

OVERCOMING LOST CHILDHOODS

**LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE
REHABILITATION AND REINTEGRATION
OF FORMER CHILD SOLDIERS IN COLOMBIA**

OVERCOMING LOST CHILDHOODS

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE REHABILITATION AND REINTEGRATION OF FORMER CHILD SOLDIERS IN COLOMBIA

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With thanks to the Baring Foundation for making the project on Displaced Former Child Soldiers possible, and YMCA Bogotá and all the staff of Casa Shalom and Shaddai, who continue to work tirelessly on behalf of demobilised youth in Colombia. Thanks also to Fundación Enseñame a Pescar, Profamilia and numerous other Colombian NGOs for sharing their extensive experience in the area of rehabilitation and reintegration of former child soldiers. We are grateful to ICBF, IOM, UNICEF and representatives of the Colombian government at various levels for generously sharing their time, expertise and information. We would also like to thank Susila Dharma International for permitting the consultant time away from her normal duties to carry out this research. Thanks also go to the Children's Legal Centre, Gemma Hayes, Harriet Knox and staff at Y Care International for their contributions.

Original language: English. Also available in Spanish

Cover photo: Martin Adler, Panos Pictures

Copies of this report are available to download at: www.ycareinternational.org or contact:
Y Care International, Kemp House 152 – 160 City Road, London EC1V 2NP.
Email: enquiries@ycareinternational.org

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Acronyms	3
Executive Summary	4
1. Introduction	9
1.1 Structure of the report	10
1.2 The challenge of displacement	10
1.3 Y Care International's work with conflict-affected youth	11
2. Reintegrating former child soldiers: the Colombian case	13
2.1 The Colombian context	13
2.2 Armed groups responsible for recruitment of child soldiers	13
2.3 History of reintegrating demobilised child soldiers in Colombia	15
2.4 Characteristics of demobilised youth in the reintegration programme	16
2.5 National and international institutions involved in the reintegration effort	17
2.6 Care modalities	19
3. Lessons learned from the Colombian reintegration process	20
3.1 Displacement	20
3.2 Addressing programmatic challenges	21
3.2.1 Family reunification	21
3.2.2 Sexual and reproductive health	23
3.2.3 Gender stereotyping	23
3.2.4 Formal education	25
3.2.5 Supporting income generation	26
3.2.6 Psycho-social counselling and support	28
3.3 Addressing stigmatisation	30
3.4 Rights, legislation and legal status	32
3.5 Managing the DDDR process	33
3.5.1 Caring for the caregivers	33
3.5.2 Funding challenges	34
3.5.3 Measuring success and the need for follow-up	35
4. Conclusions and Recommendations: Towards an Agenda for Action on Child Soldiers	36
4.1 Conclusions	36
4.2 Recommendations: practitioners and policy-makers in Colombia	36
4.3 Recommendations: practitioners and policy-makers internationally	37
Annex 1. Bibliography and Resources	39
Annex 2. Methodology and interviews conducted	40
1. Methodology	40
2. Interviews conducted	40
Annex 3. Number of demobilised youth in care facilities in February 2007	41

LIST OF ACRONYMS

AUC	United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia
DDRR	Disarmament, Demobilisation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration
ELN	National Liberation Army
FARC	Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia
ICBF	<i>Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar</i> (Colombian Institute for Family Welfare)
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
SENA	<i>Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje</i> (National Training Service)
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association
YCI	Y Care International

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Denied a childhood and often subjected to horrific violence, an estimated 200,000 to 250,000 children are currently serving as soldiers for both rebel groups and government armed forces in armed conflicts worldwide. Yet, despite near-universal condemnation of the recruitment and use of child soldiers, there has been inadequate attention paid by the international community and national governments to the process of demobilising them, understanding what they need for a successful transition to civilian life, and identifying what the State must do to make adequate and appropriate reparations to them for their lost childhoods.

Colombia's civil conflict spans more than four decades and has drawn in left-wing rebels and right-wing paramilitaries, as well as Colombia's armed forces. Overall, 11,000-14,000 child soldiers are thought to have served in various illegal armed groups. In Colombia, as in other international experiences, young people who are present when their units demobilise or are captured by government forces, pass through official disarmament, demobilisation and rehabilitation and reintegration (DDRR) processes. The three main armed groups from which child soldiers have been demobilised since the *Programme of Assistance to Demobilised Children and Youth* was launched in 1999 are the FARC, the ELN and the AUC – although there are also a number of smaller, lesser-known groups involved. Government armed forces are also known to have used young people as informers, as well as in other ways including as armed combatants. What is most exceptional in the case of Colombia is that child soldiers are going through a DDRR process in the midst of the armed conflict. The stakes are high; if the process fails, many children and young people will be led right back to the armed groups.

Y Care International's experience working with at-risk and vulnerable children and young people in conflict affected areas, including child soldiers has made apparent the need to share lessons learned and good practice in the rehabilitation and reintegration of former child soldiers. Drawing on this experience, Y Care International and YMCA Bogotá, with the support of a three year grant from the Baring Foundation, researched and analysed the specific rehabilitation and social reinsertion needs of former child soldiers in Colombia. This project has been grounded in fieldwork carried out in Colombia from February-March 2007 with YMCA Bogotá (an official service provider for the government programme), former child soldiers and other key actors who have helped shape policy, practice and programming for the reintegration of former child soldiers since 1999.

This report summarises the lessons learned and recommendations from this process to date and can be used to inform similar work in other countries. Given the critical importance of the reintegration phase, Y Care International and YMCA Bogotá have focused on lessons learned from Colombia's reintegration programme as it represents the most difficult and determinant phase in the life of a former child soldier. The analysis includes such programmatic challenges as family-based care and reunification, sexual and reproductive health needs, gender-related issues, education, employment and income generation, psycho-social counselling and support, and overarching issues of displacement, stigmatisation, funding and monitoring and evaluation.

KEY LESSONS LEARNED

- Displacement is one of the key issues affecting the DDDR process in Colombia. Most of the former child soldiers in the programme come from rural areas to the urban area where the programme is carried out. Arriving in the city can be a shock, and in some cases a deeply troubling experience for them. These young people face many challenges, including separation from family, friends and traditional community support systems; overcoming a sense of isolation or limitations on movement and alienation from and stigmatisation by the surrounding population.
- The effects of displacement upon former child soldiers in the DDDR programme are manifested in many ways - from a high incidence of teenage pregnancies among young couples to recreate the sense of family which has been lost, to low-self esteem, to an urgency to access the financial benefits of their demobilisation so that they can start a business and send money home or reunite with family members.
- Programme practitioners have learned to help the young people articulate the frustrations, fears, sense of loss and anxiety associated with their programme-related displacement. They now emphasise the creation of a new sense of community and 'family' in the absence of real family, and provide activities that give expression to the cultures of the regions where the young people came from.
- YMCA Bogota's care workers emphasise the need for public policy and programme changes to provide solutions to the bureaucratic systems that keep demobilised youth in a state of displacement and legal limbo. They recognise that more needs to be done by the Colombian government to address the inadequacy of professional, educational and financial resources to promote family reunification and effective reintegration services and support.
- To encourage reintegration, the DDDR process in Colombia supports both foster and birth family-based care. However, given the hazards inherent in an on-going conflict—including re-recruitment and retaliation—as well as the factors driving the youth to have joined an armed group, family reunification procedures must consider all the risks and the ability of the family to adequately care for the demobilised youth.
- Where family reunification is not possible, the use of foster care is a viable alternative, particularly for the very young. However, the fostering process also raises several issues, including the higher cost of foster care arrangements, the lack of families willing to take in a former child soldier and difficulties placing older youth and those with drug addictions or psychological problems.
- Due to the challenges of family-based care and reunification, urban centre-based care remains the most common situation for most demobilised youth. However, whilst institutional care may provide better access to services, specialists, educational support and training opportunities, family reunification and return to one's community at the earliest possible opportunity is generally in the best interests of the child.
- Based on this research, more collaboration between actors involved in family reunification would facilitate the process. Other measures to promote the best interests of the demobilised youth include bringing families to join them in safe areas, improving the preparatory process for family reunification and engaging the entire local community in the reunification process.
- Gender and sexual and reproductive health issues are also important aspects of DDDR programmes. International agencies should support comprehensive sexual and reproductive health interventions for former child soldiers, who may need education about their rights and help to regain control over their own lives and bodies.

- On a vocational level, access to both education and economic opportunities are crucial for the successful reintegration of child soldiers. In Colombia as elsewhere, access to education is one of the most often requested means of support by former child soldiers, but is often forgone for economic reasons. The DDDR programme includes educational support, both in formal education classes and in private tutoring. However, demobilised youth face challenges in learning, including insecurity and lack of self-esteem in a learning environment, frustration, difficulty adapting to the school environment, and rejection by peers and others in the system.

“I went back to school and started learning all kinds of things. YMCA staff gave me hope and confidence in myself. I studied hard and got really good at working with computers and networks. Finally I got a part-time job working for a big company. When they decided to make my position full-time, my boss asked me to re-apply and said that with what he knew of my work, the job was mine. But one of my referees mentioned that I was a successful graduate of the demobilisation programme, and that screwed everything up”.

A former child soldier, 16, explains his experience of a transition house run by YMCA Bogotá.

- Teachers also face a steep learning curve in understanding the special needs and circumstances of these students. Teachers working with demobilised youth need additional training, more professional support and better curricula to be able to reach former child soldiers and motivate them to learn before they lose interest in formal education. Reintegration programmes should also balance provision of education tailored to demobilised youth with the need to prevent their marginalisation and promote better understanding and acceptance in the community.
- The DDDR programme in Colombia, as in many successful DDDR programmes, links education and economic activity to broader rehabilitation efforts. The programme has focused on increasing formal schooling for demobilised youth, as well vocational training to prepare them for running a ‘micro-enterprise’. However, the initial government policy gave a two-year timeframe for demobilised youth to access reintegration funds. Many youth had difficulty completing the programme in that time and risked losing their entitlements. Based on the initial experiences with the programme, the government policy on grants to demobilised youth has been reassessed and the programme now has no required timeframe for completion.
- Whilst in some countries entrepreneurial support may help solve the income generating needs of former child soldiers and their families, in Colombia this has not been the case. The young people in the programme are - more often than not - far from the family and community support structures that a young person generally needs to emerge as a successful entrepreneur. Colombia’s experience shows that young people who launch enterprises without adequate technical and moral support, preparation, experience and skills, often fail and may find themselves worse off than before they started.

- The difficulties posed by the micro-enterprise scheme have led to the recognition by educators and policy makers that more investment is needed in formal education, vocational training and on employment and job readiness. The programme continues, however, to be faced with opposition from employers and a public which see demobilised youth largely as perpetrators rather than victims of the armed conflict, and thus do not feel that preferential treatment is justified.

“You feel so frustrated and ashamed when you are 15 and you are struggling to learn the simple things that little kids learn easily in a few months. Everything goes so slowly, because you have never learned how to study. I thought about giving up so many times...But I am determined to learn, and to graduate from secondary school, so I can support my mother and family now that my father is dead.”

A former child soldier, 15, explains his experience of education after being a child soldier

- It is important to perceive the process of state reparations to former child soldiers as a long-term investment, rather than in terms of a one-time financial pay out within a one or two-year timeframe. In particular, vocational training, job readiness training and job placement need to be linked to a broader strategy to address social stigmatisation of former child soldiers.
- Whilst education, training and income generation are important for the effective reintegration of former child soldiers, psycho-social support and counselling should not be neglected. The key is greater understanding of the type of psycho-social support needed and how it relates to other reintegration needs.
- The model used in Colombia focuses on empowering young people to ‘deinstitutionalise’ and reconstruct their lives, first within the centre, then within the broader community and in relation to their families. Youth are encouraged to embrace their right to knowledge and participation in decisions affecting their lives, recognise their natural abilities and interests and accept their differences and those of others.
- The reintegration programmes themselves need to include peer and professional support groups for youth care workers, who continue to provide consistent care, despite high stress levels. All agencies involved in the implementation of the programme need to respect and facilitate children’s right to knowledge of and participation in decisions that affect their lives.
- Despite all this, the biggest challenge to reintegration is the stigmatisation of former child soldiers in Colombia – by neighbours, peers, teachers, employers, and Colombian society at large. Ongoing stigmatisation is the result of fear in the general population—of being caught in the crossfire or targeted by armed groups—and anger—at the continuing conflict and the impunity of ‘perpetrators’. Neither of these factors has been adequately addressed by the programme, government or the civil society organisations working with demobilised youth.

MOVING FORWARD

Full reintegration of former child soldiers will not be possible until there is a broad-based social debate and campaign to raise the awareness of the general public about the status of former child soldiers as victims of the armed conflict.

Understanding, reconciliation and meaningful reintegration of former child soldiers cannot take place in Colombia without a national process of truth, justice and reconciliation, in which society at large and the many victims of the violence are recognised and reparations made for the massive violations of their rights.

The international community has an important role to play in this process, in developing a realistic prevention and deterrence programme that matches aid to at-risk groups. This should be coupled with sanctions and prosecutions for child soldier users and abettors, as well as maintaining focus on the issue of child soldiers with continued monitoring and reporting at the international level.

Finally, the DDRR process in Colombia also requires ongoing research, monitoring and evaluation. For example, focused research is needed on factors improving rehabilitation and reintegration as well as those leading to a return to armed groups or criminal violence. Effective approaches must also be identified for engaging armed non-state actors in addressing their use of child soldiers.

