, “Child soldiering derives from a set of deliberate choices from military rebels” (2006, p. 135). Recent works have looked at the demand side, i.e. characteristics of one fighting group. This point highlights the importance of doing a thorough analysis of armed groups’ strategies for a deeper understanding of the use of children. Such an analysis is essential to implementing an effective intervention to prevent the use of children in armed groups. Armed groups might enroll children due to their cost-effectiveness and vulnerability to manipulation, but local values and practices could also explain children’s association to armed groups. Nevertheless, the “supply” side might also contribute to the increased use of children in conflicts, considering there is greater access to children in poor countries (Wessels, 2006). Hence the importance of combining and putting in perspective both factors of supply and demand.

Many academics also employ a socio-ecological model to identify factors that push children to partake into hostilities (Poretti, 2008, p. 130). The socio-ecological model uses an integrated framework to better illustrate the complex relationships between an individual and his or her environment. This framework combines a mental health approach and socio-ecological theory to “help address the plight of youth in situations of political violence and humanitarian emergencies” (De Jong et al., 2015, p. 1). De Jong, Kohrt, Jordans, and colleagues have developed this model for psychosocial interventions for CAAFAG in Nepal. The model is a mix of several disciplines, including human biology, developmental psychology, and social ecology. It is based on the “fundamental assumption that individual well-being is heavily influenced, for better or for worse, by the social, political and economic context in which individuals affected by violence live” (Dowdney cited in de Jong et al., 2015, intro).

Figure 2: Socio-ecological model – A Child’s Environment

Source: Brett and Specht, 2004.

This model uses an approach based on vulnerability, where each level comprises risk factors for both the prevention of recruitment and reintegration of CAAFAG. This model was originally designed as a “public health service model [...] based on a balance between prevention and treatment” (Dowdney cited in de Jong et al., 2015, intro).

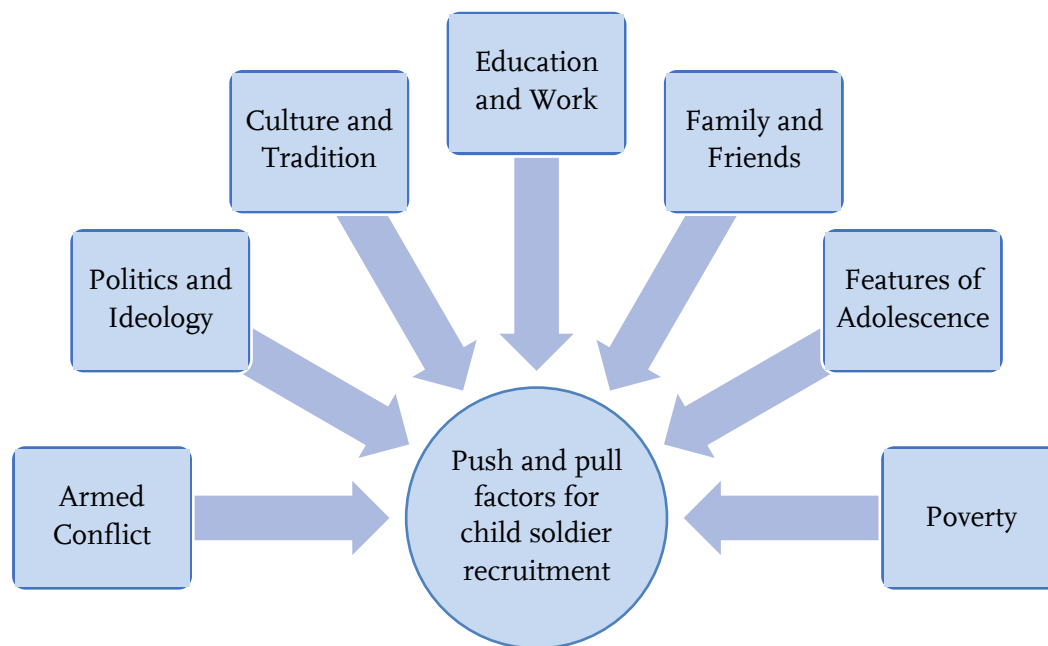
At the societal level, some norms can favor or create an environment that condones inequality and violence. At the community level, relationships with the educational, economic, legal, cultural and social sectors might become risk factors. The relationship level considers closer bonds the child has with family, relatives, and friends that might increase the risk of the child’s association with armed groups. At the individual level, biological and personal factors can increase the probability that the child is recruited by armed groups.

De Jong, Kohrt and their colleagues, have strongly focused on the community by arguing that this level is key to both recruitment and failure in reintegration, and conversely the most influential level to design interventions for both prevention of recruitment and sustainable reintegration of children formerly associated with armed forces or armed groups. Social, religious, economic and political factors can exert a positive or negative influence on children’s psychosocial well-being (ibid.). The socio-ecological model appears to be a useful tool to help identify and “take account of both local community characteristics and former child soldiers’ particular circumstances and experiences” that influence their enrollment in an armed group or threaten their reintegration (ibid.).

Regarding the specific case of voluntary recruitment, Brett and Specht have identified within the ecological model seven broad and interlinked key environmental factors: armed conflict, poverty, education and work, family and friends, politics and ideology, features of adolescence, and culture and tradition. According to Specht and Brett, such factors are cumulative, which implies that, if combined, they considerably contribute to the increase

of children’s vulnerability to military recruitment (2004, p. 36). All these factors contribute at the community level and exert an influence on the child.

Figure 3: Environmental factors framework based on vulnerability



Source: Brett and Specht, 2004, p.9

Nevertheless, these seven environmental factors are not sufficient to explain why children become involved in armed groups. Poverty and war are factors common to many children, but not all children join armed groups. Brett and Specht have therefore identified six contextual reasons to explain what can push some children to join armed forces or armed groups when other children are living in the same conditions. The six categories are: war and insecurity, economic motivations, education, family and friends, politics, and identity and psychological factors (Brett and Specht, 2004).

Motivations to join armed groups or armed forces on a voluntary basis lie in the social, economic, and political issues that define children’s lives. The child’s social environment at the community level is therefore a key dimension to take into consideration, as it influences the way children perceive situations in their surroundings. As Mulira explains, if a community’s perception of war is based on ethnic cleansing, this perception will be passed on to the child, who in turn feels motivated and justified to volunteer in hostilities (2007, p. 12). Families, peer groups, and religious or community-based groups can thus exert significant pressure that motivates children to get involved in hostilities. Children are indeed socialized through “agents” or “instances” situated at different levels of their environment (Poretti, 2008, p. 130). In this process, children not only become receptors of social norms but reproduce them as well. The mutual interactions they have with agents and instances result in children influencing and shaping their surrounding environment. The ecological model is key to providing a thorough analysis of factors influencing children to join armed groups. Such factors can be risk or protective factors, as well as coping capacities. As Poretti underlines, such a model can prove useful in the design of preventive responses because, “each level of the ecological model can be thought of as a

level of influence and also a key point for intervention” (Dahlberg and Butchart cited in *ibid.*).

Many ethnographic studies have highlighted the links among war, masculinity, desire for recognition, and initiation into adulthood (*ibid.*, p. 126). Depending on the context, culture and traditions, for some children, enrolling in an armed group is perceived as an acceptable rite of passage. According to Poretti, the social construction of manhood and social expectations related to it – such as the need to be the breadwinner of the family, combined with a complex set of individual and environmental characteristics, can motivate young men to join armed groups because they are a source of income, power and status (*ibid.*). However, while studies suggest that young men are more likely to join armed groups on a voluntary basis, such an analysis provides insight solely into young men.

Finally, an explanation of children joining fighting groups would depend on catalyst moments such as lack of income, the need to provide for one’s family, the interruption of education, a traumatic familial event, or the influence of relatives and friends. Such factors can influence the individual decision to join armed groups. Children’s decision to join fighting groups is considerably influenced by what children have experienced: poverty, death, loss of relatives, displacement, religious motivations, need for revenge, and collapse of social culture (Cohn and Goodwin-Gill cited in Mulira 2007, p.12). Referring to the “ecological model”, the society, community, and relationship levels are connected. Catalysts moments can occur at these three respective levels, but the trigger mechanism that pushes a child to join an armed group is at play at the individual level, where the decision is made.

Such arguments echo Michelle Poretti’s analysis of reasons to join armed forces or armed groups. “Every story is unique, but the reasons given by child soldiers (...) are often strikingly similar and point to the complex and dynamic relationship between the child and its environment” (Poretti, 2008, p. 126). The most frequent reasons cited by children for joining up are poverty and social exclusion, ill-treatment, humiliation (especially for girls who are victims of sexual abuse), the quest for respect, the unavailability of lawful means to improve social status, desire for guns and power, desire for consumer goods, the quest for finding a young men or female partners, friendship and surrogate families, identity, protection, desire for revenge, ideological fervor, or survival (*ibid.*).

Estimates from experts suggest that voluntarily participation exceeds forced recruitment, but the term “voluntary” remains questionable and should be understood with caution if one is to consider the deplorable conditions that push children to enlist (Mulira, 2007, p. 11). Children who join armed groups on a voluntary basis “defy the idea of children as innocent, vulnerable or passive victims” (Poretti, 2008, p. 129). In fact, joining can often appear as their only chance for survival, which therefore calls into question the use of the term “voluntary recruitment”. On the other hand, their decision to join reveals that children are “creative and resilient actors” who seek to improve their own lives (*ibid.*). This is important, as children’s agency is of utmost importance when designing assistance programs to help reintegrate former CAAFAG into civilian life.

2.2.2. Forced recruitment

Both armed forces and armed groups can resort to physical force to recruit children. Forced recruitment is practiced by abducting children from schools, buses, market places, streets, churches, refugee and IDPs camps (Mulira, 2007, p. 6), but also via conscription through coercion and serious threats (Dudenhoefer, 2016). According to estimates, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), active in northern Uganda, has abducted over 20,000 children to be used as combatants, porters, and sex slaves (Ann Davison cited in *ibid.*, p. 6). Forceful recruitment has been largely used by the LRA, but also in Sri Lanka, Mozambique, and Sierra Leone. Children can become fierce fighters and turned into weapons through brainwashing, brutal indoctrination and inducement through the consumption of hard drugs and alcohol (*ibid.*, p. 7). As a result, children can be forced to commit atrocities against their community and families, as a strategy to make their return to their communities impossible or extremely challenging. This is particularly prevalent for girls associated with armed forces or armed groups who have been victims of rape or sexual exploitation. Cultural beliefs and social practices considerably contribute to the marginalization and exclusion of returning children from their community.

2.3. Impacts on child soldiers

The recruitment of children into armed groups or armed forces, voluntary or forced, constitutes one of the most disruptive obstacles to the healthy development of children (Mulira, 2007, p. 15). Nutrients, psychological stimuli and social interactions are vital to the growth and development of children, but if their development is blocked, their physical and mental well-being are seriously impacted (*ibid.*).

As a result of being raised in an environment of severe violence, being involved in the perpetration of violence, and being subjected to repeated physical, sexual and emotional violence, children associated with armed forces or armed groups are particularly vulnerable to psychological disorders, and at risk of developing symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD) (Schauer and Elbert, 2010; Betancourt et al., 2013, p. 196). In fact, studies indicate that children associated with armed forces or armed groups are much more vulnerable to PTSD, with some reports indicating a rate of up to 90%, as a consequence of experiencing repetitive and cumulative traumatic stressors (Schauer and Elbert, 2010, p. 328). Such stressors include exposure to combat, acts of abuse such as torture, rape, beating, violent death of a parent or relative, life-threatening events, separation, displacement, killings, abductions, detention, lack of parental care, lack of access to livelihoods and spending months in transit camps (Barath, 2002; Boothby, 1994; Elbert et al., 2009; Karunakara et al., 2004; Mollica, Poole, Son, Murray, & Tor, 1997; Schaal & Elbert, 2006; UNICEF, 2005; Yule, 2002, in *ibid.*, p. 314). Such traumas considerably impact children's development, which is further impeded by the lack of key services, such as education, economic opportunities and health care, as a consequence of war.

Schauer and Elbert further explain that such traumatic exposures can impact both the mental and physical health of children. They argue that "repeated exposure to chronic and traumatic stress during development leaves the children with mental and related physical

ill-health, notably PTSD and severe personality changes. Such exposure also [...] impairs their integration into society as a fully functioning member” (2010, p. 311-312).

2.3.1. Physical health impacts

Regarding physical health impacts, studies reveal that the rates of physical morbidity and mortality are significantly elevated among traumatized populations (ibid., p. 331). Moreover, in conflict settings, access to health services is considerably limited as a consequence of insecurity and the destruction of health facilities, which exacerbates mortality, epidemic rates of disease transmission and life expectancy, making children particularly vulnerable.

According to Schauer and Elbert, traumas can result in severe anxiety states that further “lead to a functional and structural alteration of the brain (ibid, p. 331)”. Several studies point to the “relationship between trauma-spectrum disorders, foremost PTSD and increased somatic complaints, such as cardiovascular, pulmonary, neurological, and gastrointestinal complaints; [...] susceptibility to infectious diseases; vulnerability to hypertension and atherosclerotic heart disease; abnormalities in thyroid and other hormone function; increased risk of cancer and susceptibility to infections and autoimmune disorders; and problems with pain perception, pain tolerance, and chronic pain (ibid.)”.

2.3.2. Mental health impacts

Traumas can also lead to mental health issues. “During childhood and adolescence, the mind and brain are particularly plastic and hence, stress has a great potential to affect cognitive and affective development” (Schauer and Elbert, 2010, p. 332). Due to repetitive and cumulative traumatic stressors, the brain of a child or an adolescent will thus “develop along a stress-responsive pathway” that can enhance the child’s or adolescent’s “capacity to rapidly and dramatically shift into an intense angry, aggressive, or fearful fleeing/avoiding state when [feeling] threatened” (ibid.).

Additionally, children formerly associated with armed forces or armed groups may develop feelings of guilt or shame for violent acts committed or endured that result in affective disorders, including “major depression, suicidal ideation, and various forms of anxiety disorders” (ibid.). Furthermore, such feeling may lead to social isolation, loss of trust and self-esteem and major changes in patterns of behavior or ideological interpretations of the world (Dickson-Gomez, 2002; Janoff-Bulman, 1992 in ibid.) that impede children’s reintegration into civilian life. Finally, when associated with armed forces or armed groups, the consumption of drugs and alcohol to desensitize children from violence and to prepare them for combat “leads to a higher risk for the development of psychotic symptoms, such as paranoia” (ibid., p. 333).

2.3.3. Socio-ecological environmental factors at the community and family level

Factors at play at the community and family level can considerably increase PTSD symptoms among former CAAFAG. They live in fear of rejection and legal or physical retribution because of some of the acts they have committed during their association with

armed groups. Families and communities can reject children for abuses they have committed, but may also reject a child fearing potential retaliation on their community and family for acts committed by the child. As a result, CAAFAG face a greater risk of post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD), fear, depression, anxiety, and self-destructive behavior (Poretti, 2009, p. 124). The consideration of the child's socio-ecological environment at the community and family level in psychological treatment is therefore an essential aspect in intervention programs for children formerly associated with armed forces or armed groups.

A study conducted by Theresa Betancourt and colleagues has highlighted the influence protective and risk factors at the community level may exert on the reduction or increase of PTSD symptoms among such children in Sierra Leone (Betancourt, et al., 2013). It concluded that family and community support improve PTSD symptoms among former CAAFAG, despite limited access to care (*ibid.*, p. 198). The findings furthermore indicated that higher rates of PTSD among former CAAFAG were associated with experience of rape during the war, harming or killing others, family abuse and neglect following the war. Additionally, PTSD symptoms would increase with the death of a parent and with community stigma following the war (*ibid.*).

Such findings reveal the importance of the socio-ecological model when implementing interventions for children affected by conflict. First, as recommended by Betancourt and her colleagues, “psychological treatments narrowly focused on past traumas alone may not be appropriate for helping these young people [CAAFAG] navigate the stressors they face in the post-conflict environment” (2013, p. 200). Second, focusing on the community and family level within the social environment of the child is crucial to identifying risk factors that may increase psychological disorders, and, conversely to turning them into protective factors to decrease such symptoms through the intervention. In this way, they make a more sustainable impact by improving the resilience of both the community and children. Both the type of violence experienced during the association with armed forces or armed groups and post-conflict stressors within the child's socio-ecological environment need to be considered in the psychological treatments of children formerly associated with armed forces or armed groups (*ibid.*, p. 201).

The research of Betancourt et al. goes further by advocating that “systems for appropriate assessment, monitoring and follow-up for children most at risk for severe and persistent post-traumatic stress reactions should be envisaged from early on in the humanitarian response and can also provide a foundation for more sustainable systems of mental healthcare in the post-conflict environment” (*ibid.*, p. 201). Such a recommendation already highlights the need for linking relief to development, the so-called Nexus approach for a transition from emergency to development.

Finally, programs should additionally examine traditional practices, values, and beliefs to become more effective if they are sensitive to the best interests of the child (Mulira, 2007, p. 19). Such a consideration would enable the development of a more contextualized approach, thus avoiding a clash with Western values. As part of psychological and reconciliatory healing, several studies, including Betancourt et. al.'s study, indicate how vital it is to work at a community level by helping community members understand that children were first and foremost victims (*ibid.*, p. 21) and to “establish culturally relevant,

sustainable and responsive mental health services” (Betancourt et al., 2013, p. 201). According to articles 3(2) and 6(2) of the CRC, every child is entitled to receive “protection and care as is necessary for his or her well-being” and State Parties must “ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child”. Children should therefore be protected from the direct and indirect consequences of joining armed groups given that they represent a “substantial share of the world’s population and are the future”, as strongly argued by Michele Poretti (2009, p. 125).

2.4. The specific case of girls associated with armed forces or armed groups

2.4.1. Context

Although girls are estimated to represent a third of all CAAFAG in the world, i.e. 100,000 girls, scientific literature on girls remains poor (Odden and Tonheim, 2013, p. 17). Until recently, girls have rarely been recognized as children associated with armed forces or armed groups in academic work and have been overlooked in post-conflict efforts (Tonheim, 2010; 2013). The lack of research on girl soldiers might be a result of the non-gendered representation of childhood (Bodineau, 2014, p. 117). There is a general assumption that CAAFAG are young male combatants, and that the presence of girls in armed groups remains a minor phenomenon. When scientific research mentions the issue of girls associated with armed forces or armed groups, girls are represented as passive victims of sexual violence (Ayissi and Maia, 2004, p. 20; Bodineau, 2014, p. 17). Official statistics on these girls remain relatively scarce, as very few of them benefit from assistance programs. It is therefore extremely difficult to know the exact number of girl soldiers.

In Africa, forced and voluntary recruitment of girls into armed forces and armed groups from a very young age is a well-documented practice. Between 1990 and 2003, girls have served as active combatants in more than ten countries in Africa (Holst-Roness, 2006, p. 13). In Liberia, DRC, Ivory Coast, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Sierra Leone, girls have been turned into fierce weapons of war (Ayissi and Maia, 2010, p. 20). Girls appear as the primary targets of armed groups and armed forces that abduct children as their main strategy for recruitment. According to estimates, in Sierra Leone, girls made up to 60% of all children abducted by armed groups and forces (Holst-Roness, 2006, p. 13). Such fighting groups then use girls as combatants, sexual and domestic slaves, spies, messengers, logisticians and servants and in the looting of villages, reconnaissance missions, and infiltration of enemy groups. According to a report of Amnesty International, 75% of demobilized girls in Liberia who had been associated with fighting forces had been sexually assaulted (ibid.).

Not only do girls face considerable challenges due to more stigmatization from communities, which is exacerbated when they return with babies (Bodineau, 2014, p. 122), but girls are also confronted with extreme violence when associated with fighting forces. An ICRC report reveals that in Liberia, Uganda and Sierra Leone, girls were systematically beaten if they complained. Moreover, those who tried to escape were either killed or threatened with violence against their families. Very often, new recruits were tasked with attacking their own village or executing a member of their own family in order to make their return impossible and turn them into killers (Holst-Roness, 2006, p. 13).

Girls associated with armed forces or armed groups remain largely excluded from post-conflict reconstruction programs, which deprives them of opportunities for social reintegration. Part of this exclusion can be explained by the predominance of the peace and security mandate over child protection, as the security approach can consider girls as non-combatants and therefore not threatening the peace (Bodineau, 2014, p. 115). According to the Cape Town Principles, the definition of child soldier clearly states that girls who do not have a combatant role are still given the same status as those taking an active part in hostilities. The definition includes girls recruited for sexual purposes and for forced marriage. It does not, therefore, only refer to a child who is carrying or has carried arms (1997, p. 12).

2.4.2. Causes leading to girls' involvement in hostilities

Underlying causes of recruitment that have been previously analyzed are similar for girls, but most studies show that girls are at a higher risk of forced recruitment than boys. Gender inequality makes girls particularly vulnerable to abduction or forced recruitment, including sexual violence within armed groups and forces (IDDRS, 2006, p. 6). However, some girls can have specific motivations to join armed groups on a voluntary basis. Sexual violence committed by State forces, and thus supported by the State, the lack of educational opportunities, ill-treatment and exploitation in the family, the lack of opportunities to earn livelihoods and to express themselves, insecurity and the absence of opportunities for empowerment constitute factors of vulnerability to recruitment.

Some girls decide to join armed groups and armed forces in order to escape a situation of exploitation or subordination. Others seek protection from sexual abuse by thinking carrying a weapon will protect them (Ayissi and Maia, 2004, p. 23). Other reasons are given in an ICRC report, such as escaping domestic abuse and ill-treatment, revenge for the killing or abuse of a relative, following or pleasing their parents, and serving a religious, ethnic or political cause (Holst-Roness, 2006, p. 14). In contrast to boys, it seems that girls do not join armed groups to provide for their families.

As mentioned earlier, reasons to join fighting forces are largely influenced by the context and socio-economic conditions. In countries plagued by armed conflicts, where street violence, extreme poverty and lack of support structures prevail, girls are more prone to enlist (*ibid.*). It also appears as a matter of survival, when bearing a gun is thought to be the last option to get access to food, security and protection.

Girls are at a very high risk not only when associated with armed groups and armed forces but also after they have left, as they can become a threat to themselves and to others. Not only are girls drugged to encourage violence and fearlessness, they are also armed with lethal weapons and turned into sex slaves, cooks and cleaners in the camps. Enemies of the forces they are associated with can pose great dangers to girls as well, because their involvement in the hostilities makes them potential targets of opposing forces (Holst-Roness, 2006, p. 15).

2.4.3. Impacts on girls associated with armed groups

Growing up in war-torn environments significantly puts girls at risk of gender-based violence, which can strongly impact their physical and emotional well-being. During armed conflicts, women and girls are particularly vulnerable to key gender-based experiences, such as sexual violence, including torture, rape, mass rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced sterilization, forced termination of pregnancies, giving birth without assistance, and being mutilated (United Nations, 2002 in Schauer and Elbert, 2010, p. 342). Additionally, the risk of early unprotected sexual activity (for instance, sex for food and security) is significantly high during armed conflicts, and particularly harms girls as it “can result in teenage pregnancy and the contraction of HIV/AIDS” (Kessler, 2000; Yule, 2002 in *ibid.*, p. 314). Their reproductive health and mortality are consequently directly affected (Ayissi and Maia, 2004, p. 24).

When associated with armed groups or armed forces, girls are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation, rape, forced and early marriage and prostitution, which affect girls’ both physical and emotional well-being. Physically, these girls cope with illnesses, exhaustion, wounds, menstrual difficulties, complications from pregnancy and birth, sexually transmitted diseases, and a host of other illnesses, such as malaria, intestinal parasites, tuberculosis, anemia, diarrhea, malnutrition, disabilities, scars, and burns, all of which challenge their survival (McKay & Mazurana, 2004; Stavrou, 2005 in Schauer and Elbert, 2010, p. 342). Emotionally, such experiences increase the girls’ risks of developing strong psychological disorders. Several studies revealed significant correlations between child sexual abuse and several unhealthy outcomes, including behavioral and psychological problems, sexual dysfunction, relationship problems, low self-esteem, depression, suicidal thoughts, deliberate self-harm, alcohol and substance abuse, and sexual risk-taking (Holst-Roness, 2006, p. 21). Findings from a study on the post-traumatic stress symptoms among former child soldiers in Sierra Leone demonstrated that a strong relationship existed between PTSD symptoms and surviving rape and perpetrating violence (Betancourt et. al., 2013, p. 199). The study further highlighted a striking gender difference in PTSD levels among former CAAFAG, with higher levels of distress among female war-and disaster-affected children (*ibid.*). Such findings echo a report of Child Soldiers International on girls associated with armed forces or armed groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo (2017). The study reveals that girls exhibit psychosocial problems, such as a high level of emotional distress and anxiety due to the violence that has been inflicted upon them by armed groups during their association, but also due to acts of violence they have been forced to commit that they keep secret (Child Soldiers International, 2017, p. 36).

