

A photograph showing the silhouettes of four people—two adults and two children—gathered around a long wooden table. They are positioned in front of a large window with vertical blue bars. The scene is backlit by bright light from the window, creating a dramatic silhouette effect. The room appears to be an office or a meeting space, with a sign on the wall that partially reads "Le DIRECTEUR" and "Rm 7".

THE RECRUITMENT OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH INTO ARMED GROUPS

A VoiceMore Report from The Democratic Republic of the Congo

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OVERVIEW

This report outlines a project led by a group of young people living in North Kivu in The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), supported by War Child UK. It details their concerns regarding the recruitment of children and youth into armed group in their community, what they feel are the causes and consequences, the research they designed and conducted, and their recommendations for ways to address the issue.

WHAT IS VOICEMORE?

VoiceMore is War Child's youth advocates development programme which empowers young people affected by armed conflict to share their experiences and act to combat issues impacting them.

VoiceMore Groups in our programme countries discuss and debate how conflict affects children and youth in their area and what they feel could be done to help improve their lives. They are then supported to design and run their own advocacy projects in their local community, with War Child helping them elevate these concerns onto national and international platforms.

OBJECTIVES OF THE PROGRAMME

- Support young people to identify the challenges they and other children and youth face in the regions and country where they live, and to undertake advocacy action which brings about positive change within their communities and beyond.
- Enable young people to improve their well-being by gaining confidence, knowledge, and skills to honestly express their views, needs and rights, including understanding how to conduct research and advocacy.
- Promote the participation of youth in decision-making and raise the voices of young people affected by conflict to those in power.

VOICEMORE IN THE DRC

CONTEXT OF MASISI

The DRC, and North Kivu province in particular, has experienced many years of conflict and insecurity. The territory of Masisi, one of six territories of the province of North Kivu, has been severely affected.

It is populated by a wide variety of ethnic groups and has been at the centre of acute and violent conflict since the beginning of 1993, leading to huge numbers of displaced persons and refugees in the area. A multitude of armed groups, both local and foreign, continue to operate in the region. DRC is one of the richest countries in the world in terms of natural resources, especially cobalt, which is used in the manufacture of mobile phones. Years of war, political upheaval and mismanagement of mineral wealth have created instability, as different groups fight to exert control and access to resources such as minerals. Sporadic clashes across the province have continued for years, resulting in cycles of continuous displacement and rights violations.

As a result of this ongoing conflict, the population of the eastern region has very limited access to basic services such as education and healthcare, and communities live under the constant threat of violence. Opportunities to access jobs remain limited and most families depend on livestock and agriculture, however land conflicts and the repeated displacement of families (some of them into displacement camps) have plunged the population into extreme poverty and exacerbated insecurity, which has further limited possibilities for development. In addition to perpetuating cycles of poverty and child and human rights abuse, the presence of armed groups also results in the recruitment of children and youth, something which this report will outline in more detail.

The Masisi VoiceMore group formed part of a wider programme initiative called the Partnership Against Child Exploitation (PACE) which was funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). PACE was a consortium of different aid agencies, private sector organizations and an academic institution¹ working together to try and end the worst forms of child labour.



¹ Consortium members included: War Child UK, World Vision, Thomson Reuters Foundation, Columbia University, Fifty Eight and UN Global Compact Network UK (UNGC UK).

SETTING UP THE PROGRAMME

War Child UK supported the setting-up of VoiceMore Masisi in 2020. Community consultations were first held with local authorities, community leaders and youth to ensure understanding of the programme and its objectives. Then, together with the community, it was agreed how the young people should be selected.

Criteria included an equal gender split, ensuring opportunity for young people living with disabilities, young parents, equal representation of ethnic, religious groups and including some young people who were displaced. Due to the focus of PACE, youth with some experience of the worst forms of child labour were also prioritized. Young people in the community discussed and voted for who they felt should be selected for the programme to represent them. 20 spokespersons were nominated, aged between 17 and 23 years at the start of the programme.

VOICEMORE TRAINING SESSIONS

Before starting their advocacy project, both groups first completed two VoiceMore preparatory trainings², to help build confidence, knowledge and skills in acting as a spokesperson and understanding advocacy.

Young people covered topics such as the role of a spokesperson, children's rights, body language and non-verbal communication, active listening, public speaking, understanding people's perspectives, interviewing skills and keeping safe. Then they looked at the purpose and principles of advocacy action, before working together to identify the most significant issues they felt were affecting children and youth in their community, summarised below:

- Recruitment of children and young people into armed groups
- Exploitation of children and young people in artisanal (small scale) mining
- Exploitation of children and young people in brothels
- Exploitation of children and young people in cattle herding
- Lack of education for children
- Alcoholism among children and young people
- Sexual violence against children and young people
- Child labour which involves carrying heavy loads
- Youth unemployment
- Early marriage
- Kidnap by armed groups or gangs to extort ransoms from victims' families

² VoiceMore groups first complete a spokesperson training, then advocacy and research training, before moving on to plan and conduct their research then advocacy action.

- Theft of children in the market

To help decide on their main issue for their project, the young people then further discussed and analysed the following:

- The potential impact they felt they could have on the issue.
- Potential safety implications of speaking up on the issue.
- The level of vulnerability to harm or abuse of those affected.
- How much power those affected have to bring about change by themselves.

The group first narrowed their list to three issues they felt were most severe and detrimental, which included the recruitment and use of children and young people in armed groups, the exploitation of children and young people in mining, and the exploitation of children and young people in brothels. From these they decided to select one which they felt offered a good opportunity for the entire community to engage on, which was the recruitment and use of children and young people in armed groups.

The following chapters outline what the group felt are the were causes and impacts of the issue, who key stakeholders are, and what was already being done to address the issue, before moving on to their research and advocacy phases.

SITUATION OF CHILDREN IN ARMED GROUPS

Members of the VoiceMore group were particularly concerned about the impacts joining an armed group has on children's lives. Young people who join were at significant risk of injury, disablement, death, and psychological issues. While those who manage to leave face social exclusion and stigma in communities.

The young people felt these children and youth when living in the bush adopted negative coping mechanisms, such as drug use, and were often coerced or forced into committing crimes against civilians and other group members. For those who manage to leave, life continues to be extremely difficult. The group emphasised the significant stigma young people leaving face (especially girls), which hinders opportunities for integration back into families and communities, in addition to the possibility of retribution from armed groups, who see them as betraying them or carrying their information or secrets. The group felt that while children joined to try and find greater opportunity or to meet basic needs, ultimately involvement leads to far worse life chances.

"Being in the wild is extreme torture, eating is a problem, dressing is a problem, washing is a problem, there is no studying, you must rob other people in order to get something."