1. INTRODUCTION

In over 20 countries around the world, children are direct participants in war.¹ Denied a childhood and often subjected to horrific violence, an estimated 200,000 to 250,000 children are serving as soldiers for both rebel groups and government forces in current armed conflicts.² They fight in places like Afghanistan, Colombia, DR Congo, Iraq, Myanmar, and the Sudan. These young combatants participate in all aspects of contemporary warfare. They wield AK-47s and M-16s on the front lines of combat, serve as human mine detectors, participate in suicide missions, carry supplies, and act as spies, messengers or lookouts. Both girls and boys are used as child soldiers. In some countries, such as Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Uganda, a third or more of the child soldiers were reported to be girls.³ In some cases, girl soldiers may be raped, or given to military commanders as sexual slaves or 'wives'.

Many child soldiers are abducted or recruited by force and are often compelled to follow orders under threat of death. Others join armed groups out of poverty, desperation or the need for protection. As society breaks down during conflict and children face severely restricted access to school, are driven from their homes, or are orphaned or separated from family members, children may perceive armed groups as their best chance for survival. Others seek escape from poverty by joining armed groups that promise financial or other incentives, or join military forces to avenge family members who have been killed by an opposing group.

In 2000, the United Nations adopted an 'Optional Protocol' to the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* on the involvement of children in armed conflict. The protocol prohibits the forced recruitment of children under the age of 18 and requires State parties to take all measures to ensure they do not take part directly in hostilities.⁴ To date, it has been ratified by more than 110 countries.⁵ The International Labour Organisation (ILO) *Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour*, prohibits the 'forced or compulsory recruitment of children [under the age of 18] for use in armed conflict'.⁶ It has been ratified by more than 160 countries.⁷

Yet despite near-universal condemnation of the recruitment and use of child soldiers, there has been inadequate attention paid by the international community and national governments to the process of demobilising child soldiers and their rehabilitation and reintegration into civilian life. Whilst former child soldiers in some countries have access to rehabilitation programmes to help them locate their families, get back into school, receive vocational training and re-enter civilian life, many demobilised children and youth have no access to such programmes⁸. Without education, social support, and marketable vocational skills, they lack the means to support themselves and are at chronic risk of re-recruitment into armed groups.

The experience of reintegrating child soldiers in Colombia has much in common with similar processes in other post-conflict countries; however, much about the Colombian case is unique and instructive. Drawing on extensive experience working with at-risk children and youth in conflict affected areas, Y Care International and its partner YMCA Bogotá, with the support of the Baring Foundation, initiated a process of research and systematisation of lessons learned. The process was grounded in the experience of YMCA Bogotá as one of the few civil society organisations delivering the official reintegration programme for former child soldiers, under the mandate of the *Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar* (the Colombian Institute for Family Welfare or ICBF). This research has highlighted the urgent need to share experiences, lessons learned and good practice in the rehabilitation and reintegration of former child soldiers worldwide.

This report presents lessons learned from the DDDR programme in Colombia, with reference to international experience and good practice. It is a contribution to the work of the YMCA movement and other organisations who are striving for the effective social reintegration of former child soldiers around the world.

1.1 STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

Chapter 1 provides an introduction to key terms and concepts used in this research study.

Chapter 2 presents an overview of the Colombia context and the national Disarmament, Demobilisation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (DDRR) programme.

Chapter 3 presents lessons learned from eight years of experience in rehabilitation and reintegration programmes for former child soldiers in Colombia. Building in particular on YMCA Bogotá's experience gained in operating a Transition Home and Specialised Care Centre for demobilised youth in Bogotá, this chapter considers how the Colombian experience can help inform future reintegration policies and programmes for former child soldiers.

Chapter 4 provides conclusions and recommendations for on-going efforts to improve the prospects for effective socio-economic reintegration of former child soldiers in Colombia and internationally.

1.2 THE CHALLENGE OF DISPLACEMENT

At the centre of this research project was an analysis of the relationship between displacement and the recruitment of children into armed groups, and the effects of displacement on the reintegration process of former child soldiers in Colombia.

Definition of an internally displaced person (IDP): Internally displaced persons are 'persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalised violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognised State border'. (IDMC 2007)

As a consequence of Colombia's protracted armed conflict, Colombia has the second highest number of IDPs (see above definition) in the world at close to 4 million people⁹. Children are particularly vulnerable to internal displacement in Colombia, with over half of all displaced people in the country being under 18.¹⁰

Lisa Alfredson (2002) has highlighted the close correlation between child soldiering and displacement, which she describes as being part of a 'vicious cycle' with various manifestations. Displacement may occur before, during or after a child is recruited, and at any stage of armed conflict. The risk of child recruitment in Colombia has led many families to flee their homes or become refugees in an effort to protect their children. A February 2007 report of the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers in Colombia found that the threat of recruitment of children into armed groups is among the main causes of the massive forced displacement in the country¹¹.

'Recruitment may affect all types of displaced children—refugees, asylum seekers, the internally displaced, and those separated from their families or caregivers. These categories are far from mutually exclusive; children often become trapped in a cycle of vulnerability to both recruitment and displacement. Bearing this in mind, we can identify at least four basic connections between child soldiering and displacement. First, beginning with the most commonly recognised connection, former child soldiers are vulnerable to displacement. Second, an increasingly recognised connection, displaced children are vulnerable to military recruitment and re-recruitment. Third, children are displaced or relocated to prevent recruitment. And fourth, perhaps the most controversial of the categories, child soldiers are displaced as soldiers (as a general characteristic of their condition).'¹²

In Colombia, all these relationships are common and merit detailed investigation. This report will focus on the issue of displacement as part of the DDDR process itself, exploring how displacement combines with other factors such as social stigmatisation in receiving communities and thus poses additional challenges to the inclusion and reintegration of former child soldiers into Colombian society. Many of today's demobilising youth in Colombia originate from rural areas. Depending on age of initial recruitment, perhaps two thirds of their lives may have been spent in rural military encampments. The large urban centres in which the DDDR programme is delivered constitute an alien and often hostile environment. As will be discussed later in this report, YMCA Bogotá and other agencies supporting the reintegration process of demobilised youth have developed special measures to help former child soldiers overcome the obstacles posed by displacement.

1.3 Y CARE INTERNATIONAL'S WORK WITH CONFLICT-AFFECTED YOUTH

Y Care International's (YCI) work on former child soldiers derives from its extensive experience in working to support and assist children, youth and communities affected by armed conflict worldwide. YCI recognises that young people are disproportionately affected by conflict, often victims of exploitative recruitment as child soldiers. Currently, YCI is working with YMCA partners in Colombia, Liberia, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Sierra Leone and southern Sudan where conflict has devastated education and health services, created large numbers of internally displaced people and refugees, high rates of unemployment, broken communities, and traumatised, injured and disabled civilians.

Over the years, YCI has worked with national and local YMCAs in war-torn countries to help them rebuild damaged social services such as health centres and schools, support the educational needs of children and young people, provide vocational training and access to employment opportunities, provide psycho-social counselling to victims of violence, and train young people to become peace promoters and advocates at local and national levels. In recent years, YCI has been supporting a number of projects that focus on addressing the needs of former child soldiers - in Colombia in 2004, in Liberia in 2005, and in the Senegal Casamance region in 2006. This report focuses on lessons learnt from the work of YCI and YMCA Bogotá in responding to the specific rehabilitation and reintegration needs of former child soldiers in Colombia, in the hope that these lessons can provide insights to inform work with this group of highly marginalised young people in Colombia and worldwide.

For further information about Y Care International's work with disadvantaged and marginalised children and young people worldwide, please refer to www.ycareinternational.org.

Box 1. Terms and Definitions

Child Soldier: This report uses the UN definition: *‘A child soldier has been defined as any person under 18 years of age who forms part of an armed force in any capacity, and those accompanying such groups, other than purely as family members, as well as girls recruited for sexual purposes and forced marriage.’* (Secretary General of the United Nations, Report to the Security Council, S/2000/101, 11 February 2000)

Demobilised Youth: The term used in Spanish is ‘jóvenes desvinculados’ or youth ‘no longer involved with’ irregular armed groups. The vast majority of participants in the DDRR programme are between 16 and 18 years old, and do not consider themselves to be children (some already having children of their own), although they remain children as defined by the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child. In this report they will be referred to as ‘former child soldiers’ or as ‘demobilised youth’.

Disarmament, Demobilisation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (DDRR): The acronym DDRR will refer to the full process from the point of disarmament to effective social reintegration. However, this research focuses mainly on care and support measures after child soldiers have been disarmed. In this report, ‘the programme’ will be used to refer to the official national DDRR programme managed by the Colombian government.

Defining ‘reintegration’ in the Colombian case: For many observers, the term reintegration (the return to ‘normal’ community life and restoring a sense of belonging) of former child soldiers in Colombia is a misnomer, since most children who are recruited into armed groups are already highly marginalised and excluded – economically, socially, and even within their own families. In addition, many former child soldiers are being ‘reintegrated’ into an urban context which is unfamiliar or alien to them, further contributing to a sense of displacement.

2. REINTEGRATING FORMER CHILD SOLDIERS: THE COLOMBIAN CASE

The experience of DDDR of former child soldiers in Colombia has much in common with similar processes in post-conflict countries, but there is also much about this case which is unique and may have broader application in future DDDR efforts with child soldiers elsewhere. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the *Programa de Atención a Niños, Niñas y Adolescentes Desvinculados de los Grupos Armados Irregulares* (Programme of Care for Boys, Girls and Adolescents Demobilised from Irregular Armed Groups) of the Colombian Institute for Family Welfare (ICBF). Hereafter, the national DDDR effort will be referred to simply as ‘the programme’.

2.1 THE COLOMBIAN CONTEXT

“What you have to remember is we are trying to make peace in the midst of war”
- Counsellor working with demobilised youth in Bogotá

What is most unique about Colombia’s DDDR process is that it is taking place within an on-going armed conflict. Unlike similar processes in other countries, there have been no definitive peace negotiations between the Colombia government and illegal armed groups, and there are no comprehensive peace accords that signify an end to armed hostilities. Most international studies on child soldiering emphasise the extreme importance that inclusive peace agreements play in the success of DDDR programmes for child soldiers¹³: ‘In cases where [DDRR] was tried while the situation was unstable or the fighting still went on, such as by UNICEF in DRC, the programmes were often in vain. As one Congolese NGO noted, ‘Demobilisation in the middle of war is neither possible nor permanent’¹⁴.

Yet in Colombia, there appears to be little choice. After more than 40 years of armed struggle, were it not for continual renewal of the fighting forces with young blood, and the on-going participation of children and young people in the illicit economic activities which support the conflict, it is arguable that the fighting would have ended long ago. Government officials and NGO staff working with former child soldiers have in Colombia suggested that successful DDDR of child soldiers may be a precondition for, rather than the result of, definitive peace agreements.

2.2 ARMED GROUPS RESPONSIBLE FOR RECRUITMENT OF CHILD SOLDIERS

Colombia’s civil conflict spans more than four decades and has drawn in left-wing rebels and right-wing paramilitaries, as well as Colombia’s armed forces. Left-wing guerrilla groups emerged ‘in the mid-1960s, in what Pizarro (1996) describes as a context fertile for insurgency: an influential revolution in Cuba; a tradition of guerrilla fighting in the countryside; a weak state without a monopoly of violence over the territory, notably absent in remote rural areas; high levels of inequality and rural poverty.’¹⁵ Between 11,000 and 14,000 child soldiers are thought to serve in the different illegal armed groups in Colombia. While there are a number of armed groups involved, and government armed forces are also known to have used children and youth as informers and in other ways, there are three main armed groups from which child soldiers have demobilised:

Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC): The FARC is the oldest and largest group among Colombia's left-wing rebels - and one of the world's richest and most powerful guerrilla armies. The group was founded in 1964, when it declared its intention to use armed struggle to overthrow the government and install a Marxist regime. But tactics changed in the 1990s, as right-wing paramilitary forces intensified their attacks on the guerrilla group, and the FARC became increasingly involved in aspects of the drug trade and other illicit activities to raise money for its military campaign. In 2002, the then President Andres Pastrana broke off three years of peace talks with the FARC after members hijacked an airliner and kidnapped a Colombian senator onboard. President Alvaro Uribe, who swept to power in 2002 vowing to defeat the rebels, launched an unprecedented military offensive against the FARC, forcing them to retreat from urban areas. The Colombian government has indicated a readiness to open talks with the FARC on the condition that they first lay down their weapons. The rebels, who control large areas of the Colombian countryside, have to date refused to negotiate with Uribe's administration, which is suspected by many Colombians and international human rights groups of having links to right-wing paramilitary groups. The FARC is governed by a secretariat and is estimated to have 18,000 fighters. The group is known to actively recruit child soldiers, although the precise number within its ranks is unknown. According to ICBF, 50% of all demobilised children and youth have been members of the FARC.

National Liberation Army (ELN): This left-wing group was formed in 1965 by intellectuals inspired by the Cuban revolution. The ELN is behind many kidnappings in Colombia, and takes hundreds of people each year to finance its operations. The group has focused on hitting infrastructure targets such as the oil industry, because it has been unable to take on the security forces directly like the FARC. Members justify kidnapping as a legitimate way of fundraising in what they say is their campaign for improved social justice and human rights. The group have not become involved in the drug trade to the same extent as the FARC, partly because of the moral objections of an influential former leader. The ELN reached the height of its power in the late 1990s, but in recent years has been hit hard by the paramilitaries and Colombian armed forces. The group has been showing a will to make peace since June 1998, but the government broke off talks in 2002, claiming that the guerrillas were not committed. Recently however the ELN returned to peace talks with the Colombian government. The group is thought to have between 3,000 and 5,000 fighters including child soldiers, although exact numbers are unknown.