Furthermore, girls, like boys, are deprived of a family and education when associated with fighting forces, which considerably influences their development and preparation for adulthood (Holst-Roness, 2006, p. 14). However, demobilized girls or those who have escaped fighting forces have fewer opportunities than boys for education or professional training, as a result of discrimination and stigmatization (*ibid.*, p. 23). In fact, returning girls, who are perceived by their community or family to have had forced or voluntary sexual relations with combatants, and/or bring back children from such encounters, belong to the most stigmatized group of survivors (Schauer and Elbert, 2010, p. 342). The

stigmatization of rape and extra-marital pregnancies severely affects returning girls' self-esteem and their reintegration into their families and communities (Mulira, 2007, p. 17; Ayassi and Maia, 2004, p. 25). The final conclusion of Betancourt's study on former child soldiers in Sierra Leone demonstrates the great influence two community factors exert on children's mental health recovery: "stigma and perceived discrimination due to former association with fighting forces were significantly associated with worsening of post-traumatic stress symptoms over time [...]" (Betancourt et. al., 2013, p. 199). These two community factors can result in ostracism, displacement, and an increased vulnerability to re-recruitment. Finally, PTSD symptoms can also be transmitted from the mother to the child. Returning pregnant girls are extremely vulnerable to such psychological outcomes. Psychological exposure and suffering from trauma can have transgenerational effects (Schauer and Elbert, 2010, p. 338). Schauer and Elbert explain that "if a pregnant mother is affected by severe and chronic stress, epigenetic modifications in the child may act as a molecular or cellular memory that tune the offspring for one or several generations for survival in a hostile environment, making generations more vulnerable for mental illnesses, including suicide" (Szyf, McGowan, & Meaney, 2008, in *ibid.*). Therefore, the quality of care a mother gives to her child can considerably alter "the expression of genes in the child that regulate behavioral and endocrine responses to stress" (*ibid.*).

For these very reasons, girls need a comprehensive gender-specific support that takes into account their specific needs, if they are to successfully reintegrate into civilian life.

2.5. Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) of war-affected children

2.5.1. Definition of DDR intervention

Various interventions are designed to support children associated with armed forces or armed groups based on their rights guaranteed by international and national legal instruments, such as cultural values shared by their communities. One of the most common interventions is the DDR process that stands for Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration, which is called DDDR as well (Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration). The design of such a program must be understood within a larger perspective, i.e. peacebuilding in post-conflict situations. In fact, such programs mostly feature in post-conflict reconstruction programs and aim to contribute to "security and stability in post-conflict environments so that recovery and development can begin".⁹

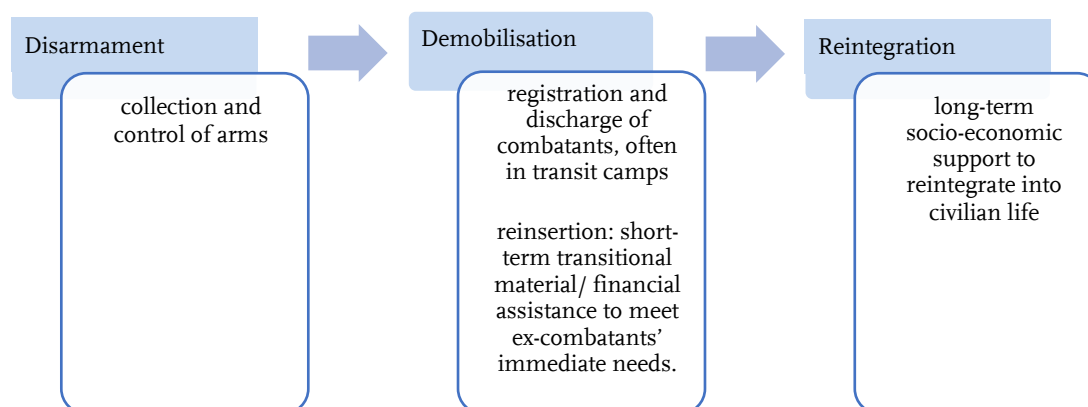
DDR for ex-combatants is a complex process with political, military, security, humanitarian and socio-economic dimensions (Nzambi, 2016, p. 99). It aims to address post-conflict security challenges faced by ex-combatants who are left without livelihoods or structures of support in the transition from war to peace and development¹⁰. The main objective of DDR programs is to disarm and disintegrate warring factions, and to

⁹ UNDDR website, introduction, available at: http://www.unddr.org/what-is-ddr/introduction_1.aspx (last visited on 19 December 2017).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

guarantee the successful socio-economic reintegration of ex-combatants in order for them to take part in the peace process (Nzambi, 2016, p. 99).

Figure 4: DDR process



Source: UNDDR Website

2.5.1.1. Disarmament

Disarmament constitutes the first phase of the process and focuses on the collection of arms in a conflict area (ibid.). This generally implies the gathering and confinement of combatants as well. It further includes programs designed for the management of arms. In brief, disarmament refers to the collection, inventory, control, and destruction of small arms.

2.5.1.2. Demobilization

Demobilization focuses on the official release of members from armed groups. This process includes a reinsertion phase as well, during which short-term assistance is provided to ex-combatants in order to prepare them for the reintegration phase.¹¹ During this phase, combatants start reintegrating into civilian life. It serves as “transit assistance” (ibid, p. 100), during which ex-combatants are provided with training, a job or income generating activities. They can also receive a package, which consists of money or any compensation in hand. Reinsertion is a short-term material or financial assistance that addresses urgent needs and¹² can last up to one year (ibid, p. 101). Some demobilized combatants are recruited into the official national armed forces. However, this option is not available for children, as their age disqualifies them from joining the army.

2.5.1.3. Reintegration

“The aim of child-based reintegration is to offer children a participatory support program that has been specifically designed for their needs and gives them a viable, long-term alternative to military life” (IDDRS, 2006, p. 25).

¹¹ United Nations, *Maintien de la paix*, available at : <http://www.un.org/fr/peacekeeping/issues/ddr.shtml> (last visited on 5 November 2017).

¹² UNDDR website, introduction, available at: http://www.unddr.org/what-is-ddr/introduction_1.aspx (last visited on 19 December 2017).

Reintegration refers to the last and most important step that will determine the success or failure of the DDR process. It focuses on the longer-term process of socio-economic development. Through this process, ex-combatants acquire a civil status and sustainable employment. Reintegration is in essence a social and economic process that takes place at the community and local level (Nzambi, 2016, p. 101). Such a process requires, however, long-term external support.

Regarding CAAFAG's reintegration, the process includes family reunification (or any other alternative if the reunification is not an option because of persistent insecurity or related risks or rejection from the family), access to school and training, economic support, and in some cases, psychosocial support. According to several studies, economic reintegration is the best option, because it enables children to be more independent and to provide for themselves (ibid, p. 103). The intervention's response depends and is designed according to the child's background, age, role performed in the armed forces and armed groups, gender, and experience.

The concept of “reintegration” can be understood within the larger framework and theory developed in a sociology on “integration”. In sociology, the concept of “integration” refers to a process enabling one individual or a group of individuals to become members of a larger group through the adoption of its values, social norms and system (Rhein, 2002 cited in Nzambi, 2016, p. 104). “Integration” then requires two conditions:

- The individual’s willingness to adapt and integrate, and
- the capacity of the society to integrate the individual by respecting differences and particularities of the individual.

The last condition seems vital for the success of a reintegration process, especially for children formerly associated with armed forces or armed groups. In fact, it is essential that the community tolerates the differences of former CAAFAG in order to help them reintegrate their communities. Such a tolerance capacity is much needed given the rejection and discrimination former CAAFAG, especially girls, face when returning home. Integration thus appears as the result of socialization, the process through which members of a group share the same values and norms (ibid, p. 105). Such a definition then presupposes that the opposite of integration refers to marginalization and exclusion, which child soldiers do face when reintegrating into their communities.

Successful reintegration depends on several factors, including education, vocational opportunity, economic security, and support from family and the community (Mulira, 2007, p. 8). It is paramount that all levels of the community are involved to facilitate the process of acceptance. For instance, education will not be guaranteed if not combined with a social promotion mechanism. Cultural institutions, such as churches, also play a key role in promoting social reintegration, but the success of a reintegration is very difficult to measure and is predominantly case dependent (Tonheim, 2010, p. 24).

A conceptual framework has been developed by Annan et al. (2010) to assess the reintegration process. Four major factors were raised: social acceptance, hostility, economic livelihoods and psychological well-being. This framework was designed in a Western context and should thus be contextualized (Annan et al., 2010, p. 3-7).

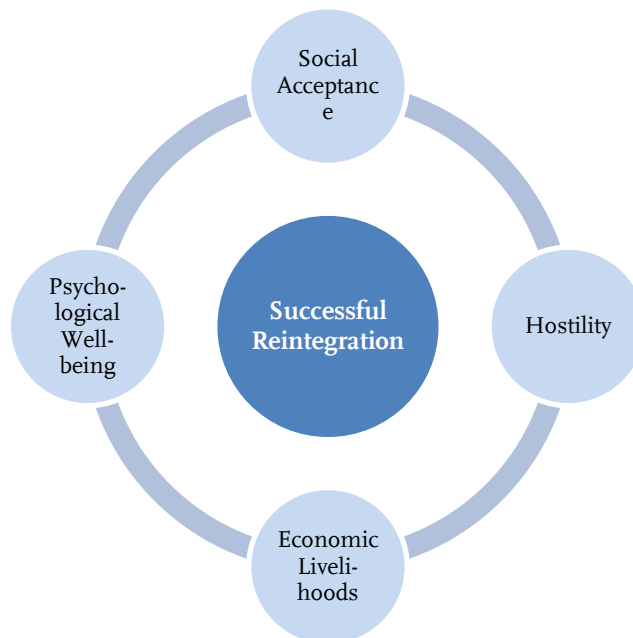
Social acceptance relates to how welcomed a child formerly associated with armed forces or armed groups is by the family, community and surroundings. Social acceptance is considered vital for a successful reintegration and goes hand in hand with the opportunity to generate economic livelihoods. However, for many children, stigmatization and discrimination severely impede social acceptance and socio-economic opportunities (ibid, p. 6).

Some studies argue that children may be perceived to have aggressive behavior due to their time spent with armed forces and armed groups. However, there is little available evidence regarding the hostile behavior former CAAFAG have in post-conflict settings (ibid.). Nevertheless, the “hostility” factor remains an important element to consider in the reintegration process as it can have a direct impact on social acceptance of the child.

Economic livelihoods relate to income-generating activities, education and vocational training. Due to a child's association with armed forces and armed groups, the child loses opportunities for education and employment. Economic reintegration is thus considered the most important step for success.

Due to traumatic experiences during the association with fighting forces, psychological well-being is an important factor in the successful reintegration of children. If the intervention does not work on these four factors, there is a higher risk for re-recruitment, since children will either come back to the same conditions that have pushed them to leave their home or come back to an even worse situation.

Figure 5: Conceptual framework for reintegration



Source: Annan et.al, 2010

2.5.2. Challenges of the DDR intervention

The DDR intervention faces many challenges as it operates in post-conflict situations where instability threatens peacebuilding programs. The following challenges have been

pointed out in a report released by the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (2010, p. 13).

Regarding disarmament, challenges include ongoing armed conflict, lack of political will, a high number of weapons circulating, lack of legal framework governing weapons ownership, and proliferation of militias.

Demobilization often lacks a thorough understanding of the types of groups and organizations that are being demobilized, as well as of their needs and motivations. In contrast with disarmament and demobilization, reintegration requires a long-term approach, and in most post-conflict settings, economic recovery is slow and haphazard, so that the creation of alternative livelihoods and jobs is extremely difficult.

The fact that DDR processes address both adults and children poses further challenges. The disarmament step requires ex-combatants to hand in a weapon as proof of having been a combatant, but many children that have been associated with armed forces or armed groups have been excluded from intervention programs because they did not have a weapon to provide as a proof of their affiliation (Peters, 2006). Many children, as seen in the Cape Town Principles definition, do not perform combatant roles, but fall nonetheless under the category of “child soldier”. The requirement of a weapon at the disarmament phase risks the rejection of children, particularly based on their gender (Tonheim, 2010). For this very reason, it is crucial that each component of DDR process adapts to the individual's needs (Singer, 2006, p. 183).

Access of children to DDR programs is challenging for several reasons (IDDRS, 2006, p. 8). First, children, especially girls, are not always considered full members of armed forces or armed conflicts, as mentioned above. Second, some DDR staff lack training and do not properly identify children or cater to their needs, which severely restricts children's access to vital services. Third, children themselves might avoid being identified as having been associated with an armed group or armed forces because of the fear of discrimination and retaliation. Fourth, some children are unaware of their right to benefit from support programs, including DDR. The main challenge thus lies in encouraging “girls and boys to benefit from DDR programs while avoiding any damaging effects” (ibid.). It is therefore important to generate a thorough analysis of recruitment patterns and various roles played by children, and to gain direct and free access to them. In order to achieve this, it is essential to raise awareness among key actors, including children, military, DDR actors and child protection actors about the services available for CAAFAG and how to access them, as well as to establish clear identification procedures for boys and girls associated with armed forces and groups.

Identification and access to demobilization for girls is another significant issue (IDDRS, 2006, p. 10). Many DDR staff are ill-informed about the presence of girls in armed groups and forces, and also about appropriate responses to their specific needs. Programs are therefore often unintentionally preventing girls from accessing them. On the other hand, armed groups and armed forces hide children, especially girls, as they are increasingly aware that the military use of children violates international law. Moreover, members of fighting groups are very reluctant to release girls who serve as “wives” or domestic servants and girls can also be reluctant to be demobilized because of fear of retaliation from their families and armed groups or forces.

DDR interventions can be seen as a “continuum” from a minimalist approach (strengthening security) to a maximalist perspective (an opportunity for development) (Muggah et al., 2003, p. 5). Nevertheless, interventions tend to focus on the minimalist perspective, hence the difficulty to assess the potential effects of DDR programs and the success of reintegration in the long run.

2.5.3. The role of community development

As previously mentioned, a DDR intervention is part of the peacebuilding process. Regarding intervention support for children associated with armed forces or armed groups, few programs have had long-term impacts, and therefore the efficiency of the community-based model for the reintegration of former CAAFAG, branded by many organizations, is questionable (Odden and Tonheim, 2013, p. 194).

Community development is a process through which a community gathers around common goals. Hoffman and Dupont (1992) define it as a gradual increase of the control and power that a local community exerts on specific issues that concern them (Odden and Tonheim, 2013, p. 195). The community can therefore be considered as a mean or an aim (Grand'Maison, 1970 cited in *ibid.*).

Three community development models have been developed by Rothman and Tropman (1987 cited in *ibid.*): local development, social planning and social action. Local development describes a process which focuses on the social and economic progress of the community by enabling its active participation. This model then supposes that issues are defined by members of the community themselves in order to address them. External support only guides the community into their organizational choices. Social planning requires the participation of experts to identify issues and provide recommendations. Finally, social action refers to the mobilization of individuals who are directly concerned by a common issue and seeks to decrease the imbalance of power between oppressed groups and the society as a whole.

Although the three models differ in actions, they all share the same objective and are based on the mobilization of community members, and all models seek their active participation in contributing to their own development. According to Odden and Tonheim, reintegrating children formerly associated with armed forces or armed groups can be conceived as addressing a social imbalance through the framework of community development (*ibid.*, p. 196). The involvement of the community in the reintegration process of former CAAFAG is essential, and without community acceptance a reintegration process is at risk of failing. To reduce the risk of reprisals, communities must be prepared for returning children through awareness-raising and education (IDDRS, 2006, p. 26). The preparation of communities can be achieved by reaching key actors through “sensitization of community leaders, strengthening of local child protection networks, peace and reconciliation education, and events aimed at encouraging a lasting reintegration of the children” (*ibid.*).

De Jong, et al., strongly advocate for a community-based approach while developing an intervention based on the socio-ecological model (figure 2). They argue that socio-ecological and transgenerational approaches can provide key knowledge about the relationship dynamics between population groups and across generations in relation to

their context (de Jong, et al., 2015, p. 4). Such an approach helps to understand not only the root causes of the enrollment of children in armed groups, such as poverty or the breakdown of supportive structures (e.g. parents' protection) in a community, but it also helps identify factors that impact children's psychosocial wellbeing. The reintegration of these children requires the involvement and mobilization of the entire community, and increased collaboration among multiple sectors, including economic, social, educational, legal and women's organizations (to address human rights violations, family violence, and good governance) (de Jong, et al., 2015, p. 5). In this effort, it is important to consider the important role cultural, religious and traditional rituals can play in the protection and reintegration of children. They can develop and strengthen solidarity mechanisms based on traditions and can serve in sensitization and mediation activities. Religion and cultural beliefs can also paradoxically serve as a significant tool that influences the recruitment of children into armed forces and groups. Child protection actors must consequently make sure that they conduct a thorough analysis of community traditions and practices that are physically and mentally harmful to children.

One of the most important aspects of community development is the direct participation of children formerly associated with armed forces or armed groups in their reintegration process at the community level. Their involvement is part of the 'social action' model, in which children can improve their sense of community belonging by contributing to the "creation of appropriate reintegration mechanisms" (IDDRS, 2006, p. 26). This strategy underscores the need to break down "the vertical organization of sectors and stimulate horizontal cooperation in favor of children's well-being" (de Jong, et al., 2015, p. 5). In sum, community development is very challenging, but necessary for children's reintegration.

2.6. Conclusion

The literature review on the global phenomenon of child soldiers has provided some insights into both research questions. The literature analysis highlights the fact that the sustainable reintegration of children who have been associated with armed forces or armed groups is generally threatened by several external and internal factors that challenge assistance programs and severely increase the risk of re-recruitment. Additionally, not only are girls' rights disregarded by international law, but social workers also lack consideration and awareness when working with girls who have been associated with armed groups, which often prevents girls from benefiting from protection programs.

External factors to intervention programs can increase the vulnerability of children to recruitment into armed groups, and they can threaten CAAFAG's reintegration into their communities.

One of the main challenges lies in the surrounding environment of violence in which the child is raised. The changing nature of war has led to an increased reliance on children in hostilities and in civil conflicts, resulting in the high level of vulnerability of children in armed conflicts. Not only have the means of warfare become more violent, such as, for example, the widespread use of SGBV as a method of war to dehumanize the enemy, but civilians have become the first victims of conflicts, since fighting occurs in civilian areas. As argued by Dudenhoefer (2016) and Lischer (2010, p. 159), civil wars, and particularly

wars driven by greed, are often considered an economic opportunity by armed factions. From this perspective, children can be seen as an economic opportunity as well, because of their cost-efficiency and vulnerability to manipulation. Their use by armed groups is exacerbated by the proliferation of light weapons that can be easily handled by children. Additionally, the protracted length of civil conflicts has several consequences. First, it generally exacerbates poverty, which increases the risk that children enlist in armed groups because of lack of protection. Second, it can result in a shortage of manpower, leading armed militias to resort to children as an alternative. When armed conflicts result in displacement, unaccompanied, separated, and displaced children are most at risk.

The direct social environment of the children is key to understanding the root causes leading to their recruitment and the failures of their reintegration into communities. In this respect, the use of the socio-ecological framework (figure 2) is particularly helpful to identify push and pull factors influencing children to enlist, or causes that may increase the risk of re-recruitment. This model is particularly helpful in providing knowledge on voluntary recruitment, which is considered the main pattern of recruitment among CAAFAG, especially for boys. According to Brett and Specht (2004, chapter 2), some of the main reasons children join armed groups are war and insecurity, economic motivations, the lack of access to education, the influence of family and friends, politics and culture, identity, and psychological factors. Regarding forced recruitment, armed groups generally resort to two main strategies: they either abduct children from poor protected areas, often out of the village, or children are conscripted through coercion. The expression “voluntary” recruitment, however, should be considered with caution, as conditions pushing children to enlist are often the last available option for survival.

Second, internal factors directly linked to the child DDR interventions may explain the risk of recruitment as a result of failure of reintegration. The main objective of DDR interventions focuses on strengthening peace and security by providing ex-combatants, including children, with long-term socio-economic alternatives to military life. The last phase of the process, the socio-economic reintegration, thus requires that demobilized children enjoy social acceptance, economic livelihoods and psychological well-being to be sustainable.

The literature review highlighted that DDR interventions tend to design their strategies from a minimalist perspective, in which the intervention has a security-oriented approach that focuses on the disarmament and demobilization phases to eliminate potential threats to peace. Such an approach stresses the need, for instance, for combatants to hand in a weapon during the disarmament phase as proof of an association with armed groups. Even though the Cape Town Principles clearly state that children holding non-combatant roles within armed groups and children who do not carry arms are also child soldiers entitled to assistance, many of those who do not possess a weapon are rejected during the disarmament phase and thus not granted access to assistance programs. Another result of this strategy is the lack of investment in development during the reintegration phase. Children may consequently return to the same or even worse conditions that pushed them to join armed groups in the first place. According to Brett and Specht, children who have voluntarily joined armed groups are more likely to re-enroll in armed groups if the conditions that led to their initial recruitment are not sustainably addressed and do not improve (2004, p. 5).

Regarding the specific case of girls, their exclusion from DDR interventions may be the result of their gender and place in society. Based on the assumption that girls do not perform combatant roles, these girls are not considered a threat to peace and security, which results in their marginalization from post-conflict reconstruction programs as a result of the minimalist approach. Secondly, studies suggest that most girls are abducted by force and sexually exploited by armed groups. The stigmatization of rapes and extra-marital pregnancies considerably impedes the sustainable socio-economic reintegration of girls in their communities. Furthermore, research indicates that girls demonstrate a higher vulnerability to psychological disorders, especially PTSD symptoms, as a result of their association with armed groups. Such symptoms can originate from repetitive and cumulative traumas experienced at different levels. In armed conflict situations, girls are the most at risk of gender-based violence, such as rape followed by abduction by armed groups. In addition, during their association with armed groups, sexual exploitation and the perpetration of violence considerably increase the risk of developing psychological issues and PTSD symptoms. Finally, two community factors, stigma and discrimination due to children's association with armed groups and sexual exploitation, significantly worsen PTSD symptoms and can prevent the mental recovery of returning girls when reintegrating into their communities. Conversely, still at the community level, family acceptance is a key protective factor for returning children that results in decreased PTSD symptoms and reduces the risk of re-recruitment (Betancourt et al., 2013, p. 199). Therefore, the examination of the socio-ecological environment of the child at the community level is essential for their mental health recovery, especially understanding the vital role a family plays in aiding in the reintegration of returning boys and girls.

To conclude, the successful reintegration of children formerly associated with armed forces or armed groups is notably hindered by the minimalist approach of the DDR intervention and the lack of efforts to sustainably address external factors that push children to join armed groups at the reintegration phase. The socio-ecological model thus appears to be a useful tool to help address such challenges. This framework provides the means to analyze which positive and negative influences may affect a child's well-being. By focusing on a community-based approach, the model helps design an intervention that takes into account the "local community characteristics and former child soldiers' particular circumstances and experiences".¹³ It enables implementing a contextualized program that considers local values and perspectives, while also considering how they can best serve the child's interest or harm the child's well-being. Key community stakeholders who can exert a substantial positive influence on children's reintegration can then be identified, trained and supported to mitigate the risk of re-recruitment and promote girls' access to reintegration programs.

¹³ Child Soldiers International, available at: <http://www.child-soldiers.org/psychosocial.php> (last visited on 22 October 2017); De Jong, et al., 2015: introduction.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research strategy

While there is an increasing trend in contemporary international humanitarian and development discourse to address gender inequality and promote women and girls' rights and empowerment in crises, the case of girls associated with armed groups is only now starting to raise academic researchers' and organizations' interest. However, in daily practice, there are discrepancies between commitments and action. Girls associated with armed groups remain at the margins of interventions (Tonheim and Odden, 2013, p. 53; Child Soldiers International, 2018).

My main objective in this research is, therefore, to amplify the voices of girls who have been associated with armed groups in North Kivu. To realize this aim, I have designed a methodology that enables research participants to share their perceptions, opinions, and feelings on the child DDR intervention. With a careful selection of research participants who could share valuable information relevant to the research question, i.e. child DDR gender-related challenges, I have given priority to local actors, and in particular children who have been associated with armed groups. I also designed an accessible and functional feedback mechanism to identify needs, gaps, and challenges of the child DDR intervention. This objective enables local empowerment and accountability to respondents by promoting local participation. This is in line with what scholars consider as "going beyond the Do No Harm" principle by having a positive impact on research participants' life through their active involvement in the research process (Odden and Tonheim, 2013, p. 34).

This research is based on a qualitative methodology that includes sociological discourse analysis. An exploratory field study took place in the province of North Kivu, DRC, from July to September 2017. I have combined various participatory methods, such as participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focus groups to gather primary data. The collected data was analyzed through a sociological discourse analysis.

3.2. Data collection

3.2.1. Location

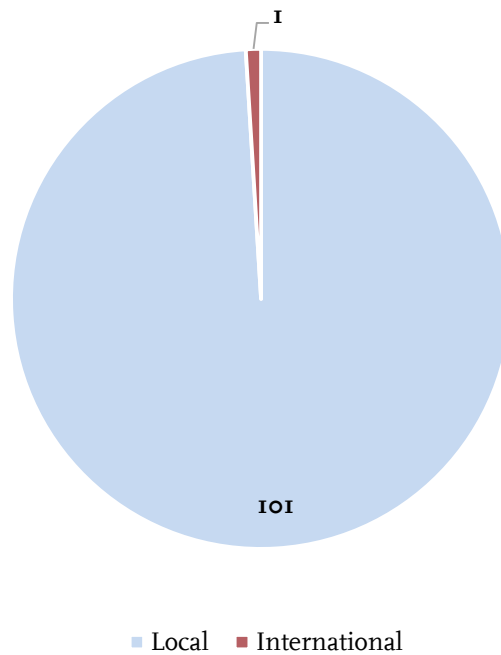
During the exploratory research process, I immersed myself in the local context by volunteering in a local non-governmental organization, PAMI (*Programme d'Appui à la Lutte contre la Misère*), a UNICEF child DDR implementing partner based in Goma.

