

THE RECRUITMENT OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH INTO ARMED GROUPS

A VoiceMore Project, North Kivu, The Democratic Republic of Congo

This paper summarizes a project led by a group of young people living in North Kivu in The Democratic Republic of Congo. It details their concerns regarding the recruitment and use of children and youth in armed groups within their community, what they feel are the causes and consequences, the research they designed and conducted, and their recommendations for ways to help prevent and address the issue.

Background

In 2020 War Child UK started supporting 20 young people in Masisi, North Kivu to identify the challenges facing children and youth in their area. Before starting their project, the young people first completed their VoiceMore training to help build confidence, knowledge, and skills in acting as a spokesperson and understanding advocacy.

Once they had completed the first two trainings, the group then discussed which issues they felt were most impacting children and youth in their area. Those they felt were significant included the recruitment of children and young people into armed groups, and the exploitation of children and young people in artisanal (small scale) mining, in brothels and cattle herding.

The group decided to focus on the protection issues facing children and youth who are recruited into armed groups, as they were particularly concerned about the impacts this had on young people, including significant risk of psychological issues, injury, disablement, or death, while those who manage to leave face social exclusion and stigma in communities. Beyond the immediate impacts on young people who join, they also felt this form of exploitation has a much wider impact at community level. Children and youth are used to bolster and increase the size of armed groups. These young people are then used to carry out atrocities on behalf of leaders, causing wider repercussions such as: increased insecurity in the region, which causes further displacement; high levels of violence as armed groups attack 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; and the creation of a wide sense of fear, frustration and anger.

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.

RESEARCHING THE PROBLEM

Research Methodology

The group decided to try and find out more about the issue by conducting research in their community. First, they were supported through VoiceMore's research training, a three-day participatory training to help build understanding and skills in the 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. They wanted to use data collection methods that could involve lots of different people in the community and would allow them to hear about issues in depth. For this reason, they opted for key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs). The group decided they wanted to engage children, youth, parents, community leaders, civil society representatives, local authority representatives and some security personnel. In total the young people spoke to 278 respondents, conducting a total of 24 FGDs 28 KIIs.

Research Findings

Principle factors contributing to recruitment as cited by respondents¹:

- **Job and Livelihood Opportunities:** Lack of jobs, training and income generating activities were cited as one of the biggest driving factors in children and youth joining armed groups in the area.
- **Poverty:** linked to lack of income, poverty and not being able to meet basic needs such as food, was repeatedly reported as a major reason for children and youth joining.
- **Land Access:** Issues surrounding land access and land grabbing were highlighted by all respondents as a significant contributing factor.
- **Access to Education:** Lack of access to education was also mentioned as a reason for children and youth 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

THE GROUPS' RECOMMENDATIONS

Development and Provision of Community-Based 'Transit and Orientation Centres':

These centers must be managed by local organizations who are supported by INGOs. Such centres would welcome children and youth, 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.

"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

Encourage More Acceptance from Local Leadership: Encourage local leaders and authorities, 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.

More Support for Girls: Greater efforts should be made to identify girls leaving groups and support their reintegration. Girls must be offered both economic and social support, as well as training in different trades (not just ones traditionally deemed 'female'). More emphasis should be placed on reducing the social stigma girls face.

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.

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.

Invest in Education: Greater investment is needed in education, including infrastructure. More schools need to be built, access to education improved for children, and flexible learning options for older children and youth.

Provision of Recreational Activities: While livelihood and education support should be the main priorities, providing some recreational activities would be beneficial, such as football, arts, 'child friendly spaces', and other activities depending on the interests of local young people.

Click [here](#) for more information on War Child's VoiceMore programme and youth-led advocacy and [here](#) to download a copy of the full report in English or French.

For further information about this project, or a copy of the report in Swahili, please contact sophieb@warchild.org.uk

"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

¹ For the complete research findings please refer to the full VoiceMore report.