United Self Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC): This right-wing umbrella group was formed in 1997 by drug-traffickers and landowners to combat kidnappings and extortion by the guerrillas and maintain the economic and political status quo in the country. The AUC has its roots in the paramilitary armies built up by drug lords in the 1980s, and claim that they took up arms in self-defence, in the place of a powerless state. However, many see it as a violent drugs cartel in charge of a significant chunk of the illegal drug trade. The AUC has grown in strength and influence over the years thanks to its links with the army and financing from business interests and landowners. The group has carried out numerous massacres and assassinations in Colombia, often targeting left-wing activists who speak out against them.

The paramilitaries declared a ceasefire in 2002 and began formal peace talks with the government in 2004. Negotiations have resulted in the demobilisation of some 32,000 fighters, in a process beset by hurdles such as ceasefire violations, and the paramilitaries' demand for amnesty¹⁶. The disbanding of the AUC between 2003 and 2006 is seen by the administration of President Uribe as a vital step toward peace. However, while taking some 32,000 AUC members out of the conflict, there is growing evidence that many former AUC members are reconstituting themselves in new armed groups that are more than the 'criminal gangs' that the government describes. Some of them are increasingly acting as the next generation of paramilitaries, and they require a more urgent and more comprehensive response from the government.¹⁷

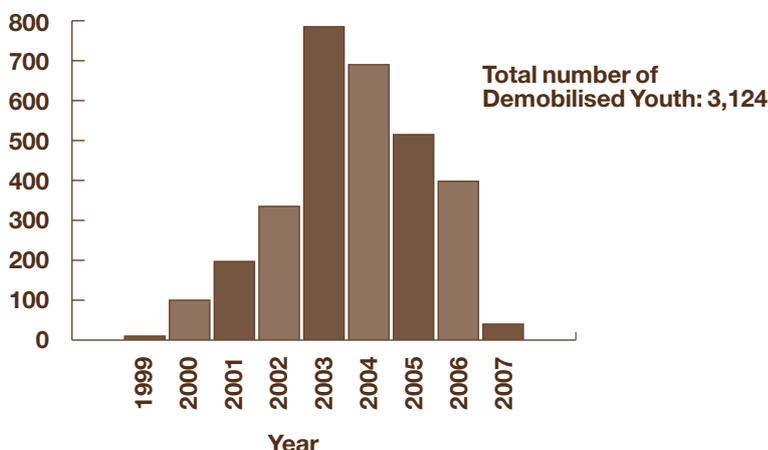
2.3 History of reintegrating demobilised child soldiers in Colombia

The ICBF, mandated as the State's child protection agency in Colombia, initiated high-level discussions between government ministries and with the international donor community in 1997¹⁸ and, in 1999, it launched the *Programme of Assistance to Demobilised Children and Youth* with 10 demobilised youth. The numbers grew rapidly, peaking in 2003 when 775 demobilised children and adolescents passed through the programme.¹⁹ This peak followed the *Declaration of Peace in Colombia* by the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC) in November 2002. As of the end of February 2007, the ICBF programme had worked with 3,124 demobilised children and adolescents²⁰. Unlike many other countries' experiences with the DDRR process, which were completed quite rapidly, the DDRR of child soldiers in Colombia is now in its ninth year.²¹ Over this period of time, most youth in the DDRR programme have been attended to in three major urban centres – Bogotá, Medellín and Cali. Their displacement to urban areas is due to both the need to protect them from risks of retaliation should they return to their home towns or villages, and the need to provide specialised care, counselling, education and protection that are more feasible in the big cities.

Practitioners working with demobilised youth, including YMCA Bogotá, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and ICBF officials, have observed a number of trends in the demobilisation process, most notably identifying three distinct waves of youth demobilisations that have shaped the experiences of youth care workers in the DDRR programme.

1. The first wave – from 1999 to 2002, this consisted mainly of the voluntary demobilisation of individuals and small groups from the guerrillas (FARC and ELN) who turned themselves in. These were largely poor, rural youth, who were overwhelmed by the city, but did not have major behavioural problems or drug addictions. Many of them had been drawn to the guerrillas as a form of rural employment, in the absence of other educational and livelihood opportunities.²²

Figure 1. Number of Demobilised Youth in the ICBF Reintegration Programme November 1999 to February 2007



Source: ICBF Programme Overview, February 28, 2007

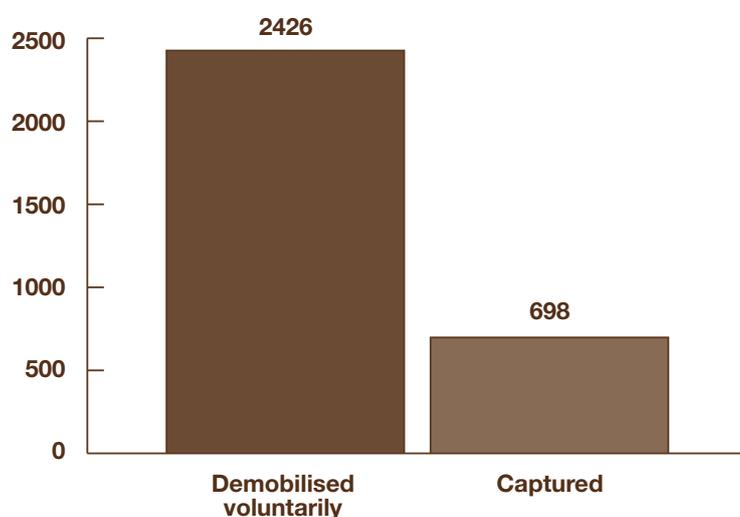
2. The second wave of demobilisations began in 2003 following the peace agreements with the AUC paramilitaries in November 2002.²³ From 2002-2006, massive group demobilisations occurred²⁴. AUC paramilitaries were allied with urban gangs and crime rings in big cities such as Bogotá, Medellín and Cali. The children and adolescents associated with the paramilitaries were mainly urban youth, involved in urban crime and prostitution.²⁵ They presented a significant challenge to youth care workers, with significant psychological problems related to abuse, mistreatment and drug addiction.

“Some of this second group came in top of the line running shoes and t-shirts – it was clear that they were used to having money, and were much more sophisticated than the kids we had seen before.” – Professional working with former child soldiers in Colombia

3. The third wave came in 2006, following the end of AUC demobilisations. This wave has been marked by a lower rate of individual demobilisations, mainly of rural youth associated with the FARC and ELN. These young people have similar profiles to those of the first wave, but more of them enter the programme as a result of being ‘captured’ rather than having demobilised voluntarily.²⁶

Of the 3,124 children and youth who have passed through the programme since 1999, 22% have not demobilised voluntarily – but have been ‘captured’ or ‘rescued’, depending on one’s point of view²⁷. This significant percentage of involuntary participants has led staff and youth to question whether some youth are not being held at care centres against their will. Whilst all institutions involved fully accept that family reunification is the optimal solution for demobilised youth, a key objective of the government is also to ensure that under-aged youth are not re-recruited to their original units. Yet demobilised youth often see mobility restrictions at the programme locations (Transition Homes and Specialised Care Centres) as a form of imprisonment.

Figure 2. Number of voluntary demobilisations versus youth captured

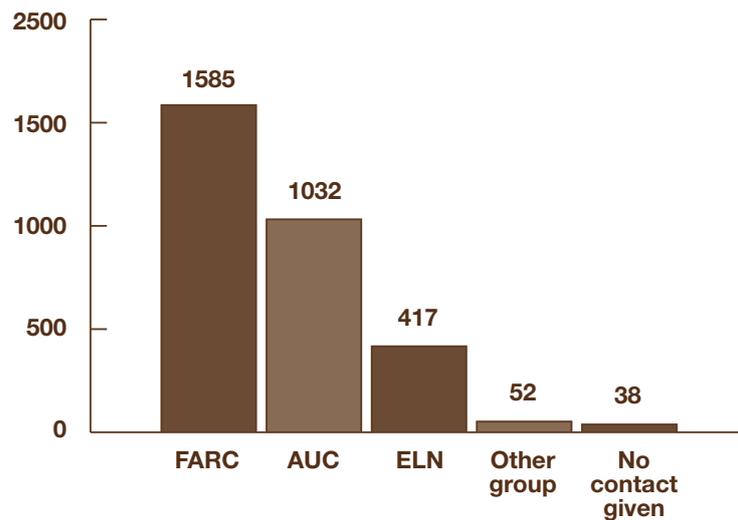


2.4 CHARACTERISTICS OF DEMOBILISED YOUTH IN THE REINTEGRATION PROGRAMME

According to ICBF statistics, 50% of all demobilised youth have been with the FARC and 13% with the ELN. Both are left-wing guerrilla groups, which recruit mainly poor children and youth from rural areas. 33% have come from the AUC, and are mainly from urban areas. The remaining demobilised youth come from lesser-known groups or are unwilling to state which armed group they were associated with. Of the 3,124 children and youth who have passed through the ICBF programme, 26% are girls and 74% are boys.²⁸ Discussions with demobilised youth and youth care workers have shown that both girls and boys have served in direct combat. The FARC and ELN in particular have a highly egalitarian attitude to the tasks undertaken by girls and boys.²⁹

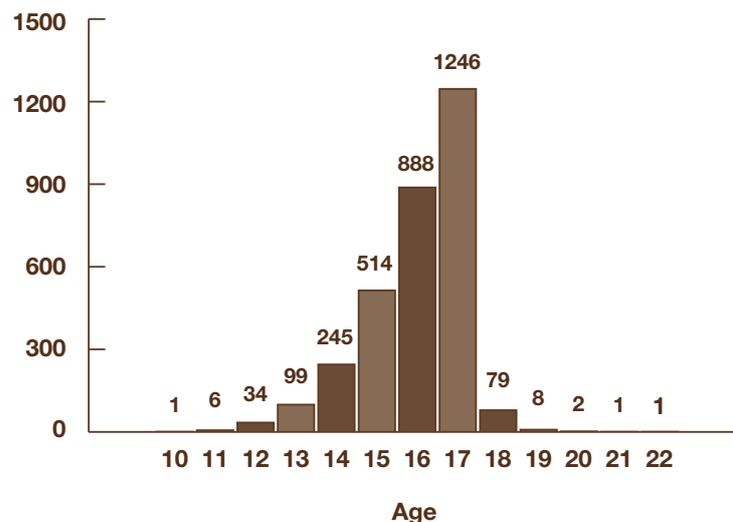
A marked disadvantage for the programme is the late age at which former child soldiers are demobilised and enter the reintegration programme. Statistics gathered since the beginning of the programme indicate that 40% of all youth join the programme in their 17th year, and that 68% join the programme between the ages of 16 and 18. Once they turn 18, if they have been certified by the state as being an ex-combatant, ICBF no longer has the mandate to care for them, and their case is taken over by the High Council for Social and Economic Reintegration which is responsible for adult ex-combatants.³⁰

Figure 3. Demobilised youth by armed group to 28 February 2007



According to ICBF, approximately 60% of youth are in the programme for 18 months or less, which means that programme staff have very little time to work with them, and address their many needs, including family reunification, securing official documentation, access to legal support, education and livelihoods support.

Figure 4. Children and Adolescents Entering the ICBF Reintegration Programme to February 2007



2.5 NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS INVOLVED IN THE REINTEGRATION EFFORT

The following table, whilst not exhaustive, lists several national and international organisations involved in aspects of assistance to former child soldiers in Colombia. This network of institutions was originally much larger. In 2003, when the programme was taking in its highest number of participants, the ICBF predicted that the services of numerous NGOs would be required to meet the institutional care needs associated with the massive demobilisations anticipated. In 2004, for example, five NGOs in Bogotá were contracted by ICBF to run Transition Homes. However, by November of that year, an ICBF review determined that these small Transition Homes were not needed and contracted YMCA Bogotá to be the sole provider for this service. A similar reduction has been seen in the number of Specialised Care Centres.

Table 1. Mapping of Institutions supporting former child soldiers

Type of Organisation	Direct Services, Care and Support	Monitoring/ Oversight	Sensitisation/ Advocacy	Research	Capacity Building	Legislative Development
National	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • YMCA Bogotá • Fundación Enseñame a Pescar • Centro Don Bosco • Fundación Desarrollo Social • Profamilia • Cajas de Compensación CROJ • Secretaries of Education • Secretaries of Health • SENA • Other NGOs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ICBF • Defensoría del Pueblo • Attorney General • High Council for Social and Economic Reintegration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alianza para la niñez Colombiana • Defensoría del Pueblo 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • YMCA Bogotá • Javeriana University • Universidad Nacional • Universidad de los Andes • Other Colombian universities • Defensoría del Pueblo • Other NGOs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ICBF 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defensoría del Pueblo • ICBF • Alianza para la niñez Colombiana
International	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IOM 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UNICEF • UNHCHR 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Save the Children • IOM • Coalition to Stop the use of Child Soldiers • UNICEF 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IOM • Coalition to Stop the use of Child Soldiers • UNICEF 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IOM • UNICEF 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers • UNICEF

2.6 CARE MODALITIES

Since the programme began in 1999, there has been a significant evolution in the policies governing care and reintegration efforts for former child soldiers. All institutions working with this group of young people agree that they have been learning through experience, without a prescribed blueprint for attempting reintegration in the context of an ongoing armed conflict. At the outset, given the level of inexperience with the issue, institutional care was the main care modality used in Colombia. In 2002, for example, almost all children and young people were placed in institutional care, with a few family reunifications.³¹ This was due to ongoing security concerns, concerns about risks that the family itself might pose to the child's well-being and a weak institutional structure for providing family support and monitoring. Foster care is not generally practised in Colombia, and is extremely rare with young people considered to be marginal, violent or a threat to society. Thus placing youth in foster care where family reunification was not possible was virtually unheard of. In the midst of the armed conflict, public fear of reprisal or being drawn into contact with armed groups is strong and thus foster parents and organisations are reluctant to involve themselves in the lives of demobilised youth.