Child, Focus Group Participant

Beyond the impacts on children who join, the group also felt this form of exploitation has much wider impact at community level. Children and youth are used to increase size of armed groups

and carry out atrocities on behalf of leaders, leading to wider repercussions such as those outlined below:

- Increased insecurity in the region, which in turn causes displacement and reduces the possibility for development.
- High levels of violence in the community, as armed groups attach and loot villages to steal their livestock and possessions.
- Increase in sexual and gender-based violence, as members abuse others within groups and attack civilians.
- The creation of a sense of fear, stress, frustration and anger, which socially and psychologically impacts members of the community and relationships within the community.

"When you run away they hunt you down and you may die because they know you are going to tell all their secrets to the government."

Child, Focus Group Discussion

Despite this issue having such a huge impact on children, families and communities in the area, the young people asserted very little was being done to address it. This lack of action on the issue was one of their main motivations to also focus their project on this topic.

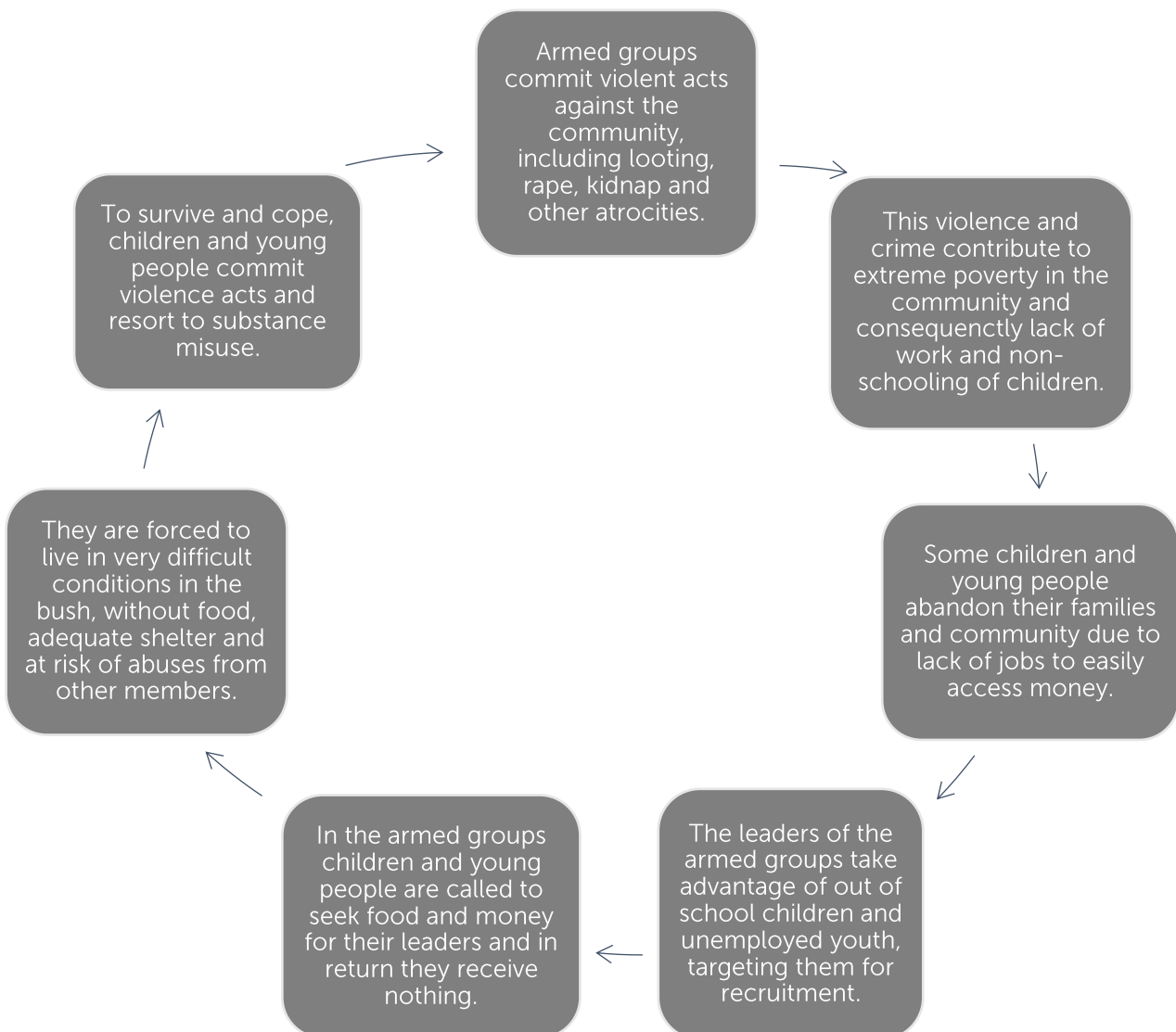


Photo Credit: Christian Jepsen

CYCLES OF VIOLENCE

After agreeing the focus for their advocacy project, the group then moved on to discussion sessions exploring in more depth what they felt were the drivers and consequences of the issue.

First the group identified what they felt was a 'vicious circle' effect of recruitment, as outlined below³:



³ It should be noted the cause and effect 'cycle of recruitment' presented here by the young people is an example and not intended to present the only possible set of reasons why young people join. Forced recruitment also exists in the area, in addition to the presence of territorial self-defence groups, which are other ways in which young people become engaged. See War Child's 'Tug of War' Report for further information: https://www.warchild.org.uk/sites/default/files/link-files/tug-of-war_children_in_armed_groups_in_drc_english.pdf

In this way the conditions that cause recruitment are sustained. This cycle also contributes to re-recruitment, as children join, leave, and then - through lack of other options - rejoin again.

After discussing this cause and effect relationship, the group then analysed in more depth what they felt were the root causes of the issue and wider impacts resulting from recruitment, as outlined on the following page.

