



# When children affected by war go home Lessons learned from Liberia

SUMMARY



This is a summary of a report that was written and researched by Krijn Peters with Edwin Dorbor (interpreter and research assistant) and Sophie Laws (research adviser) in 2000, and edited by Bridget Pettit and Celia Petty. The research included three months of fieldwork in Liberia, and was guided by project advisory teams in the UK and Liberia and by the expert advice of Dr Patrick Bracken. A number of Save the Children staff provided information for the research, most significantly Jane Gibreel, Bart Witteveen, Una McCauley and Cornelius Williams. Several other organisations also assisted with the research, allowing the author to visit their programmes or have discussions with staff members. These organisations were Don Bosco Liberia, Children's Assistance Programme, and Calvary Chapel Liberia. It is with thanks to all these people and most importantly the young people of Liberia, their families and communities, who agreed to share their experiences, that this report was made possible.

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# **When Children Affected by War Go Home: Lessons learned from Liberia**

## **Summary**

### **Introduction**

The official disarmament, demobilisation and rehabilitation (DDR) process in Liberia took place over a 2\_ month period starting in late 1996. In 2000, Save the Children UK undertook a study that tracked a group of children associated with armed forces following the DDR process.

To date there have been very few attempts to look at the experiences of children associated with armed conflict following a DDR process. This research in Liberia sought to help fill this gap by asking of a relatively small group of children and others 'who fared best and why?' Two groups of young people were involved in the research. First, there were those who had been through the official DDR process and had been involved in the Save the Children UK rehabilitation and reunification programme, which included a stay at a Save the Children UK transit centre. Second, there were those children and young people who had self-demobilised and had not received assistance from official programmes. The research took place a year after the last Save the Children UK transit centre closed.

### **Definition**

'Children associated with armed forces' is the term preferred by Save the Children UK in referring to any child under 18 years of age who is a part of, or is attached to, any kind of armed force, whether or not there is an armed conflict. This definition is not limited to children who are carrying or have carried arms, but includes those involved in any other capacity, such as cooks, domestic workers, porters, messengers, spies, decoys, couriers, guards, and those accompanying such groups other than purely as family members. It includes girls as well as boys, and children recruited for sexual purposes and forced 'marriage'. It applies to all children in armed forces, regardless of whether they have been forced to join, or appear to have done so voluntarily, and applies equally to governmental and non-government forces. This definition is consistent with the Cape Town Principles as set down in the Cape Town Plan of Action (1997).

### **Research method**

The research involved a literature review, in-depth interviews with 43 ex-child soldiers, and eight group discussions with ex-child soldiers, their families, community and spiritual leaders, community children, teachers, former commanders, Save the Children UK staff and other related programmes. The main emphasis of the research was on learning directly from the young people who went through the Save the Children UK transit centres, though considerable additional fieldwork was used.

This study therefore focuses on the experiences of a relatively small group of children associated with armed forces, and the information collected is qualitative. It is hoped that the study provides a useful contribution to better defining priorities for programming in similar situations. The research also provides a contribution to wider policy issues relating to:

disarmament and demobilisation; resettlement packages; transit centres; features of the transit centres such as education, vocational training, counselling and staff; reunification with families; changed social relationships; and girl child soldiers.

### ***General context***

This study took place in 2000, three years after the DDR process had been completed, at a time when Liberia seemed to be at relative peace. However, the economy had been devastated by the war and the situation has not improved in the subsequent years. In 2002, approximately three-quarters of the population were living on less than US\$1 per day, with an estimated 52 per cent of the population living in extreme poverty on less than US\$0.50 per day. Liberia remains one of the most 'food insecure' countries in the world with an estimated 35 per cent of the population undernourished (OCHA, 2003).

### **The process of demobilisation, disarmament and rehabilitation**

The disarmament and demobilisation process took place over a period of 2\_ months and involved more than 20,000 soldiers, more than 4,000 of whom were child soldiers. Many of the young people in the research had found the DDR process confusing. They had been misinformed or under-informed by their commanders, and in many cases the children who could have benefited from transit care did not make themselves known to the appropriate people.