Goma was a relevant setting for the research. First, as the capital of North Kivu, on the border with Rwanda, Goma is where most humanitarian organizations are based. They mainly operate in the eastern region of DRC, due to the greater humanitarian need. It was therefore easier in Goma to meet relevant actors involved in the DDR programs for children. Second, North Kivu remains a crisis-affected province where child recruitment campaigns by armed groups persist. Third, I could secure access to local actors involved in the child DDR intervention, especially to children taken in into the program, by volunteering at PAMI. PAMI is active in Goma, in the territories of Rutshuru, Masisi, and

Nyiragongo that border the eastern part of Rwanda. Since 2009, PAMI has intervened as a child protection agency to provide assistance to CAAFAG. UNICEF is the main donor of PAMI to implement the child DDR program. The NGO has a CTO (center of transit and orientation) in Goma where demobilized children stay in transit, while receiving reintegration support, mainly including vocational training, education and psychosocial support, until links with their families have been restored.

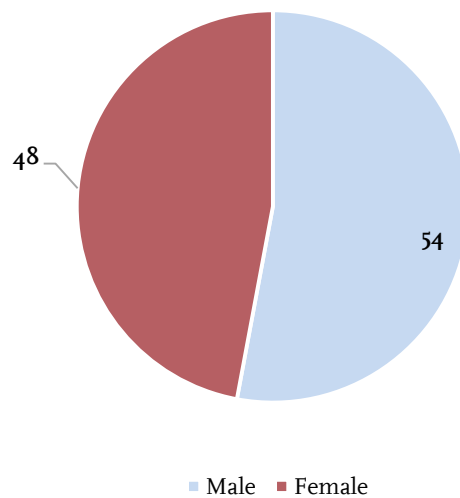
3.2.2. Subjects

Figure 6: Types of participants: local vs international



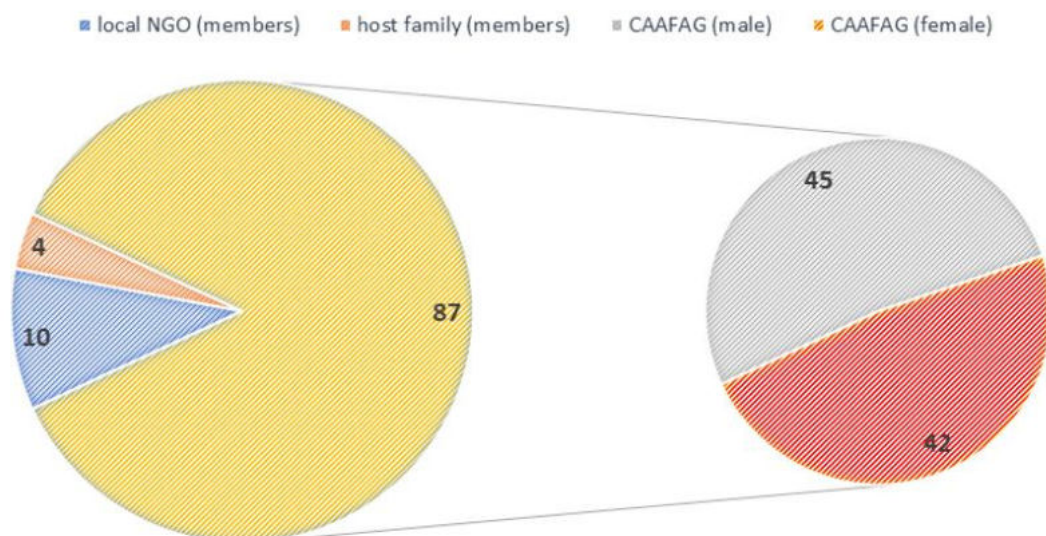
Source: own composition

Figure 7: Sex of participants



Source: own composition

Figure 8: Type of local participants



Source: own composition

To gather relevant data my main focus was on children formerly associated with armed groups, particularly girls, who were taken into the care of PAMI. However, I have also focused on frontline actors involved in the child DDR intervention, mainly including child protection actors, psychosocial workers working at PAMI CTO, community-based child protection actors, foster care families (FCF), and military personnel in detention and demobilization centers.

3.2.3. Methods

With regards to the used methods during the field study, the applied methodology draws from ethnographic techniques by adopting a sociological approach. In ethnography, the researcher participates in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, observing, listening, and asking questions through informal and formal interviews to collect data relevant for the inquiry (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 3). Although the period of the field study and access to research participants' daily lives were rather limited, I have employed participant observation, formal and informal interviews, and finally focus groups.

The immersion as a co-worker has offered the opportunity to gather a vast array of quality data. First, direct access to demobilized children at the CTO was made possible on a daily basis, which enabled me to conduct interviews with them in line with UNICEF Guidelines for interviewing children.¹⁴ Second, field observation could be conducted at the CTO and during missions to examine its internal operating dynamics, the environment and the relations between children and social workers at the center. Third, I also had the opportunity to study the internal functioning of the NGO, by attending several meetings

¹⁴ UNICEF, Guidelines for interviewing children: https://www.unicef.org/esaro/5440_guidelines_interview.html (last visited on 15 July 2017).

and trainings inside and outside PAMI offices, and by interviewing relevant PAMI staff. Fourth, dynamics between PAMI and other implementing partners, international as well as local, could be investigated during coordination meetings. Such partners included the ICRC, UNICEF, MONUSCO, FARDC, and local authorities.

Participant observation

Participant observation “connects the researcher to the most basic of human experiences, discovering through immersion and participation the hows and whys of human behavior in a particular context” (Guest et al., 2013, p. 75).

This study started with descriptive observations, aimed at recording as much information as possible by asking the general question “What is going on here?” (Spradley, 1980, p. 73). This open-ended approach started with a broad focus and subsequently narrowed the focus of research with questions, such as “who, how, where, when and why”.

Participant observation was the main research method during the early exploratory stage of the research. It offers the advantage of gaining an intuitive understanding of the meaning of gathered data. It was an essential tool to identify issues to be addressed in the interviews. Additionally, participant observation was useful in observing the technical issues of the DDR intervention and the dynamics between the different actors/organizations. Participant observation also proved to be a useful tool when interviews were not an option due to the sensitivity of the context, for instance in demobilization and detention centers.

Interviews

I employed semi-structured interviews in an effort to provide research participants, especially children, the opportunity to share their perceptions, experience and perspectives on the intervention. In total, I interviewed 95 participants. I conducted twenty formal in-depth interviews and two focus groups with three categories of participants: child protection actors, foster families, former CAFAAG – in transit and reintegrated in their communities.

Figure 9: Interviews

| Formal in-depth interviews (20) | | | | | |
|---------------------------------|--------------|---------------------------------|-----------|------|-------------------|
| Categories | Total number | Position/ type | Sex (F/M) | Age | Location |
| INGO CP actor | 1 | ICRC CP delegate | F | n.a. | ICRC office, Goma |
| LNGO CP actor | 3 | PAMI Administrative, HR manager | M | n.a. | PAMI office, Goma |
| | | PAMI DDR programme Officer | M | n.a. | PAMI office, Goma |
| | | PAMI DDR psycho-social officer | M | n.a. | PAMI office, Goma |

| Foster family | 2 | Two couples of PAMI Foster Care Families | 2M/2F | n.a. | Goma, Foster families' homes |
|-------------------------|--------------|---|-----------|-------|---|
| CAAFAG | 12 | Demobilised children in transit at PAMI CTO | 2 F | 12-13 | PAMI CTO, Goma |
| | | | 10 M | 14-16 | PAMI CTO, Goma |
| Focus groups (2) | | | | | |
| Categories | Total number | Position/ type | Sex (F/M) | Age | Location |
| Former CAAFAG | 43 | Four groups of demobilised children in transit at PAMI CTO | 10 M | 14-18 | PAMI CTO, Goma |
| | | | 10 M | 14-18 | PAMI CTO, Goma |
| | | | 4 F/7 M | 7- 13 | PAMI CTO, Goma |
| | | | 4 F/ 8 M | 7-13 | PAMI CTO, Goma |
| Former CAAFAG | 32 | Girls formerly associated to armed groups, reintegrated in Nyiragongo | 32 F | 15-20 | Local authorities premises, Nyiragongo, North Kivu. |

In-depth interviews

“In-depth interviewing, as the name suggests, is founded on the notion that delving into the subject’s deeper self produces more authentic data” (Marvasti, 2010, p. 3).

I have used in-depth interviews that included formal guided interviews and informal conversational interviews, as this type of interviewing elicits information that provides “a holistic understanding of the interviewee’s perceptions or situation” (Berry, 1999). Considering that the aim of the field research consisted in collecting research participants’ perceptions and views, in-depth interviews were a relevant method to use. As noted by Johnson, in-depth interviewing allows to “uncover what is usually hidden from ordinary view or reflection or to penetrate to more reflective understandings about the nature of that experience” (2002, p. 106).

Although most data were gathered from formal interviews, informal conversational interviews have provided key information as well. This type of interviewing consists of a conversation-like exchange, in which questions emerge from the immediate context. Its natural character may make participants forget that they are being interviewed, hence letting them feel more comfortable and open to sharing their perceptions and opinions.

Focus groups

“A focus group can be defined as a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non- threatening environment” (Krueger, 1988, p. 18 cited in Agar, 1995, p. 78).

The main aim of focus groups is to stimulate discussion and group interaction by interviewing several respondents at the same time. The researcher can thereby “understand (through further analysis) the meanings and norms which underlie those group answers” (Bloor et al., 2001, p. 43 cited in Marvasti, 2010, p. 427). Similar to in-depth interviews, I have used a semi-structured format to conduct focus groups as it establishes a non-threatening environment and more a flexible type of interviewing where participants can voice their opinions. The focus groups were based on open-ended questions that stimulate participants to elaborate on each respondent’s statements (Marvasti, 2010, p. 424). Considering the sensitive topic addressed and the type of actors, namely children who were associated with armed forces or armed groups, including girls, it was a deliberate choice to use this unstructured format to let respondents express themselves without exerting any pressure and let the group discussion stimulate the interaction among the participants.

Additionally, as argued by Fontana and Frey, the interactional nature of focus groups can stimulate participants’ memory of specific events and facts (2002, p. 651). This method was therefore prioritized for interviews with children who participated in the research, especially girls reintegrated in their community, as the interaction among participants could help them remember specific events, issues related to their situation and experience, by building upon respondents’ answers.

Finally, focus groups have been used in this research in an effort to meet the study’s objectives. Contemporary debates advocate researchers to go beyond the “Do No Harm” principle (Mackenzie et al., 2007; Wessels, 2007 cited in Odden and Tonheim, 2013, p. 34). Researchers should enhance the positive impact they have on participants’ lives through having them participate in the research processes’ (ibid.). Focus groups can give this opportunity as they can empower participants by having a therapeutic effect and reducing the feeling of isolation after traumatic experiences (Odden and Tonheim, 2013, p. 34). Nevertheless, few studies have so far paid attention to the opinions of children formerly associated with armed groups. Because of this, there is a lack of academic literature on the methodology to use for such type of research (Utas, 2004, p. 204 cited in ibid.). Girls’ voices have been particularly absent so far, hence the greater focus on girls in this study.

I used focus groups to interview children and adolescents that had been part of armed groups, particularly girls, with the aim of increasing their self-esteem and resilience. Furthermore, as Boyden and Ennew note, it is essential that children or youth be able to express their ideas and perceptions with their own words, without the latter being impacted and deformed by the way adults think and talk (1997, p. 37 cited in Clacherty and Donald, 2007, p. 149 and in Odden and Tonheim, 2013, p. 43). This is why focus groups are used in this research.

3.2.4. Timeline

To collect data, I conducted the field study according to the sequence of the different phases of the child DDR intervention. I started gathering data related to the demobilization phase, then investigated the reinsertion phase at the CTO, and finally I ended the field research by focusing on the reintegration phase. Collecting data in the

chronological order of the three DDR intervention phases helped establish links between challenges in each phase of the DDR intervention, their causes, and impacts.

Figure 10: Timeline of field study

| Object/ Phase | Location | Participant(s) | Method |
|-------------------|--|--|-------------------------|
| 1. Introduction | ICRC offices, Goma | ICRC CP delegate | Formal guided interview |
| | PAMI offices, Goma | PAMI Administrative, HR manager | Formal guided interview |
| | | PAMI DDR programme Officer | Formal guided interview |
| | | PAMI DDR psychosocial officer | Formal guided interview |
| 2. Demobilisation | FARDC/MONUSC O demobilisation military base, Mubambiro, North Kivu (27 km south of Goma) | Local child protection actors (CAJED, PAMI); FARDC soldiers, commander Demobilised soldiers; Demobilised children and adolescents (males only) | Participant observation |
| | Military prison, (operation Sokola II), Goma | Local child protection actors (CAJED, PAMI); FARDC soldiers and commander; Detained adolescent (15 years old, male); Detained young man (24 years old); Detained men (formerly associated to armed groups – Mai Mai, FDLR) | Participant observation |
| 3. Reinsertion | PAMI CTO, Goma | PAMI psychosocial workers | Participant observation |

| | | | |
|------------------|---------------------------------------|--|--|
| | | Demobilised children (boys and girls) | Informal conversations |
| | | | Participant observation |
| | | | 1 Focus groups divided in 4 groups (3 participants, including 8 girls) |
| | | | Formal guided interviews (12, including 2 girls) |
| 4. Reintegration | Nyaragongo, about 20 km south of Goma | Former girls associated with armed groups reintegrated in the area of Nyaragongo | Focus groups (32 participants) |

I started with interviewing child protection actors involved in the child DDR intervention in order to gain a general overview of the intervention. By gathering their perceptions, I could identify relevant themes for further investigation in the field study. The second phase of the research was more focused on collecting children’s and adolescents’ perceptions.

This phase started with a field mission to a military prison where a child, that had been associated with an armed group was detained, and continued with a visit to a military demobilization base in Mubambiro to check for the presence of children among the demobilized combatants. During this field mission, I mostly relied on participant observation by observing, listening, and asking questions from the immediate context in informal conversations.

Next, I focused on the reinsertion phase by immersing myself at PAMI CTO in Goma. PAMI has around 60 children under its care. Their number varies depending on the number of children whose family links have been restored and who subsequently leave the center to be reintegrated and the number of children who have been demobilized and arrive at the CTO on a more or less weekly basis. Considering that some children are newly demobilized and that many are suffering from trauma and psychosocial troubles, it was vital to use methods that would not harm them, but instead would help them regain self-confidence.

To do so, and with the objective of designing a participative methodology that would build on children’s resilience by involving them in the research as decision-makers, I set up a creative project through which I was able to gather data on those children, who were in transit at the CTO. This project was carried out with the informed consent of both children and PAMI, who were informed about the academic purpose of this activity.

The project consisted of a theatre play that children present at the CTO would stage themselves. The theatre play addressed the “four lives”: life in the family (pre-recruitment), life in the bush (when associated with the armed group), life at the transit center after demobilization (reinsertion phase of the DDR), and life in the future (aspirations and recommendations). As the children at the CTO, both boys and girls, showed a great interest in their capoeira lessons, given twice a week, both UNICEF capoeira officers agreed to participate in the theatre play by also using capoeira as a way to motivate children and to help them feel that they were in a non-threatening environment in which they could feel comfortable expressing themselves.

Capoeira is a form of martial arts that provides children with psychosocial support within a group setting (MONUSCO, 2017, p. 2). The sport advocates for peace and to settling conflicts in a peaceful manner, while gathering its participants around a joint cause. It has many benefits for children, including, for example, helping them regain self-esteem. At the CTO, it decreased tensions between children and led to better social cohesion. Because capoeira helps children find peaceful alternatives to violence, associating the theatre play with capoeira was a great opportunity to provide stronger psychosocial support to children by encouraging them to build a creative project together.

Scholars consider play activities such as theatre a psychosocial practice. Theatre enables children to release pressure and fosters mental development (Hill and Langholz, 2003; Harris, 2007; Annan et al., 2006 cited in Odden and Tonheim, 2013, p. 86). Such activities stimulate dialogues between children and their socialization.

I first organized a focus group to help children identify the main themes to address in the theatre play, as related to “the four lives”. 43 children, including eight girls, participated. Four groups of roughly 10 children were established. Given that teenagers might share more sensitive information, groups were divided according to the age of participants. The younger respondents (7 – 13 years old) were gathered in two different groups, including the girls. Two other groups were made of teenage boys between 14 to 18 years old. For each group, a psychosocial worker of PAMI would act as moderator.

After having organized the focus groups, I asked the participants whether they wished to relate their personal experience but in an individual setting. Twelve participants, aged between 13 and 17, gave a positive response, including two girls. The children were also asked if they would like to portray their personal accounts in the theatre play. All agreed. Other teenagers also wanted to participate but were too busy with professional training. They thus proposed to provide their accounts in a song format for the theatre play only. Younger children did not seem prepared to discuss their experience and only expressed their willingness to participate in the theatre by dancing the capoeira in between their comrades’ testimonies.

Before the theatre play would be staged, I organized an artistic activity for all children, in which they could select the themes addressed in the theatre play (the “four lives”). In fact, drawing activities can provide a psychosocial support to children and serve as artistic therapy. Children can imagine positive and negative situations and express their aspirations and ambitions through their drawing (Odden and Tonheim, 2013, p. 87). This activity provided key data for this research. Art used as therapy can help children channel

emotions that are linked to traumas without forcing them to face their traumas by talking about them (Hill and Langholz, 2003, cited in *ibid.*).

Finally, the last phase of this research focused on the reintegration phase of the DDR intervention. It consisted in a field mission to Nyaragongo where a focus group took place with 32 reintegrated girls formerly associated with armed groups, aged between 15 and 20. A PAMI program manager acted as a moderator and interpreter. Girls were accompanied by a PAMI female community member who had gathered them. As a matter of confidentiality and to minimize the risk of sharing sensitive information of participants outside the group, I sensitized the participants about the potential risks of disclosing sensitive personal information and helped them make considered and careful choices on the information to be shared. In cases where they wanted to share highly sensitive information, they were advised to express themselves in the third person singular.

3.3. Data analysis

The analysis of data gathered was based primarily on sociological discourse analysis. Data gathered from participant observation were essential to completing the analysis of the recorded and transcribed discourses produced during in-depth interviews and focus groups. In this study, I processed the data through three interlinked types of analyses: a contextual, a textual, and finally an interpretive analysis.

The first preliminary phase consisted of a textual and contextual analysis. As explained by Ruiz, “to interpret discourse from a sociological standpoint, discourse must first be analyzed from both a textual and a contextual approach” (2009). Discourse analysis, according to the *Dictionnaire d’analyse du discours*, generally refers to the relation between text and context (Maingueneau and Charaudeau, 2002, p. 42). In fact, examining the context of production of a discourse is paramount in order to gain a deeper understanding of its meaning. It enables one to establish links between the textual and social logics of a discourse (Le Bart, 1998, p. 9). Context is consequently understood as “the space in which the discourse has emerged and in which it acquires meaning” (Ruiz, 2009). Hence, discourses gathered from participant observation and interviews during the field study were first embedded in their proper socio-historical context in order to understand the discourse. This preliminary analysis was essential for the identification of themes and information to focus on during further analysis. Additionally, the contextual analysis facilitated both the textual analysis and the sociological interpretation of data.

Whereas the contextual analysis allows one to understand the discourse, the textual or content analysis characterize it (Ruiz, 2009). The content analysis consisted of an inductive method of fragmenting discourses into relevant units of information for their subsequent categorization. During this analysis, I identified themes and topics around which discourses developed. Discourse analysis evolved around the following three themes: patterns of the use of child soldiers, impacts on child soldiers, and finally challenges to child DDR interventions. Strong interlinkages exist between the identified themes. All together, they cover the period from the recruitment of the child into an armed group to the child’s demobilization or reintegration into civilian life. Consequently, strong relations, such as cause-effect patterns, exist between the themes, which could provide key

elements to answer the research question and explain the absence of girls in the DDR intervention in North Kivu.

Through the content, i.e. textual and contextual analysis, I generated categories for each theme that emerged from gathered discourses and the analysis of the academic debate on the research topic. I then paid greater attention to specific topics in each category based on their high or low recurrence in the data. Based on the established categories and related topics, I have been able to interpret data accordingly. The table below illustrates the categorization of selected themes and a non-exhaustive list of related topics that emerged.

Figure 11: Inductive analysis

| Themes | Categories | Topics |
|----------------|-----------------------|---|
| Patterns | Root causes | Insecurity, education, poverty, family care, ethnic values, conflict |
| | Recruitment | Voluntary enlistment, forced recruitment, Peer influence, sexual and gender-based violence |
| Impacts | Psychological impacts | Extreme violence, killing, looting, sexual abuse, sexual violence, frequent beating, humiliations, sudden death, dead body abuses, community and family rejection |
| | Health impacts | Smoking, drugs, pregnancy, rape, STIs, wounds, diseases |
| DDR challenges | demobilisation | Self-demobilisation, weapons handling, military detention, age assessment |
| | reinsertion | FJA, CTO, host family, education, vocational training, psychosocial activities, space for girls, sensitisation, active listening, psychological support |
| | reintegration | Family mediation, community-based sensitisation, land conflict, stigma, discrimination, |

| | | |
|--|--|---|
| | | family rejection, insecurity, loss of parents, follow-up support, lack of funding, donors fatigue, psychological support, children born from rape/ in the bush, community acceptance, marriage, church, IGA |
|--|--|---|

3.4. Sociological interpretation

Although the contextual and textual analyses already involve a process of interpretation through the system of categories, the final phase of this sociological analysis exclusively consisted of interpreting the discourse. According to Ruiz, “from a sociological standpoint, discourse is defined as any practice by which individuals imbue reality with meaning” (2009). The discourse analysis focused on the meaning behind analyzed discourses in order to gather information on the participants’ “reality” within the child DDR intervention. To this end, I have considered the informative dimension of discourse within the frame of this analysis. Based on the assumption that research participants were familiar with the social reality under investigation in this research, they could provide key knowledge about this reality through their discourse. Interpreting the discourse as information reflects an attempt to “explain discourse in terms of the social competence of subjects as informants, namely their knowledge of the reality” (Ruiz, 2009). Consequently, the careful selection of participants who were frontline actors in the child DDR intervention in North Kivu, and especially children, was essential to the quality and relevance of data.

Furthermore, I interpreted data using an emic approach, i.e. from research participants’ points of view, as this study aimed to reflect locals’ perspectives within the academic debate. Considering that sociology examines “social interactions, behaviors, and perceptions that occur within groups, teams, organizations, and communities (Reeves, 2008)”, this study has offered the opportunity to provide rich, holistic insights into people’s views and actions through the selected methods. The use of in-depth interviews was thus a useful and appropriate method, as it enables us to delve into the participant’s deeper self. According to Marvasti (2010, p. 426), understanding the deeper self means understanding the world from the respondent’s point of view, or gaining an empathic appreciation of his/her world, hence the emic understanding and interpretation of discourse.

Nevertheless, such a study also implies that data collected from discourse are subjective. Ruiz (2009) notes that “the interest in discourse as a means of understanding social reality is based on the notion of the subjective orientation of social action”. In fact, Ruiz further explains that social action is guided by the meaning individuals attach to their actions, as meanings are to a large degree socially produced and shared patterns (ibid.). In this sense, the collection of subjective data was relevant for this research, as an individual’s viewpoint

can explain social action according to Alfred Schutz (ibid.). Considering that “discourse is from a sociological point of view the ultimate condition of the social and cultural construction of reality” (ibid.), the analysis of the gathered subjective data from a sociological interpretation was essential to providing relevant information and knowledge, including culturally/ socially shared practices and beliefs, about the social reality under investigation: the lack of inclusion of girls in the child DDR intervention in North Kivu.

3.5. Limitations

Although sociological discourse analysis is a relevant methodology for gathering and reflecting research participants’ perspectives and beliefs, this approach presents limitations as well.

First, the methodology used remains subjective. As a matter of fact, my worldview has considerably influenced the collection, analysis and interpretation of data. Behind the seeming objectivity of used methods, my own perception has impacted the collection of data and the selection of elements I focused on during the field study. Additionally, my worldview has influenced how I have established relations between selected elements and the significances I have attached to them, thus influencing to some degree the analysis and interpretation of data. Furthermore, information from gathered discourses is filtered by the research participants’ points of view. In fact, gathered data are auto-reported, which entails the risk that perception and reality mix.

Second, as Lillis argues, it is important to avoid naïve or realist descriptivism or the “parallel danger” of reading microdata through macro social/ critical theory (2008, pp. 372-373). In light of this, I took great care not to generalize the case-study, nor to take findings as general truth. Instead, collected micro-data were systematically analyzed and interpreted in line with their direct context. Considering the small number of participants, this study can only give a detailed description of a specific context, i.e. gender related challenges in the child DDR intervention in North Kivu. Nonetheless, the data analysis and interpretation of the participants' perceptions can contribute to a more generalized comprehension of the research topic for comparable situations.