The DDRR programme has two main care and protection modalities:

1. Family-based care, including family reunification and foster care arrangements, covering only around 40% of cases;
2. Institutional care, including:
 - Transition Homes where demobilised youth spend an initial 1-3 months in 'rehabilitation';
 - Specialised Care Centres, which provide institutional care for adolescents up to the age of 18 (generally 9-12 months) in preparation for 'reintegration';
 - Youth Homes, where young people move once they are ready to leave the Specialised Care Centre;
 - Youth Protection Facilities for young people with special protection problems.

Based on international good practice and lessons learned from other DDRR processes with former child soldiers, ICBF has gradually introduced and attempted to strengthen both foster and birth family-based care. Yet institutional care remains the norm, with approximately 60% of young people involved in the programme in institutional care³².

3. LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE COLOMBIAN REINTEGRATION PROCESS

Reliable international statistics on child soldiering are difficult to gather because many former child soldiers escape or are sent away by their commanders, who do not want to be held accountable for the crime of recruitment after official demobilisations. Child soldiers who are not identified cannot benefit from official reintegration programmes and are at risk of being re-recruited if they are unable to make a successful transition to civilian life. The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers recently estimated that as few as 15% of all child soldiers in Colombia are able to access the DDDR programme.³³

In Colombia, as in other countries, youth who are present when their units demobilise or are captured by government forces pass through official DDDR processes. Experience from El Salvador, Angola, Liberia, Sierra Leone, DRC and other DDDR processes involving child soldiers, shows that child and youth-focused reintegration programmes can promote successful transitions to civilian life and, ultimately, a sustainable peace³⁴. Given the critical importance of the reintegration phase, Y Care International and YMCA Bogotá have focused on lessons learned from Colombia's reintegration programme as it represents the most difficult and determinant phase in the life of a former child soldier.

3.1 DISPLACEMENT

In the sections below, displacement of former child soldiers emerges as a cross-cutting issue – it is reflected in where and how demobilised youth are cared for, their sense of identity and alienation and their self-image as maturing adolescent girls and boys. The effects of displacement are best illustrated through the various issues and challenges that youth face throughout the course of the rehabilitation and reintegration process. Nearly all of the resident youth in the YMCA's Casa Shalom Transition Home and Shaddai Specialised Care Centre are displaced, coming primarily from rural areas in the provinces of Tolima, Arauca, Caceres, Cauca and Valle.

For them, arriving in the city is a shock, and in some cases a troubling experience. Many report feeling isolated, confused, afraid and alienated by the city. One girl recently captured from the FARC in a battle with the Colombian army expressed the shock she felt at the 'inhumanity' of life in the city: *"Now we can't walk, we have to pay to take a bus. Here there is pollution, noise, people begging in the streets. In the country, people don't have money but they can feed themselves. Here you have to pay for a glass of water – you see pregnant girls begging to survive. We are strangers in our own country"*.³⁵ By virtue of their displacement, youth are without family and community support, leaving them reliant on programme staff to provide social, academic and employment-related support and guidance.

Key challenges of displacement include:

- Separation from family, friends and traditional community support systems;
- Learning about and adjusting to the urban environment;
- Lack of freedom of movement: a sense of isolation or 'imprisonment' in the group homes. This is due to security and protection requirements which prevent youth from going out without a chaperone, and only for pre-scheduled activities;
- The stress of making the transition from living in rural areas, where there is freedom of movement, to a noisy, polluted and crowded urban area;
- Alienation from and stigmatisation by the surrounding population who are fearful and distrustful of former child soldiers;
- Inability to build bridges with the local population and culture;
- Loss of local culture and languages (particularly for indigenous youth); and
- Difficulty adjusting to the cold climate in Bogotá for those who have grown up in tropical regions of the country.

Practitioners working with former child soldiers find that professional and financial resources to help the youth adapt and adjust to life in the city are lacking: *“Many of them have never ridden on a bus or a train before. They have never been in a supermarket. It takes time for them to adjust and the programme needs to help orientate them better”*.³⁶

At the same time, for some of the youth the urban experience is not altogether bad. The city can become an exciting place, and one that offers new opportunities that don't exist in the rural areas. Indeed, one of the key causes of child and youth recruitment outside of major cities in Colombia is the near-absence of rural schooling, particularly at secondary level, and poor infrastructure and transportation, which denies them access to opportunities.

Some youth may not want to leave the city, where they can find anonymity. This can be preferable to returning to their home towns or villages where they are vulnerable to re-recruitment or reprisal for desertion. Once they have completed the programme, some of the youth are afraid to leave the friends and counsellors in the city who they know and trust: *“Once they complete their courses, we encourage them to go to a small town, where the skills they have learned will be more valuable, but they don't want to go away – they are afraid to be far from the support systems they have found here”*.³⁷

Lessons Learned: Displacement

- Programme practitioners have learned to help youth articulate the frustrations, fear, sense of loss and anxieties associated with their programme-related displacement;
- Programme practitioners now emphasise the creation of a new sense of community and 'family' in the absence of biological or foster family;
- Programme practitioners emphasise activities that value and give expression to the various cultures of the areas from which the youth originate, to prevent the loss of cultural identity;
- YMCA's youth care workers and staff of similar centres emphasise the need to seek solutions to the problems that keep youth in a state of displacement and institutional care;
- Programme managers need to address the lack of coordination with government offices and services which can delay the processing of individual cases;
- Youth who return to their homes and communities are at risk of re-recruitment or retaliation from armed groups due to the ongoing conflict and insecurity;
- More needs to be done to address the inadequacy of professional, educational and financial resources provided to promote family reunification and effective reintegration services and support.

3.2 ADDRESSING PROGRAMMATIC CHALLENGES

3.2.1 Family reunification

Many authors agree that despite the positive features of institutional care for former child soldiers in terms of access to services, specialists, educational support and training opportunities, family reunification and return to one's community at the earliest possible opportunity is generally in the best interests of the child³⁸. Whilst numbers are increasing, rapid family reunification has been more difficult to achieve in Colombia than in other DDRR experiences. In early March 2007, only 70 of the 505 children and adolescents in the programme (14%) had been reunited with their birth families, the vast majority being in some form of institutional care facility.³⁹ Most youth interviewed stated they would like to return home if they could, but cannot be reunited with their families immediately or even after many months in the Transition Homes and Specialised Care Centres. The reasons behind this are outlined below.

Given the dynamics of the ongoing conflict, displacement of former child soldiers is in large part related to the need to protect them from re-recruitment, retaliation, domestic and other forms of abuse and stigmatisation. Most youth in the programme are from areas of active conflict and many have family members involved with armed groups. The risk of re-recruitment is high, as is the risk of retaliation for betrayal in the case of youth who have demobilised voluntarily.⁴⁰

According to a 2006 study by UNICEF and the *Defensoría del Pueblo*, involving youth registered in the programme in August and September 2005, 15% of boys and 25% of girls stated that family violence, abuse and neglect influenced their decisions to join the armed group⁴¹. The same study found that, for multiple reasons, the percentage of former child soldiers who did not live with their birth families before recruitment (25.5%) was significantly higher than the national average (8%)⁴². Indeed, several of the youth residents interviewed at the YMCA care centres had lost one or both parents in the conflict.⁴³

Under such conditions, care providers such as YMCA Bogotá must consider all of the risks to youth and their families in determining family reunification procedures. They must confirm the willingness and capacity of the family to care for the returning youth and to ensure respect for their rights. Based on lessons learned through the course of the programme, ICBF initiated a pilot project to provide a monthly education stipend to poor families who were willing to receive their children back but could not afford to have them educated. To favour reunification, ICBF has covered the relocation costs of some families from areas of active conflict. These represent important new models being introduced in order to favour family reunification where possible.

Yet the same factors that put youth and families at risk in areas of active conflict also affect the security and mobility of NGOs and ICBF staff responsible for providing follow-up and support. Along with other innovations, ICBF has developed a system of mobile support units to monitor and accompany the family unification process in rural areas. However, providing an adequate support service remains a challenge as these units lack experience in working directly with former child soldiers and their families and in taking a family-centred approach.

Where family reunification is not possible, ICBF has also begun to expand the use of foster care, particularly for the very young. Early results are positive but have raised the following concerns:

- Foster care arrangements are much more costly than institutional care. In order to provide support services and counselling to both the young person and fostering family, keeping foster families in close proximity to one another has been an effective practice;
- Due to the high degree of stigmatisation and fear of former child soldiers in Colombia, it is not easy to identify families willing to take in demobilised youth, and families who are willing need to be well compensated. People are afraid of the former child soldiers themselves, and of being caught in the crossfire of armed groups who may come looking for them;
- Smaller areas, such as Manizales and Armenia, have proven to be more open to foster care than others, possibly because these cities are in the peaceful coffee growing region which has been less affected by the armed conflict and is less polarised. These areas also have strong cultural traditions of mutual and inter-family support networks;
- Older youth (16-18 years old) who have been in the armed groups for several years are extremely hard to place, as are youth with drug addictions or psychological problems. Foster care families tend to be poorly equipped to take on these cases.

Lessons learned: family reunification

- Due to challenges associated with foster care and family reunification, it is likely that centre-based care in urban areas will continue to be the norm for most demobilised youth, given their ages and their need for sustained educational support and skills development. Large cities offer anonymity, which can act as a form of protection;
- There is a need for more collaboration between actors involved in the family reunification process, including the mobile support units, and the Transition Homes and Specialised Care Centres that have gained a great deal of experience in working with demobilised youth and their families;
- Moving families from more insecure areas to join demobilised youth can be an important measure in family reunification and may protect younger siblings from recruitment and family members from retaliation by armed groups;

- It is important to find resources and trained facilitators to improve the preparatory process for family reunification, which should take into consideration the concerns and fears of youth, as well as those of their families;
- It is important to undertake pilot projects at the community level in rural areas, working with local leaders, NGOs, church and youth groups and other civil society actors to prepare the community, as well as the family, for the return of former child soldiers. At present, reunification is treated as a 'family problem' without sufficient analysis of the dynamics in small rural communities and the role of the broader community in facilitating the return and reintegration of demobilised youth. Both in the case of foster care and family reunification, the preparation and participation of the local community is an urgent priority.

3.2.2 Sexual and reproductive health

Many young people taking part in the programme rapidly form couples and there is a high rate of teenage pregnancy. Whilst teenage pregnancy is generally quite high in Colombia, psychologists and youth workers note that the motivation and intent of former child soldiers in starting a family is quite distinct: *"These are not accidental pregnancies as a result of sexual relations. These young people are in a hurry to start their own families, and have kids right away. For them, having children is part of mourning their own lost childhoods. These are the 'grandchildren of the war'"*, said a professional working with demobilised youth at a Specialised Care Centre.⁴⁴ When a young couple is expecting a child, ICBF may move the girl or couple out of the care centre, and set them up in their own apartment, which can add to their isolation. *"Once they are living on their own, they need a lot of psychological support because they become even more isolated"*.⁴⁵

The ICBF has contracted *Profamilia* - a leading family planning NGO in Colombia - to provide medical and sexual and reproductive health services and counselling to programme participants. Profamilia staff state that high rates of sexually transmitted diseases as well as high rates of teenage pregnancy pose a significant problem for demobilised youth. *"In the guerrilla, sex is permitted and widely practised, but pregnancy is not. The armed groups monitor and force both girls and boys to use contraceptives"*⁴⁶. UNICEF and *Defensoría del Pueblo* have confirmed that, of a sample of 525 youth in the programme in 2005, 90.5% of girls and 82.8% of boys said they were forced to use contraception. Once in the programme, where youth are given a choice, only 9.5% of girls and 10.3% of boys continued to use contraception.⁴⁷

Engaging youth in a dialogue about their life plans, overall sexual and reproductive health and alternatives to early parenthood is a programme priority.

Lessons learned: sexual and reproductive health

- Comprehensive sexual and reproductive health interventions are an extremely important and innovative aspect of the DDRR programme in Colombia. They enable youth to make fundamental choices about their bodies and their futures, which they were denied as members of armed groups.
- Pregnancy rates in the programme are starting to decrease following a recent change in US government policy to allow *Profamilia* to provide the youth with information and access to family planning.⁴⁸

3.2.3 Gender stereotyping

International DDRR policy and programming often fails to address the gender dimensions of children's recruitment into armed groups and the specific needs of former male and female child soldiers in the reintegration process. For example, studies in Colombia and elsewhere indicate that girls may be more vulnerable to recruitment after experiencing abuse or mistreatment, or being forced to take on undue responsibilities for family members at a young age.⁴⁹

It is important to identify the specific needs of demobilised male and female child soldiers, and the different challenges they may face as they try to integrate into civilian life. For some girls, belonging to an illegal armed group gives them a sense of power and control that they may not otherwise experience living in a relatively conservative, 'machista' society. For boys on the other hand, being strong and a good fighter are more aligned with dominant ideas about masculinity in Colombian society.