*Map of Liberia showing Save the Children UK's transit centres*



### ***Young people's views on transit centres***

The young people interviewed liked the education, vocational training and recreation elements of the Save the Children UK transit centres the best. They also liked being able to talk to their carers. The things the young people did not like included fighting, bullying and disappointments with the resettlement packages. There were two key issues for Save the Children UK staff running the centres. The first was how to strike a balance between providing adequately for the children's needs without them seeming well-off in comparison

with the local communities, and particularly in comparison with the family homes to which it was hoped they would return. The other issue was ensuring the education and vocational training curriculum remained appropriate once it became apparent that many of the residents were staying for longer periods than originally planned.

### ***Family tracing, reunification and reintegration***

Family tracing and reunification were the basic goals of the Save the Children UK programme. Some of the children interviewed had been reluctant to be reunited with their families. The reasons for this were that they preferred the conditions in the centre, feared returning to their communities where they had committed atrocities or were afraid of who was controlling their home area. In the end the majority of young people did go home. This paper looks at the issues related to this, such as parents' and children's preparation for the reunion, resettlement packages, the lack of planned follow-up visits and what happened to those young people it was not possible to reunite with any family.

Using several indicators it was established that the majority of young people did feel accepted back into their communities, though a minority felt obliged to hide their identities as ex-soldiers for fear of being rejected. The majority of practitioners and parents interviewed were positive about the integration of most children. On the whole, though, they felt children – both ex-soldier and community children – were more challenging since the war. Elders, chiefs and teachers all felt young people's attitudes had changed since the war. Most of the ex-child soldiers interviewed felt they had wasted their time being in a faction and aspired towards further education.

Economic reintegration is also looked at in some detail. All but one of the young people interviewed had had some form of work or apprenticeship since their demobilisation. The paper looks at the type of work the young people were engaged in, how they had secured the work, and how they spent the money they earned. It was found that many were making considerable economic contributions to their families. The education prospects for young people are also explored.

### ***Girls' experiences***

While for practical reasons the paper concentrates on boys, the paper also comments on the role and impact of the war on girls. Up to 20,000 child soldiers were involved in the war, and while the total number of girls who took up arms is thought to be small in comparison with boys, it has been estimated that numbers could have been as high as 5,000. However, hardly any girls demobilised and that is the main reason why they were not included in the follow up. It was found that girls faced greater barriers to going through the official demobilisation process and greater difficulties related to reunification. Many people interviewed felt girls were vulnerable to exclusion and prostitution. Practitioners and young people gave recommendations on how to access girls to provide them with the support they need.

### **Key learning points**

#### ***The disarmament process must respond to children's special needs and rights.***

- The provision of transport is important to allow children to return home.
- Links with commanders must be broken as soon as possible.
- It is vital that accurate information on the DDR process reaches children.

- At demobilisation camps there is a need for highly visible social workers with the time to build up a rapport with children to establish their individual needs.
- Strenuous efforts need to be made to ensure that girls associated with armed forces are informed and included in the DDR process.

***The demobilisation package is very important to children.***

- The demobilisation package was controversial and led to great disappointments.
- When demobilisation packages were not delivered as promised there was great bitterness several years later.
- Whether to give the package to the child or their family on reunification needs to be decided early and clearly explained.

***Many children stayed at the transit centres longer than originally planned for.***

- Children valued the transit centres for the protection they offered.
- The overall package of education, accommodation and recreation worked well.
- Longer stays had repercussions in terms of provision of education and vocational training.
- It was difficult to get the balance right in terms of providing for basic needs and maintaining conditions similar to those most of the children would be returning home to.
- There was a need to plan better for those children who, for various reasons, cannot easily be reunited with family.