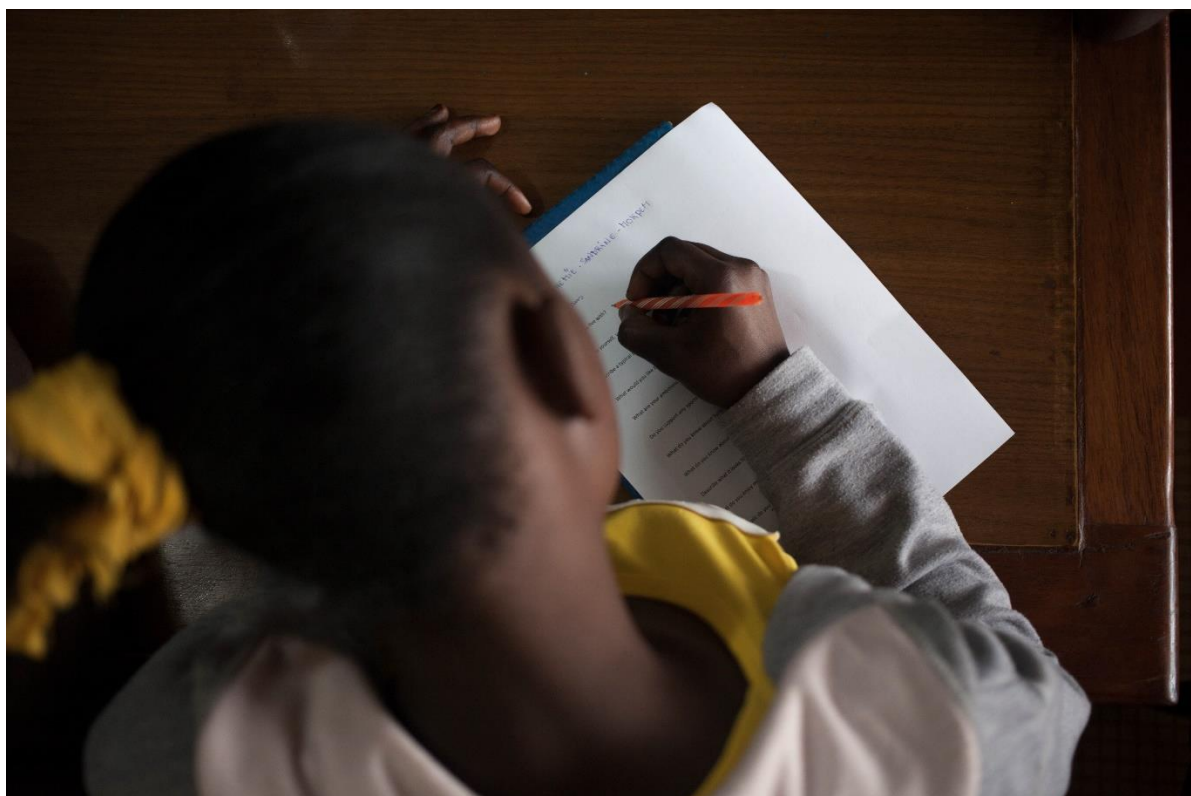


Photo Credit: Arete

CAUSES AND IMPACTS OF RECRUITMENT AND USE

Impacts of the Issue

Children and young people in armed groups become delinquents, drunkards, smokers of tobacco and other kinds of drugs.

It exacerbates poverty in the community.

Illiteracy and ignorance of the population due to lack of education.

Children and young people are emotionally traumatized/their psychologies are hurt.

Mismanagement of national and international services.

Non-respect of children's rights.

As a result of psychological problems and trauma people experience, in the future we will have a community of people who are not responsible.

Most children and young people die in the bush during tensions between loyalist forces and armed groups, or in clashes between armed groups.

Violent crime in the community, such as rape, looting, theft, killing and murder.

It prevents development of the region, province, and the country in the future.

We will have leaders who are immoral and corrupt.



The Recruitment of Children and Youth



Inaccessible education because of cost.

Land conflicts and power conflicts in the community.

Poor families are not able to provide for their children's basic needs.

Inadequate school infrastructure in the region.

Lack of youth support centres and children's clubs in the community.

To seek revenge following conflicts in the community.

Lack of fields to cultivate.

Some schools remain without subsidies from the government, some teachers remain unpaid.

Some parents remain unaware of the need / importance of education.

Lack of occupation for young people, including work and training.

Ignorance of children's rights by community members.

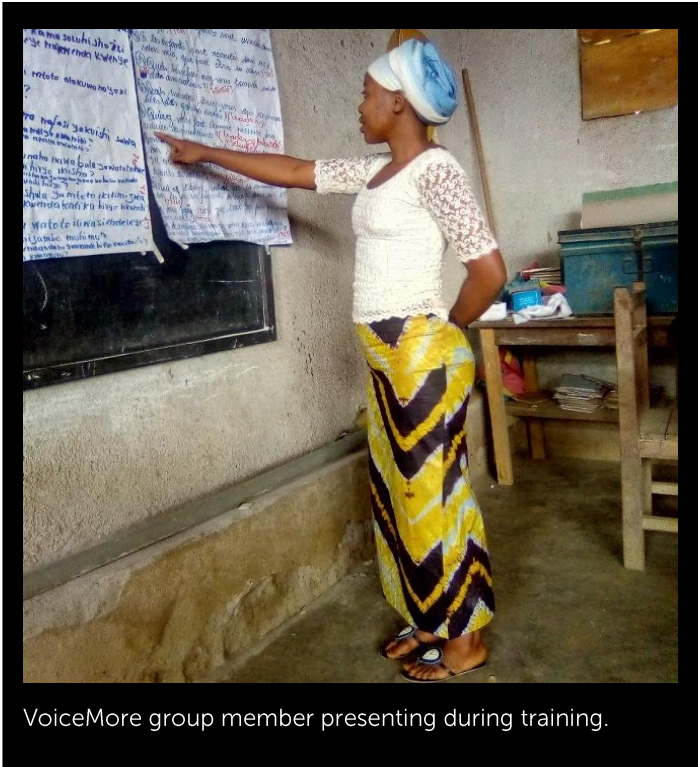
Widespread insecurity throughout the community.

Massive displacement, looting of livestock, goods, and money during the war.

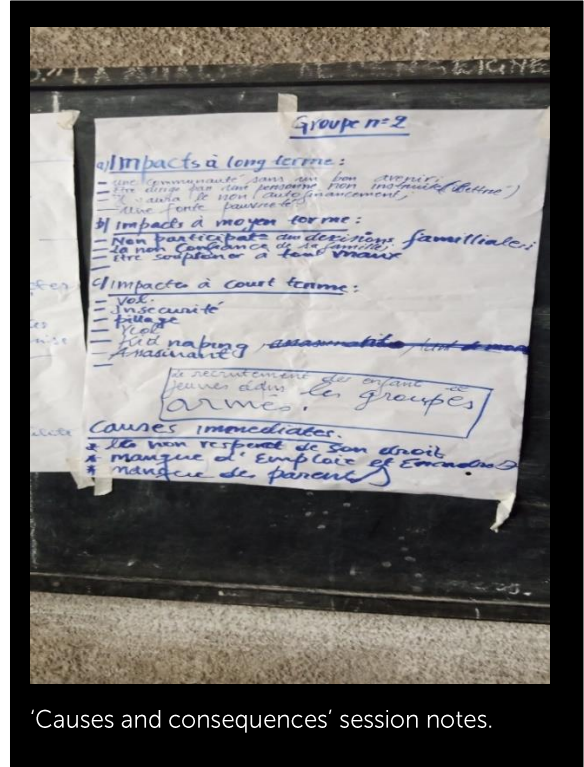
Intra-family conflicts, communal and community conflict.

War and the difficult conditions of access to education.

Causes of the Issue



VoiceMore group member presenting during training.



'Causes and consequences' session notes.