In the Colombian case, there are significant differences in terms of the roles of girls and women within the opposing illegal armed groups. In the guerrilla groups FARC and ELN, women are valued for being strong and capable, and treated as equal to male soldiers. However, in paramilitary groups, conservative gender stereotypes are more common and as such women are more likely to be treated as sexual objects. These dynamics have a significant impact on the way that demobilised boys and girls interact with members of the opposite sex, and on their perception of their own gender identity.

For many female former child soldiers, particularly those from guerrilla groups, life outside of the armed group can be unsettling, particularly if they are expected to adhere to traditional gender-specific roles: 'Because [the girls] changed as a result of their experiences, they challenge traditional roles that they cannot accept, hence the notion of 'troublesome girls' who do not adhere to normal gender roles.'⁵⁰

“The girls from the guerrillas are fighters – without the typical socialisation of many urban Colombian girls”, according to Profamilia staff. “When the girls first demobilise, they feel strong, good about themselves. They feel pretty. But after some time in the programme – in the city – they don’t feel so pretty. Their self-image, which reflected the values of the armed group, begins to erode in the face of billboards and ads that promote a very different ideal of femininity than what they are used to.”

In its current design, the programme offers little to help girls understand and articulate their feelings and put into perspective contrasting gender stereotypes. The skills and vocational training offered to demobilised girls seem to confirm gender stereotypes, suggesting that for a successful transition to civilian life they should become a hairdresser, beautician, dressmaker or caterer, and a mother.

Lessons learned: gender stereotyping

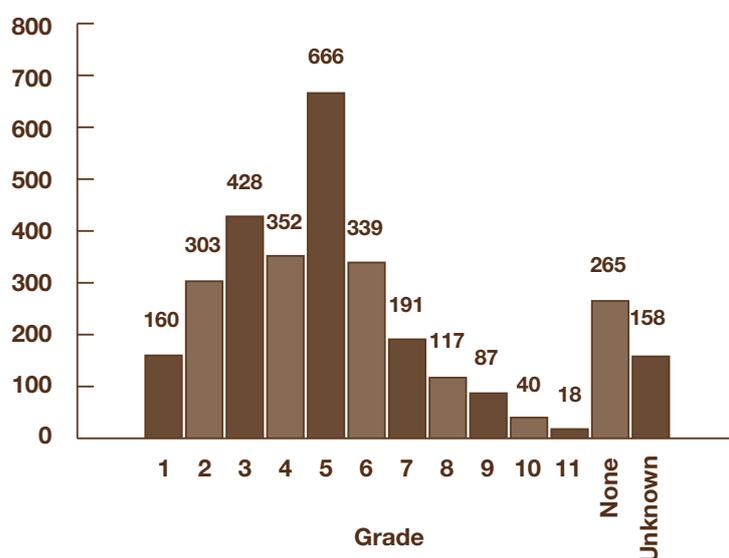
- The reintegration programme should address the issue of gender stereotypes and explore with young women how reintegration into civilian life does not have to mean complying with traditional notions of 'femininity'. Otherwise, a certain number of girls may prefer to return to armed groups that may value and encourage non-traditional gender roles and models of femininity.
- Youth care workers, educators, policy makers and programme planners should be encouraged to critically analyse the gender assumptions underlying many aspects of the programme.

3.2.4 Formal education

An essential element of reintegration is access to education and income generating opportunities.⁵¹ This is closely linked to the psychosocial aspects of the programme because establishing a new identity for the child soldier depends on a feeling of success in learning and productive activities. According to Verhey, ‘identity and positive meaning in their civilian life is gained through appropriate, contributive roles in their families and communities.’⁵² In Colombia as elsewhere, access to education is one of the most often requested means of support by former child soldiers, but is often forgone for economic reasons. All demobilised youth interviewed were concerned about obtaining a basic education as a stepping stone to accessing vocational or professional training and ultimately employment. However, considering that 70% of the youth have only a Grade 5 education or less and 8.5% have never been to school, they have a long and difficult road ahead.⁵³

The programme offers two types of educational support. Youth are registered in accelerated formal education classes in state schools which offer ‘catch-up’ or adult education classes. Youth are also given tutoring and help with their homework within the Transition Homes and Specialised Care Centres by centre staff.

Figure 5. Years of schooling of demobilised youth in ICBF programme



According to educators and youth care workers, demobilised youth become easily frustrated and demotivated by the hurdles they need to overcome to acquire basic literacy and numeracy skills. They experience low self-esteem as academic learners, aware that they are unable to do things that much younger children normally learn in school. According to educators, it is difficult for the youth to understand the rights and responsibilities of being a student, not having grown up within the formal education system.⁵⁴ It is also common to experience rejection and stigmatisation by their peers and, in some cases, even by teachers and school administrators.

Educators in the schools which receive former child soldiers face the additional challenge of lacking an inter-disciplinary team of staff to support them. The teachers are given no additional support to teach a group with which they are highly unfamiliar. Whilst YMCA and other programme practitioners have actively sought to share their experiences in working with demobilised youth, there is still much fear and ignorance amongst teaching staff.

Lessons learned: formal education

- In order to overcome insecurity and shame as learners, a personalised individual or small-group approach is most successful for demobilised youth. As such, more teaching staff are required per capita for former child soldiers than are required by other learners. Additional support is also required to help youth complete homework after hours;
- Teachers may require specialised training to help them understand the psycho-social needs and learning styles of demobilised youth;
- Whilst an accelerated learning programme, 'CAFAM', exists and is appropriate for the early stages of the programme, as youth progress, many find that it becomes routine and boring. New, more stimulating curricula and streamlined programmes should be developed as a priority, to help youth achieve academic success;
- Better coordination is needed at the local level between all actors involved: ICBF, group homes, NGOs, educational authorities and schools. There have been encouraging cases in which groups of demobilised youth were registered in schools, and the teachers provided with appropriate training in advance;
- Directly addressing the resistance within the educational community to receiving, accepting and assisting demobilised youth is important. As in the rest of Colombian society, educators may resent making special efforts or significant investments on behalf of a few demobilised youth when there are many other groups of children who cannot even afford to register in school, afford books, uniforms or transportation. As a spokesperson for the Bogotá Secretary of Education stated: *"I have very few resources and many children who can't even get into school! Where do you put the money?"*⁵⁵
- Programme practitioners and policy makers must challenge the tendency to 'marginalise' and segregate demobilised youth, keeping them together in formal and vocational education groups. Reintegration programmes should provide social and educational spaces where demobilised youth and other youth can mix and learn with one another, otherwise no effective reintegration can occur;
- An annual national conference of educators and professionals working with demobilised youth—sponsored by ICBF, the Ministry of Education, IOM, ILO and other agencies—has been an effective strategy for sharing challenges and lessons learned.

3.2.5 Supporting income generation

Successful DDDR programmes link education and income generating activities to broader rehabilitation efforts, and include support for family livelihood needs, which are often the root cause of children joining armed groups. Good examples exist from experiences in Angola, where the DDDR programme supported the establishment of micro-enterprises such as bakeries to provide former child soldiers and their families with an income, as well as supporting apprenticeships through providing materials to artisans or businesses. International experience teaches that 'a balance must be achieved between the child soldier's need to earn income and the need to resume education'.⁵⁶

The need to address this balance was behind the original design of the DDDR programme in Colombia, which involved an emphasis on increasing formal schooling for demobilised youth as well vocational training to prepare youth for establishing and running their own micro-enterprise. According to government policy, demobilised youth had two years within which to complete the programme and receive their certification as ex-combatants (CODA), after which they would receive 8 million pesos (approximately US\$4,000) to start a micro-enterprise, or, if they chose, to purchase an apartment. This lump sum provided an important incentive for voluntary demobilisation, however many youth currently in the programme are frustrated by delays preventing them from accessing these funds.

Several lessons learned have led to a reassessment of government policy surrounding grants to ex-combatants. Firstly, the two-year timeframe for accessing reintegration funds can be discriminatory. Some youth were very young at the time of demobilisation and had difficulty completing the programme, or experienced delays in the processing of their cases and therefore risked losing their entitlement. In addition, adult ex-combatants faced no similar timeframe for accessing their reintegration packages. Thanks to lobbying by a number of national and international NGOs, the programme no longer has a required timeframe for completion.

Secondly, very few demobilised youth in Colombia have been able to establish successful small enterprises, and many quickly spent the money intended to help them establish a livelihood. Programme practitioners could only identify one young person who had managed to develop a successful enterprise upon leaving the programme.⁵⁷ Based on the experience of programme practitioners, educators and vocational training staff, most former child soldiers are too young and lack the life skills, formal education and maturity to establish and maintain a successful enterprise on their own. Without strong family and institutional support, in almost all cases their businesses fail.

Displacement poses a huge challenge to running an effective micro-enterprise. Without the advice and support of family and friends, youth are likely to be taken advantage of by strangers. They also lack the knowledge and understanding of the local market. Many are eager to send money home to family members, and quickly use up the small amount they have left for investment.

New modalities for state support and reparations

The difficulties posed by the micro-enterprise scheme have led to the recognition by educators and policy makers that more investment is needed in formal education, vocational training and preparing youth for employment. They now consider finding job placements and apprenticeships an important part of the reintegration process for demobilised youth, who need to learn the norms of the workplace and formal labour market before they can become successful entrepreneurs. The National Training Service (*SENA – Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje*) is now increasingly delivering training programmes to demobilised youth to prepare them for paid employment. Government policy is being re-examined in favour of an ‘open-ended’ commitment to former child soldiers – encouraging them to stay in school and continue to train for as long as they wish, and go to university if they secure a place. In this scenario, more skills training would be available but the cash amount could be converted into a loan, rather than a one-off grant.

On the one hand, this open-ended policy appears to be a positive development. It recognises that the obligations of the State for its failure to protect the youth and prevent their recruitment will require long-term state-supported vocational training. It also recognises that education and reparations for a lost childhood involve more institutional support than an initial cash payout. On the other hand, the prospect of receiving cash and setting up a small enterprise remains very appealing to the demobilised youth and it would be hard to convince them that a loan is as attractive. The Colombian state continues to face difficulties determining adequate and appropriate reparations that would be both valid in the eyes of the former child soldiers and effective in supporting their longer-term reintegration process.

Finally, the strategy of refocusing the programme on job readiness and placements has come up against the biggest challenge to demobilised youth – public fear, anger and stigmatisation. Preparing youth for the labour market is a crucial but challenging element of the social reintegration process. In a country where youth unemployment was over 37% in 2003⁵⁸, the general public and many employers do not see why this particular group of young people should be given any preferential treatment or support. As discussed in greater detail in Section 3.3, demobilised youth are largely perceived by Colombian society as ‘perpetrators’ rather than ‘victims’ of the armed conflict.⁵⁹

Lessons learned: state support for income generation

- The state must establish non-discriminatory timeframes for demobilised child soldiers to access benefits packages;
- Whilst in some countries support for starting micro-enterprises may have provided a solution to the income generating needs of former child soldiers and their families, in Colombia, this has not been the case. The experience in Colombia shows that young people who launch enterprises without adequate preparation, experience, skills and support, most often fail;
- It is important to perceive the process of state reparations to former child soldiers as a long-term investment rather than a one-time pay out. Financial grants to former child soldiers could be a valid part of the reparations made to them as victims of forced recruitment;
- DDRR programmes should support the livelihood needs of former child soldiers with appropriate vocational training and job readiness training (how to prepare a CV, letter of application, interview skills, presentation skills, etc), rather than micro-enterprise projects alone. Job placement is an important service to youth, who find it difficult to overcome fear and stigmatisation from employers and the general public. Vocational training, job readiness training and job placements need to be linked to a broader strategy to address social stigmatisation of former child soldiers.

3.2.6 Psycho-social counselling and support

International studies have emphasised the crucial importance of education, training and income generation – be it through starting a small business or through employment – for effective reintegration of former child soldiers.⁶⁰ Some have expressed concern about the amount of resources that rehabilitation and reintegration programmes spend on ‘psycho-social’ support and counselling relative to these other areas. According to Beth Verhey, ‘reflecting on lessons learned, counsellors in Liberia estimated that less than 5% [of former child soldiers] required special psychological care. NGOs in El Salvador put such estimates at less than 2%’.⁶¹ Recently, an empirical study of the consequences of child soldiering on 1,000 households and 741 former child soldiers in Uganda found that the psychological effects were moderate to low, with the exception of those involved in committing atrocities. On the other hand, the consequence of child soldiering on educational attainment and income generation was very high.⁶²

According to Blattman (2006), the solution for future reintegration policy and programming is increased spending on literacy, education, agricultural improvement and enterprise development, and less on psycho-social support and a therapeutic response.⁶³ In Colombia, the experience of practitioners shows the need for a more nuanced understanding of what type of psycho-social support is needed and how it relates to educational achievement, livelihood generation and successful reintegration. YMCA Bogotá’s psycho-social approach is based on the premise that giving meaning to their experiences of the past, present and future enables the young people to increase their motivation and productivity, which directly translates into practical achievements.