Another drawback lies in the lack of knowledge of local languages. Acquiring fluency in local languages and in local forms of meaning are central aspects of sociological research, but I could not speak Swahili or other local languages. Although French is a strong asset, as it is a national language in DRC, speaking Swahili is a great advantage since it would have allowed me to speak at any moment and in spontaneous conversations with relevant local actors, especially children. Such knowledge would have offered the opportunity to gain more relevant data closer to the children’s own perceptions by conducting more informal conversational interviews with them.

Finally, access to data has been challenging on some occasions. First, due to insecurity, access can be withdrawn at any moment. North Kivu remains a volatile context where conflicts and rebellions persist. Second, data were not systematically disaggregated by age, place of origin, religion or faith, ethnic group due to limited access to this information.

3.6. Conclusion

This research employs a qualitative methodology to investigate barriers that girls associated with armed groups in North Kivu face to access the DDR intervention, and possible relationships between the intervention and conflict. This study draws on both a literature review on the topic and an exploratory field study with an immersion in a local NGO, PAMI, a UNICEF DDR implementing partner in North Kivu.

I used a sociological discourse analysis to analyze and interpret primary data gathered from the field. My general objective was to collect perceptions and perspectives of the “frontline” local actors on the child DDR intervention. In this effort, I interviewed predominantly children formerly associated with armed groups, with a stronger focus on girls, and local child protection actors. I aimed to provide research participants an accessible and working platform, offering them the opportunity to voice their opinions on the research topic; I designed a participatory methodology that could go beyond the “Do No Harm” principle (Odden and Tonheim, 2013, p. 34) by having a positive and empowering impact on participants’ lives.

Hence, I used a combination of participative methods to increase the quality and relevance of data. Participant observation during the field study was a useful tool for guiding the exploratory research. I also used semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus groups to gain a deeper insight into research participants’ viewpoints, feelings and experience. I collected data according to the sequence of the DDR intervention, in an effort to better establish correlations between challenges identified at each phase of the intervention and relate cause-effect patterns between the three phases (disarmament, demobilization/reinsertion, and reintegration).

I used three interlinked types of analysis to interpret the collected data: a contextual, content/textual, and interpretation analysis. The contextual analysis consists of understanding the discourses from interviews and focus groups. Considering that a discourse acquires its meaning from the context in which it has emerged, the examination of the socio-historical context of each produced discourse is essential to understanding the social reality reflected in the discourse. Next, I generated the content analysis of the data through an inductive method of analysis of three themes: patterns of the use of child soldiers, impacts on child soldiers, and finally child DDR intervention-related challenges. Subsequent categories and related topics were identified through the inductive analysis and helped to establish relations between the themes. Finally, I interpreted data from a sociological standpoint, by considering the informative dimension of the discourse. I considered research participants as key informants that provide essential and relevant knowledge, attitudes and perceptions on the social reality under investigation. It was a deliberate choice to interpret subjective data, as it has the advantage of reflecting a collective social reality, in particular shared social and cultural patterns and practices.

Nevertheless, this research faces several limitations. First, due to limited access to information, data were neither systematically disaggregated according to age nor mapped by region of origin or ethnic or religious group. Second, the use of subjective data presented a risk of bias, as research participants could potentially mix reality with perception. Finally, the sample of this research being relatively small and context-specific,

findings from this study cannot be generalized but rather understood within their direct context.

4. Contextual analysis: children associated with armed groups in North Kivu, DRC

This chapter focuses on the specific case of North Kivu to provide more contextualized knowledge about the two research questions. It starts with a general overview of the current crisis, followed by a brief analysis of the historical context. All different points that were developed in the theoretical background chapter (2) will be examined within the context of North Kivu. The study of the socio-historical context related to child soldiers in North Kivu is a key step in sociological discourse analysis to help understand the meaning of gathered data from the field study. This first step of the analysis exclusively draws on the literature review from various sources, mostly academic works, reports from international agencies such as the UN, ICRC, UNICEF, Child Soldiers International and official documents.

4.1. Context

The DRC is the second largest country in Africa. For more than 20 years, it has been plagued by an ongoing humanitarian crisis, characterized by the persistence of armed conflicts, local fighting with an ethnic and clan dimension, massive displacement, high numbers of refugees, chronic outbreak of epidemics, natural disasters, extreme poverty, and fighting over natural resources and political power. The crisis has led to political instability at a local level (Hodal 2017).

Notwithstanding its abundant natural resources, DRC is one of the world's poorest countries, ranked 176/188 in the 2016 Human Development Index.¹⁵ With an estimated population of 70 million people, the impact of the multiple internal conflicts is unprecedented. 7.7 million people are estimated to have experienced severe food insecurity, 8.5 million are in need of humanitarian assistance, 3.8 million are internally displaced, almost 2 million are severely malnourished children. In addition there are more than 479,000 refugees from Rwanda, Central African Republic, Burundi and South Sudan.¹⁶

The eastern region of the country has been hit by insecurity, which aggravates the humanitarian crisis. Internal conflicts are proliferating, while humanitarian and development funding have decreased considerably. From Bas-Uele and Haut-Uele to Ituri, the Kivus, and Katanga, four armed groups of foreign origin (FDLR, LRA, ADF, and FNL) and a growing number of local armed groups are currently active. They have fragmented the eastern region, resulting in severe chaos and a protracted conflict.¹⁷ A study conducted by the Congo Research Group in 2015 identified around seventy armed groups having

¹⁵ ECHO, Factsheet, Democratic Republic of Congo, July 2017.

¹⁶ ECHO, Crisis Report n°6 – DRC: Multiple complex emergencies, 11 October 2017.

¹⁷ ECHO, Humanitarian Implementation Plan (HIP), Great Lakes Region, 4 April 2016, ECHO/COD/BUD/2016/91000.

their areas of influence in North and South Kivu alone, and each numbering less than 200 soldiers and recruiting mostly along ethnic lines (Stearns and Vogel, 2015, p. 5).

Figure 12: Armed groups in North and South Kivu



Source: Council on Foreign Relations, 16 January 2016, available at: https://www.cfr.org/interactives/eastern-congo?cid=otr-marketing_use-Congo_InfoGuide-BrilliantMaps#!/#map (last visited on 27 February 2019)

North Kivu remains particularly affected by the crisis and has been at the epicenter of violent intercommunity fighting for more than two decades. A host of armed groups, local defense militias and foreign armed groups with a political agenda are fighting each other and committing mass violations of human rights, particularly in the territories of Beni, Lubero, Walikale, Masisi, Rutshuru, and Nyiragongo, to a lesser extent. A study led by the Congo Research Group mapped the presence of armed groups and hotspots of fighting and violence across the Kivu provinces. It showed that armed groups are scattered throughout the Kivutian highlands, but “are much less present in the sparsely populated lowlands to the west. Most of the fighting is clustered in other areas where a variety of armed groups is opposed to each other, or where the FARDC conducts military operations” (Stearns and Vogel, 2015, p. 5-6). Identified hotspots included the border between Walikale and Masisi territories, the Rusizi Plain, and areas where FARDC offensives occurred (Beni, Masisi, Walikale and Rutshuru), leading to the worst displacement in the Kivus because of the national army counterinsurgency operations (ibid.).

The main active armed groups are the “Mazembe” militias and *Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Rwanda* (FDLR) in Lubero and Rutshuru, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) in Beni, and the Mai Mai “Nyatura” and *Conseil National pour le Renouveau et la Démocratie* (CNRD) in Masisi.¹⁸ The FDLR maintains its presence and influence in various parts of North Kivu (Walikale, Lubero, Rutshuru, Masisi) and it could number between 1,000 and 2,500 troops, several times larger than any other armed group in the area (Stearns and Vogel, 2015, p. 5). Due to intensifying inter-ethnic violence and armed groups vying for power and control over natural resources, humanitarian access has shrunk

¹⁸ ECHO Crisis Report n°6 – DRC: Multiple complex emergencies, 11 October 2017.

considerably. This has left tens of thousands without access to basic services, with massive internal displacements increasing to around 1 million IDPs.¹⁹ This has resulted in IDPs and host populations becoming highly vulnerable to abuses committed by armed groups and forces, which includes sexual violence, theft, looting, forced recruitment and abductions, massacres, lack of access to education and health services, and chronic recurrence of epidemics.

4.2. Historical context

Since its independence in 1960, DRC has faced a host of rebellions and coups, as well as civil strife, and violence, and it remains extremely volatile. From 1965 to 1997, President Mobutu Sese Seko governed the country with an iron fist and his presidency was marked by the failure of the democratic process and the devastating consequences of the Rwandan genocide (Nzambi, 2016, p. 47). Although conflicts in DRC have caused, directly and indirectly, the highest death toll of any conflict since World War II (Autesserre, 2010, p. 2), DRC has become a forgotten crisis. Since 1960, the Kivu provinces have remained hotspots of continuous violence and abuses, where civilians suffer the most.

The spillover of the Rwandan genocide was both a catalyst and turning point for the recent Congolese wars. From April to July 1994, more than 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were massacred by Hutu extremists. After the end of the genocide, about 2 million Rwandan refugees, mainly Hutu, were forced to flee to eastern DRC. They feared reprisals and persecution from the Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front that seized power in Kigali. Among the refugees, more than 50,000 were armed Rwandan Hutus who took part in the genocide. They militarized the refugee camps, using them as bases to launch raids on Rwanda, and created armed groups that resorted to violence and looting for survival (Autesserre, 2010, p. 47). Meanwhile, Mobutu's dictatorship was becoming increasingly unpopular, resulting in the creation of an anti-Mobutu coalition by the Rwandan, Ugandan, Angolan and Burundian governments and South Sudanese rebel forces. The coalition eventually led to the engineering and support of Congolese armed groups and local militias by DRC's neighbours. In particular, they helped the armed rebel group Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of the Congo-Zaire (AFDL). These tensions led to the First Congo War, which lasted from 1996 to 1997 and eventually resulted in the toppling of Mobutu by the AFDL. He was replaced by Laurent-Désiré Kabila.

The new president quickly dismissed his foreign backers, resulting in the creation of a new Congolese rebel movement by Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi: Rally for Congolese Democracy (RCD). In August 1998, the Second Congo War broke out with RCD launching an attack on Kabila's government. In July 1999, a ceasefire agreement was reached in Lusaka. Conditions of the agreement included the holding of a national dialogue, the establishment of a disarmament mechanism, and the creation of a UN peacekeeping force MONUC. By UNSC resolution 1279, MONUC's mission had as its main responsibility the verification that the Lusaka ceasefire was being respected, the repatriation of foreign militias and the withdrawal of foreign troops (Autesserre, 2010, p. 49; Nzambi, 2016, p.

¹⁹ ECHO, Daily Flash, 30 October 2017.

53). However, during this period, armed groups proliferated and abuses against civilians were still committed on a large scale.

In 2001, Laurent Désiré Kabila was assassinated and replaced by his son Joseph Kabila, the incumbent president. Joseph Kabila directly called for peace talks, while securing the trust of most Western powers. In 2003, this eventually led to the establishment of a Transitional Government, officially launching the transition from war to peace and democracy. Three years later, in 2006, Joseph Kabila was elected President through multi-party elections. However, massive violence continued to plague the eastern provinces of the country, with mass crimes perpetrated by several militias such as FDLR, LRA, Mai Mai, M23, ADF. As a result, in 2010, MONUC was replaced by MONUSCO with UNSC resolution 1925. 98% of blue helmets were deployed in the eastern provinces (Nzambi, 2016, p. 53). MONUSCO's mandate prioritized the protection of the civilian population. In 2013, UNSC resolution 2098 created an "Intervention Brigade" to neutralise armed groups, hence authorising the use of force.

If violence persists, Autesserre argues that the underlying causes are to be found in the "remnants of unresolved regional and national hostilities caused by the post-war violence" (2010, p. 54). Congolese local actors appear as proxies who are manipulated and supervised by regional and national elites, "rather than endowed with proper agency" (ibid.). It is thus important to analyse causes of conflicts in DRC at a micro level, but also examine the micro-level causes in relationship with macro factors. This is particularly relevant in the eastern DRC, where local, national and regional dimensions of violence are interlinked. Local issues exacerbating violence include conflict over land, mineral resources, traditional power, local taxes, and the relative social status of specific groups and individuals (ibid, p. 176). The almost complete absence of state authority and legitimacy reinforces violence. As a result, peacebuilding is extremely challenging, while local militias are serving national and international actors by maintaining military control, continuing resource exploitation, and combating political and ethnic enemies. The following map shows the high presence of armed groups in rich mineral areas.

Figure 13: Militias and mines in eastern DRC



Source: Council on Foreign Relations, 16 Jan 2016, available at: https://www.cfr.org/interactives/eastern-congo?cid=otr-marketing_use-Congo_InfoGuide-BrilliantMaps#!/#map (last visited on 27 February 2019)

4.3. The phenomenon of child soldiers in North Kivu

The use and recruitment of children remains an issue of great concern. All parties to the conflict continue to recruit children (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2011 cited in Odden and Tonheim, 2013, p. 20). The FDLR and the local defense militias, Mai Mai, are the main recruiters and abductors of children in the eastern region of DRC. Few efforts have been made to release and demobilize children because of the almost non-existent and continuously difficult dialogue that characterizes any engagement with armed groups.

During the First War (1996-1997), Laurent Kabila used almost 10,000 children as combatants (Lischer, 2010, p. 152). Many of these children were later incorporated into the national army once Kabila seized power and toppled Mobutu (Odden and Tonheim, 2013, p. 19). Groups that allied with Kabila's government, such as the RCD-ML (Rally for Congolese Democracy-Movement for Liberalisation) and the Mai Mai militias, recruited children *en masse*. Half of the Mai Mai combatants were comprised of children under 18, while RCD-Goma's front-line combatants were comprised of 20% of children (Lischer, 2010, p. 153). It is estimated that there are 30,000 CAAFAG in DRC, 40% of which would be girls (Nzambi, 2016, p. 34).

Despite the official end of the main war in DRC in 2003, violence and conflict have continued to erupt, particularly in the eastern part of the country. The scholarly consensus argues that greed, rather than grievances, sustains the war (Lischer, 2010, p. 152). Greed wars and length of conflict are major factors of child recruitment and use by armed groups.

4.3.1. Patterns

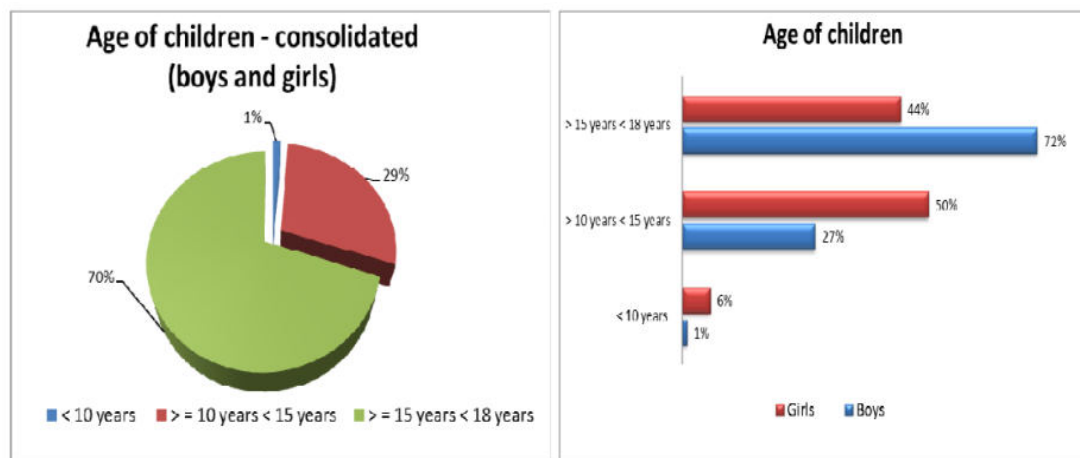
North Kivu has been confronted with cyclical violence characterized by skirmishes, killings, sexual violence, looting and large-scale episodes of violence (Pauletto, 2010, p. 42). Ongoing instability and conflict in the Kivu provinces are "rooted in the politicization

of Hutu-Tutsi ethnic divisions and the perception of different groups as being authentic Congolese outsiders” (Nduwimana, 2013, p. 5). However, the ethnic dimension of violence is deeply entwined with economic motivations (Lischer, 2010, p. 152). Tutsi and Hutu armed groups are thus resistant to demilitarization and continue to recruit children. According to a MONUSCO report, mass recruitment campaigns by armed groups between 2009 and 2015 were particularly high in North Kivu, with 56% of all recruits, followed by South Kivu with a recruitment rate as high as 21%, and the Province Orientale with 15% (2015, p. 5). The report indicates that the vast majority of children associated with armed forces or armed groups they interviewed were recruited within DRC borders (96%), with the remaining 4% recruited outside of DRC in Rwanda, Uganda, South Sudan and Central African Republic (ibid, p. 6).

The high percentage of recruitment in North Kivu (56%) results from the persistent insecurity in the province. The peak of recruitment in 2012-2013 relates to the period when members of the CNDP (*Congrès National pour la Défense du Peuple* – National Congress for the Defence of the People) had deserted the FARDC to engineer the *Mouvement du 23 mars* (M23) insurgency.

According to MONUSCO’s study, the majority of children were recruited between the ages of 15 and 18. Nevertheless, statistics suggest that girls tend to be younger at the time of their recruitment, with 56% of girls younger than 15 years.

Figure 14: Age of children recruited into armed forces in DRC (2009-2015)



Source: MONUSCO, 2015, p. 7

The FDLR and the Mai Mai self-defense groups (APCLS, Nyatura, NDC/Cheka, FDC/AP, PARECO and Rayia Mutomboki) appear to be the main perpetrators of child recruitment. FDLR recruited a quarter of all children between 2009 and 2015 while the Mai Mai accounted for 41% (MONUSCO, 2015, p. 7).

According to academic literature, most boys join armed groups on a voluntary basis, while girls are, in most cases, recruited by force and abducted. Odden and Tonheim’s research indicates that 90% of girls and 40% of boys were recruited by force (2013, p. 22).

4.3.2. Causes of recruitment

Voluntary recruitment is closely linked to forced displacement, which breaks down social structures (Pauletti, 2010, p. 40). Ongoing conflict also increases the vulnerability of children to recruitment by armed groups. Unaccompanied children and demobilized children are particularly at risk of recruitment (Lischer, 2010, p. 156). Displacement results in a lack of access to vital resources such as food and water, which can motivate children to join armed groups for survival. Other factors can increase the vulnerability of children making them easy targets for recruitment. Due to widespread poverty in eastern DRC, scores of children are left abandoned and live on the streets. Some are also accused of witchcraft and of having magical powers. As a result, their community and family often blame them for the deaths and illnesses of members of the family. This often results in their rejection and banishment from their home, which is a widespread phenomenon. The lack of access to education due to the high school fees and the lack of resources allocated to education and vocational training at the national level “open the window for recruitment of child soldiers” (Nduwimana, 2013, p. 7).

Voluntary recruitment has also direct links with social norms and practices at the community and family level. Nduwimana maintains that child recruitment is “entrenched in social attitudes towards children” (ibid.). Some families and communities can support and encourage their children to join armed groups, as a duty to defend the community’s interests and security. The suffering of the family can serve as an impetus for recruitment as well, where children take the responsibility to provide for their family by joining armed groups in order to be a breadwinner (Lischer, 2010, p. 157).

In sum, displacement and desperation seem to be the main factors leading to recruitment, forced or voluntary, of children by armed groups. Displacement further exacerbates the breakdown of social protection structures, such as the family. In addition, recruitment is also influenced by the length of time displaced, poor economic opportunities, separation from parents, traumatization and lack of education as the government’s spending on education and children’s programs remains low. Consequently, as Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict notes, children are extremely vulnerable to recruitment while seeking protection, food and a place in society (2003, p. 23 cited in Lischer, 2010, p. 157).

4.3.3. Impacts

Children who have been associated with armed forces or armed groups in eastern DRC have been considerably traumatized and psychologically affected by witnessing, experiencing and perpetrating violence. According to one study, more than 90% of CAAFAG in Goma have experienced severe violence and/or murder, one-third of them were victims of sexual abuse, nearly 80% had been seriously beaten, and 64% reported they have personally killed someone (Nduwimana, 2013, p. 8).

Local conflicts are justified by identification with ethnic groups, but the underlying economic dimension exerts a tremendous influence on the war dynamics in the eastern region. These types of local conflicts involve brutal warfare strategies against civilian populations, including systematic atrocities, like massacres and mass rapes. Such strategies are used to frighten civilians and to make regions uninhabitable for the group

to be expelled (Schauer and Elbert, 2013, p. 313). The civilian population is therefore severely impacted, with children, girls and women being the most at risk. Additionally, such warfare techniques not only dehumanize their victims, but can result in severe traumas, including mental and physical health issues. In a study carried out in 2007 among children formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups in Uganda and Congo, Bayer and his colleagues indicated that all interviewed children reported they had been violently recruited by armed forces at a mean age of 12 years and had served an average of 38 months in captivity (Bayer, Klasen and Adam, 2007 in Schauer and Elbert, 2010, p. 322). “The most commonly reported traumatic experiences were having witnessed shooting (92.9%), having witnessed somebody being wounded (89.9%), and having been seriously beaten (84%). A total of 54% of the children reported having killed someone, and 28% reported that they were forced to engage in sexual contact. Further, 35% of the interviewed children had exhibited a fully developed post-traumatic stress disorder” (Schauer and Elbert, 2010, p. 322).

A study with similar findings conducted in DRC stressed, “Growing up in an armed group is linked to higher levels of trauma-related disorders, aggressive behaviour, and failed reintegration” (Hermenau et. al., 2013, p. 7). The research concludes that addressing mental health issues of children formerly associated with armed groups is therefore imperative for effective reintegration programs (ibid.).

4.3.4. Girls associated with armed groups in North Kivu

Girls associated with armed groups experience great suffering both during their association with armed groups and upon their return. Programs to support their release, psychosocial backup and reintegration are too scarce and underfunded in DRC, which results in a low percentage of girls leaving armed groups and even fewer receiving assistance.

According to a MONUSCO newsletter, among 119 children who have been abducted between January and June 2017 in North Kivu, South Kivu, Ituri, Tanganyika, Haut Uélé and Bas Uélé, almost half of them (47) were girls (2017, p. 6). Such figures indicate that forced recruitment is still rampant in eastern DRC, given that they are probably higher due to the lack of visibility of the phenomenon. MONUSCO estimates suggest that girls make up 30 to 40% of all children recruited, but among demobilized children, only 7% are girls (MONUSCO, 2015, p. 8).

It is impossible to accurately assess the percentage of girls under the age of 18 in armed groups due to limited access to armed groups in out-of-reach areas. In addition, it is more difficult for girls to escape such groups (ibid., p. 9). Many of them are pregnant or do not want to leave their children behind, others fear retaliation if they are caught. Moreover, girls are often considered by armed groups, commanders as dependents by virtue of being their “wives” or concubines and consequently they do not consider them as eligible for demobilization (ibid, p. 8). Finally, many armed groups are reluctant to release girls, fearing to be held accountable for acts of sexual violence against the girls (ibid, p. 10).

4.3.4.1. Patterns of recruitment

Girls can spend between a few days to four years with armed groups, the average being six months. Main recruiters of girls are the LRA in Oriental province, Mai Mai Katanga in Katanga province, Mai Mai Simba in Oriental province and North Kivu, Nyatura in North and South Kivu, FRPI in Oriental Province, Rayia Mutomboki in North Kivu, and ADF in North Kivu (MONUSCO, 2015, p. 11).

Forced recruitment seems to be the dominant pattern of recruitment for girls (Odden and Tonheim, 2013, p. 22; Monusco, 2015, p. 11). Girls are used to perform different roles during their association with armed groups, such as carrying heavy loads of pillaged goods, caring for babies, cooking and performing domestic tasks, collecting water and firewood for combatants, and being “wives” and sex slaves (Odden and Tonheim, 2013, p. 129). They can also be used for spying on the FARDC and as combatants.

4.3.4.2. Causes of recruitment

As mentioned, the majority of girls are forcibly recruited during attacks on their village, while others join on a voluntary basis. Some are lured by promises of education, a job, or money. Girls, in particular, make the decision to join armed groups to escape domestic violence and sexual abuse (Keairns, 2002; Coulter et al., 2008 cited in Odden and Tonheim, 2013, p. 23).

Like boys, girls’ decisions to join armed groups are related to various motives, namely seeking self-protection, revenge, or a sense of responsibility to contribute to the security and defense of their community’s interests. Some social and cultural practices can influence the association of girls with armed groups as well. In some communities where self-defense groups such as the Mai Mai are based, children may become associated with armed groups through cleansing rituals. In these rituals, parents volunteer their young boys to engage in combat alongside the armed group based in their community, and also offer their virgin daughters to prepare combatants for the battle (MONUSCO, 2015, p. 17). Through these cleansing rituals, there is the general belief that if combatants devirginize the young girls, they will be empowered to fight the enemy.