RESEARCHING THE PROBLEM

After completing their spokesperson and advocacy training, and deciding on the issue they wished to address, participants were then asked if they were interested to try and find out more about the issue by conducting research in their community.

The group decided this would be beneficial because specific information on the situation in their area was limited, it could provide information on the community's vision for change, in addition to evidence to support their advocacy. The group were supported through VoiceMore's research training; a three-day participatory training to help build understanding and skills. Sessions include basic principles of research, differences between qualitative and quantitative data, choosing a research method, identifying suitable respondents, informed consent, confidentiality, safety and risk assessment, and finally data analysis.

RESEARCH METHODS USED

After the research training, the group worked together to decide on a research plan for their project. They wanted to use data collection methods that could involve lots of different people in the community and would offer opportunity to hear more in-depth people's opinions, feelings and hope for change.

For this reason, they opted for mainly qualitative methods, which included key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs). Interviews they felt would offer good opportunity to engage with some stakeholders who would be unlikely to participate in focus groups (such as security personnel), while focus groups would be good way to reach lots of children, youth and families.

Next the group decided on who their target stakeholders for the research would be, drawing from previous stakeholder mapping exercises conducted during the advocacy training. The group decided they wanted to engage children, youth, parents, community leaders, civil society representatives, local authority representatives and some security personnel.

Once their target stakeholders were identified, the group developed sets of questions to be asked in the interviews and focus groups. The same key questions were asked to all respondents, but with additional added or adapted questions for specific groups, for example, for civil society and local authority representatives. They devised questions that would help them understand level of awareness of the problem, what respondents felt were causes and impacts, what could help alleviate the issue and what was already being done to combat the problem.

Before going out and gathering their data, the group first did practice sessions on how to approach people, how to explain what they were doing and why, and how to help respondents feel comfortable and at ease. Both the FGDs and KIIs were recorded on a Dictaphone so the group could listen back later during analysis stage.

Child, youth and parent respondents were randomly selected from the community, while leaders and local authority representatives were approached based on a predefined list. Interviews, focus groups and questionnaires took place in churches and in workplaces, while interviews with members of the security services took place at their offices and community leaders at their homes. The young people selected these options as they felt they would least disrupt people's regular activities would allow more participants to respond. Data collection took place over an intensive five-day period.

In total the young people spoke to 278 respondents, as outlined below.

A total of 24 FGDs were held within the community:				
Respondents	Number of FGDs	Age Range	Total Number of participants	Female respondents
Parents	8	30-45	80	39
Children	8	12-17	85	40
Youth	8	18-30	80	40

A total of 28 KIs were conducted within the community:			
Respondents	Number of KIs	Age Range	Female respondents
Community Leaders / Civil Society Representatives	17	20-45	2
Local Authority Representatives	7	20-43	None
Security Officers	4	24-40	None

SAFETY AND RISK MANAGEMENT

Before conducting any research during VoiceMore, young people are supporting to consider risk factors related to the research activity, both during data collection and post data collection. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic the group had selected, this risk mitigation phase was particularly important for this project.

The group were supported to explore dangers that could be encountered when approaching people, while conducting activities or during journeys to and from sites. This was done via discussion sessions and a participatory risk assessment, where the group collectively agreed what safety protocols were to be and what to do if an incident occurred. Participants also took part in role play scenario sessions to practice approaching respondents and how to react if they experienced any hostility and a session on data management and confidentiality, to decide how they could safely keep the recorded files and notes.

In addition to putting in place these mitigation measures, the group approached the local authorities and leaders in the community to introduce their project and explain the research they wished to undertake in order to secure backing and acceptance.

CHALLENGES FACED AND MITIGATION MEASURES

Most community members participated in the interviews with goodwill towards the young people, while others were motivated by hope of seeing change in the region as a result of the research.

However, there were still some challenges anticipated and encountered during the data collection phase, which the young people reflected on and devised the below mitigation measures:

Challenge	Mitigation Measure Adopted
Some respondents requested financial support towards transportation costs to be able to participate in interviews.	This was one of the reasons the young people travelled to respondents' places of work or homes, meaning such requests were not necessary.
Community members were suspicious of the reasons the young people wanted to ask such questions and suspected them of being associated with the intelligence agencies.	To get around this challenge, the participants moved in small groups of three or four young people with different genders for safety. They also ensured each group included someone who was regarded a 'son or daughter' of the specific area because they lived there themselves or were associated with the villages.
Community members were afraid of young spokespersons when they arrived in their area, as they had never / very rarely had met people from other places trying to undertake such work.	The group organised presentations of their group and planned activity when they arrived in a village. They also ensured they carried a 'recognition' document from the local heads of the localities. Before asking for their participation and consent, the group took time to explain the project carefully and what they wanted to achieve with it.
The use of a Dictaphone was challenging with some groups, who felt suspicious and wary of being recorded. The security personnel in particular did not want them to use the devices,	Where possible the young people still used the Dictaphones but explained information was confidential. In the case where people were not comfortable, they instead took notes of their answers.
Some community members thought the young people were 'evaluators' who had come to identify the people who would receive humanitarian aid.	During the briefing and introductions, the young people explained that although they were supported by an Non-Government Organisation (NGO) themselves, they were not staff and instead local volunteers with their own advocacy project.

Requests for money to answer questions was also something the young people experienced.	To help avoid this, the young always started activities by explaining to participants the activity and it related to their and the community's situation. This helped participants appreciate the 'bigger picture' to the work and they no longer made financial requests.
Distances between villages and the lack of accessibility was a major challenge to data collection. The group wanted to cover a large area, a fuller section of the region, but had a limited amount of time to do this in.	Participants decided to limit themselves to the most accessible and secure villages in their community. These villages were mapped by the group. They decided to work in small groups, so one person could ask questions, one could operate the Dictaphone or taking notes, and the other keeping general control and oversight of the room and what was going on. This made data collection safer and more efficient.
On occasion, some planned respondents were absent when requested.	To help circumvent this difficulty, the young people prepared the participants 48 hours before meeting by calling them and reminding them of the activity they had committed to.
Lack of visibility and weather conditions.	In order to ensure visibility and encourage the community to see them as a group working together, the young people had t-shirts printed with the project name to wear while conducting activities. They also bought some basic backpacks for protecting the data collection tools from heavy rains.

DATA ANALYSIS

After completing their data collection, the VoiceMore group first listened back to all the recorded files and read over the notes collected. This was to ensure everyone in group has a chance to hear what all respondents had said (as they were in smaller groups during data gathering). The group were then supported to discuss and identify what they felt were the most important points stakeholders collectively made and to compare answers between groups.

This was done by splitting into smaller groups, discussing, and noting the focus of people's responses, then sharing in plenary to further distil and narrow down. The recorded files and notes

were also transcribed by the staff team, translated and a further analysis made by War Child using an inductive Grounded Theory approach, seeking to identify primary areas of concern and recommendation by drawing out code words and patterns in feedback. This analysis was shared back with the young people, for their further reflection and to compare to the conclusions they drew in their own analysis. Finally, a set of draft recommendations were drawn up and then shared again with the group, who made alterations before they were consolidated for this report.

LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

Research was conducted in a limited area of Masisi territory, meaning conclusions and recommendations are primarily intended to relate to that direct area. The research presents perspectives and opinions of local children, youth and other wider community members. The research should consequently be regarded primarily as a lens from which to understand wider community sentiments and ideas in relation to recruitment and preventing recruitment.

While some Children previously Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups (ex-CAAFAG) and their parents did participate in the research, numbers were limited due to challenges of identifying them and access. It is recognised it would have strengthened the research to have a higher number of directly affected individuals participate in interviews and focus groups. The research therefore presents a stronger voice of community in general, as opposed to personally affected individuals.

In post-activity reflection sessions, the young people recognised including more specific questions on girl's experiences and needs would have strengthened the research. While a high number of girls and women in the community participated in focus groups and interviews, very few were also female ex-CAAFAG. The young researchers felt specific, tailored support for girls was essential, because of their experiences inside groups and stigma faced after leaving. For this reason they include a note in the recommendations section, but understand further focused research would be needed to understand better experiences and needs of female ex-CAAFAG in Masisi specifically.

A further limitation of the research, and potentially influencing factor in data collection, was the local populations relationship with international aid and the role of International and National Non-Government Organisations (I/NGOs) in the area. Decades of conflict has eroded civil society, local community-based networks and structures, perpetuating a reliance on international support via I/NGOs. Although the young people presented themselves as an independent group of youth activists and the activity as research related only, local respondents may still have modified their answers on possible 'solutions' based on the hope that resource and services could become available via the project. This may have created bias in responses to certain questions.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TOWARDS RECRUITMENT IN MASISI

- **Job and Livelihood Opportunities:** Respondents identified lack of jobs, training and income generating activities as one of the biggest driving factors in children and youth joining armed groups in their area. All felt increasing possibility for learning a vocational skill or trade, and being able to earn a small income, would have a significant impact on reducing recruitment and improving reintegration efforts.
- **Poverty:** linked to lack of income, poverty and not being able to meet basic needs such as food, was repeatedly given as a major reason for children and youth joining. Both child and youth respondents put significant emphasis on this, and parents agreed that not being able to provide for families could make children leave. Having basic needs met at home they felt would reduce the number of young people joining.

"At some point my parents gave me land but others came and grabbed it from me, therefore I joined an armed group ..."
Child, Focus Group Discussion
- **Access to Education:** Education was repeatedly given by all groups as a solution to preventing recruitment. It was marginally more popular an answer for children than youth, with some expressing that unless alternative forms of education were available for youth, it was better suited to younger ones. Overall, however, it was less popular as a solution than livelihoods and vocational skills training.
- **Revenge:** Joining as a means to seek revenge was raised minimally by respondents. It was not seen as a major factor in decision-making to join. When it was mentioned, it was in reaction to land being stolen.
- **Land Access:** Issues surrounding land access and land grabbing were highlighted by all respondents as a significant contributing factor to children and youth joining. Having access to land to farm provides income and stability. Losing land and having no means to rectify or pursue its return is driving recruitment of children.

"We young people just stay idle because we have no jobs, we cannot even go to the farm because we have no fields they already grabbed them from us."
Youth, Focus Group Discussion

IMPACTS ON COMMUNITY

- **Fear:** Many respondents spoke of the fear that is felt by young people and the community. For the community this related to the looting, theft, sexual assault, and other abuses committed by members of the armed groups on villages. Children associated who try to leave, or do leave, face significant fear of retaliation from members of the groups. Finally, fear was something community's felt in relation to the children and youth who returned, as they were scared of their behaviours and what they had 'become' after living in the bush.

"Living with them presents so many problems because we have lost all hope in them. If you borrow something they won't give you because they are afraid of you. If someone dies in the locality they will accuse the one who left the armed group and no one else."

Child, Focus Group Discussion

"If you have already failed in your family and you do not listen again to advice from your parents and other people, that leaves many people going there."

Youth, Focus Group Discussion

- **Community Acceptance:** Respondents drew attention to the need for community acceptance of young people leaving armed groups. Fear, suspicion, and lack of trust felt by community members was recognised as a barrier to this. If a young person was seen to leave voluntarily, and to have changed their ways and behaviours, then this was something which would support community acceptance. Having something to keep them occupied (such as training or work) was also deemed necessary.

PERCEPTIONS OF FAMILY

- **Family Relationships:** The importance of relationships between children and their families was raised by children, youth, parent respondents repeatedly. Home was seen as a place where comfort could be found, both material and in the form of good counsel from parents. Parents focused on the need to advise children and were making active efforts to do this, though this advice they felt was not always listened to. Orphan children were mentioned as more vulnerable to recruitment. Although the role of family was given as an important factor to stop recruitment, it was interestingly not suggested as an area under solutions. Training, education and jobs were far more popular answers than the notion of trying to support families. However, it may be because this was felt as the principal way families could enable more support. More research is needed to understand this connection.

"We are always worried about our children and can only sleep if you are together but can't sleep if he is away, as you begin to have thoughts of them dying or being crippled or having other problems while there."

Parent, Focus Group Discussion

PRE-EXISTING ACTIVITY IN THE AREA ADDRESSING RECRUITMENT AND REINTEGRATION

- **Sensitisation and Awareness Raising:** Awareness raising activities conducted by NGOs and International Non-Government Organisations (INGOs) was the main way local people felt the issue was being addressed. Most felt it was needed, though some questioned its effectiveness. There was almost no mention of formal DDR by children, youth and parents in responses, which might indicate they are not sure of what local state support is or that it is not widely understood, recognised or accessible.

- **Responsible Actors:** When asked who was working on the issue or who should be addressing the issue, the most popular answers were NGOs and the state. Community and local leaders received minimal mention. I/NGOs were seen as the main actors who could provide help and support. This might be reflective of the ‘aid dependency’ that affects an area experiencing such a protracted crisis. There was an appreciation that the state shouldered the main responsibility, but their willingness and ability to be effective was questioned.