YMCA Bogotá’s approach to the reintegration of demobilised youth continues to emphasise psycho-social support. However, this support is of a practical, day-to-day nature, helping youth meet their self-set objectives. It does not emphasise an individual psycho-therapeutic model. Rather, experience with the Colombia reintegration programme has permitted the YMCA and others to generate distinct models of psycho-social support suited to the needs of demobilised youth.

In the minority of cases in which a therapeutic psychological response is required, practitioners have explored how best to deliver these services. Most of the Transition Homes and the Specialised Care Centres have professional psychologists on their staff. Yet some questioned the appropriateness of having staff of the institutional care facility providing psychological therapy: *“The youth would benefit from having a psychologist outside the Centre, rather than being counselled by a person you see everyday. They need someone who is more at arms length. Professionals who have too many roles and tasks to do inside the Centre can lose their empathy, and there is also a danger that confidentiality can be compromised if they share information covered in therapy with the Centre team.”*⁶⁴

YMCA BOGOTÁ'S CARE MODEL

“When we started working with this population a few years ago, we had no idea what to expect. But our discovery is that there are fewer differences than you would think between them and other youth. The real difference is in terms of their legal status and the extent of violation of their rights.” YMCA Bogotá youth care staff

The rehabilitation and reintegration model developed by YMCA Bogotá focuses on empowering young people to ‘deinstitutionalise’ and reconstruct their lives, first within the centre, then within the broader community and in relation to their families. The centre’s interventions are intended to help them deal with their psychological and physical displacement, to avoid a feeling of loss of identity and to help re-establish relations with their families and society at large. Centre staff encourage the programme’s participants to consider their lives as a ‘work in progress’ – to understand that where they were before has brought them to where they are now, and that they can start to visualise and articulate where they want to be in the future. Indeed, most young people interviewed appeared to have a clear idea of what they wanted to achieve, personally and professionally, and felt quite positive about the future.

The support provided by the programme is emotional, psychological and also physical. For protection and security, youth in the Transition Homes are taken out together, as a group, always accompanied by Transition Home staff. By the time they enter the Specialised Care Centre, youth have more autonomy, know the city better, and are allowed more freedom of movement. Generally, however, the young people in the programme are assisted with their studies and accompanied to school, workshops, doctors’ visits or on outings as a group. The logistics are complex and the workload demanding, as staff find themselves playing multiple roles: friend, counsellor, rule-keeper and chaperone.

Lessons learned: psycho-social counselling and support

- The importance of establishing relationships, based on trust, respect and equality. Former child soldiers need to ‘unlearn’ relationships based mainly on authority and hierarchy as they experience in the armed groups;
- The importance of supporting youth in all areas: from helping with their studies, to providing emotional support, and fun, creative and cultural activities;
- The need to respect children’s right to knowledge of and participation in decisions that affect their lives: one of the biggest challenges for youth care workers is dealing with false expectations that military personnel and others may have given child soldiers about the DDRR process in order to entice them into demobilising. For example, youth often believe that they will receive their compensation package immediately and do not expect a lengthy bureaucratic process. Further, they may not realise that they can be pursued for crimes that they committed while they were with the armed group. Staff must help the young people understand the legal and bureaucratic process that they are in, so they are in a position to make informed decisions about their future;
- The importance of helping youth to recognise their natural abilities and interests, both through their studies and in other areas;

- The importance of helping youth talk about and accept their differences. Having youth from both opposing armed groups can produce a highly-charged atmosphere. Youth who have been captured are particularly unprepared to face the ‘enemy’ in such close quarters. Youth interviewed confirmed that they experienced intense fear of being attacked by another resident upon first arriving at the centre. With time, these fears diminish as staff members engage the participants in discussions to explore how the conflict has affected them, what assumptions they have about others, and what they learn from living together day to day.

From their experience in working with demobilised youth, YMCA Bogotá has developed a care model which focuses on giving new meaning to the demobilised youths’ personal life paths through a module called ‘Constructing Scenarios of Peace’. The process helps the youth develop a ‘Life Project’. The participants keep a journal which encourages them to reflect on where they have been and where they are going, including:

- An analysis of my life
- Telling my life story
- The saddest moments
- Life before recruitment
- My personal mission
- Who influenced me
- How I would like to be remembered
- Where I would like to be in one year – in 10 years – in 20 years
- My life values
- My life for a better Colombia – how can I improve society?
- What I have achieved – knowledge of my abilities, preferences, and weaknesses

3.3 ADDRESSING STIGMATISATION

The single biggest challenge to reintegration raised by the programme participants, youth care workers, government officials and the broader network of educators and other professionals is the stigmatisation of former child soldiers in Colombia – by neighbours, peers, teachers, employers, and Colombian society at large. This is as much an issue in the communities of origin as it is in the urban centres that receive the former child soldiers. Demobilised youth experience stigmatisation – from rejection by schoolmates to the inability to get a job. YMCA Bogotá, which typically relies heavily on community volunteers to enrich its programming, struggles to find volunteers willing to work with this population. At the time of the research visit, one YMCA Transition Home was being closed down by the municipality and forced to move, due to fear and pressure by neighbours. ICBF did not intervene.

Ongoing stigmatisation is the result of fear and anger amongst the general population, neither of which has been adequately addressed by the programme, the Government or the civil society organisations working with demobilised youth. The fear ranges from being drawn into contact with armed groups, being caught in the line of fire, or being identified and targeted by armed groups as someone who is too vocal or too active on this issue. Public anger in Colombia results from the fact that the armed conflict continues. Few Colombians have escaped without losing family members and friends to the conflict, and millions of people have been displaced, significantly contributing to increased poverty levels. Basic social services such as education, healthcare and housing are overwhelmed by the level of need. At the same time, ex-combatants are seen to be receiving generous support, services and payment packages to demobilise, with impunity for the crimes they have committed against fellow Colombians.

Neither government nor national civil society actors involved in the DDDR programme actively engage in public debate on these issues, perhaps out of fear of retaliation against themselves or the youth they are trying to protect. The role of advocacy around the DDDR process and child soldiers has been taken up by a small number of largely international NGOs, such as Save the Children, Terre des Hommes, the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers and Human Rights Watch. However, their efforts appear more oriented to international actors than Colombian society. Effective social reintegration of former child soldiers cannot take place unless both youth and society at large are engaged in the process. According to one NGO representative involved in the process: *“What we need is a campaign to build awareness about these youth as victims. Although they are now legally recognised as victims, socially they continue to be stigmatised as victimisers”*⁶⁵

The YMCA recognises that it is important to involve the largest possible number of civil society sectors in helping to address the problems faced by demobilised young people. There is a great lack of understanding within Colombian society in general surrounding the factors associated with children and young people joining illegal armed groups. To raise awareness of these factors, the telling of experiences and life stories of demobilised youth can be a very useful tool. However, to use such material it is necessary to first obtain the authorisation and endorsement of the ICBF, given current regulations around the protection of minors and recounting of their experiences. As a result, YMCA Bogotá is cautious in trying to challenge negative public perceptions of former child soldiers, but has made some efforts in this direction. For example, they have held “Cineforos” – public film screenings that were followed by an opportunity for the public to meet and hear about the experiences of former child soldiers. In addition, the YMCA plans to hold a workshop for demobilised youth where they will present videos about their lives and experiences as child soldiers, in order to put a human face on the issue.

Lessons learned: addressing stigmatisation

- The DDDR programme for child soldiers in Colombia focuses on ‘protecting’ demobilised youth and Colombian society from each other by keeping them separate, rather than openly addressing the issue of fear and stigmatisation that each group has for the other;
- Full reintegration of former child soldiers will not be possible until there is a broad-based social debate and campaign to raise public awareness about the status of former child soldiers as victims of the armed conflict, victims of the crime of recruitment by armed actors and victims of the denial of many of their rights under the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (see also Section 3.4);
- A public awareness campaign could begin anywhere, within schools or other social spaces where demobilised youth and others interact, but must begin soon, or the significant investment made in the reintegration effort will be jeopardised;
- More actors from civil society, at the local and national level – including the church, municipalities, human rights organisations, teachers federations and other organisations concerned with child rights and protection – need to be engaged in a discussion about what they can do to facilitate reintegration of demobilised youth;
- Understanding, reconciliation and meaningful reintegration of former child soldiers cannot take place in Colombia without a national process of truth, justice and reconciliation, in which society at large and the many victims of the violence are recognised and reparations made for the massive violations of their rights. Demobilised youth are caught up in the social outrage at the impunity of the leaders and key members of armed groups, who are seen to benefit from state support whilst their killings and crimes against humanity often go unrecognised, unnamed and unpunished.

3.4 RIGHTS, LEGISLATION AND LEGAL STATUS

As part of the DDDR programme, it has been important for all organisations involved to understand the nature of the violations of former child soldiers' rights and their status as victims of the armed conflict and the crime of illegal recruitment. It has also been important for practitioners to understand and be able to clearly explain to youth that their testimony to the authorities on acts committed as child soldiers could eventually be used against them, taking into account the new national *Law on Childhood and Adolescence*⁶⁶.

UNICEF and the *Defensoría de Pueblo* have emphasised the need for awareness raising and training to ensure that the courts and judiciary, among others, recognise former child soldiers first and foremost as victims of the conflict, taking into account their vulnerability and their precarious ability to exercise their rights prior to recruitment.⁶⁷ These organisations have also encouraged the courts and judiciary to recognise the total negation of child soldiers' rights whilst in the armed groups, and their recruiters' violations of international humanitarian law. In line with Colombian law and the jurisprudence of the Constitutional Court, all demobilised youth are considered victims of the armed conflict, and since the degree of their 'voluntarism' is unknown, they should be - and are in practice - treated as victims of the crime of 'illegal recruitment', due to their status as minors. The *Defensoría* among others, has insisted that once the minor has demobilised, the response of the State must be in line with its international obligations to ensure the best interests of the child and the restitution of his/her rights.

The *Law of Justice and Peace* (Law 975) was passed to facilitate the demobilisation in the context of peace negotiations with armed groups. It laid down conditions by which armed groups could hand over minors that they had illegally recruited without losing benefits provided to them under this law.⁶⁸ Yet several armed groups have chosen not to formally demobilise minors, but rather send them away to turn themselves in on an individual and seemingly voluntary basis. Such practices cast into doubt whether or not the youth was ever a victim of the crime of illegal recruitment, which might ultimately affect their rights to justice and reparations. Also, ICBF, which is responsible for protecting minors from recruitment, has never taken legal action against any armed group for the crime of illegal recruitment, whether the armed group has admitted to this or not. The practices of the armed groups and the failure by the State to take legal action against those who have recruited youth conceal the act of recruitment and negate the responsibility of armed actors who practised it.

Furthermore, the judicial treatment of youth under Law 975 is disproportionate to that of the demobilised adults who were responsible for recruiting them, but are not punished for doing so. While adult ex-combatants enjoy impunity, the Constitutional Court in its decision C-203-05 has found that whilst demobilised minors 'are considered victims of the armed conflict, this does not exempt them from all penal responsibility'.⁶⁹ Child rights advocates in Colombia are challenging this contradiction, as it is particularly unjust for children to be punished for acts committed while members of armed groups, whilst their adult recruiters and commanders enjoy impunity. The dichotomy of treating demobilised minors as both victims and perpetrators is also found in Law 1098 (2006) on Childhood, which lays down in 19 articles the rights of protection that should be enjoyed by all Colombian children. Three of these articles explicitly relate to demobilised youth as victims of rights violations. This law clearly states that recruitment of minors is a crime, and demobilised youth are both victims of the crime of recruitment, as well as the violation of their human rights. However, if they were found guilty of crimes against humanity their status as 'victims' would not prevent them from being found guilty as perpetrators.

Lessons learned: rights, legislation and legal status

- While in the current context of ongoing conflict it may be forgotten, practitioners should remember that the rationale for the programme is and must remain the restitution of the rights of former child soldiers as victims;
- There is an urgent need for the training of lawyers, judges and government officials with regard to interpretation and jurisprudence concerning former child soldiers to ensure that they are not unjustly punished while the real perpetrators enjoy impunity;
- Society at large needs to be made aware of what distinguishes former child soldiers from their adult leaders.

3.5 MANAGING THE DDRR PROCESS

In addition to the programmatic aspects, there have been challenges and lessons learned concerning the overall management of the DDRR process. Almost all representatives of international, national and civil society organisations would agree that coordination of resources and coherence of action has been a major challenge for programme implementation.

Several organisations, including NGOs and universities, are developing and operating programmes, but these organisations often don't know what others are doing and there is no forum to share learning and assess initiatives for effectiveness. For example, the Universidad Nacional had received EU support to set up a programme of productive activities for demobilised youth but by the time the funds arrived, the programme was nearing completion. While this appears to have been an interesting effort there has been no systematic assessment of whether this was an appropriate use of resources.

Organisations in Bogotá working closely with demobilised youth on a day-to-day basis, feel that the process of coordination, joint learning and information sharing between international, state and civil society actors must be improved.⁷⁰

Lessons learned: managing the DDRR process

- According to practitioners, there is a need to develop more participatory management processes where service providers working most closely with youth can engage in dialogue with government and ICBF officials and give meaningful feedback based on their direct experience in working with youth;
- There is a need for a round table discussion of all actors involved at the municipality level to help coordinate, improve logistics and share good practice.