4.3.4.3. Impacts

Girls are disproportionally affected by crises and conflicts and subject to discrimination based on their age and gender. Girls suffer many abuses during their association with armed groups that result in traumatization and psychological disorders. They experience traumatic incidents of violence such as rape, frequent beating, and witnessing the murder and maiming of other children on the battlefield or by commanders. During their association, they are under constant pressure and fear, living in desperate conditions, and are driven to exhaustion from forced labor, hunger, and lack of medical care (MONUSCO, 2015, p. 23). Girls can witness rapes against other girls, such as those associated with Mai Mai Simba, M23 and the LRA (ibid.), but they can also be forced to commit atrocities and to kill other children that were caught while trying to escape. Such experiences have severe psychological consequences.

For girls who have escaped community armed groups, the risk of re-recruitment is high (MONUSCO, 2015, p. 25). Many girls are harassed by their abductors and raped again after their release. As stated, upon their return, girls face stigmatization and discrimination within their own community and family. Those who were raped or used as “wives” are often rejected by their families, as their abductors are often their families’ enemies or aggressors. In the eyes of their families, girls have lost their social and moral value (Odden and Tonheim, 2013, p. 130; Child Soldiers International, 2017, p. 30). Consequently, their return is experienced as a second traumatization (ibid, p. 140). In fact, girls are considered to be violent and to have a bad influence on the behaviour of their peers, but also as being dangerous, as they are seen as carriers of communicable diseases. Such preconceived ideas result in their discrimination and social exclusion. As indicated by Betancourt and her colleagues, the lack of community and family acceptance significantly exacerbates PTSD symptoms (Betancourt et. al., 2013).

Furthermore, several studies have demonstrated the harmful impacts of child recruitment on girls in DRC and argued that child recruitment and a lack of access to education were mutually reinforcing (Child Soldiers International, 2017; GCPEA, 2018). The report *Education Under Attack* demonstrated that “forced conscription limited girls’ access to education, while the inability to afford education led some girls to join armed groups instead [...]” and that “girls who were abducted or recruited and raped, sometimes for months, often dropped out of school afterward” (GCPEA, 2018, p. III-112), thus increasing the risk of re-recruitment.

Overall, sexual abuses are the main cause of girls’ stigmatization, which particularly hampers their reintegration into their family and community and increases the risk of re-enlistment into armed groups as well (Odden and Tonheim, 2013, p. 136). Girls’ prospects for the future are severely impacted by psychosocial issues that they face not only due to the high level of violence they have had to confront, but also due to the breakdown of families, identity problems, disabilities, STIs as a consequence of SGBV and lack of respect for their sexual and reproductive rights, moral and spiritual despair, stigmatization, and rejection by family and community.

4.3.5. Child DDR intervention in eastern DRC

Over the last few years, the Congolese government has produced several frameworks and strategies for stabilization, peace consolidation, disarmament and demobilization, and security sector reform. Nevertheless, these frameworks and strategies contain similar gaps and weak points that contribute to the failure of peace-consolidation efforts and stability. Hugo de Vries identified three elements (CRU report, 2015, p. 24). First, the lack of a conflict assessment or theory of change. Second, the emphasis on expanding the state into administrative and security “vacuums”. Third, the request of the state for support in terms of development hardware (roads, buildings, energy), equipment (transport, communications, agricultural inputs) and training, rather than “for socially transformative issues such as inter-community dialogue, civil society strengthening, and oversight or improving state-society relations”. Consequently, such frameworks “serve not to generate positive social change but to steer international support towards expanding the state’s territorial control and influence”, which risks igniting conflicts (ibid.).

The DDR intervention is severely undermined by several factors. First, limited resources and endemic conflict significantly shrink access to education, training, food and shelter (Nduwimana, 2013, p. 6). Second, funding for reintegration programs is limited, both from international donors and the national government. For instance, financial resources for UNICEF to implement the child DDR program have considerably decreased, while the number of children waiting for access to education and training keeps increasing (UNICEF, January – June 2017, p. 3). Since 2013, UNICEF and its implementing partners have assisted 18,400 children but at least 6000 are still waiting for reintegration (ibid, p. 2), which represents almost a third of the total.

Since May 7, 2004, a national framework for children associated with armed forces and armed groups “*Cadre opérationnel pour les enfants associés aux forces et groupes armés*” was adopted by the national government for the PNDDR (*Programme national de désarmement, démobilisation, et réinsertion*). The PNDDR mandate consists of bringing former child soldiers back to civilian life in line with the national and international commitments taken by DRC (PNDDR, 2004, point 8). The PNDDR is made by the CONADER (*Commission nationale de Désarmement, Démobilisation et Réinsertion*) (Nzambi, 2015, p. 140). Its specific objectives include sustainable reintegration and the development of adapted strategies for the reintegration of girls. The community-based approach is presented as a key condition for successful reintegration of children formerly associated with armed groups. Activities are to be developed and implemented through a network of partners trained by national NGOs and technical institutions, CBOs, and local and community-based cooperatives in order to supervise and establish an effective DDR program (ibid). The role of communities is central to the PNDDR mandate at the economic, structural (administrative and customary levels such as village leaders but also families, health centers, schools) and social levels of former CAAFAG’s reintegration. Nevertheless, several studies indicate that communities are playing a passive role and that there is no real partnership between child protection organizations and communities (Odden and Tonheim, 2013, p. 201). The lack of participation of communities contributes to the stigmatization and discrimination that hamper former CAAFAG’s reintegration into their communities. Furthermore, CONADER has faced operational capacities issues while implementing the DRR intervention for children, as well as significant technical, managerial, and corruption issues (Nzambi, 2015, p. 149).

Gathering data on the exact number of children released from armed groups is extremely challenging, as estimates only take into account children who have been demobilized through official processes. Self-demobilized children are not taken into account, which excludes many girls from estimations (Child Soldiers International, 2017, p. 11), as a large part of girls associated with armed groups directly return to their communities rather than passing through a demobilization base. As mentioned earlier, only 7% of girls have been demobilized through the official DDR process, while they are estimated to make up 40% of all CAAFAG in DRC. According to several studies, girls would rather escape by their own means and in a discrete manner in order to avoid being identified in public and stigmatized upon their return because of their exploitation as sex slaves (Odden and Tonheim, 2013, p. 25). As a result, there is a clear absence of girls in the national DDR program. Self-demobilization has many pitfalls, primarily because children who self-demobilize do not receive a demobilization certificate granting them access to assistance

programs. According to research led by Child Soldiers International, more than a third of the 150 girls formerly associated with armed groups interviewed had never received any assistance (Child Soldiers International, 2017, p. 12).

In reintegration programs, the psychosocial dimension is of utmost importance, especially for girls who suffer from severe psychosocial problems. Programs lack the needed specialized staff for psychosocial support, but are also not adequately adapted to the special needs of girls, and access to basic services for local partners and girls remains very limited due to underfunding and short-term projects (Odden and Tonheim, 2013, p. 79). Adapting health care for girls is also key to successful reintegration, as girls face considerable stigmatization and discrimination upon their return because of the sexual abuse they have been subjected to. Ending stigmatization is necessary, but not enough. Psychosocial support is much-needed, yet DDR programs focus on vocational training and income-generating activity (IGA) at the expense of emotional support (Child Soldiers International, 2017, p. 35).

To enhance children's reintegration, reinsertion kits, composed of various necessary accessories to launch an economic activity that they have been trained for, are provided. The quality of such kits is often questionable or not adapted for the intended use. Additionally, such kits are also often sold due to financial problems, which can be the result of a parental decision (Odden and Tonheim, 2013, p. 119).

Reinsertion programs aim to provide former CAAFAG with sustainable economic alternatives to prevent them from re-joining armed groups, but such an objective requires long-term efforts from child protection staff to do follow-up with respect to economic activities training. The training provided during the short-term period, as well as the supervision and guidance in the long-term, are both highly necessary in order to ensure that the training is fruitful. Nevertheless, as noted by the ILO, there is a clear lack of follow-up and of staff who are familiar with the local context and its economic and social aspects (Odden and Tonheim, 2013, p. 120). In DRC, long distances, lack of infrastructure and limited financial resources, along with insecurity, negatively impact the implementation of a long-term follow-up. As a consequence, many demobilized children do not acquire economic independence, which significantly increases the probability of re-enrollment into armed groups. The lack of long-term funding has a considerable impact on the success and sustainability of reintegration, as funding for education and training is not sufficient (Nduwimana, 2013, p. 18; Nzambi, 2015, p. 264).

Although the child DDR intervention faces considerable issues, one of the main reasons for these challenges, and for the failure for successful reintegration, lies in the underlying motivations in the design and implementation of the DDR process. As stated, there are two main approaches for the reintegration of children formerly associated with armed groups: the security-oriented approach and the child protection-oriented approach. The first aims to prevent new outbreaks of violence and conflict, whereas the second is based on the promotion of the child's well-being. In eastern DRC, the overall approach focuses on security rather than the child's well-being due to persistent insecurity. The DDR process is closely linked to security sector reform, as the main idea behind DDR is that ex-combatants pose a threat to security and peace in post-conflict environments. Preventing

recruitment into armed groups is therefore considered essential to preserving peace, enhancing stability and allowing for development.

Nevertheless, the risk of re-enlistment into armed groups is high when ex-combatants and former child soldiers fail to reintegrate economically and socially into their communities, “which may cause substantial economic development issues, and a new turn in the cycle of violence becomes inevitable” (Schauer and Elbert, 2010, p. 312). Schauer and Elbert go on to argue that the failure to provide extensive mental health services within the child DDR intervention significantly obstructs the individual’s functioning and capacity within the affected community, and reinforce the cycle of violence (ibid.). In that sense, the failure of CAAFAG’s reintegration creates a pool of ex-soldiers who are frustrated and re-join armed groups because of socio-economic exclusion (Odden and Tonheim, 2013, p. 218). This poses a considerable threat to stability and peace, as these are the adult combatants of tomorrow, and they represent 30% of combatants in eastern DRC.

As a consequence of the strong focus on the security approach, demobilization, rehabilitation and reintegration services remain a novelty for formerly abducted girls and women (Schauer and Elbert, 2010, p. 343). Schauer and Elbert explain that gender disparities privilege boy soldiers over girls, which means that few girls enter or benefit from formal programs (ibid.). As girls associated with armed groups are not seen as a major security threat, they are insufficiently targeted (Bouta, 2005 in ibid.; Odden and Tonheim, 2013, p. 215; Child Soldiers International, 2017, p. 14). The DDR intervention also focuses on the technical elements that are easily measurable and quantifiable at the expense of vital social aspects of the reintegration. In fact, the DDR intervention has a military approach that measures success upon the number of collected arms (Odden and Tonheim, 2013, p. 228). Nevertheless, as indicated by the Paris Principles, some children do not bear arms or perform combatant roles but still fit the definition of “child soldier” (2007). Girls associated with armed groups do not often perform combatant roles or possess arms, which excludes them from the DDR program and limits their access to reintegration programs. Donors generally look for immediate and measurable results, but measuring socialization and improvement in the social acceptance of reintegrated children within their families and communities requires a long-term follow-up, which clashes with donors “expectations of fast results” (Odden and Tonheim, 2013, p. 232). Such expectations then result in putting aside the social and psychological aspects of the child’s reintegration. Regarding the specific case of girls, their full reintegration most likely requires a much more holistic approach, including mental health, sexual and reproductive health, and vocational training interventions, “because it cannot be assumed that traditional socioeconomic support within marriage is an option for most female returnees” (Schauer and Elbert, 2010, p. 343). Insecurity and ongoing conflicts pose additional challenges to the DDR process in the region, as the risk of re-recruitment is higher in conflict areas. Most studies on the reintegration of former child soldiers have been conducted in post-conflict environments, hence the lack of knowledge about reintegration in conflict environments (Pauletto, 2010, p. 37). Autesserre (2010) argues that UN peacebuilding efforts in eastern DRC have often failed, as interventions have been designed and implemented as if the region were in a post-conflict environment. However, eastern DRC is still plagued by persistent fighting (Nduwimana, 2013, p. 18).

4.4. Conclusion

As a result of more than 20 years of civil conflicts with cyclical violence, the eastern region of DRC is plagued by a severe protracted crisis. As a consequence, the Congolese population suffers from chronic food insecurity, extreme poverty, lack of economic opportunities, and massive human rights violations. The humanitarian and security contexts of the country also play a considerable role in the use of children in armed groups.

The province of North Kivu remains the main hotspot where the recruitment of children takes place. The FDLR and Mai Mai militias are the main recruiters in the area. The DDR intervention in DRC faces numerous challenges that threaten the sustainable reintegration of former CAAFAG and the inclusion of girls in assistance programs. Difficulties in successfully reintegrating such children into their communities may stem from the security-oriented approach of the DDR intervention.

This approach leads to a lack of involvement of local communities in the reintegration process. The passive role of communities thus prevents interveners from identifying environmental factors and harmful social practices that impede the reintegration of children. Partly due to limited funding, the security approach also focuses on the short-term technical aspects of the intervention, rather than the long-term social factors. This results in a lack of involvement in development because a long-term follow-up investigating the future socio-economic reintegration of children is not ensured. Consequently, the intervention does not build the resilience of reintegrated children and their host communities, and fails to have a sustainable impact.

Second, the security approach lacks a gender-sensitive strategy. The limited access to the DDR intervention for girls may be explained by several factors. First, girls can face higher risks in escaping armed groups, especially if they have babies and young children to care for, or when they are considered as the “wife” of a soldier. Second, the stigmatization and discrimination that results from sexual and gender-based violence can either prevent girls from leaving armed groups, fearing rejection from their families and communities, or push them to return directly to their communities because of guilt and shame. Female returnees are consequently not identified by the protection services and do not access assistance programs. Their stigmatization due to sexual exploitation also results in socio-economic exclusion within their communities, which restricts their livelihoods. Third, the lack of work at the community level does not allow for the establishment of a functioning and appropriate referral system and child protection mechanism, including the identification of children and returnees at risk. Moreover, the security approach lacks the appropriate tools to work on harmful dynamics that arise due to a lack of investment in a community-based intervention and increase the risk of re-recruitment. The security approach of the DDR intervention lacks a conflict-sensitive analysis, which would assess whether its programs contribute to the political economy of war. Finally, a gender analysis is paramount to the effectiveness and sustainability of the DDR intervention in eastern DRC. Girls’ roles within armed groups are overlapping and range from cleaners, cooks, sexual slaves, and wives, to spies, informants and combatants. As Schauer and Elbert argue, “it is important to understand that underlying these various roles and activities, girls’ participation is central to sustaining a force because of their productive and reproductive labor” (2010, p. 341). Therefore, it is essential to consider girls as much as

boys in DDR interventions, as they represent the same level of threat for security and stability due to the fact that they sustain armed groups through their labor. It seems important therefore that the DDR programs include a gender transformative dimension within the security-oriented approach. This will allow for the challenges of traditional societal gender roles and patriarchal privilege whereby girls (and women) serve men and boys, as “honing their labor is a foundation, upon which fighting forces rely” (McKay & Mazurana, 2004 in Elbert, 2010, p. 341).

5. Content and interpretation analysis

This chapter consists of the content analysis of the data gathered during the field study. The inductive analysis resolves around three themes, divided into sub-categories. Extracts from observations, including informal conversations, from formal guided interviews, and from focus groups are included in this chapter in order to illustrate arguments and interpretations. To ensure confidentiality, the names of interviewed children and some participants are not mentioned.

5.1. Patterns of the use of child soldiers

5.1.1. Root causes of child recruitment

Research participants’ discourses, especially the children’s, about the root causes of the use of child soldiers strongly echoed the socio-ecological model, where the direct environment of the child, particularly at the community level, is closely linked to the higher risk of recruitment. Depending on the environmental push and pull- factors, recruitment is likelier to be forced or voluntary.

Girls are mainly recruited by force, while voluntary enlistment is more frequent among boys. According to an ICRC child protection delegate, “boys are mainly recruited on a voluntary basis, only more or less 15% are recruited by force”. Among boys that participated in the formal guided interviews, five were recruited by force, while the other five joined on a voluntary basis. Four boys were recruited by the FDLR (two by force and two on a voluntary basis), three were recruited by force by the Mai Mai Nyatura, and one boy voluntarily joined the Mai Mai Mazembe. Among girls, respondents in both formal guided interviews and the focus group organized with reintegrated girls exclusively: two were associated with the armed group ADF because their father had joined as a militia member and had brought their family to the military camp, 16 girls were recruited by force, while five others indicated that they joined on a voluntary basis.

Recruiters mentioned by interviewed children were mainly the FDLR and the Mai Mai groups. Such results echoed MONUSCO research from 2015, which showed that between 2009 and 2015, a quarter of all children associated with armed groups were recruited by the FDLR and 41% by the Mai Mai (MONUSCO, 2015, p. 7).

Forced Recruitment

With respect to forced recruitment, the factor of insecurity and conflict prevailed. Patterns of forced recruitment were nevertheless diverse and would differ based on gender. Forced

enlistment in armed groups would either take place from children's homes or outside the village.

Several young male participants were recruited through forced conscription in their villages.

- *At home, peace did not exist. Insecurity prevailed. Every day, Mai Mai Nyatura militia members were coming to the village to take children for recruitment. When we saw the armed men, we were fleeing to hide but we always had to come back afterwards. One day, on our way back, we encountered Nyatura members. After murdering my father in front of me, they took me by force into their armed group. (male)*
- *The Mai Mai Nyatura were recruiting at that time and enrolled young people in their militia. Whereas my little brothers and sisters had left the village to come back to my father in Beni, I have not escaped the recruitment and was taken. (male)*

Abduction out of the village, when children go to the field or when leaving the village was a practice repetitively mentioned.

- *On my way home, I have come across armed men of FDLR. They searched me and directly found in my pocket the demobilization certificate of the FARDC. They suspected me of being a spy for the FARDC. They then took me by force and brought me to their colonel where I was held captive. [...] After one week, the colonel proposed I become part of their group. Fearing death, I said yes. (male)*
- *Just two weeks after being reunified with my family, I came across my former commander on the road. I was re-recruited by force by the FDLR. (male)*
- *I was going to the market every Monday and Tuesday with my tshukudu. On my way there, I encountered Mai Mai Nyatura members. I was taken by force. (male); ("tshukudu" is a typical local scooter used to transport goods)*

In the case of girls who had been recruited by force, either from home or outside of village, their abduction entailed the use of violence and systematic sexual abuse. This finding is similar to results from studies by MONUSCO (2015, p. 11), Odden and Tonheim (2013, p. 12) and Child Soldiers International (2017, p. 20).

Although forced recruitment from home was less frequently mentioned by interviewed girls, their abduction usually included a high level of violence.

- *Two men broke into our house. They wanted to take me. My parents resisted but they threatened to kill them if they continued to resist. My parents then left the men to take me. (female)*
- *Rebels came to us and took me by force. My father stepped in to dissuade them. He continued to resist despite the death threats. They murdered my father in front of me. They took me. A few steps further, in the bush, they all raped me. (female)*

Nevertheless, the main pattern of recruitment of girls consisted of abductions outside the village, when tending fields or collecting water, along with systematic rape – gang rape in many cases – demonstrating the high risk of forced recruitment and of SGBV girls face once leaving their village.

- *I was going to the field to cultivate beans. I was with my little brother. Soldiers came. They tied up my little brother and they all raped me in front of him. I could not walk because of the pain. They took me by force on their back and left my little brother.*
- *We were five girls that went to collect water in the park. Armed men came from behind. First, they beat us. Then, they tied us to the trees to rape us. Afterwards, we were forced to follow them.*

Voluntary Recruitment

Regarding voluntary recruitment, the interlinked factors of the socio-ecological model were raised by interviewed children as motives to join armed groups. Factors at the community and family levels were the most influential to voluntary enlistment.

First, at the societal level, the poor economic conditions or separation from parents were the most common issues raised by participants. These issues are related to the lack of necessary social structures for protection, including children's lack of access to education because of the high fees and the fact that they work outside the village in the fields or in markets. Demobilized male participants mentioned the following motives during focus groups and formal guided interviews at the transit center.

- *Idleness*
- *Orphans*
- *Working in the field*
- *No access to education because of school fees*
- *Food security and protection*
- *Parents' trade collapse: poverty*
- *I was selling bananas. One day, when my small business went bankrupt, I decided to join the Mai Mai Mazembe. (male)*
- *At home, I was attending school but I stopped and started working in the field so that we could live. After my father's death, I decided to join the FDLR. (male)*

At the community level, social norms, practices and values seemed to exert an influence as well, such the defense of the community and ethnic group.

- *Ethnic conflict*
- *Self-defense*
- *Land conflict/ family conflict*
- *We were waging an interethnic war. Being Hutus, we were defending our ethnicity against others. I was consequently deemed able to defend my Hutu ethnicity as well. (male)*

At the relationship level, the influence of peers was a decisive factor in voluntary recruitment.

- *I was attending school. I was living with my friends. My friends influenced me to join the armed groups. (male)*

Another child was influenced by a child soldier and envied his position and the respect associated with being a member of an armed group.

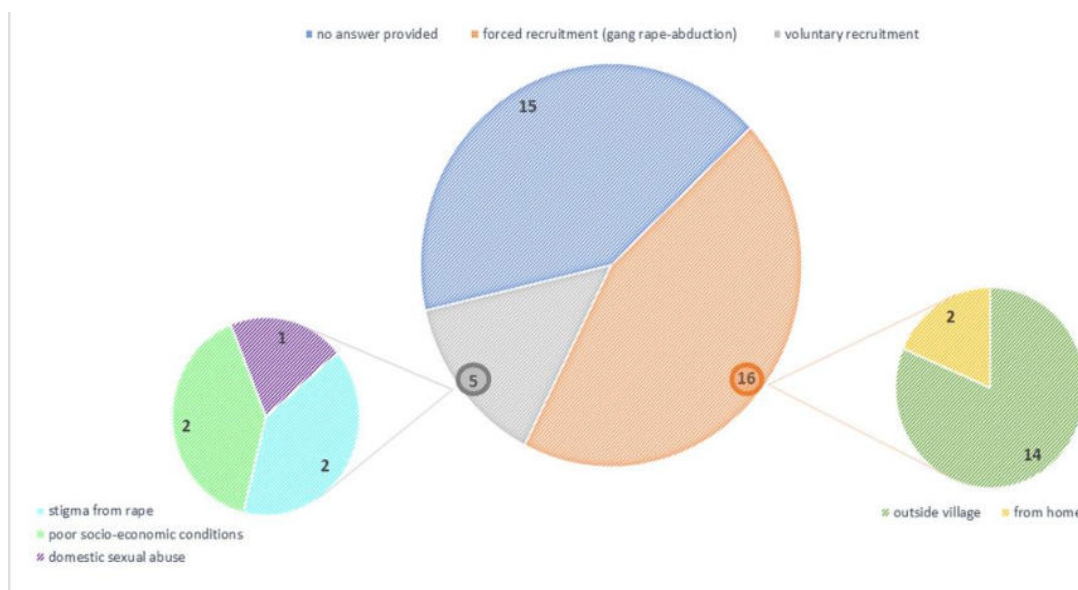
- *I started thinking. This little boy was just a child. Nevertheless, with his weapon, he was respected, and people obeyed him. I then took the decision to join the armed group in order to be respected as well. (male)*

Finally, several factors were at play at the individual level, such as:

- *The belief that life in the army is an easy life;*
- *Desire for vengeance and reprisal;*
- *Quest for social status;*
- *Marginalization and stigmatization from community and family.*

Like boys, data showed that girls voluntarily joined armed groups because of poor socio-economic conditions. Nevertheless, according to reintegrated girls who participated in a focus group, stigmatization as a result of rape and domestic sexual abuse were decisive factors in joining armed groups on a voluntary basis.

Figure 15: Patterns of recruitment of girls



Source: own composition

As indicated in figure 15, three factors acted as trigger mechanisms for the five girls. Two had joined because of extreme poverty and sought to marry a soldier to secure their livelihood.

- *I was living in very poor conditions. I was idle and roaming. I therefore decided to join a soldier and marry him rather than continuing to steal. Even if I were mistreated, I had enough to survive.*

Two others joined because of stigmatization by their community and family after being raped.

- *I was raped and ridiculed afterwards by my community that marginalized me. I therefore decided to voluntarily join an armed group that was occupying our territory. Because of shame, I left.*

Another participant mentioned she left her house because of domestic sexual abuse.

- *After my father died, my mother remarried. Her husband was abusing me every day. I therefore left to join an armed group.*

The findings showed that environmental factors at the societal, community, relationship and individual level could increase the risk of recruitment into armed groups. Generally, children who are not attending school and who therefore work in more insecure areas outside the village are at higher risk of recruitment. Forced recruitment is mainly linked to insecurity and the presence of armed groups in the area. Forced conscription from home or abductions outside the village when working in the fields or collecting water – in other words, in poorly protected and isolated areas – were the main techniques used by armed groups. However, data demonstrated that girls are at higher risk of forced recruitment and of sexual violence due to their gender.

Regarding voluntary recruitment, environmental factors, such as peers' influence, lack of education and poor socio-economic conditions, and sexual abuse and stigmatization, especially for girls, were important factors of influence for recruitment. For one child, the social environment played an important role when he mentioned that he was defending his ethnic interests, reflecting Nduwimana's argument that child recruitment and use is "entrenched in social attitudes towards children" (2013, p. 7). Results clearly showed that children are indeed socialized through "agents" (friends) or "instances" (armed group, community, tradition, values) situated at different levels of their environment (ibid.). Children tend to become receptors of social norms that might be harmful to them and they then reproduce them.