OTHER OBSERVATIONS AND NOTABLE FINDINGS

- **Gender:** Most responses focused on the ‘masculine’ pronouns and there was no mention at all of girls, both their reasons to join or how their experiences on leaving might differ to that of males. The group included no specific questions around gender, which might be why this was not addressed, however, the fact it was not raised by respondents explicitly might be reflective of the way their specific needs are not considered by the local community, and potentially an indicator the level of stigma they face.
- **Recreational Activities:** There was minimal mention of recreational activities in the research. Sports and children’s clubs were suggested by a minority as ways to help prevent joining or to occupy young people on leaving, but these were dwarfed considerably by a focus on livelihood activity and education access.
- **Mental Health and Psychosocial Support:** In a similar way to recreational activities, mental health and psychological needs were very minimally mentioned by respondents. No specific questions regarding this were however asked. It may be there is simply not an awareness that such services / activities could exist as part of prevention and reintegration. Equally, it may be that respondents felt these needs would be met and improved by other forms of support, for example, by having the possibility to generate an income safely. More research is needed to understand local attitudes and interests in this area.
- **Forced versus Voluntary Recruitment:** Forced recruitment was only mentioned by security officials. Children, youth, parents and civil society respondents did not raise this as a way in which young people end up in groups. They did however put emphasis on the fact that, although young people might ‘go to join’, it was mostly due to having no other viable options and desperation, and in that sense was therefore not truly ‘voluntary’.
- **Rights:** Children’s rights received a fair amount of attention in responses which indicates local understandings of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child exist. High levels of NGO involvement in the area and any rights awareness campaigns they run may contribute to this. A common message in the data however was that rights were not being upheld, and more needs to be done to assure them.
- **No Reference to Ideology:** There was no mention at all by any respondents of ideology, ideological beliefs, or any form of religious / spiritual belief as being a reason to join. Children

“The problem is that they go without informing anyone and we can’t know what is in their hearts, they leave for the wild and the next thing you hear is that someone is already dead, we just keep telling them that joining the wild is bad and there is no life there.”

Child, Focus Group Discussion

and youth agreed that young people felt no pride in being in armed groups. There was no mention of seeking status and power by young individuals who join.

SUMMARY OF MAIN SOLUTIONS AS SUGGESTED BY RESPONDENTS

- More Vocational Skills Training and Livelihoods Support, including in agriculture.
- Support to access education and to stay in school.
- More awareness raising and sensitisation on the issue, for children, youth and communities.
- Greater state intervention, in stopping armed groups and their activities.
- More support from NGOs in prevention and reintegration activities.
- Consider the specific experiences and needs of girl's who join and leave groups.

"The person to help him with beginnings such as weaving, herding, sewing, so that ideas from there fade because he has an occupation."

Youth, Focus Group Discussion

"We request that when the government brings back those children it should bring in crafts so then they will no longer have any thoughts of returning to the wild."

Civil Society Representative, Focus Group Discussion

"All I can say is ask you to help our children read, feed, sew, bake, and if you are a farmer, you should be given seeds."

Parent, Focus Group Discussion

POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMMING

- **Emphasis on Vocational Training / Livelihoods Support:** By far the most popular recommendation and solution of children, youth, parents and civil society in this research was vocational training and livelihoods provision. This was seen as being the key factor in prevention and successful reintegration. More programming is required in the area, which should target children and youth, both those at risk and those who have left. The lack of the role of ideology in recruitment also suggests that once these basic needs are met, the opportunity to significantly reduce recruitment in the area could be encouraging.
- **Awareness Raising and Sensitisation:** While sensitisation and awareness raising was a significant focus for respondents, it would be helpful to analyse in more depth what local experiences of this are and what might be most effective. Target stakeholders, such as children, seemed to know less of it (and what other support was available) than civil society representatives for example. There was some questioning effectiveness, which given the fact main drivers are poverty and meeting basic needs, could demonstrate that messaging alone will never be sufficient in bringing about real change on the issue. The focus and content of messaging could also be helpfully reviewed and adjusted based on what local children and youth would feel would most resonate.

- **Access to Land:** Land access and land grabbing was repeatedly flagged as an underlying contributing factor to recruitment and community conflict, fuelling armed groups survival and creating poverty which drives young people to join groups. It would be useful to consider how advocacy surrounding recruitment in the DRC context raises and addresses this issue, though appreciating changes in law and law enforcement is what is largely needed. Finding ways for families to safely access and farmland for food production could also provide benefits within broader community-based reintegration efforts.

RECRUITMENT AND USE OF CHILDREN GLOBALLY

Globally the recruitment and use of children in armed groups remains a significant violation of children's rights and recognised as one of the worst forms of child labour in addition to being a war crime⁴. In armed forces and armed groups children are exposed to violence, as perpetrators, victims, or witnesses.

While attempts to estimate numbers have been attempted in the past, identifying accurate figures for children engaged in armed groups is incredibly challenging⁵, given the nature of the issue coupled with a fast-shifting landscape of conflict in many countries and regions. It is, however, known that recruitment continues to be an issue in countries currently experiencing conflict, such as Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Afghanistan, Mali, Somalia, Central African Republic, and the Democratic Republic of Congo among others, and numbers are thought to be in the region of tens of thousands⁶.

Recruitment and use differ between countries and contexts, depending on the type of conflict, the force or groups that are active, the social, political, economic and cultural situation as well as other factors. Some armed groups forcibly recruit children from local populations or use highly coercive methods get them to join. Young people, including children, do however opt to join groups themselves⁷. While this does demonstrate personal agency, it should be recognised this choice is often a result of lack of other options, or due to a converging set of needs, often combined with an underappreciation of the longer-term consequences.

Reasons children become involved in armed forces or armed groups are complex, diverse and personal to each individual, depending on their personal circumstances, sense of identity and

⁴ILO, *Child Labour and Armed Conflict*: <https://www.ilo.org/ipec/areas/Armedconflict/lang--en/index.htm>

⁵ War Child UK, *Rethink Child Soldiers*, https://www.warchild.org.uk/sites/default/files/link-files/War_Child%20UK_Rethink_Child_Soldiers_Report_Final.pdf

⁶ UN Office for the Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict: <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/six-grave-violations/child-soldiers/>

⁷ Boyden, J and de Berry, J, *Children and Youth on the Front Line: Ethnography, Armed Conflict and Displacement* (Berghahn Books, New York, 2007)

motivations^{8,9}. The simplest factor to joining is simply the presence of conflict and of armed groups. Growing up in the locality where they operate is one of the biggest risk factors¹⁰. Other factors can include joining in an effort to meet basic needs, such as food, for economic gain, such as access to resources, for protection (when joining a group may present better opportunity to defend family or provide for self and others), revenge, status, power, for ideological or other reasons¹¹.

Children perform a variety of roles, which can include combat or fighting, but commonly other supportive activities, such as spying, running errands, manning checkpoints or portering. Girls are most often used in domestic roles, such as cooking, cleaning and through 'marriage' providing sexual favours, though in some contexts they also participate in fighting. Their experiences once engaged or associated with a group can also vary depending on a number of factors. Roles can also change over time, as a child grows older, or based on the amount of time they spent in a group. Association with armed groups is also possible while still living at home or in a local community, for example, children might run errands on occasion or act as informer, providing information when required. Some groups expect life-long commitment from those who join, while others might allow for more fluid engagement, which can see children join, leave and re-join multiple times, depending on their circumstance and the level of support they receive both inside and outside the group.