3.5.1 Caring for the caregivers

“When I started working here, I had really bad dreams for months. The dreams were a way of clearing my mind of all the horrible stories I heard from the kids – what they had been through. I couldn't speak to anyone else outside the Centre about the things I had heard and seen. Even my family doesn't understand why I am working with these kids.” YMCA Bogotá staff member

Several international cases have demonstrated the importance of establishing consistent relationships of care and trust in DDRR programmes for demobilised youth.⁷¹ Yet at the same time, staff turnover tends to be high, due to the high level of stress and poor working conditions involved in dealing with this group. In Colombia, the strain on staff of the Transition Homes and Specialised Care Centres is compounded by public frustration and outrage with the cost of DDRR programmes, which are seen to be at the expense of projects could benefit those viewed as 'real' victims of the conflict, such as displaced people and victims of kidnappings and assassinations.

- According to youth workers, a number of factors make their roles both professionally and personally challenging:
- The job feels never-ending, as for every youth who leaves the centre, new ones arrive;
- Staff members have to deal with the high expectations that youth bring with them about how life will be after demobilising. It is often a strategy used by the military to entice youth to demobilise from the guerrilla by embellishing the facts about what lies ahead. Youth workers in the Transition Homes and Specialised Care Centres are left to deal with the frustrations of youth with the institutional procedures and the slow timeframe for completing the reintegration programme;
- While they are officially operating in a network of other supportive institutions (in the areas of education, healthcare, etc.), staff feel they receive little cooperation and support from supposed partner organisations;
- Even their own family members do not always understand why they choose to work with this particular group of young people and may fear being drawn into violence associated with acts of revenge and retaliation.

A lesson learned from the Colombian case is that the design and implementation of reintegration programmes need to include peer and professional support groups for youth care workers. Particularly in Colombia, where demobilised youth are widely perceived as perpetrators rather than victims of the conflict, there is a need to provide extra support to youth care workers who may be judged and ostracised for doing their jobs.

3.5.2 Funding challenges

In most peace settlements and post-conflict recovery programmes, child soldiers are either forgotten or lumped together under the general grouping of ‘ex-combatants.’ The result is that children typically receive inadequate support, not only to their detriment but also to the detriment of broader peace prospects. For example, in its first operation in Sierra Leone in the mid-1990s, the UN earmarked US \$34 million to disarm, demobilise and reintegrate ex-combatants. However, only US \$965,000 of this already small amount was directed towards the tens of thousands of child soldiers, despite the fact that they made up the bulk of the fighters in the war.⁷² As a result of the failures of the peace process, the original settlement in Sierra Leone did not hold and fighting broke out again, with many former child combatants rejoining the warring groups.⁷³

Inadequate attention continues to be paid to the child soldier issue in peace processes and post-conflict planning today, with demobilisation programmes for children lacking in many countries, from Afghanistan and Kosovo to East Timor and Liberia.⁷⁴ In fact, it was not until the 1999 Lomé Accord in Sierra Leone that any peace treaty even recognised the existence of child soldiers or made any specific provisions for their rehabilitation and reintegration into society.⁷⁵ As such, the agreement was groundbreaking in setting a mandate for both the local parties and international agencies to address the issue of child soldiers. This can serve as a reference point for peace talks in other conflict zones where children are directly involved.

In comparison to other DDRR processes, the Colombian experience appears to be relatively well-funded, but NGOs providing services to the state are unable to cover their costs.⁷⁶ Despite the hundreds of millions of dollars received in international aid to Colombia to respond to and prevent child recruitment, only a small percentage trickles down to those organisations/institutions actually providing assistance and services to the youth themselves.

In an important lesson, the process has shown that too much money is channelled towards the bureaucracy of the programme, whereas funds should be more effectively channelled towards the daily delivery of support and services for demobilised youth.

3.5.3 Measuring success and the need for follow-up

A key challenge for the programme will be to measure its success in terms of actual social and economic reintegration of demobilised youth. According to ICBF, given the brief period that youth are in the programme, it is difficult to set high targets. 70% are in the programme for two years or less, and nearly 40% are in the programme for nine months or less before they reach 18 - after which they are no longer covered by ICBF's child protection mandate.

The minimum criteria for success should be that for all youth leaving the programme:

- Their identity documents are in order;
- Their judicial situation is resolved, having been certified by the Operational Committee for the Giving Up of Arms (CODA);
- They have had a psycho-social evaluation;
- Contact with their birth family has been made and steps taken to assess the possibility of family reunification;
- Youth have acquired at least one additional year of formal schooling;
- They have passed through a process of 'giving meaning' to their experience as child soldiers and as demobilised youth.

In other aspects of its work, ICBF has begun to measure success in terms of the percentage of youth in family-based versus centre-based care, with the goal of having 75% of all youth in the programme in family-based care.

One important challenge will be to measure the ultimate success of the programme in preventing re-recruitment or recruitment of youth by armed groups or criminal gangs. While ICBF knows that approximately 20% of youth who come to the programme drop out before they have completed it, they do not have a system in place to follow-up on what has happened to them after leaving the programme.

Based on the experience of Colombia and DDRR programmes in other countries, it is important to establish a system for following up with youth who have completed the programme, as well as those who have dropped out. Without this it will be impossible to measure the long-term impact of any DDRR programme on the lives of former child soldiers.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS: TOWARDS AN AGENDA FOR ACTION ON CHILD SOLDIERS

4.1 CONCLUSIONS

This report has documented some of the key lessons learned from the national rehabilitation and reintegration process of former child soldiers in Colombia that was initiated in 1999. The experience of YMCA Bogotá and other organisations working with demobilised youth in Colombia has highlighted that the effective reintegration of this group faces a number of challenges, both at programmatic and policy levels. Full reintegration of former child soldiers, however, will not be possible until the issue of stigmatisation is addressed. A broad-based social debate is needed to raise awareness among the general public about the status of former child soldiers as victims of the armed conflict, by their recruitment into armed groups and the denial of their rights. Unless this campaign begins soon, the significant investment made in the reintegration effort will be jeopardised.

Although this report has focussed on lessons learned from the DDDR process with child soldiers in Colombia, it is hoped that these lessons can inform the design and implementation of ongoing and future DDDR processes worldwide, to improve their effectiveness in achieving reintegration. The following sections present key recommendations emerging from the findings of this report, aimed at both Colombian and international practitioners and policy-makers involved in DDDR processes.

4.2 RECOMMENDATIONS: PRACTITIONERS AND POLICY-MAKERS IN COLOMBIA

- **Coordination and communication between agencies/actors working with former child soldiers should be strengthened** to speed up the processing of their cases and find solutions to the legal and bureaucratic problems that keep youth in institutional care.
- ICBF and urban-based NGOs with experience in supporting former child soldiers should **undertake outreach work with community-based organisations** nationwide to enable them to effectively perform their roles in the rehabilitation and reintegration of former child soldiers and the family reunification process.
- **All agencies involved in the DDDR process should establish spaces for listening to organisations working directly with demobilised youth.** It is important to promote an open dialogue with high-level ICBF officials and other organisations responsible for caring for demobilised youth, with the aim of resolving any problems affecting the implementation of the process. Regular round table meetings of all actors involved in the process at the municipal level could address this need.
- Civil society actors at local and national level – including the Church, municipalities, human rights organisations, teachers' federations and other organisations concerned with child rights and protection – should engage in discussions on how to facilitate the effective reintegration of demobilised youth into Colombian society. This could lead to the **development of community pilot projects** to prepare the community for the return of former child soldiers. At present, reunification is treated as a 'family problem' without sufficient analysis of the role of the broader community in facilitating the return and reintegration of demobilised youth.
- **More resources should be allocated to the preparatory process for family reunification** which take into consideration the concerns and fears of demobilised youth, as well as those of their families.

- While an accelerated learning programme exists for demobilised youth and is appropriate for the early stages of learning, it does not adequately motivate learners to develop their academic skills. There is a need to **develop and share new stimulating educational curricula and programmes** to help demobilised youth achieve academic success. It is also important that youth understand the relevance of what they are learning, and how it will help them acquire relevant skills and knowledge for the working world.
- In order to overcome shame experienced by some demobilised youth as learners, **a personalised individual or small-group learning approach should be encouraged**. The ICBF and the education authorities in Colombia should allocate resources to provide more teaching staff per capita for demobilised youth. Educators will also require specific training to help them understand their specific psycho-social and learning needs. This would also help in overcoming their resistance to teaching this group.
- The *Defensoría del Pueblo* in Colombia should undertake **training of lawyers, judges and government officials on jurisprudence concerning the issue of former child soldiers**. This would ensure that child soldiers are not used as scapegoats when their group leaders enjoy impunity.
- Based on the experience of other DDRR programmes, it is strongly recommended that ICBF, supported by such agencies as UNICEF and IOM, establish a **system for monitoring and follow-up**, both of youth who have completed the programme, and those who have dropped out. Without systematic follow-up it will be impossible to measure the long-term impact of the programme.
- Understanding, reconciliation and meaningful reintegration of former child soldiers cannot take place in Colombia without a **national process of truth, justice and reconciliation**, in which society at large and the many victims of violence are recognised, and reparations provided for the violations of their human rights. It is important that international, national and local organisations unite to plan for such a process, whilst continuing to advocate and support efforts for a negotiated end to the ongoing conflict.

4.3 RECOMMENDATIONS: PRACTITIONERS AND POLICY-MAKERS INTERNATIONALLY

- **Gender awareness and analysis should be an integral element of DDRR programmes** for former child soldiers, with training provided to youth care workers, educators and policy makers to help them analyse underlying gender assumptions in any DDRR programme.
- **Comprehensive sexual and reproductive health interventions for former child soldiers are needed**, who need support to understand their rights and regain control over their own sexual and reproductive life.
- All actors in the DDRR programmes must **respect and facilitate children's right to participation in decisions that affect their lives**. All agencies involved in the implementation of the programme should be in a position to provide clear, truthful and timely information to youth about who is involved in their cases, what they can expect, and ensure that youth are consulted on decisions that affect their lives.
- **Peer and professional support networks should be established for youth care workers** working with demobilised youth, who may be judged and ostracised for working with this group.

- Practitioners in Colombia have managed to turn the potentially explosive situation of having demobilised youth from both sides of the conflict under the same roof into a **valuable learning experience for peaceful coexistence**. It would be interesting to use this approach as a model in future DDDR programmes.
- International agencies concerned about the issue of child soldiering should engage in and support the **development of more country-based comparative studies that help promote learning from DDDR experiences with child soldiers**. This should include establishing studies that track the progress of former child soldiers over time. Focused research is needed to identify factors that promote effective rehabilitation and reintegration, and prevent re-recruitment of former child soldiers into armed groups.
- The international community must **strengthen efforts to identify effective approaches for engaging armed non-state actors in addressing their use of child soldiers**, and prosecute child soldier users and abettors.
- Finally, it is vital that the international community **maintains its focus on the issue of child soldiers with continued monitoring and reporting, and in particular the implementation of UN resolution 1612⁷⁷**, together with **ongoing advocacy to prevent the use of child soldiers in conflicts worldwide**.

ANNEX 1.

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND RESOURCES

Alfredson, L. 'Child soldiers, displacement and human security'. Disarmament Forum: Children and Security. UNIDIR: 2002, no. 3. pp. 17-27.

Blattman, C. 'The Consequences of Child Soldiering'. HiCN Working Paper 22, November 2006.

Brett, R. 'Adolescents volunteering for armed forces or armed groups' *International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)*: December 2003, Vol. 85, No. 852, pp. 857-866.

Coalición contra la vinculación de niños, niñas y jóvenes al conflicto armado en Colombia, 'Fronteras: La Infancia en el Límite'. February 2007.

Coalición contra la vinculación de niños, niñas y jóvenes al conflicto armado en Colombia, 'Informe Alternativo a la Representante Especial de Secretario General de Naciones Unidas para la cuestión de los niños y los conflictos armados'. January 2006.

Cubides Serrano, P. 'Niños, niñas y jóvenes desvinculados del conflicto armado: entre el desarraigo y la reparación'. ACJ Bogotá, February 2007.

Defensoría del Pueblo/UNICEF, 'La Niñez y sus derechos. Informe defensorial. Una caracterización de las niñas, niños y adolescentes desvinculados de los grupos ilegales: inserción social y productiva desde un enfoque de derechos humanos'. Bulletin No. 9, November 2006.

Education Quality Improvement Programme (Equip1), Issue Paper 2, 'Role of Education and the Demobilization of Child Soldiers - Aspects of an Appropriate Education Program for Child Soldiers'. March 2007

Human Rights Watch, 'You'll Learn Not to Cry: Child Combatants in Colombia'. September 2003.

IDMC, 'Internal Displacement: Global Overview of Trends and Developments in 2006'. April 2007

International Crisis Group, 'Colombia's New Armed Groups'. May 2007.

Keairns, Y.E. 'The Voices of Girl Soldiers in Colombia', *Save the Children*: January 2003, Policy Briefing.

Knox, H. 'Incentives for violence and disincentives for peace? An analysis of the motivations of the FARC rebels and the elusive quest for conflict resolution in Colombia', September 2005. MSc Dissertation, DESTIN, LSE.

Mackay, S. and D. Mazurana. 'Where are the girls? Girls in fighting forces in Northern Uganda, Sierra Leone and Mozambique: their lives during and after war', *International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development*, 2004

OHCHR, et al. 'Action for the Rights of Children' Resource Pack on Child Soldiers. October 2002.