5.2. Impacts

Children, both when recruited and when returning to their communities, face an environment of psychological, physical and sexual violence. As analyzed in the literature review and the context analysis, such exposure to extreme violence increases the risks of developing psychological and physical traumas, mostly manifesting themselves as PTSD symptoms. Analyzed discourses also demonstrated differences in the types of potential impacts according to gender, given that girls face higher risk of SGBV, sexual and reproductive health issues, and stigmatization upon their return.

5.2.1. Forced recruitment: physical and sexual violence during abductions

First, experiences of children shared during interviews demonstrated the high level of violence perpetrated when they are recruited by force. Both for boys and girls, some parents were killed in front of their eyes. Additionally, girls were systematically subjected to SGBV, often by several armed men, when being abducted. Some were stigmatized after the sexual abuse, left their community and joined an armed group.

- *After murdering my father in front of me, they took me by force into their armed group. (male)*

- *I come from Rutshuru. One day, armed men came on my way. They raped me. I could not even stand up because of the tears from sexual violence. They took me by force and brought me to their militia. (female)*
- *On the way back to school, three soldiers stopped me. They raped me and took me by force with them. (female)*
- *I left home to tend the fields. Four rebels arrived suddenly. They raped me. One in the front, one behind, two from each side. When I came back home, they rejected me and repudiated me. I left and joined other rebels. (female)*

5.2.2. Roles served in armed groups: from combatant to sexual slave

Second, results from the research showed that boys perform more combatant roles than girls within armed groups, and can consequently perpetrate more violence than girls. As shared by an ICRC child protection delegate: “Boys perform more combatant roles and are therefore in an environment of constant violence”, which implies that boys were at extreme risk in life-threatening environments.

The majority of young male research participants also described performing a combatant role but also described performing domestic tasks such as being cooks for the commander. They were used as spies to track FARDC positions, as escorts for the commanders, and sent to recruit other children, to loot, and to fight on the frontlines during combats. Their testimonies show how children were constantly in an environment of violence through their roles in the armed groups.

- *There (in the armed group), with the other FDLR soldiers, I was stealing cows of villagers, barricading roads to loot vehicles. I was raping girls. I cooked for the commander. I was also used as a spy to track the FARDC. I was sent to verify whether the area was not mined in order to loot, and I was sent to recruit other children. (male)*

The research showed that girls mainly perform domestic tasks, such as cooking, washing or collecting water and coals.

- *I was doing the laundry. I went to collect water. I was fixing shoes.*

Many of them mentioned that they were taking great risks when they had to collect water, because of the presence of other armed groups, but also because of the wild animals in the bush, and had to walk long distances.

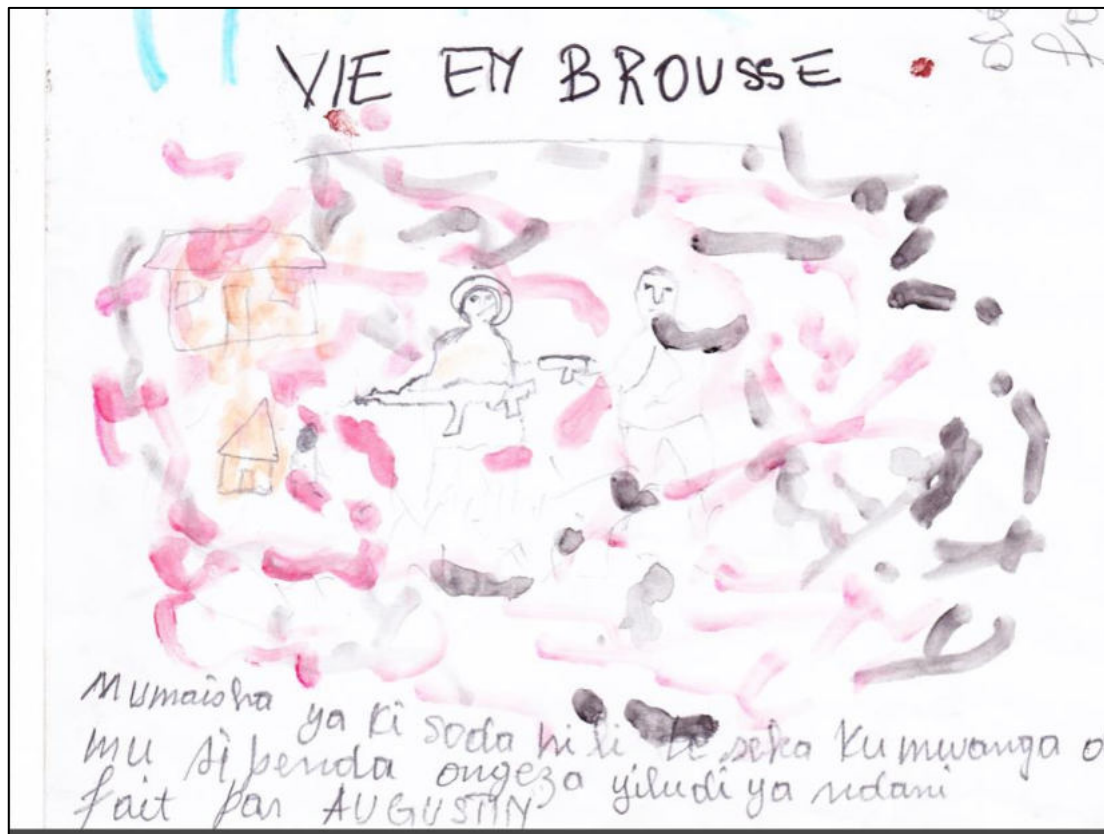
- *To collect water, we had to walk long distances and there was a lot of insecurity. We were gone from 7 am. to 3 pm or from 3 am. to 9 am with heavy cans of water on our back for fifteen kilometers. We had to go in a group because of insecurity, wild animals, and armed groups.*

Nonetheless, during focus groups with reintegrated girls, they also described serving combatant functions such as looting, intimidating civilians, or as a scout.

- *They (the abductors) have directly forced us to loot a village together and have put us on the frontlines. We were caught in an ambush as the population had defended itself.*
- *I was sent as a scout in order to spot houses where there was money. I indicated them in order to loot them afterwards.”*

the bush. I was killing people and I was in a bad life.]” The red colour indicated the colour of the blood. On the other black branch, the child told: “*Ici avec la vie dans la brousse, j’avais le coeur noir.* [Here in the life in the bush, I had a black heart.]” Such messages indicate the high level of violence the child had to live with.

Figure 17: Drawing as a psychosocial activity: Life in the bush



This is a 15 years old boy’s drawing describing life in the bush. The drawing seems to show armed men, smoking and pointing their guns at houses on fire, with a non-armed person in the back next to a house. We can imagine that the non-armed person is a girl because of the dress, a civilian from the burnt houses. The message written by the boy was self-explanatory as well, and linked to the red color indicating the blood from killings: “I have suffered in the military life by shedding blood. I do not want to go back.”

Male demobilized participants in focus groups at the center of transit identified the following elements: looting, sexual violence, beating, humiliation, theft, fighting, sudden death, executions, and massacres. Some children deemed the use of violence as positive in some cases, such as their newfound ability to use arms as an intimidation tool to get whatever they wanted. This echoed one child’s answer: “Life in the army is easier.” Several children indicated that the opportunity to have sexual relations with girls, whenever they wanted, was another positive aspect of joining an armed group. It indicated a clear lack of sensitization and awareness about sexual violence and its consequences. Nevertheless, one male teenager revealed the violence he perpetrated when associated with the armed group and did not envisage it as positive but as traumatizing:

- *If there was a theft, I was there. If there was a rape, I was there. (male)*

Both boys and girls described what militia men did in front of children or what they made them do, exposing children to a high level of violence and potential traumatization. The abuse of dead bodies or executions of civilians were frequently mentioned.

- *After combat, we had to maim the genitals of the dead enemies. We had to roast them and then we were forced to eat them. (male)*
- *We were forced to play and jump on the dead bodies of people we killed. They gave us a knife and we had to take the eyes out. The dead bodies were foul smelling because they were rotting for three to four days. We also had to maim men's genitals. (female)*
- *We were cutting legs, knees, we maimed, we beheaded and then we put the head on coals. For women, we cut their breast. (female)*
- *They forced us to eat human flesh of the men they had killed. (female)*
- *People were killed in front of us. The children who had escaped were punished in front of us. Sometimes they killed them. (female)*
- *On our way, we encountered a pregnant woman. Some [members of the armed group] asked themselves how the baby was positioned inside the woman. They told the woman they would look at how he was placed. But she laughed. They then grabbed her by the throat and cut her belly to see where the fetus was. (female)*

Such witnesses indicate that children, male and female, experience extreme violence not only within the roles they serve, sometimes on the front lines of combat and attacks against civilians, but also during their daily life in the bush with the armed group. These findings echo similar results from other studies, including a study conducted in 2013 that revealed that more than 90% of these children were confronted with high levels of violence and/or murder (Nudwimana, 2013, p. 8). Such experiences can have a serious impact on the mental development of children (Mulira, 2017, p. 15). In fact, Schauer and Elbert have demonstrated that the most common traumatic life events for children who had been associated with armed groups included the forced perpetration of violence, such as being “forced to skin, chop, or cook dead bodies (8%), forced to eat human flesh (8%), forced to loot property and burn houses (48%), forced to abduct other children (30%), forced to kill someone (36%), forced to beat, injure, or mutilate someone (38%), caused serious injury or death to somebody else (44%), saw people with mutilations and dead bodies (78%), experienced sexual assault (45%), experienced physical assault including being kicked, beaten, or burnt (90%)” (2010, p. 322). Another study of Annan and Blattman conducted in 2006, “Survey of War Affected Youth- SWAY”, revealed that 23% of the children who participated in the survey had been forced to abuse dead bodies (Schauer and Elbert, 2010, p. 323).

These results are very similar to experiences shared by children in this study, indicating the high risk of developing psychological disorders due to such traumatic perpetration, experience and witnessing of extreme violence.

5.2.4. Returning to civilian life: psychological violence – stigmatization and discrimination

Finally, during the focus group with reintegrated girls, most participants described suffering from stigmatization and discrimination within their community and family since they had returned to civilian life. Girls were showing feelings of anger and despair about being marginalized due to the sexual abuse they had suffered. Most girls mentioned that they were respected within their community before their association with the armed group. They did not have any problems with their community members. However, since they returned, they felt marginalized, and boys did not respect them.

- *Before I was going to church. I was leading the choir and was respected. But now, I'm marginalized. (female)*
- *I was in an Adventist church. My parents were paying my school fees and I had no problem. I was respected and the social interaction with boys was peaceful. They really respected us. (female)*
- *Before, I was walking in the neighborhood, I would greet boys and they did in return. Now people are scared of me. (female)*

Members of their community believe they are a bad influence and do not want to socialize with them or prevent their children from socializing with girls who were once in armed groups. For this reason, the girls are not able to marry, which poses additional barriers to secure livelihoods. They mentioned that if they had a job, it would help them regain their social value. Several confided that they were considering re-joining armed groups to survive, as they were nearly living on the street and did not receive any assistance.

- *We are marginalized and stigmatized since our reintegration into our communities. We do not have the right to marriage according to men. We are called the "bisigara", in brief, rubbish, prostitutes. (female)*
- *The others fear us. They say that our behaviour is bad and that they have to avoid us, otherwise we will have a bad influence on them. (female)*
- *I want to get married. I found someone. However, he would only get married under the condition that I pay the dowry, as opposed to him, since I have already been with men. (female)*
- *Professional occupations can help us because if we have a source of income, it will attract others, and men as well, which would make it possible for us to find a man. (female)*
- *I have no occupation, no assistance, no food. I have become almost like a child living on the street. (female)*
- *If I had an occupation, I would not even consider re-joining an armed group. (female)*

In Betancourt et. al.'s research on PTSD symptoms among former child soldiers in Sierra Leone, the findings showed the vital role played by family and community support in the psychological recovery of children (2013, p. 196). In particular, the stigma and discrimination reintegrated girls face significantly disable and prevent their psychosocial and psychological recovery. As argued by Child Soldiers International, "acceptance by

families and communities is the most important predictor of successful and long-term reintegration for children formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups” (2017, p. 30). However, because of rape or sexual exploitation of girls by armed groups, in the eyes of their families and communities, girls lose their social value. As a result, such girls experience their return and subsequent social exclusion as a second traumatization (Odden and Tonheim, 2013, p. 140).

In conclusion, the narratives of interviewed children indicated the experiencing, witnessing and perpetration of extreme violence at different key moments of their lives. Such experiences of violence, according to several studies on post-traumatic symptoms, result in significant psychological disorders if not adequately addressed. Children experience traumas when abducted by armed groups, sometimes leading to the murders of their parents in front of their eyes and followed by sexual abuse in the case of girls. Then, in the bush, killings, beating, sexual violence, abuse and mutilation of dead bodies were frequently mentioned by children. Nevertheless, few girls talked about the sexual exploitation by armed groups, and boys also did not talk about having been subjected to sexual violence. Such lack of information might be linked to the taboo of the topic, the feeling of shame and guilt. Finally, when returning to civilian life, girls face severe stigmatization and discrimination due to the presumption of their sexual exploitation by militias. The lack of community and family support significantly deteriorates the mental recovery of girls, decreases their socio-economic opportunities, and increases the risk of re-joining armed groups as an alternative for survival.

5.3. DDR related challenges

5.3.1. Demobilization

Several issues during disarmament and demobilization, the first two phases of the DDR intervention, were identified in both participant observation and narratives of child protection workers and children that participated in the research.

The observation of the demobilization phase took place in the context of the PAMI’s child DDR intervention. PAMI works directly in coordination with the UEPNDDR (*Unité d’Exécution du Programme National de Désarmement, Démobilisation, et Réintégration*), MONUSCO, UNICEF and the CAJED, the second implementing partner of UNICEF in Goma for the child DDR intervention.

In coordination with MONUSCO and the FARDC, the first step of the DDR program is to intervene on different MONUSCO and FARDC bases where armed groups’ members are demobilized or detained after they have been captured during combats or disarmed. During this first phase, child protection actors from the PAMI, CAJED, and MONUSCO will verify the presence of minors among the demobilized combatants. Once identified, interviews are conducted with the presumed minors in order to assess their age. A form to fill in is given in order to evaluate the age and to obtain key information about the child. If the child is a minor, a handover document, the demobilization certificate of MONUSCO, is given to all partners to be signed to certify that the child is under 18 years of age.

During the field mission to the FARDC-MONUSCO detention camp in Mubambiro, several observations indicated issues during the verification process. Upon arrival, detainees, only boys, were aligned in front of the child protection personnel. Before the identification of presumed minors, the members of CAJED and PAMI introduced themselves, explained the reasons for their presence, and delivered a sensitization speech by evoking the six grave violations mentioned in the UNSC resolution 1612 and risks related to rape with STIs and their long-term consequences, including transgenerational effects. This was a positive introduction. However, once interviews were conducted with presumed minors, many issues surfaced.

5.3.1.1. High re-recruitment and lack of demobilized children's inclusion in decision-making

Initial observations revealed the high rate of re-recruitment among demobilized male children and the lack of inclusion of and listening to the demobilized children during the decision-making process regarding their fate. Many of the children have already been through the demobilization process, only to be recruited again. All of them insisted they wanted to join the FARDC, as it was their only option for survival, since insecurity is still high in their community due to the presence of armed groups. The case of a 17-year-old boy was particularly explanatory. The young boy had already been demobilized but once reintegrated within his family, although he had warned about the presence of the FDLR with which he had been associated, he was directly re-recruited by force. He managed to escape during combat. He insisted on not going again to a CTO (transit center), arguing he would not receive any reinsertion assistance as very few received training or education when he was at the transit center and feared being reintegrated again within his community, although security has not improved. He underlined that if he was caught up again by the FDLR, the armed group would certainly kill him this time. His only viable option for survival was to join the FARDC. Although the young boy showed patterns of high stress and fear, his opinion was barely taken into account by the child protection personnel. The little attention given to the fears and opinion of the child significantly contrasted with the training PAMI social workers had received a few days before by DRC (Danish Refugee Council) in order to train them for active listening of children and to be able to better identify psychological troubles of former child soldiers in order to refer them to appropriate services if needed. “The participation of children in all decision process is highly important”, insisted the Danish Refugee Council trainer. However, the child was in this case excluded from the decision process with no alternative options proposed to him to find a common agreement.

5.3.1.2. Detention and rejection of non-armed children

As mentioned by a PAMI officer, PAMI and CAJED work directly with the DDR partners, including MONUSCO and FARDC. When going on field missions for verifications for instance, PAMI and CAJED directly represent UNICEF.

During verification of the presence of a presumed minor in a military prison in Goma, the lack of coordination among DDR actors was observed. Upon arrival at the prison, an FARDC commander and FARDC/ MONUSCO protection officer shared that “as soon as

a minor is present in a military prison, PAMI, CAJED and MONUSCO must directly be notified by the FARDC to assess the child's age and remove him if he is minor.” They further shared that detainees were well treated. Once the child protection officers talked with the child, in the presence of many soldiers in the room, the child said that he had been there for thirteen days and interrogated several times. Coordination is thus clearly weak as the child spent almost two weeks in prison without child protection agencies being informed.

The child was arrested with another young boy who was 20 years old. After communicating with the child and trying to ascertain why he had travelled alone from Masisi to the border of Rwanda, it was suspected that the child was associated with an armed group from Masisi, who were using him as a spy and to recruit young boys living in poor conditions at the Rwandan border. The older boy, who was from Rwanda, was suspected to have been recruited by the young child, who had promised to find him a good job, without mentioning which one, in Masisi. With the older boy, we could notice clear traces of physical violence on his head and legs, indicating he had been beaten. He admitted that he had been interrogated several times with some violence at times. However, he did not go into details and spoke with a very low voice, probably because of the strong presence of FARDC soldiers in the room. For the older boy, his fate was out of the hands of the child protection agents as he was an adult. However, such observations raise doubts about the efficiency of coordination among partners and the treatment and conditions of detainees and child soldiers present in prisons.

Interviewed demobilized boys at the PAMI transit center reported cases of detentions and refusal at demobilization centers if they had no weapon to hand in as a proof of their former affiliation with armed groups. Most of the boys, whether recruited by force or on a voluntary basis, escaped the armed group because of the threatening environment in which they were living. They went to a MONUSCO or FARDC camp for demobilization. Some pinpointed significant issues relating to demobilization. One child who escaped with other boys was refused by MONUSCO for demobilization because he did not have a weapon and was sent back alone into the bush. Accounts also mention that boys are detained during several weeks in military prisons after the disarmament phase, waiting for child protection agents to get them out.

- *With three other friends we escaped with our weapons. Before arriving to MONUSCO, we hid our weapons. Upon our arrival, the MONUSCO did not allow us to get demobilized because we had no weapons. As we could not prove that we were associated with an armed group without our arms, we were chased off. On the road, we met with FARDC soldiers who took us to Rumangabo camp. The colonel told us we needed to find our weapons. We looked for them together. Once we found our weapons, we were detained for one week then transferred to the isolation cells of the military prison in Goma. PAMI child protection agents then came and took us. (male)*
- *Life was difficult [in the armed group], so I decided to escape and find refuge at FARDC. I have been detained for one week, then taken in charge by PAMI. (male)*

5.3.1.3. Self-demobilization

An ICRC child protection delegate mentioned that the presence of girls in CTOs is very rare. “We find mainly boys.” In fact, the presence of girls at the PAMI CTO was very limited and is confirmed by statistics handed in by PAMI. In 2016, among the 255 demobilized children who were under the umbrella of PAMI, there were only 33 girls as indicated in the document below.

Figure 18: PAMI statistics on demobilized children and children benefiting from socio-economic reintegration (2012-2016)

| PROJET UNICEF/DDR- ESFGA | | | | | Reintegration économique | | |
|--------------------------|------|-------|------|------|--------------------------|-----|-----|
| | | Total | | | | | |
| | | F | G | Tot | F | G | T |
| ANNEE | 2012 | 22 | 283 | 305 | 87 | 167 | 254 |
| ANNEE | 2013 | 125 | 475 | 600 | 10 | 260 | 270 |
| ANNEE | 2014 | 38 | 281 | 319 | 12 | 171 | 183 |
| ANNEE | 2015 | 171 | 324 | 495 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| ANNEE | 2016 | 33 | 222 | 255 | 0 | 50 | 50 |
| TOTAL | | 389 | 1585 | 1974 | | | |

logiciel B.D | PAMI

Source: PAMI

“Access to girl soldiers remains a challenge”, the ICRC delegate told us. This statement was confirmed by a PAMI officer as well as many other PAMI members during informal conversations. He explained that “during verifications of armed groups’ troops, girls are often protected by commanders and hidden in the hills or in the bush with officers. Commanders do not present them because these minor girls have become their wives or sexual slaves and they know it is a violation punishable by law.” In fact, the difficult access to these girls can be explained by their use as wives or sexual slaves for members of armed groups, as also mentioned by the ICRC delegate. Furthermore, girls refrain from leaving armed groups for fear of being caught and killed. As a PAMI officer observes, “The girls have more fears, because they are threatened that they will be killed if they escape”. A third reason for the lack of access to the girls can be due to their self-demobilization. The ICRC delegate explained, “Girls have the reflex to directly come back to their family or community as risks are less serious for them, contrary to boys.” She argued that girls “know that they will be stigmatized and discriminated against by their family, and not considered able to get married anymore, but having not taken part in combats, the families accept them upon their return, even though they are marginalized by their community.” According to the literature analysis and studies, however, girls can also take an active part in hostilities.

During the focus group with reintegrated girls, participants told that although some went through the official DDR process, the majority of girls went back home directly and did not get assistance for reintegration as they did not have a certification of demobilization which grants them access to reintegration programs.

To conclude, this analysis demonstrates several challenges at the disarmament and demobilization phases that impede the child DDR intervention. First, a lack of coordination and knowledge among child DDR partners was observed. The rejection of children who do not possess arms goes against the 2007 Paris Principles, which clearly state that children who do not bear arms or did not play a combatant role still fit the definition of “child soldier”. Additionally, it reveals that the DDR intervention in North Kivu has a military approach as it measures success according to the number of arms collected (Odden and Tonheim, 2013, p. 228). The child DDR intervention thus seems designed according to a security-oriented approach, which risks excluding children associated with armed groups who do not hold arms from the program. As a result, they are more vulnerable to re-recruitment as they do not have access to reintegration programs and have to come back to an area where insecurity still prevails. The detention of children after their disarmament also reveals the lack of coordination and communication between MONUSCO/ FARDC and child protection actors. Second, one explanation for the lack of girls in child DDR programs can be related to the high rate of self-demobilization among girls, who are consequently not identified by protection actors nor referred to appropriate child protection services. Considering that girls often do not bear weapons, one can assume that they are rejected as well or do not dare to present themselves at demobilization centers if it is required to bring a weapon as a proof of former association with armed groups.

5.3.2. Transit period – reinsertion

Once certified as minors, demobilized children are taken to centers of transit and orientation managed by local child protection organizations, such as those of CAJED or PAMI. Different possibilities are given at PAMI according to the special needs of the child. Children close to adulthood (15 to 17 years old) and whose reintegration poses challenges are rather placed in FJA (*foyer de jeunesse d'autonomisation*). In these centers, they receive a professional training to increase their chances of finding a job afterwards. Other children are placed at the CTO center during the day and live in foster families. The transit period should not be longer than three months, but as indicated by a PAMI staff-member, “it generally lasts much longer, up to several years because of the difficulty to restore links with their families.”

Several workers of PAMI have indicated issues as well with foster families.

“Very often there are incidents and thefts in the foster families or children are not satisfied because they feel discriminated against and do not want to obey the rules. It is not rare that children threaten the foster family. Requests for sexual favors are frequent from both sexes. Boys can request them from the host mother or sisters, while a girl can make such requests to the host husband, which severely deteriorates the relations with the host mother. Many foster families ask to choose children by themselves or change the children given, however the non-discrimination principle does not allow for such practices.

Nevertheless, in practice, we often accept to meet foster families' choices and requests for a better cohesion." (A PAMI officer)

When interviewing foster families, they mentioned they were sensitized by PAMI before hosting children in order to cope with problems they could face with children's behaviors. However, the regular requests for change as indicated in the previous statement suggest poor mediation efforts and lack of capacity-building of the local staff.

During their stay at the CTO center, a PAMI worker stated "educational and creative activities are provided to the children in transit" to prepare them for the reintegration. However, my observations corroborated those of the ICRC child protection delegate: "Very often, demobilized children stay in these transit centers without receiving education or training and child protection workers end up doing childcare in the centers." In fact, only children staying in FJA at PAMI were offered professional training. This remained the exception. All other children staying at the CTO center were not given any educational activities or creative activities during the research period. It is possible that educational activities were lacking because of the summer holidays. However, children were spending more of their time doing leisure activities. Only the capoeira classes given by UNICEF social workers were occupying children twice a week for two hours. The ICRC also regularly sent an officer to sensitize children against re-recruitment into armed groups and inform them of their basic rights. They also offered active listening for children who needed to talk, and kept overseeing the family reunification by emphasizing the importance of not sending children back to areas where insecurity still prevailed. Similarly to observations, interviewed male demobilized children mentioned the lack of clothing, the lack of access to education and professional training and the monotony of life at the CTO.