Regardless of context, involvement in armed groups for most children will result in a significant reduction of life chances and negative impacts on well-being. Children recruited and used in armed groups frequently suffer severe physical hardship and abuse, which can result in life-long injury, disability, and ill health. Experiences when inside or associated with groups can severely impact psychological well-being, sometimes resulting in long-term mental health conditions and depression. Many young people develop dependencies on drug and alcohol as a way to cope with the pressures and conditions inside groups. Sexual exploitation and abuse, while more common for girls, also affects boys. Difficulties and challenges experienced while being a member of an armed group are not immediately or easily solved upon leaving. Children who have been associated with an armed group often become highly stigmatised in their local communities, making efforts at reintegration to their previous homes or elsewhere difficult. Social

Definition

The term 'child soldier' is often used when talking about children involved in armed groups. A more accurate and correct term is 'Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups' or 'CAAFAG' for short. This is because it recognises the varied roles children play in groups (not that just of 'fighters'). Below is the definition according to the Paris Principles.

'A child associated with an armed force or group refers to any person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls, used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities.'

⁸ United Nations University, *Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict* (United Nations, 2018)

⁹ Brett, R and Specht, I, *Young Soldiers: Why they Choose to Fight* (Rienner, ILO, 2004)

¹⁰ (Idlib).

¹¹ United Nations University, *Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict*, (United Nations, 2018)

exclusion for girls can be even more acute, as they may leave a group with a child and are often labelled as prostitutes, resulting in a significant devaluing of them socially. Many children also experience criminalisation upon leaving a group and can be detained by authorities in a further violation of their rights.

There is consequently no one standard 'trajectory' that children follow to find themselves associated, their reasons to become involved are highly complex and multifaceted, and their roles and experiences with groups can vary greatly. Understanding this is key to designing effective prevention and reintegration programmes; to work effectively they must engage affected young people, partner with communities, ensure they build on local knowledge and capacity, be evidence based and make investments in wider infrastructure¹². The recruitment of children into armed groups must also be regarded as more than a child and human rights issue, it is a phenomenon that damages societies and threatens regional stability, making it also a high-priority issue in peacebuilding¹³.

INTERNATIONAL LEGISLATION

A number of key international treaties and legislation exists to try and prevent the use of children in armed forces and with non-state actors. This also include guidelines on how to engage and support children leaving armed groups.

2007: The Paris Commitments and Principles

The aim of the Paris Commitments¹⁴ is to combat the unlawful recruitment or use of children by armed forces or armed groups. Objectives of the Commitment are to prevent recruitment, secure release of children already in groups and support their social reintegration and offer protection. 'Paris Principles' refers to the guidance that countries must follow if they sign up to the Commitments, outlining standards and expectations. The UN formally adopted these principles and guidance for members states in 2007, marking an important moment in global efforts to end recruitment.

2000: The Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict

The Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (OPAC)¹⁵ is an 'Optional Protocol' to the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). It is a further commitment countries who have already ratified the UNCRC can agree to. It has been important to the efforts to stop the use of child recruitment because it specifically outlined more distinct law on recruitment. The treaty asks states to 1) prohibit conscription into the military of children under the age of 18; 2) ensure that military recruits are no younger than 16; 3) prevent recruits age 16

¹² War Child UK, *Rethink Child Soldiers* https://www.warchild.org.uk/sites/default/files/link-files/War_Child%20UK_Rethink_Child_Soldiers_Report_Final.pdf

¹³ Wessells, M, *Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection* (Harvard University Press, London, 2006)

¹⁴ The Paris Principles: <https://www.unicef.org/mali/media/1561/file/ParisPrinciples.pdf>

¹⁵ Office for the Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict: <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/tools-for-action/opac/>

and 17 from taking part in hostilities. The treaty also prevents non-state armed groups from recruiting anyone under the age of 18 for any purpose.

1999: International Labour Organisation Convention No.182 on the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour

The International Labour Organisation's (ILO) Convention on the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour¹⁶ entered into force in November 2000. It defines forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict as a worst form of child labour. It also obliges each signatory country to "take immediate and effective measures to secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour as a matter of urgency".

1998: The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court

The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court¹⁷ (often referred to as the International Criminal Court Statute or the Rome Statute) is the treaty that established the International Criminal Court (ICC). It was adopted at a diplomatic conference in Rome, Italy in July 1998 and it entered into force in July 2002. The Rome Statute made it a war crime, leading to individual prosecution, to conscript or enlist children under the age of 15 years or use them to participate actively in hostilities.

1990: African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child

After the development and ratification of the UNCRC the African Union produced its own specific charter for the rights and welfare of children¹⁸, developed in 1990 and coming into force in 1999. Its main purpose was to adapt rights contained in the UNCRC to address issues deemed to be facing African children specifically and to encourage wider implementation of the Convention areas. The contents of the African Charter are consequently very similar to the UNCRC, but there are some key differences. One of which is the age of recruitment, which must not be under 18 (Article 22), whereas in the UNCRC this is 15 (with only voluntary signing of OPAC making it above 18).

1989: United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)¹⁹ is the most complete statement of children's rights ever produced and is the most widely ratified international human rights treaty in history. The Convention has 54 articles that cover all aspects of a child's life and set out the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights that all children everywhere are entitled to. It also explains how adults and governments must work together to make sure all children can enjoy all their rights. Under Article 38 (war and armed conflicts) Governments must not allow children under the age of 15 to take part in war or join the armed forces. Governments must do everything they can to protect and care for children affected by war and armed conflict.

¹⁶ International Labour Organisation: <https://www.ilo.org/ipec/areas/Armedconflict/lang--en/index.htm>

¹⁷ International Criminal Court: <https://www.icc-cpi.int/resource-library/documents/rs-eng.pdf>

¹⁸ African Union (1979) African Charter on The Rights And Welfare Of The Child https://www.un.org/en/africa/osaa/pdf/au/afr_charter_rights_welfare_child_africa_1990.pdf

¹⁹ UNICEF: <https://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights/>

1949: The Geneva Conventions

The Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols²⁰ are the core of International Humanitarian Law (laws that regulate the conduct of armed conflict and seek to limit its effects). Several protocols were added after the Geneva Conventions came into force in 1950 which related to recruitment. The 1977 Additional Protocol One (Article 8) and Additional Protocol Two (Article 9) both forbid the recruitment and use of children under the age of 15 years. Both protocols emphasise children's special right to care, respect, and protection. They make the recruitment and use of child soldiers under the age of 15 years in armed conflict war crimes under international humanitarian law.

It should be noted that while these important international treaties, protocols and guidance exist, there remains huge challenges in holding signatory states to account and realising these standards. They are an essential part of the framework from which stopping recruitment and use can be realised, but local rules, regulations and practices within communities play a significant role in stopping recruitment and framing reintegration efforts.