***Transit centres would have benefited from greater local community involvement.***

- The transit centres were set up rapidly in an emergency situation. Some of the longer-term difficulties could have been addressed at the beginning through greater local community involvement, greater community liaison and clearer exit strategies.
- Longer-term alternatives such as foster care and group homes needed to be explored for some children.

***Following up children after they left a transit centre proved very difficult.***

- It became clear that logistically the level of follow-up planned for was impossible and as a consequence some families felt very let down.
- It is unrealistic to expect children with serious problems be sent home and for their families to keep them without some form of economic and other support.

***Following the war there was no 'normal' situation for young people to reintegrate into.***

- There were no substantial differences between those young people who had been through a transit centre and those who had not.
- Based on the criteria established during the research the majority of young men interviewed were successfully reintegrated.
- Most respondents had some form of employment, most were doing agricultural work.
- Most of the young people interviewed felt accepted back into their community.
- Adults in the community perceived young people as having less respect for their elders.

*There were significant problems in supporting girl associated with armed forces.*

- Girls were harder to access and very few went through the disarmament and demobilisation process.
- Very few girls went to the transit centres.
- Girls were seen as more difficult to re-integrate and more vulnerable if they were unable to return home.

**Recommendations**

This research and further programming experience in Liberia and elsewhere has led Save the Children UK to identify a number of key issues which must be further explored and better addressed if the international community is to effectively assist children associated with armed forces, and their communities, to truly achieve re-integration following conflict.

- **A broader definition of children associated with armed forces needs to be more consistently adopted.** It is important that an integrated approach should be taken to programming for children associated with armed forces. The needs of all conflict-affected children need to be addressed within a broad child protection framework.
- **Girls associated with armed forces require specific efforts to identify and support them.** Special attention must be paid to documenting and responding to the specific needs of girls and the specific threats facing them. Their particular needs include greater difficulty in persuading armed forces to release them, and the psychological, physical and social consequences of sexual and physical abuse, forced marriage, and pregnancies. Reintegration is also more difficult for girls, who may be stigmatised as a result of their association with armed forces. Special attention must also be paid to responding to the needs of children conceived or born to girls in armed forces, as well as the particular situation that these mothers face. As recent research suggests that more girls than previously thought are involved in armed groups, it becomes even more important that their specific needs are identified and catered for in programmes to support children associated with armed forces.
- **Long-term commitment is required from the international community.** The needs of young people and their communities do not end with demobilisation and reunification. The process of reintegration and rebuilding shattered communities is one that takes many years. There are no quick fixes and external agencies offering support in terms of programmes and funding must recognise this and respond appropriately.
- All interventions for children associated with armed forces need to be based on a thorough understanding of the **political, socio-economic and cultural context**. Where possible, interventions should be **community-based**, supporting existing protection mechanisms and capacities. A **livelihoods-based** approach is important to ensure the needs of the young people are explored and supported in a holistic way.

- All interventions should take into account the necessity for children to **participate meaningfully** in all stages of programme planning, and in particular in decision-making on issues that will directly affect them.
- The Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) was a major achievement in terms of preventing the use of children in conflict by armed groups. This has been signed by 115 States and ratified by 63, which shows progress but also that there is still a considerable way to go. For those States that have signed there is **a need for the international community to hold them accountable** for the undertaking they have made.

### **Reference**

OCHA (2003) *Liberia Mid-Year Review*, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

*When Children Affected by War Go Home* looks at young people in Liberia who were associated with armed forces – whether as fighters, porters, cooks, guides, or for sexual purposes. It explores what happened to these young people after they returned home following the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DMR) process that took place from 1996–97. Through in-depth interviews with young people who had been associated with armed forces, as well as interviews with their families and communities, this research addresses the question, ‘Who fared best in the DMR process and why?’

Copies of the full report *When Children Affected by War Go Home* (hard copy or .pdf file) are available from Save the Children’s West Africa Desk, tel +44 (0)20 7703 5400, or email [enquiries@scfuk.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@scfuk.org.uk)

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