Additionally, findings pointed to the clear lack of psychosocial and psychological support, which consequently hampers the success of children's reintegration into their families and communities. While introducing the PAMI activities, the administrative and finance manager mentioned that "PAMI ensures a psychologist follows up on children who have traumas." According to the ICRC member, only CARITAS has a psychological center for serious cases. "However, psychological support is very short-term." The DRC training given by a psychologist also indicated the lack of psychological and psychosocial support for children. He insisted "the psychological approach is very important and must be added to the psychosocial approach." He further underlined the importance of using two different forms at the disposal of psychosocial workers because they help in cross-checking facts and thus generate a better identification of psychological troubles the child may suffer from. One form is from UNICEF and centers on psychosocial assistance (listening form), while the other is from the Danish Refugee Council (follow-up form) and concerns psychological support. Nevertheless, all agents present at the training said they never used the DRC form because it took too much time to write. The Danish Refugee Council trainer replied that "the DRC forms allow one to identify children's feelings, their story, symptoms or how to strengthen the child's resilience. The form is also essential as it enables the means to identify children who have returned [from armed groups] and who are sent to other centers". The form contains all information on children who have been through the demobilization process. It thus helps identify children who had already been demobilized and the center where they have stayed in transit. The statement of the PAMI

member is therefore questionable, as psychosocial workers do not use the DRC form for the psychological follow-up of children, nor are there psychologists working at the center. The lack of use of the DRC form also suggests that few children are referred to a psychologist. Participant observation also confirmed that psychological support was clearly absent.

Finally, observations, focus groups, and interviews with demobilized girls at the transit center revealed the lack of safe spaces for girls and the lack of gender-sensitive activities. Several girls mentioned they felt intimidated and uncomfortable with boys asking them personal and intimate questions. They also confided feeling excluded at the center. During the field observation at the CTO, no activities were adapted for girls and boys would play football without including girls. Some girls would sometimes join boys for board games, but most of the time they would stay in groups together or seek the presence of an NGO worker, female or male, to remain close to them. Then, girls could also feel excluded from capoeira classes. In fact, although the martial art has a significant impact on boys, helped galvanize children, and decreased tension between them, the sport was not always specifically adapted for girls and could increase the feeling of exclusion. It was generally observed that, first, there were not enough UNICEF capoeira uniforms for all children. As a result, girls, who for the main part wear dresses, were not able to participate, while boys could use their trousers. This was a source of frustration for girls. Female teachers of capoeira, self-defense classes or other activities, such as dance classes for girls, would be a great tool, as an alternative, to let girls express themselves and not feel excluded.

To conclude, results indicated several issues at the reinsertion phase that challenge the child DDR intervention. First, the difficulty of restoring links with the child's family and relatives prolongs the period of the transit to years instead of the average period of three months. Second, a clear lack of mediation, psychosocial and psychological support emerged from the analysis, suggesting a lack of investment in capacity building of local staff. Third, children in transit are lacking access to education and vocational training, and have no real occupation at the CTO. According to scientists, inactivity significantly impacts the mental development of children who have been affected by armed conflict (Odden and Tonheim 2013, p. 86). This issue implied that children are not prepared for the reintegration phase, as the needs of children at the reinsertion are not even covered. Finally, from girls' accounts and observation, the special needs of the girls are not met at the transit center neither. Girls feel excluded because of the strong presence of boys, and sometimes feel intimidated by them. The capoeira activity, promoted by UNICEF, tends to exclude girls because of a lack of equipment and space.

5.3.3. Reintegration

5.3.3.1. Family reunification

Once a child's family links have been restored, demobilized children have to be reunified with their family. Several PAMI aid workers have mentioned the difficulty of family reunification and the need for mediation.

“Some families reject the child upon his return home. In some cases, the family is located in an insecure area where the risk of re-recruitment is too high. The family can be dead or

has disappeared. Sometimes relatives of the family want the child to come back, but only to access the child's family land. Land conflicts are very important and always need to be considered." (a PAMI officer)

"There is a follow-up. If there are problems, we make a mediation." (a PAMI officer)

Nevertheless, based on observations of the Danish Refugee Council's training given to PAMI psychosocial workers and an interview with the ICRC child protection delegate, there is a lack of mediation and sensitization efforts for family reunification. During the DRC training, the trainer mentioned the important role played by psychosocial workers "to sensitize families about potential reactions their children may have (insults, physical violence)." He further underlined the importance of the training for PAMI psychosocial workers as they had admitted that they "often speed up the reunification of children with their families because children are difficult." Such statements were backed up by the ICRC child protection delegate who stated: "Familial mediation must in principle take place before the reintegration. However, mediation remains rare and children are brought back to their families who have not been sensitized to what their child has experienced with the armed group, which puts him in danger as stigmatization and discrimination are high towards former child soldiers." She also raised another main issue for children whose family reunification is impossible when the family is dead or cannot be traced or when relatives are members of armed groups. "Once children are 18, they have to leave the centers, without any proposed alternative, with neither education nor training." Another worrying issue was confided by a child protection actor: "Some children refuse to be brought back to their families because they have been informed that some children were abandoned along the way by child protection actors because of the fear of insecurity and that most of the children had been directly re-recruited by armed groups before reaching their community and family." These various pieces of information from different participants indicate that the local implementing personnel is not provided with sufficient operational capacities, which result in the lack of mediation, sensitization, and personnel who have a good knowledge of the area of reintegration. As a result, children are reunified in insecure areas and their families and communities are not provided with the necessary tools to set boundaries to their child, and thus fail to create a protective environment. Children are thus put at risk as they face considerable stigma upon their return, facilitating their re-enrollment into armed groups.

5.3.3.2. Socio-economic reintegration

Important challenges were raised during interviews regarding the last phase of the DDR intervention, reintegration, which represents the most decisive step in the successful child's reintegration into civilian life. A PAMI officer mentioned that "if there are available funds, economic support is provided upon the child's choice: educational or professional support." Once reintegrated, "a follow-up takes place: one visit every three months, then two per year, and if all goes well, no more visits."

All interviewed child protection actors raised attention to the UNICEF budget reduction for reintegration. "UNICEF has significantly reduced its budget, which has the consequence that many children are waiting for a reintegration kit (education or training)" (PAMI officer). In fact, PAMI statistics illustrated the lack of financial resources. In 2015,

no funds were available for the socio-economic reintegration of 495 children. In 2017, at least 1651 demobilized children are waiting for the socio-economic reintegration, among whom 627 have waited since 2013. In 2015, there was no reintegration support given to any child. In 2016, only 50 former CAFAAG benefited from a reintegration kit. However, the 50 only included boys only.

Figure 19: PAMI Statistics: Socio-economic reintegration of CAAFAG (2017)

| | | Zone Est | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|--|--|-----|-----|---------|-----|-----|------|----|-----|-------|----|----|-----|-----|-----|-----|----|-----|------|-----|-----|------|-----|-----|------|-----|-----|-----|----|----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|------|------|-----|---|---|
| | | Tableau Statistiques DDR-Reintegration pour 2017 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| NORD KIVU | | JANV | | | FEVRIER | | | MARS | | | AVRIL | | | MAI | | | JUN | | | JUIL | | | AOÛT | | | SEPT | | | OCT | | | NOV | | | DEC | | | | | | | | |
| PAMI | | F | G | T | F | G | T | F | G | T | F | G | T | F | G | T | F | G | T | F | G | T | F | G | T | F | G | T | F | G | T | F | G | T | F | G | T | F | G | T | F | G | T |
| Anciens cas en attente de la reintegration 2013 | | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 47 | 48 | 2 | 3 | 5 | 22 | 27 | 5 | 56 | 64 | 30 | 52 | 82 | 27 | 58 | 120 | 17 | 58 | 75 | 14 | 42 | 56 | 10 | 37 | 47 | 21 | 82 | 103 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 130 | 497 | 627 | | | | |
| Anciens cas en attente de la reintegration 2014 | | 1 | 5 | 6 | 2 | 5 | 7 | 2 | 7 | 9 | 2 | 5 | 7 | 1 | 9 | 10 | 0 | 5 | 6 | 1 | 13 | 14 | 2 | 12 | 14 | 5 | 66 | 71 | 3 | 8 | 11 | 5 | 11 | 16 | 2 | 16 | 18 | 26 | 163 | 189 | | | |
| Anciens cas en attente de la reintegration 2015 | | 22 | 53 | 75 | 7 | 23 | 30 | 21 | 32 | 53 | 8 | 16 | 24 | 20 | 16 | 36 | 6 | 13 | 19 | 14 | 11 | 25 | 14 | 35 | 49 | 23 | 25 | 48 | 16 | 20 | 35 | 9 | 19 | 28 | 11 | 9 | 20 | 171 | 272 | 443 | | | |
| Anciens cas en attente de la reintegration 2016 | | 0 | 30 | 30 | 2 | 33 | 35 | 5 | 31 | 36 | 2 | 22 | 24 | 2 | 19 | 21 | 0 | 9 | 9 | 0 | 24 | 24 | 3 | 13 | 16 | 0 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 7 | 7 | 34 | 41 | 37 | 236 | 263 | | | | | | |
| 2017 en attente de la reintegration | | 0 | 35 | 35 | 0 | 14 | 14 | 0 | 18 | 18 | 4 | 11 | 15 | 4 | 9 | 13 | 0 | 8 | 8 | 0 | 20 | 20 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 121 | 129 | | |
| Total | | 23 | 123 | 146 | 12 | 122 | 134 | 30 | 91 | 121 | 21 | 76 | 97 | 35 | 100 | 144 | 36 | 89 | 124 | 37 | 172 | 209 | 36 | 118 | 154 | 45 | 148 | 191 | 29 | 69 | 98 | 38 | 116 | 154 | 20 | 58 | 79 | 363 | 1289 | 1651 | | | |

Source: PAMI

A PAMI officer further stated “the mobilization of funds has considerably decreased because of donor fatigue. There is an important deterioration.” The ICRC child protection delegate confirmed this statement while explaining, “UNICEF has faced budget reductions, and CAJED, as a result, cannot even offer training to children anymore. [...] Children have lived for years in a context of violence and are only familiar with the bush. They are not prepared for civilian life. The majority having not received education in CTOs, when they come back home, they have no other choice than to re-join armed groups for survival.” Interviewed demobilized children also shared their concerns on prospects for the future. When confiding their aspirations for the near future, all of them hoped for education or a job to secure for livelihoods once reintegrated.

5.3.3.3. Stigmatization of returned girls

Finally, as already mentioned in the section on the impacts on CAFAAG, girls formerly associated with armed groups experience stigmatization and discrimination from their community and family upon their return. Their social stigmatization seems to be linked to the sexual violence they have been subjected to. Returning girls, who are perceived by their community or family to have had forced or voluntary sexual relations with combatants, and/or bring back children from such encounters, belong to the most stigmatized group of survivors, as also noted by Schauer and Elbert (2010, p.342). In the eyes of their families, girls have lost their social and moral value (Odden and Tonheim, 2013, p. 130; Child Soldiers International, 2017, p. 30), which results in a lack of community and family support.

As a result of stigmatizations, girls face higher risks of discrimination, which leads to fewer opportunities for education or professional training, hence increasing the risk of re-

enrolment into armed groups. The following extracts from reintegrated girls' narratives during the focus group illustrate this argument.

- *We are marginalized and stigmatized since our reintegration in our communities. We do not have the right to marriage according to men. We are called the “bisigara”, in brief, rubbish, prostitutes. (female)*
- *I want to get married. I found someone. However, he would only get married under the condition that I pay the dowry, as opposed to him, since I have already been with men. (female)*
- *Professional occupations can help us because if we have a source of income, it will attract others, and men as well, which would make it possible for us to find a man. (female)*
- *I have no occupation, no assistance, no food. I have become almost like a child living on the street. (female)*
- *If I had an occupation, I would not even consider re-joining an armed group. (female)*

In girls' discourses, marriage was presented as playing an important role in their reintegration. However, stigma provided a significant barrier to it, preventing girls from finding a husband because of traditional and cultural values that consider extra-marital affairs a breach of moral standards. According to girls, acquiring economic independence is a precondition for marriage in their case and would help them regain social value. Nevertheless, results indicated that many participants were not benefiting from any assistance or that because of lack of funding or discrimination their education was interrupted or they could not access vocational training, although they are vital for the psychosocial recovery of these girls. They provide a structured environment in which they can regulate their emotions, develop a positive identity, and a sense of self-worth, through the acquisition of knowledge (Child Soldiers International, 2017, p. 38).

Lastly, the main issue that was observed, linked to stigmatization, is the clear lack—almost absence—of community sensitization. In fact, without community acceptance, reintegration processes will fail. As stated, the lack of community and family acceptance significantly exacerbates PTSD symptoms (Betancourt et. al., 2013). Consequently, girls' return can be experienced as a traumatization additional to traumatic events experienced during their abduction and life in the bush with the armed group. As highlighted in IDDRS report, it is essential that communities are well prepared for returning children, especially girls (2006, p. 26) due to the gender-based discrimination they face. To this end, it is important to identify and sensitize community members who exert influence on their community. Furthermore, awareness-raising campaigns about what children have experienced in armed groups and on the need for social acceptance provides the means to prepare communities for returning children.

To conclude, challenges identified at the last phase of the DDR intervention are the most critical issues to the effective reintegration of children into civilian life, and are strongly linked to issues flagged at the previous phases of the intervention, having a snowball effect-like impact.

First, family reunification can be very difficult. The death of parents, the disappearance of the family, or the rejection of the child because of violent acts he had to commit during

his association with the armed group – hence the high need for mediation – can be a major obstacle. Persistent insecurity in the area of reintegration can also prevent the child from reuniting with the family.

Second, the lack of funds clearly deteriorates the DDR intervention and hampers the socio-economic reintegration of former CAAFAG. As a result, a large part of demobilized children is still waiting for a reintegration kit and many are reintegrated without having been offered education or professional training, which put them at significant risk for re-recruitment.

Third, girls experience severe stigmatization when reintegrating into their communities because of sexual abuses they have been subjected to. Such stigmatization hampers their reintegration into their family and community and increases the risk of re-enlistment into armed groups as well (Odden and Tonheim, 2013, p. 136). Stigma clearly disables and prevents their psychosocial recovery. As argued by Child Soldiers International, “acceptance by families and communities is the most important predictor of successful and long-term reintegration for children formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups” (2017, p. 30). However, because of rape or sexual exploitation of girls by armed groups, in the eyes of their families and communities, girls lose their social value. As a result, girls experience their return as a second traumatization leading to their socio-economic exclusion (Odden and Tonheim, 2013, p. 140). Findings indicated a clear lack of psychological and psychosocial support in the reintegration phase. This results from a lack of training of local NGO members but also from a lack of human resources specializing in psychology, which affects the system of referral to appropriate psychological and health care services.

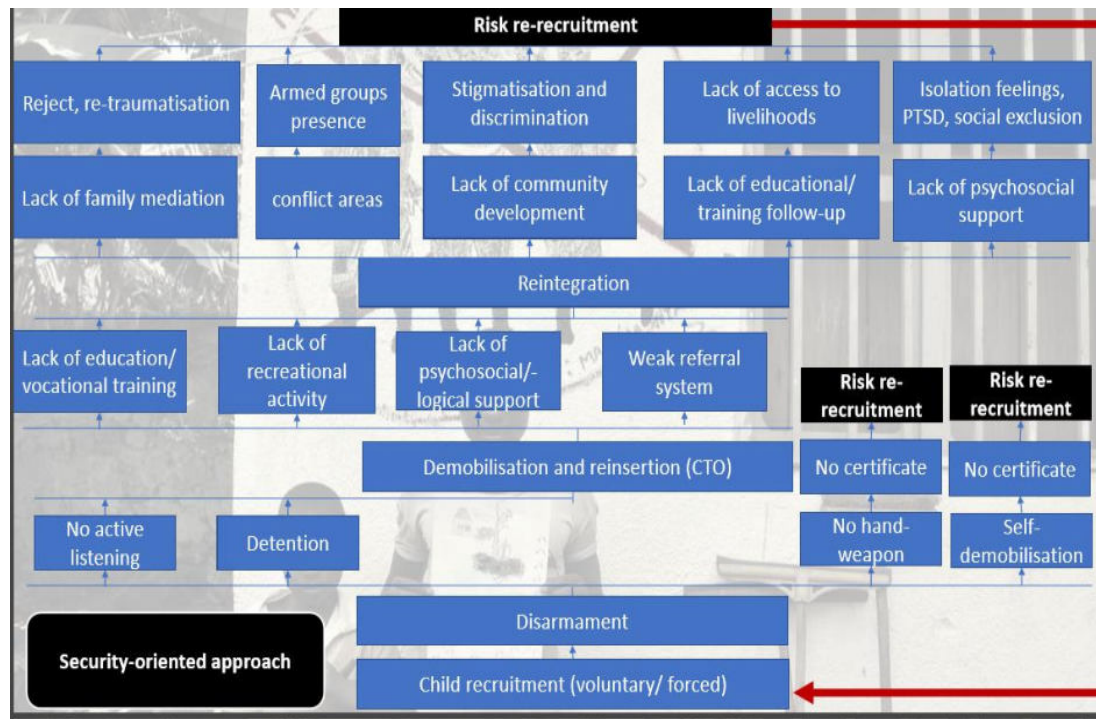
5.4. Analysis, interpretation, and conclusion

5.4.1. Analysis

The analysis revealed that the child DDR intervention in North Kivu mainly proceeds based on a security-oriented approach. As a result, the DDR intervention puts little emphasis on the community-based approach and lacks an appropriate gender-sensitive strategy. Findings generally showed that there is a lack of investment in the child DDR intervention. Due to a lack of funding and a short-term approach, there is a poor focus on the reintegration phase which requires a long-term intervention. Consequently, only immediate needs of demobilized children are partly addressed and there is no strategy for ensuring the sustainability of the intervention. As a result, the poor link between humanitarian and development assistance compromises the effective reintegration of these children into civilian life, increasing the risk of re-recruitment. Additionally, the lack of investment in development gives little room for establishing mechanisms for the prevention of recruitment into armed groups. Girls are particularly affected by the security-oriented approach of the DDR program, as this approach does not address the stigma and marginalization girls face upon their return. Their psychosocial recovery consequently significantly deteriorates, which increases the probability of re-recruitment. This research thus concludes that for the child DDR intervention in North Kivu to be sustainable, linking the humanitarian and development components of the intervention is essential for successful reintegration and prevention of child recruitment.

This section will enumerate all challenges that were identified at all phases of the intervention (see chart: security-oriented approach) and will suggest recommendations (see chart: well-being approach). Finally, this section will conclude by discussing alternatives to obstacles that comprise the child DDR intervention in North Kivu.

Figure 20: Security-oriented approach of the child DDR intervention



Source: own composition

This chart illustrates the challenges identified at all levels of the DDR intervention that all contribute to the risk of ineffective reintegration and result in a higher risk of re-recruitment, which is opposed to the first aim of the security-oriented approach of enhancing stability and peace.

As highlighted in the analysis, the military approach of the disarmament phase already increases the risk of re-recruitment. Requesting a weapon as a proof of former association with armed groups excludes many children, especially girls who have not performed combat roles. Children who have served roles other than combatants, or who have simply hidden their weapons in the bush out of fear of retribution, are thus not taken into the system during the very first phase of the intervention and are instead sent back to the bush. As a result, refused children are left with no choice other than to re-join armed groups, with the risk of being persecuted for having left the armed group, or to directly return to their community with the risk of retribution, stigmatization and marginalization, hence increasing the risk of re-enlistment as well. Then, when arriving in demobilization bases or when caught by FARDC, male children are often detained in military centers for several weeks, which can become another trauma. Finally, children's opinions on their situations were barely taken into account by the child protection personnel, indicating a lack of participation of children in decisions that directly affect them. Children who have directly gone back to their communities, i.e. self-demobilization, which is a major trend among girls, do not access assistance programs as they do not receive a demobilization

certification and are often not identified within their communities by child protection personnel.

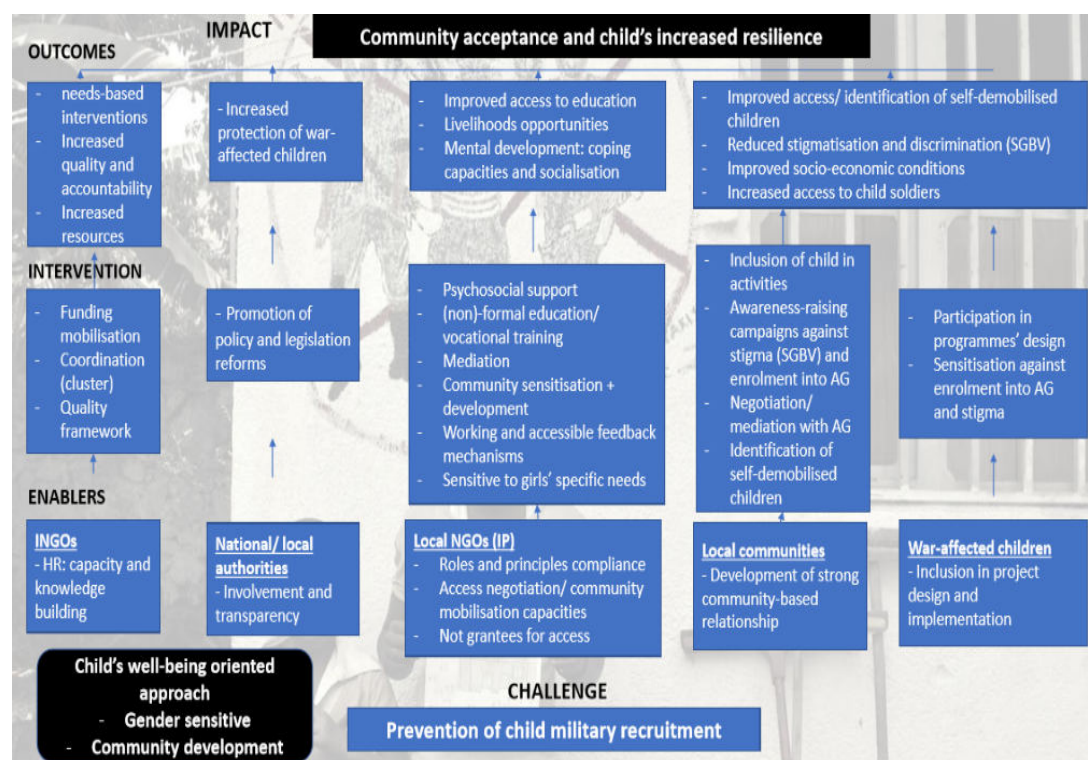
Second, during the demobilization phase, when children are staying in rehabilitation centers in preparation for their reintegration, services provided to children are lacking because of poor funding, lack of capacities and lack of training of the local implementing actors. As a result, children's needs are not sufficiently addressed, due to lack of educational and vocational services that limit their socio-economic opportunities and lack of psychosocial and psychological support although children have been confronted with high levels of extreme violence in their past. Then, the difficulty of family tracing can extend their transit in CTOs to years, which can increase psychological issues given the lack of appropriate services. Finally, there is a lack of safe space for girls in centers, where activities are not always gender-appropriate and where girls can feel unsafe with the strong presence of boys.

Third, not only are children unprepared for reintegration due to the lack of services mentioned in the above paragraph, additional elements at the last phase of the program, reintegration, also pose further obstacles to the success of the child DDR intervention. Children are sometimes reintegrated with their families and relatives, although insecurity still prevails. The pervasive presence of armed groups in the area of reintegration puts children at risk of re-recruitment and poses an elevated threat to their lives. Once family tracing is successful, children are reunited with their relatives but without sufficient mediation with the family and the community. The lack of mediation does not prepare the family for the return of their child, which can result in the rejection and marginalization of the child upon his or her return. In case of rejection, the child can experience such a discrimination as an additional trauma, thus increasing the risk of re-enlistment. The lack of both a community-based approach and a focus on community development do not enable the root causes of stigmatization and discrimination to be addressed. This includes the lack of educational and vocational training and psychosocial and psychological follow-up at the community level. As a result, children formerly associated with armed groups face tremendous difficulties in reintegrating into their communities and families, both socially and economically.

Consequently, all challenges identified in the three phases of the child DDR intervention are interlinked and have a snowball effect from the disarmament phase to reintegration that increases the risk of re-recruitment.

5.4.2. Towards a community-based intervention and promoting local initiatives

Figure 21: Child's well-being approach



Source: own composition

This chart suggests recommendations on how to counter challenges that compromise the child DDR intervention. It works as a “theory of change” and presents a child’s well-being approach that contrasts with the security-oriented approach. It enables a sustainable intervention by linking the humanitarian assistance to longer-term development interventions. This type of approach is more gender-sensitive and invests in a community-based approach and local initiatives that not only helping preventing child recruitment, but also enable an effective and sustainable reintegration into civilian life.

This research concludes that the key for a sustainable child DDR intervention is found in fostering community and family acceptance of reintegrated children, especially girls. The next section will indicate the main impediments to the reintegration of children and propose alternatives for each impediment. It strongly focuses on gender-related challenges and reintegrated girls.