RECRUITMENT AND USE OF CHILDREN IN THE DRC

Over recent decades good progress has been made to prevent and reduce recruitment in the DRC. Unfortunately, despite these efforts, recruitment remains a substantial issue across the country and particularly in regions such as North and South Kivu.

The country ratified and signed the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child in 1990 and in 2001 OPAC. It signed the Rome Statute in the year 2000, became signatory to the ILO Convention 182 in 2002, and agreed to the Paris Commitments and Principles in 2007. More recently, in December 2020, the DRC also ratified the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

The country has therefore committed to all major conventions and international law pertaining to recruitment. It has also taken national level action. In 2012, DRC signed a plan of action to end and prevent the use of children in the Congolese armed and security forces. By 2017 this resulted in it being removed from the United Nations list of parties to armed conflict that recruited children list.

While this has marked significant progress for the country, unfortunately recruitment continues to be a major issue. This is due to the presence of a vast number of armed non-state actors who continue to recruit and use children. In the 2021 General Assembly Security Council report on Children in Armed Conflict, the UN verified 3,470 grave violations²¹ against 1,294 children (2,113 boys and 799 girls) in the DRC, alongside a further 1,786 grave violations against 1,294 children (786 boys and 507 girls) which occurred in previous years²². From this, the recruitment and use of

²⁰ International Committee of the Red Cross: <https://www.icrc.org/en/war-and-law/treaties-customary-law/geneva-conventions>

²¹ UN Children and Armed Conflict: <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/six-grave-violations/>

²² UNSC Children and Armed Conflict Report from the Secretary General: www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2021/437&Lang=E&Area=UNDOC , 2021, page 8.

788 children (687 boys, 101 girls) was confirmed, in addition to 1,313 children (1,135 boys, 178 girls) recruited in previous years and used, until their separation in 2020, by 36 armed groups²³. These numbers only represent cases that could be verified and do not include young people who are still serving or may have left groups on their own and not been tracked by any formal body. These numbers can therefore be regarded as lower than the true number affected.

Ending the recruitment and use of children in the DRC undoubtedly rests on the ability to cease hostilities and the presence and activities of armed groups. The complex and resource driven backdrop to conflict in the country however makes this an exceptionally challenging task. It is also within this context of on-going hostility and repeated violence that demobilisation and reintegration must take place, presenting considerable challenges for government, security, civil society and I/NGOs attempting to support children, in addition to a civilian population who have experienced years of looting, exploitation and violence from armed groups, leaving populations desperate and struggling to meet their own basic needs.

There is nevertheless much more that could be done to both reduce the number of children recruited and to help them recover upon leaving. Reintegration programming is desperately underfunded at international level and programmatic interventions under researched²⁴. Funding cycles are almost always short-term, sometimes only six months in duration, which does not allow organisations to work in any meaningful way with children or achieve any sustainable outcomes. Historically programming has also failed to engage affected populations, including children and youth themselves, missing vital opportunity to learn and improve reintegration support²⁵. While at global level solving protracted geo-political crises and conflicts is a sizable and long-term challenge, immediate changes to funding and programmatic approaches in the area of reintegration work could very quickly change the life chances and trajectories of thousands of children.



Photo credit: Arete

²³ Idlib.

²⁴ War Child UK, *Rethink Child Soldiers*:

https://www.warchild.org.uk/sites/default/files/linkfiles/War_Child%20UK_Rethink_Child_Soldiers_Report_Final.pdf

²⁵ United Nations University, *Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict* (United Nations, 2018)

VOICEMORE RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on their research findings and discussions, the VoiceMore group developed the following recommendations to help prevent the recruitment of children and youth into armed groups in their area and for improving reintegration for those who leave:

- **Development and Provision of Community-Based ‘Transit and Orientation Centres’:** These centers must be managed by local organizations who are supported by INGOs.²⁶ Such centres would help young people leaving armed groups at a critical moment – as soon as they leave. They would be ‘one stop shops’ that would help welcome the young people, provide immediate advice and critical support (such as providing necessary documents to show they have left and family tracing), offer training and livelihoods opportunities, re-entry to education for younger children, recreational activities and psychosocial support to help erase the ‘mentality of the bush’.
- **Encourage More Acceptance from Local Leadership:** Encourage local leaders and authorities, such as the Chef de Groupement (chief of area), local chiefs, security services and other community leaders, to welcome associated children and youth back. If these leaders encourage acceptance of the children and youth, other members of the community will follow. As social acceptance is key for reintegration to work effectively, this would improve the possible of programming being more effective.
- **More Support for Girls:**²⁷ Greater efforts should be made to identify girls’ leaving groups and support their reintegration. Girls must be offered both economic and social support. Training in different trades (not just ones traditionally deemed ‘female’), for example entrepreneurship would be useful. More emphasis should also be placed in programming to ensure the particularly harsh social stigma girls face is analysed and overcome.
- **Uphold Existing Child Protection Law:** The Department of Social Affairs Divisions, Gender, Family and Children Divisions should popularise and implement existing law on child protection within regions and localities. It is not as well understood as it needs to be. They should ensure local leaders and other local government departments and services (such as security and the police) fully understand and help uphold it.

“He cannot live with others as he lived with them in the past and by going to the wild there are big changes that come with it.”

Child, Focus Group Discussion

²⁶ The young people felt particular areas in the Masisi area would most benefit from these: Masisi Center, Biiri / Lushebere, Matanda and Kibab.

²⁷ While girl’s specific needs were not raised explicitly by the respondents in the research, the young people still felt they require extra and specialised support.

- **More Livelihood Support for Young People:** More livelihood support, including vocational training, apprenticeships and skills building for children and youth is needed. Young people need more viable opportunities to learn skills and generate income. This would play a major part in preventing recruitment and re-recruitment in the area.

"We ask that they teach various skills and help to look for opportunities so that we can also be meaningful to our families and communities."

Child, Focus Group Discussion

- **Invest in Education:** Greater investment is needed in education, including infrastructure. More schools need to be built and access to education improved for children. Providing more flexible learning options for older children and youth who have exited groups should also be developed and supported.
- **Provision of Recreational Activities:** While livelihood and education support should be main priorities, providing some recreational activities in programming and for other children and youth in the area would be beneficial, such as football, arts, creating 'Child Friendly Spaces' and other activities depending on the interests of local young people. Local NGOs, with support from INGOs and wider community, should lead this.

In early 2022 the group will be undertaking advocacy to raise awareness of the issue, disseminate and discuss their research and findings, and to promote their recommendations.

For more information about this work, or this report, please contact Sophie Bray-Watkins, War Child UK Youth Advocacy and Participation Adviser

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"A message to those who already went there, I tell them to come back and build our community, and those who have still not gone, I just tell them not to go because there is no life."

Youth, Focus Group Discussion

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