Save the Children, Briefing/Policy on International Reconstruction Effort in Liberia, 2004.

Singer, P.W. 'Addressing the Global Challenge of Child Soldiers' *Geneva Centre for Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF)*: 2005, Yearbook Series No. 3.

Verhey, B. 'Child Soldiers: Preventing, Demobilising and Reintegrating'. World Bank Post-Conflict Unit working paper. November 2001.

Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, 'Colombia's War on Children'. February 2004.

Y Care International, Baring Foundation project reports Years 1 – 3.

ANNEX 2. METHODOLOGY AND INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED

1. Methodology

This research was carried out using the following steps:

- Reviewing literature on child soldiering to identify key lessons learned and good practice based on international experiences of the demobilisation, disarmament, reintegration and rehabilitation of former child soldiers over the past decade.
- Holding discussions with Y Care International programme staff about the organisation's in-house experience in working with child soldiers in several parts of the world.
- Conducting a field mission to Colombia from 25 February to 7 March 2007 to meet with and learn from the extensive experience of YMCA Bogotá and other key actors who have helped shape policy, practice and programming for the reintegration of former child soldiers since 1999. This involved meetings, interviews and focus groups with staff and demobilised youth in the Casa Shalom Transition Home and the Shaddai Specialised Care Centre operated by YMCA Bogotá, amongst others. For a list of representatives of organisations interviewed, see below.
- Gathering, reviewing and analysing research reports and documentation in Colombia on various aspects of policy, programming and the evaluation of rehabilitation and reintegration efforts.

2. INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED

Representatives of:

- Alianza para la Niñez Colombiana
- CAFAM - Caja de Compensación Familiar
- Centro de Atención Especializada CAE Shaddai – The entire staff and demobilised youth
- CIREC - Centro de Rehabilitación
- Fundación Enseñame a Pescar
- Hogar Transitorio Casa Shalom – The entire staff and demobilised youth
- ICBF
- IOM
- Ministerio del Interior
- PROFAMILIA - Programa de Jóvenes
- Secretaría de Educación
- Secretaria de Salud
- SENA
- UNICEF
- Universidad Nacional Proyecto para la Reinserción y la Productividad

ANNEX 3. NUMBER OF DEMOBILISED YOUTH IN CARE FACILITIES IN FEBRUARY 2007

Type of care arrangement	Providers/setting	Youth being attended to on 28 February 2007	
		Number	Cumulative per cent
Institutional care facilities			
Hogares Transitorios (Transition Homes)	Casa Shalom (YMCA Bogotá)	21	
	Semillas de Amor	18	
	Nuevas Caminas	8	
CAE – Centro de atención especializado (Specialised Care Centres)	Esperanza Luz y Alegría	10	
	Shaddai (YMCA Bogotá)	30	
	Semillas de Paz	29	
	Heroes del Futuro	28	
	El Retorno	27	
	Puertas Abiertas	26	
	Nueva Luz	28	
	José (Enséñame a Pescar – Bogotá)	19	
	La Florida	30	
	Casa Juvenil (Youth Home)	Casa Juvenil Don Bosco (Cali)	9
Redes de Protección (Protection Network)	Bogotá Network	1	
	Other Regional Networks	19	60%
Family care arrangements			
	Foster homes (Bogotá)	37	
	Foster homes (Quindio)	31	
	Foster homes (Meta)	29	
	Foster homes (Caldas)	31	
	Families moved to be close to youth	10	
	Returned to birth families	60	
	Placed in special protection facilities	4	40%
Total		505	100%

APPENDICES

- ¹ Estimates of the number of child soldiers and countries where they are being recruited vary. According to a 2001 *Human Rights Watch* report (<http://hrw.org/campaigns/crp/where.htm>) children were being used in combat in the following countries: Colombia, Mexico, Peru, Russian Federation, Turkey, Yugoslavia, Algeria, Angola, Burundi, Chad, Republic of Congo, DRC, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Rwanda,, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Uganda, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Israel and OPT, Lebanon, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Sri Lanka, East Timor, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan
- ² *Human Rights Watch*. <http://www.hrw.org/campaigns/crp/index.htm>
- ³ *Human Rights Watch*. http://www.hrw.org/campaigns/crp/fact_sheet.html
- ⁴ Articles 1 and 2.
- ⁵ *Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights*, 'Ratifications and Reservations', http://www.ohchr.org/english/countries/ratification/11_b.htm
- ⁶ 'Convention Concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the *Worst Forms of Child Labour*' (No. 182) (17 June 1999), arts. 1-3.
- ⁷ *International Labour Organisation*, 'Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention: ratifications', <http://www.ilo.org/ilolex/cgi-lex/ratific.pl?C182>
- ⁸ For example, in Colombia it is estimated by ICBF that only 10-15% of demobilised youth have received support from the official DDR programme. In other DDR processes such as those in El Salvador and Angola, many youth have also slipped through the cracks. See Beth Verhey (2001)
- ⁹ *IDMC*, 'Internal Displacement: Global Overview of Trends and Developments in 2006', April 2007, page 6
- ¹⁰ *Human Rights Watch*, 'Colombia: Displaced and Discarded, The Plight of Internally Displaced Persons in Bogotá and Cartagena', October 2005, Section III
- ¹¹ *Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers*, 'Fronteras: La Infancia en el Límite'
- ¹² Alfredson, L., p.19
- ¹³ Verhey, 2001; Singer, 2005
- ¹⁴ Singer, 2005, pages 121-122
- ¹⁵ Knox, 2005, page 12
- ¹⁶ In June 2005, the Colombian Congress passed a controversial law known as 'Ley Justicia y Paz' which paved the way for the demobilisation of thousands of paramilitaries set to receive reduced jail terms for crimes committed. International human rights organisations expressed concern that this legislation would serve to strengthen the increasingly widespread problem of impunity in Colombia.
- ¹⁷ *International Crisis Group*, May 2007
- ¹⁸ *ILO*, 'Prevention and Reintegration of children involved in armed conflict: An Inter-regional Project' (internal project document, 2002)
- ¹⁹ Based on information provided during interviews with IOM, ICBF, YMCA and staff of other NGOs
- ²⁰ The numbers for 2007 cannot be used as an indicator as they only cover the first two months of the year.
- ²¹ Most post-conflict DDRR programmes are completed within two years after a cease-fire agreement (e.g. DDRR processes in Angola and El Salvador among others). See Verhey 2001
- ²² Based on information provided during interviews held in February/March 2007 in Bogotá between the author and representatives of IOM, ICBF, YMCA and other Colombian-based NGOs
- ²³ Following negotiations in the context of the Ralito I (July 2003) and Ralito II (May 2004) accords to provide a framework for demobilisation, AUC and the Colombian government signed an agreement which in April 2006 led to bloc by bloc demobilisation of over 32,000 AUC members by the end of 2006. See: *International Crisis Group*: http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?action=conflict_search&l=1&t=1&c_country=29
- ²⁴ Whilst it is claimed that the AUC no longer exists in Colombia, at the time of this research project several analysts commented that these groups had disbanded and taken advantage of demobilisation packages offered by the government, but were gradually reconstituting themselves under new identities in major urban centres.
- ²⁵ Based on information provided during interviews held in February/March 2007 in Bogotá between the author and representatives of IOM, ICBF and YMCA Bogotá, March 2007
- ²⁶ Observers in Colombia say it's possible that ELN will enter into peace negotiations with the Government within a few months. If so, this will represent a new phase of the process, with populations similar to the first and third waves but on a scale that might approach the large demobilisations of the 2002-2006 period
- ²⁷ Statistics from ICBF reports, shared with the author during interviews with ICBF representatives in Bogotá in March 2007
- ²⁸ *Ibid*
- ²⁹ *Ibid*
- ³⁰ ICBF continues to have a mandate for youth up to the age of 21 whose legal status has not yet been resolved by the government committee overseeing the implementation of the DDRR process
- ³¹ Interview with author and ICBF in Bogotá, March 2007
- ³² For more information, see Annex 3
- ³³ *Coalición contra la vinculación de niños, niñas y jóvenes al conflicto armado en Colombia*, 'Fronteras: La Infancia en el Limite'
- ³⁴ Verhey, 2001; Singer, 2005
- ³⁵ Interview between author and demobilised girl soldier in Bogotá, March 2007
- ³⁶ Interview between the author and Bogotá YMCA Programme Staff in Bogotá, March 2007
- ³⁷ Interview between the author and the Director of a Bogotá NGO, March 2007

- ³⁸ See, e.g., Verhey, 2001; Singer, 2005; Blatt, 2006; *UNHCR-Unicef-Save the Children* (2002)
- ³⁹ For detailed statistics, see Annex 3.
- ⁴⁰ The risks are also high for families of demobilised youth inhabiting zones of active conflict. For example, during the research team's visit to a YMCA care facility, a girl in the programme learned that her father had been killed as punishment for her voluntary demobilisation. According to centre staff, such cases are not uncommon.
- ⁴¹ *Defensoría del Pueblo* and UNICEF, November 2006, p.21
- ⁴² *Ibid*, p. 24
- ⁴³ One told a devastating story of how his mother, a commander of the FARC, took all his brothers to fight for her group, and had his father assassinated. To avenge his father's death, the boy joined paramilitaries only to lose his girlfriend and unit in a battle with the FARC. He said "I have no home to go to now...I am completely on my own". (Interview between the author and a former child soldier in Bogotá, March 2007)
- ⁴⁴ Interview between the author and professional of Bogotá NGO, March, 2007
- ⁴⁵ Interview between the author and *Profamilia* staff, March 2007
- ⁴⁶ *Defensoría del Pueblo* and UNICEF, p. 37
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid*
- ⁴⁸ Until two years ago, the policy of USAID, which was funding this component of the programme, did not allow the dissemination of contraception and related counselling.
- ⁴⁹ E.g., Yvonne Keairns (2003), Rachel Brett (2003), *Unicef and Defensoría del Pueblo* (2006)
- ⁵⁰ S. Mackay and D. Mazurana, 2004, p.53
- ⁵¹ *Education Quality Improvement Programme*, 'Role of Education and the Demobilization of Child Soldiers - Aspects of an Appropriate Education Program for Child Soldiers'
- ⁵² Verhey, op. cit., p.18
- ⁵³ See statistics from ICBF in Figure 3
- ⁵⁴ Based on interviews between author and staff of Secretary of Education for Bogotá District and YMCA Bogotá, March 2007
- ⁵⁵ Interview between the author and staff of the Secretary of Education, District of Bogotá, March 2007
- ⁵⁶ Verhey, op. cit, p.18
- ⁵⁷ Based on interviews between author, NGOs and child rights activists in Bogotá, March 2007.
- ⁵⁸ World Bank Indicators database, April 2003
- ⁵⁹ For example, a former child soldier and computer 'genius' found a part-time job working for a large company. The company liked him so much that they offered him a permanent position and asked him for some references. When the referee mentioned that the youth was one of the "brightest and most successful in the DDDR programme", the offer of employment was dropped. Programme practitioners had to work hard to convince the employer to take on the youth. Based on interview between the author and professional working with demobilised youth, Bogotá, March 2007.
- ⁶⁰ See Verhey (2001)
- ⁶¹ Verhey (2001), p.17
- ⁶² Blattman, C., 'The Consequences of Child Soldiering'
- ⁶³ *Ibid*
- ⁶⁴ Interview between author and a professional working with demobilised youth in Bogotá, March 2007
- ⁶⁵ Interview with author and YMCA Bogotá staff, Bogotá, March 2007
- ⁶⁶ The *Law on Childhood and Youth* was passed by Congress in August 2006 to strengthen child protection and align Colombian legislation with the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. However, NGOs such as the Colombian Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers expressed concern that the law would make it possible for demobilised youth to be prosecuted for serious crimes committed whilst in the armed group ('Fronteras: La Infancia en el Límite')
- ⁶⁷ *Defensoría del Pueblo* and UNICEF, op. cit.
- ⁶⁸ Law 975 of 2005, Articles 10 (3) and 64
- ⁶⁹ Corte Constitucional de Colombia, Sentencia C-203/05, 8 March 2005, http://www.secretariassenado.gov.co/leyes/SC203_05.HTM
- ⁷⁰ Interviews between the author, YMCA Bogotá staff and child rights activists, Bogotá, March 2007
- ⁷¹ Verhey, op. cit.
- ⁷² Singer (2005)
- ⁷³ *Ibid*
- ⁷⁴ For example, in Liberia, only 11% of the child soldiers were assisted in the first war's demobilisation programmes; *ibid*
- ⁷⁵ *Ibid*
- ⁷⁶ For example, the YMCA has calculated that it costs 5.8% more to operate the Transition Homes and Specialised Care Centres than funds provided by ICBF. This is in addition to aspects of the programme which IOM covers, such as family reunification visits and furnishings for the group homes.
- ⁷⁷ In 2005, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1612, which sought to establish a monitoring and reporting mechanism on the use of child soldiers, whilst imposing targeted measures against those who continue to recruit children as soldiers.

Y Care International is the international relief and development agency of the YMCA in the UK and Ireland. It works in partnership with YMCAs in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East to empower young people and their communities to find alternatives to a future of poverty and disadvantage, and to build lives and communities marked by hope and positive change.

Y Care International

**Kemp House
152-160 City Road
London EC1V 2NP
United Kingdom**

**Tel +44 (0)20 7549 3150
Fax +44 (0)20 7549 3151
enquiries@ycareinternational.org
www.ycareinternational.org**