5.4.3. Main gender-related challenges

First, it appears that girls are, for the most part, self-demobilized, because of the stigma linked to their association with armed groups, and primarily due to their sexual exploitation. As a result, self-demobilized girls do not access reintegration assistance programs as child protection actors face tremendous difficulties in identifying self-demobilized girls due to the lack of strong community-based network. Consequently, self-demobilized girls are not provided with a demobilization certificate that grants them access to support programs.

Second, due to lack of funding and short-term interventions, opportunities to receive vocational training or education are even slimmer for girls due to discrimination as argued by Holst-Roness in an ICRC report (2006, p. 23), and even more so when coming back as a mother or pregnant. However, education and skills trainings are crucial for girls' psychosocial recovery (Child Soldiers International, 2017, p. 38). In fact, they help girls regain not only their "social value", but also their self-esteem, which considerably promotes acceptance by their community. Interviewed girls clearly indicated that the opportunity to generate economic livelihoods would automatically help recover their social value among their community. Most girls who participated in the focus group indicated that they work in the fields or perform pastoral activities to pay their school fees or to secure livelihood. Against this background, providing girls with farming tools and seeds could be one of the most useful approaches in supporting them. Considering that eastern DRC is a very fertile region, strengthening and supporting girls' capacities in farming and animal husbandry has several advantages. It provides them with sustainable economic livelihoods and can benefit the entire community by improving the quality of agriculture and animal husbandry in the area of their reintegration (Child Soldiers International, 2017, p. 54). As a result, girls would be able to recover their "social value". Nonetheless, as noted by Child Soldiers International, time and investment are necessary to rehabilitate the agricultural and pastoral sector in eastern DRC (*ibid.*). To this end, research is essential to identify most in-demand fields of work for vocational training.

Third, encouraging acceptance must be at the heart of reintegration interventions for girls who have been associated with armed groups. In this respect, community sensitization and participation are essential. However, although the PNDDR (National Program for DDR) mandate presents the community-based approach as a precondition for successful reintegration (PNDDR, 2004, point 74), analysis showed that communities are playing a rather passive role at the economic, structural and social levels, which consequently does not prevent stigmatization of girls. This research supports the argument of Child Soldiers International, which argues that "a child's adaptation to the environment they return to is a more significant factor in their psychosocial recovery than their experiences in an armed group" (2017, p. 26). In fact, achieving community acceptance appears to be the most effective lever for girls to recover their social status and prevent stigmatization. In this effort, each level of the community must be encouraged to participate in the reintegration process. Child protection actors must sensitize key community members who exert an influential role (neighbors, community leaders, school, church, youth associations, etc.) in order to promote social cohesion and become sensitized to the suffering of the children involved, especially girls. As a result, it will be easier to promote girls' active participation in their community life and recover their social value in the eyes of their community.

Fourthly, it is essential that these girls can benefit from active listening and psychosocial support once reintegrated. In this effort, child protection actors could identify community members who volunteer to provide listening to children without judging them and they should receive training accordingly.

Fifth, the analysis showed the importance of including these girls as active participants within the reintegration process. They could also cooperate with child protection agencies by identifying self-demobilized girls in order for them to benefit from reintegration assistance and to prevent them from re-joining armed groups because of lack of support.

It would also provide child protection actors with key information on patterns of recruitment regarding girls. In fact, although studies indicate that forced recruitment is the main pattern among girls, such statistics only rely on the testimonies from the few girls who have been, for the most part recruited by force. However, the argument that forced recruitment is the main pattern for girls may be questioned, considering that girls who have voluntarily joined might for the majority decide to not leave armed groups because of shame and the fact that they have no other option for survival.

Finally, as recommended by Child Soldiers International, communities must be encouraged and trained to engage with armed groups in order to advocate for the release of children – especially for girls, and against their recruitment (2017, p. 71). Such actions would increase the probability of opening up opportunities for dialog with armed groups' representatives, considering that many armed militias in eastern DRC are community-based.

5.4.4. Alternatives

To conclude, interventions should be designed on the basis of the ecological model (figure 2), in which each level of the child's environment (society, community, relationship and individual) must be considered both as a point of influence for recruitment and as a point for intervention to prevent recruitment and stigmatization upon former child soldiers' return, particularly girls. Moreover, designing interventions by resorting to the socio-ecological model helps implement a more contextualized and conflict-sensitive program that better addresses the child's best interests and meets the community's needs by reducing the risks of doing more harm than good and contributing to the political economy of war.

Then, this research demonstrated how important the reintegration phase of the child DDR intervention is for the sustainability and success of the intervention. Therefore, the child DDR intervention, as a whole, should at each phase of the program, especially the disarmament and demobilization phases, always refer to the first objective of such an intervention, namely that all activities are to support the transition of the child from military life to civilian life, where the child feels part of the community and like a valued community member.

To achieve such an objective, the intervention should first strengthen and develop local capacities. The long-term success of child DDR programs heavily depends on the capacities of local actors and communities. Strengthening their capacities by actively involving them in the intervention can considerably enhance the prevention of child recruitment and the sustainable reintegration of children. For instance, local actors (such as implementing partners, CBOs) and communities (such as teachers, religious and community leaders, influential women in communities) should be sensitized and receive training on response to sexual and gender-based violence, on psychosocial support, and on child's rights and child protection.

Second, the active participation of children formerly associated with armed groups at all stages of the intervention is crucial. They should be systematically consulted and kept informed, and actions that affect them should respond to their needs and concerns, hence the importance of establishing a functioning and accessible feedback mechanism.

Children should be able to participate in decision-making on matters that directly affect them. Given that friends' influence is a major factor of voluntary recruitment, youth committees could be established at the community level, where reintegrated children could also be involved and sensitize other children and girls on child recruitment and stigmatization of sexual violence and association with armed groups. Girls' groups could also be established in order to identify girls at risk of recruitment and self-demobilized girls, by referring them to appropriate services and sharing information on their rights to access health services, education and vocational trainings. Finally, capoeira activities could be used to sensitize children at the community level as well, and not only in transit centers. The capoeira would enable the gathering of a large audience at the community level and the promotion of sensitization messages to the community, but also would help integrate socially children formerly associated with armed groups. Within the messages, sensitization on SGBV and related risks, such as STIs, HIV, would be strategic as it would be an opportunity to reach and sensitize a large number of men and male adolescents. However, the involvement of children, especially former CAAFAG, necessitates a solid risk analysis. Should the capoeira activities not include girls sufficiently, self-defense activities for women and girls could be envisaged as well, also in order to reach out to a larger audience with a majority of girls and women. Finally, to increase access to information and even non-formal education, local radios could be used to broadcast awareness-raising and educational campaigns for hard-to-reach children.

Similarly to children, the active participation and participatory consultation of communities should be a fundamental dimension of the intervention for both the prevention of child recruitment and reintegration of CAAFAG, and mostly to foster acceptance through sensitization of communities. Therefore, it is important to work and engage with influential members of the community – youth, men and women, leaders, and members who are respected in the community. An integrated approach is therefore central to the effectiveness of the intervention. Such an approach will consider the community as key stakeholders to work with and thus will focus on community development instead of only targeting children without consulting the community. Such an approach risks contributing to the stigmatization of the child. The establishment of committees at the village and community levels, involving influential members of the community, would enable sensitizing the community through awareness-raising campaigns. Local implementing partners could train and support community-based child protection structures (such as CBOs, such committees, or youth clubs as mentioned above) to better refer children and help prevent child (re)-recruitment and discrimination upon former CAAFAG's return to their communities.

Fourth, the intervention should be inclusive, regardless of the age, gender, and role served when associated with armed groups. Providing training and awareness-raising are crucial to developing a common understanding for all actors involved. Additionally, attention to the specific needs and issues faced by girls is crucial for the intervention. Although they remain invisible, their presence in armed groups should be always presumed. The alternatives previously mentioned already give more attention to the specific situation of girls through training and sensitization to their specific needs. Moreover, sensitization on issues such as early pregnancy and early marriage are paramount in trainings and awareness-raising campaigns of all actors, especially at the educational level, considering

the close link between SGBV and out-of-school girls. Finally, addressing the sexual, reproductive, and mental health of girl victims of SGBV and stigmatization upon their return is essential. Providing them with basic health care is not enough. Mobile health care teams could sensitize communities on SGBV and related risks for girls (formerly) associated with armed groups. In basic health care kits, a sexual violence kit could be included. Additionally, psychosocial and psychological services are crucial for their physical and mental integrity and for the sustainability of the intervention. Hence the importance of linking the humanitarian assistance with development, by not only addressing their immediate health care needs, but also by investing in fostering acceptance as it was recognized that family and community acceptance considerably enhance girls' psychosocial recovery.

Finally, a clear coordinated strategy seems fundamental for child DDR programs, where all actors involved (UN, INGOs, local implementing partners, local government and authorities, community-based organizations, and donors) should act according to a clear referral mechanism. Lastly, as already mentioned, such interventions cannot be sustainable if only implemented in the short-term to respond to the immediate needs. Tackling the root causes is essential if the intervention is to successfully address child recruitment and reintegration of CAAFAG into their families and communities. Linking relief to development, the so-called nexus approach, is key to the sustainability of child DDR intervention and to effectively build peace in the province. To do so, actors should advocate for long-term funding and invest in the community-based intervention.

5.5. Limitations

The methodological approach of this study has realized its objective of empowering children who have participated in the research. Play and artistic activities such as the theatre and drawing, but more particularly focus groups, have proved to be effective empowerment tools for participants. In fact, the specific objective consisted in going beyond the “Do No Harm” principle by having a positive impact on participants' life through making them participate in the research process. Such a methodology has been recommended by several researchers (Mackenzie et al., 2007; Wessels, 2007; McKay et al., 2010; Denov and Maclure, 2006; Hart and Tyler, 2006 cited in Odden and Tonheim, 2013, p. 34). In this research process, the used methods have provided a platform for the voices and perceptions of interviewed children. Such a methodology has been applied in an effort to encourage local participation. It also showed that focus groups are effective and culturally appropriate tools for feedback mechanisms in DRC and can thus help child protection actors increase their accountability and the resilience of people they assist. Nevertheless, results from this research must be read and considered only in the frame of the case-study. First, observations from the field research have mainly focused on the work of one local NGO. Second, the sample of this study being rather limited, it is important to not read the gathered micro-data through the macro-social theory. The case-study cannot be generalized but has to be interpreted in its direct context. Moreover, the sample being limited, there was a risk of biased answers mixing between perceptions and realities. Finally, this research has not disaggregated the collected data systematically according to the age/origin of the child and armed group the child was associated with. The main aim of the study was to gather children and girls' perceptions in order to contribute to a more

generalized comprehension of the challenges that the DDR process faces in North Kivu and the exclusion of girls from the reintegration process. In that sense, the applied methodology has enabled me to answer the research question. Nevertheless, it is vital to insist on the need for further research on the topic on a larger scale, with more detailed indicators.

In light of this, a statistical study could complete this research, if conducted on a larger sample. In fact, the statistical research has the advantage of highlighting relations that exist between different variables of a given population (Gournay, 2012, p. 1). This method can then link factors, such as for instance the socio-cultural origin, the education, socio-economic living conditions, and the religion of the interviewed children formerly associated with armed groups and determine potential links between these variables.

There would be a greater legitimacy if the phenomenon of children associated with armed groups could be combined with and based on a geographical approach as well. In fact, gathered data could be processed through a geographic information system (GIS).²⁰ This system would allow for graphically modelling geo-referenced data that would provide a broader and mapped vision on hotspots where child recruitment by armed groups is higher.

6. Conclusion

The last part of this paper provides the conclusion of this research, while highlighting lessons learned and recommendations for each issue that has been raised regarding the two research questions of this study.

The theoretical background analysis and field research demonstrated that the DDR intervention in North Kivu faces significant challenges to the implementation of a sustainable intervention for the reintegration of children who have been associated with armed groups, and for girls in particular. The DDR program often turns into a vicious circle of demobilization – reintegration - re-recruitment – demobilization, and so on. Findings from this research showed that returned girls can experience their reintegration as a second traumatization due to stigmatization and discrimination as a result of their perceived sexual exploitation by the armed group. Furthermore, the risk of re-recruitment is higher when children formerly associated with armed groups are socially and economically excluded. In fact, as a result of the lack of community sensitization and the

²⁰ GIS lets researchers visualize, question, analyse, and interpret data to understand relationships, patterns, and trends. See Environmental Systems Research Institute (ESRI), What is GIS?, available at: <http://www.esri.com/what-is-gis> (last visited on 27 February 2019). It “is a system designed to capture, store, manipulate, analyze, manage, and present all types of geographical data. GIS can be used as tool in both problem solving and decision-making processes, as well as for visualization of data in a spatial environment. Geospatial data can be analyzed to determine (1) the location of features and relationships to other features, (2) where the most and/or least of some feature exists, (3) the density of features in a given space, (4) what is happening inside an area of interest (AOI), (5) what is happening nearby some feature or phenomenon, and (6) and how a specific area has changed over time (and in what way).” University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries, Mapping and Geographic Information Systems (GIS): What is GIS?, available at: <https://researchguides.library.wisc.edu/GIS> (last visited on 11 November 2017).

lack of funding that reduces access to education and vocational training, these children often suffer social exclusion by their own communities and families, which may increase post-traumatic stress disorders.

Against this background, it seems essential that child protection actors for the DDR intervention in North Kivu systematically refer to Mary Anderson's "Do No Harm" principle in order to minimize harm and seize opportunities for peace. Nonetheless, the "Do No Harm" principle is a minimum and is part of the larger spectrum of a conflict-sensitive approach. In line with this principle and mostly the conflict-sensitive approach, child protection actors should work "on" violent conflict in eastern DRC. The approach of working "on" war means that the focus is put on supporting efforts for reconciliation, protection and human rights issues, primarily through civil society groups (Goodhand, 2005, p. 264). Programs should then be designed in a way to seize opportunities that "affect the dynamics of conflict in a positive way", by "influencing the incentives for peace and disincentives for violence" (ibid, p. 265).

In this way, conflict sensitivity provides the means to mitigate the negative effects of assistance interventions on conflict dynamics. A thorough analysis on conflicts and violence in the province of North Kivu is therefore essential and should be tailored to the needs of the children involved, especially by adopting a gender-sensitive analysis. The identification of specific indicators is necessary to examine trends in violence and dynamics that lead to child military recruitment and sexual exploitation of girls by armed groups in the province.

Therefore, the analysis of the different layers of conflict and root causes of violence provides insight on their interlinkages, thus allowing for identification of where the intervention can exert a lever of influence. Micro- and macro-factors related to child recruitment in North Kivu must be considered in such an analysis as well. For instance, it seems necessary to establish connections between the armed groups/ clans/ ethnic groups' geographical positions and their traditional social norms and practices and the natural resources/mineral-rich areas to identify where risks of child recruitment are likely to be higher. To acquire a better understanding of armed groups' strategies and patterns of recruitment, mapping the positions of the armed groups in the region can help identify where risks of forced recruitment and abductions, or rape and sexual abuse being used as a method of war, or voluntary recruitment due to high poverty or traditional practices of ethnic groups and clans where community-based defense militias are located, are higher. In this effort, GIS could prove useful to process geographical data. Such a scientific technique would allow one to combine, analyze and graphically model geo-referenced databases. In a larger study on the same research topic, it would be interesting to correlate land use (habitat, cultures, and mining areas), the living conditions of populations, and the preferential areas of child recruitment by maintaining a distinction between areas where either voluntary or forced recruitment prevail. The combination of such information would provide a broader and mapped vision on the phenomenon of child recruitment. Identified 'hotspots' by the GIS where risk of child recruitment is high would help better adapt and design strategies for preventing child re-recruitment and mediation with armed groups. Intervention and sensitization campaigns should then adapt their messages to deliver accordingly.

The development of strong community-based relationships can provide child protection agents with rich sources of information and security. In this way, NGOs can gain larger access to communities, which can facilitate the identification of self-demobilized girls. As a result, self-demobilized girls would be entitled to access reintegration programs. Still, based on observation and interaction with communities, protection actors should better grasp underlying dynamics of stigmatization against girls formerly associated with armed groups and how to address them. Mediation efforts are crucial in order to minimize the risks of stigma and re-enrolment of children in armed groups. Sensitization of communities about the suffering and traumatic experiences lived by children who return seems vital in order to foster community acceptance. Therefore, attention to all influential aspects (economic, social and structural) and members of the community would greatly benefit the DDR intervention, by making sure the traditional practices and institutions are serving the best interest of the child.

Negotiations with armed groups are another essential tool for the release of children, girls in particular, due to the lack of awareness that rape, sexual exploitation, and forced marriage are human rights violations. So far, the ICRC and Geneva Call are the main leaders on negotiations with armed groups in eastern DRC. However, the development of strong community-based relationships between local NGOs and communities could encourage community members to engage in negotiations and sensitization efforts with armed groups, if appropriately trained for such mediation actions. Moreover, considering that a large part of combatants of community-based armed militias are likely to originate from the respective community, focus on community sensitization is central to effective intervention.

This research also concludes that a nexus approach can address challenges that impede the DDR process in North Kivu. Linking humanitarian assistance and development could facilitate a longer-term and more sustainable intervention for children's reintegration into civilian life. Such an approach enables a transition from emergency to development assistance and both addressing humanitarian needs and improving the resilience of an affected population. As defined by the European Union, improving resilience requires strengthening the capacity of local and national actors to identify and deal with risks, vulnerabilities and their underlying causes.²¹ In this effort, actions linked to community development are essential for the child DDR intervention to be sustainable. Long-term sensitization on child recruitment and SGBV is crucial, working on fostering community acceptance is paramount to the psychosocial and psychological recovery of girls, and strengthening reintegrated girls' existing capacities in the agricultural and pastoral sectors is essential for their socio-economic reintegration as it benefits the entire community, prevents stigma against girls, helps them recover their social status, and thus prevents re-recruitment. In a broader perspective, actions linked to the protection of the environment might also help prevent child recruitment and the demobilization of children associated with armed groups. For instance, the installation of a power plant in Virunga National

²¹ European Commission Website, International Cooperation and Development, "Resilience Building and Humanitarian-Development Nexus", available at: https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/policies/fragility-and-crisis-management/resilience-building-humanitarian-development-nexus_en (last visited on 17 June 2018).

park in North Kivu helps provide jobs to idle young men and boys, offering an alternative to enrolment into armed groups. The power plant also provides electricity. Consequently, young boys and girls might not need to go far from the village for charcoal and this would reduce the risk of being abducted, raped and recruited by force. Regarding the power plant installation, Mr. de Merode, director of Virunga National Park, argues that economic development is a peacebuilding tool (Yee, 2017). Then, sensitizing demobilized children about the importance of protecting and conserving the ecosystem in North Kivu and the work of park rangers might help them spread the word that park rangers can protect children associated with armed groups they could encounter in the bush and refer them to appropriate services.

Another conclusion to draw from this research concerns the security-oriented approach that shapes the DDR intervention in North Kivu. This type of military approach can result in the exclusion of children who do not possess any arms when they arrive at disarmament bases. It contradicts the Paris Principle definition of “child soldier” that includes children who do not bear weapons. The security approach can contribute to the exclusion of girls from DDR programs, as girls tend to not be perceived as a “threat” because of the general assumption that they do not perform combatants' roles. Nevertheless, although girls are more generally used for domestic tasks and sexual exploitation, excluding them on the basis of the low level of threat they represent to security and stability is counterproductive and indicates a lack of conflict sensitive analysis. As Schauer and Elbert argue, “girls’ participation is central to sustaining a force because of their productive and reproductive labor” (2010, p. 341). Consequently, not focusing on girls and excluding them from the DDR intervention unintentionally also sustains the cycle of violence by not tackling all root causes of the use of children by fighting forces. Finally, the security approach puts strong emphasis on the disarmament and demobilization phases, at the expense of the reintegration and development phase. As a consequence, a large part of demobilized children, and girls especially, do not have access to education or vocational training. They then return to the same situation that has pushed them to leave, if not worse due to the loss of parents. Therefore, the security-oriented approach runs the risk of paradoxically compromising security, stability and peacebuilding, as its minimalist approach can increase the risk of non-released and re-recruited children forming the next generation of adult combatants. The constant environment of violence in which they live has severe repercussions on their mental development and can evolve into post-traumatic stress disorders that have transgenerational effects, especially for pregnant girls.

The theoretical background analysis and field research have both highlighted the importance of supporting and training local actors. The DDR intervention in North Kivu can be sustainable if it enhances local active participation by strengthening relationships and partnerships with local communities and by promoting the involvement and engagement of children formerly associated with armed groups as decision-makers in the process. First, their participation can foster the establishment of an effective and accessible feedback mechanism that would enable child protection actors to adapt their strategies to the real needs of both the community and children, and thus improve the quality of their intervention and accountability towards targets of their actions. Second, encouraging the involvement of former CAAFAG in activities of the intervention will considerably strengthen both their resilience and coping mechanisms, which can help heal their

psychosocial troubles and stop them from re-joining armed groups. Such an approach based on local participation and strong relationships with local communities can provide alternatives and partially bridge the gaps due to the underfunding of DDR programs.

Finally, the DDR intervention should be designing the frame of a conflict transformation strategy. Conflict transformation refers to the transfer of “power over” into “power to” and “power with” (El Bushra, 2005, p. 234). Such an approach is in line with Galtung’s theory of “positive peace” that encourages the resolution of major conflict of interest to reduce violence at a minimum by preventing exclusion, inequality and injustice (ibid.). It is thus vital that a gender transformative approach is included within the conflict transformation strategy. DDR interventions should promote women and girls’ participation in conflict transformation. In line with UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, DDR actors should encourage and enhance the participation of girls, who were formerly associated with armed groups, in advocacy and sensitization efforts for women’s and girls’ rights at the community-level and for development and reconciliation efforts as well. Women’ and girls’ involvement in these different activities would contribute to the promotion of peace and would enable harmful social norms and practices, especially related to gender, to be addressed.

Nevertheless, the current political crisis is propelling the already fragile situation of DRC towards a larger conflict. On October 11, 2017, the incumbent President Kabila, whose mandate officially ended in December 2016, announced that the presidential elections would be delayed until April 2019 (Anyangwe, 2017). This decision has angered the opposition significantly and further protracts the country's severe crisis. In North Kivu, fears of new rebellions are taking shape with outbreaks of violence erupting across the region. Moreover, the creation of new armed movements such as the National Movement of Revolutionaries (MNR) in North Kivu, which has launched attacks on villages since June 2017, (Sengenya, 2017) is a concern. Furthermore, the rich presence of copper and cobalt in eastern DRC significantly contributes to the deterioration of the security situation and fuels conflict. Copper and cobalt, due to their very high heat resistance, are used for the construction of naval vessels, air force planes, military engines, and aerospace technology. As stated by the US Department of Defense, both minerals are “strategic and critical minerals” for national defense and military interests (Prendergast and Lezhnev, 2017). In such a volatile context that further deteriorates because of the political crisis, increasing insecurity and critical interest in DRC’s rich minerals, the recruitment and use of children by armed groups is likely to persist. Therefore, all arguments and issues raised in this research conclusion should be understood as actions focused on addressing challenges that the child DDR intervention in North Kivu faces.

This research will close with suggestions for further investigation. This study has highlighted the main challenges that impede the child DDR intervention, with a strong focus on gender-based issues. Nevertheless, considering the limited period of this field study and its limited sample, it is essential to continue this research and investigate in more detail each identified challenge. Further research on this topic should revolve around two main themes that are interlinked: the nexus approach and the link between education and SGBV. First, further investigation could examine whether a triple nexus (humanitarian – development – security nexus) is considered for the child DDR intervention, and if so, what type of intervention is necessary as security component: a

state level intervention, a community-based intervention to foster community cohesion and build peace, or a combination of both interventions. The European Commission defines the nexus approach as part of an integrated approach towards preventing and resolving conflicts and assuring a return to stability (Commission of the European Communities, 2001, p. 3-4). Because of the link between humanitarian assistance and security, it is of great importance to examine how to safeguard humanitarian principles and avoid any blurring of lines between the different mandates that could affect access and acceptance of social workers at the local level. Second, this research has demonstrated the links between education and SGBV, including higher risks out-of-school girls face of SGBV and child recruitment, the low attendance rate of girls due to pregnancy and stigmatization after sexual violence, but also the benefits of school attendance for the socio-economic reintegration of girls, hence decreasing the risk of enrollment into armed groups and forced abductions in the context of North Kivu. Further research could study risks and impacts of sexual and gender-based violence in conflict settings and the importance of holistic interventions that combine protection and education. A special focus on children, especially girls, who hold non-combatant roles within fighting forces, would be relevant in order to examine how to tackle the lack of inclusion of such children in DDR interventions.

A solid ethnographic study is central to continuing this research, by focusing primarily on communities over a more extended period of time. A researcher would then obtain a deeper insight into the dynamics of influence at the community level and identify their root causes. This would significantly help the analyst understand how to address them, and how to improve communities' and children's resilience by using the socio-ecological model. Furthermore, more attention should be given to locally driven initiatives, including faith-based initiatives, to prevent and respond to child (re)-recruitment. Finally, in the context of North Kivu, the use of focus groups is strongly recommended as a culturally appropriate method of data collection that can have a positive effect on the lives of children.

7. References

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