

A photograph of a rural village scene. In the foreground, the dark silhouettes of two children's heads are visible, looking towards the background. In the middle ground, a child is sliding down a makeshift slide made of a metal sheet. Other children are sitting on the ground nearby. In the background, there are several simple houses with blue and grey roofs, surrounded by green fields and trees under a cloudy sky.

# **TUG-OF-WAR: CHILDREN IN ARMED GROUPS IN DRC**

A study on the push and pull factors influencing children to join armed groups 'voluntarily' in North and South Kivu, Democratic Republic of the Congo

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This research report was produced for War Child UK and War Child Holland in December 2017 by Emma de Vise-Lewis and Stefano Schwarz of Child Frontiers and Bavon Mupenda, independent consultant.

War Child is a child protection charity working in countries devastated by conflict. We're providing life-changing support to the most vulnerable children whose lives, families and communities have been torn apart by war. All photographs in this report were taken with consent of the child and the parent /care giver. The photos chosen for this report were done so to illustrate the report and do not depict children who are former child soldier and/or associated with armed groups. The opinions and statements presented here do not necessarily represent those of War Child UK and War Child Holland.



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## ABBREVIATIONS

<b>DDR</b>	Demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration
<b>DRC</b>	Democratic Republic of the Congo
<b>FARDC</b>	Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo)
<b>FDLR</b>	Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda)
<b>ILO</b>	International Labour Organisation
<b>MONUSCO</b>	United Nations Organisation Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Mission de l'Organisation des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation en République Démocratique du Congo)
<b>NGO</b>	Non-governmental organisation
<b>RECOPE</b>	Community-based Child Protection network (Réseau Communautaire de Protection de l'Enfance)
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children's Fund



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There is a tendency in the literature and in policy debates to discuss children joining armed groups almost exclusively in terms of forced recruitment. Yet, some are joining voluntarily. How does it happen? Why does it happen? Who are the children more prone to make this choice? Is it really a choice?

This study was commissioned to understand more about this phenomenon. Using evidence drawn from interviews with 150 children and 80 adults in five research sites in North and South Kivu in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the report examines the push and pull factors that influence children's engagement with armed groups as combatants and in other roles.

## RESEARCH METHOD

The study was conducted in five sites: Rugari in Rutshuru, Kitchanga in Masisi and Lumbishi in Kalehe as well as in Goma and Bukavu in order to access children who had been involved in armed groups, via the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) centres. The tools employed in each site with children and adults were semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions using participatory tools and individual testimonies. Questions explored individual and group perspectives on the contextual meanings of 'childhood' and 'voluntary'; individual and community reasons for participation in an armed group, including perceived benefits and risks associated with it;

expectations and realities for children in armed groups; and preventive strategies in place at the family and community levels. Participants were selected through purposive sampling at the community level. A national research team consisted of four national data collectors, a senior national researcher as well as two international researchers who were responsible for training the data collectors and providing support and supervision during the data collection phase. The study was designed to comply with international and national ethical standards and was approved by the Université Libre des Pays des Grands Lacs in Goma.

## FINDINGS

During times when the ongoing conflict is considered low-level, as was the case at the time of writing, it becomes apparent that virtually all children who join an armed group in the Kivus do so voluntarily and that forced recruitment becomes the exception. But what does it mean to join voluntarily? Communities where this study was undertaken

understood it unanimously as joining of one's free will, without force or coercion. Children's joining, even if not coerced, seems, however, to be less about desire and more about a choice made within a limited set of options.

## CONCEPTS OF 'CHILD'

Discussions with respondents revealed that by the age of 14 or 15 years, boys and girls alike are transitioning from childhood to adulthood, marked by physical and behavioural changes and actions rather than by age. Strictly speaking, therefore, children who are joining armed groups older than this age are not considered children anymore but rather adolescents or even young adults who are becoming independent and exercising their own agency. It emerged from the research that joining an armed group is one of the means by which children attain adult status. It is not an explicit intention but rather a consequence that children noted upon reflection during this research.

## A GENDERED PHENOMENON

Throughout the research, respondents' discussions about children's presence in an armed group was centred much more on boys than girls because communities do not consider girls to have joined these groups in the same way as boys. Girls and boys interact with armed groups differently and communities' perceptions around their involvement is therefore framed differently. Only children who are combatants and who carry weapons are considered to have joined an armed group. This categorisation applies overwhelmingly to boys, aged 14–17 years. Girls take on different roles and have greater mobility to come and go between communities and armed groups.

## ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES FOR CHILDREN IN ARMED GROUPS

Life in an armed group is undeniably tough for boys: They suffer physical hardship, are denied sleep and, in some instances, lack food, shelter and appropriate hygiene. Boys of all ages sleep in the open air, are vulnerable to all elements and have little access to medicine when they become ill. The level of violence towards them is high, as is the violence they commit towards others, including killings and severe beatings.

In terms of tasks for boys, there are clear distinctions between the roles that younger boys (typically from the age of 13) and older boys (typically from the age of 15) perform in armed groups. The distinction between younger and older children, however, is made according to the boys' physical size and strength more than their age. All are made to work hard. Younger boys serve as body guards, spies and bearers of the *gri-gris* potions, they transport ammunitions when they are on the move and are involved in preparing food and helping provide care for smaller children (born into the group). Older boys become soldiers and are trained to use weapons, after which they can be sent to steal, loot and kill.

Girls are rarely combatants. They are invariably with or associated to armed groups as 'wives' or more casual sexual partners and to take care of domestic chores, such as cooking, cleaning and also caring for the smaller children. They may be used as spies and scouts, which is made possible because most of them remain living in their community. Thus, they come and go easily and are unlikely to arouse suspicion.

For this study:

**Push factors** are defined as negative conditions or circumstances in a community and environment that children escape by joining an armed group.

**Pull factors** are defined as positive rewards or incentives that children anticipate for joining an armed group.

## MOTIVATIONS FOR CHILDREN BECOMING INVOLVED IN AN ARMED GROUP

Despite these harsh conditions, boys continue to join the armed groups. The research revealed that there is no single reason that explains why they join. Their participation is driven by a multifaceted series of factors that work in concert with one another, pushing and pulling children towards armed groups in different settings and circumstances. The findings show the main push factors as:

- **Household poverty**, which emerges as the main driver. Poverty and poverty-related issues were mentioned more frequently than any other motivating factor. In many instances, poverty is so extreme that parents are simply not able to provide for their children's most basic needs.

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- **Hunger** becomes then an overriding push factor. Lack of food at home was cited by respondents in all sites as a major concern. Children regularly go hungry. The promise of food that can be obtained directly from an armed group or, when not available, can be accessed through stealing, looting and taxing of communities is a big incentive.

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- **Lack of opportunity in the communities** was the third most cited reason, coupled with a lack of future prospects. Children lack the opportunity to earn a basic living or to access formal education or vocational training. A child who has nothing to do is highly susceptible to joining an armed group, which is often regarded by children to be the only viable option for survival and for making a life.

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- **Vengeance** is a major push factor for boys, especially for those who seek to avenge the killing of a parent or family member or the looting or stealing of land. By joining an armed group, a boy in these circumstances hopes to learn to fight and be armed and then to eventually take revenge on the person who has wronged him.

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- **Constant looting** at the hands of the armed groups frequently leads to children resigning themselves to the reality that nothing is going to change. In these circumstances, they see no other option but to join.

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- **Tribalism** emerged as a major push factor for boys in Lumbishi and Kitchanga, where inter-ethnic conflicts between communities are rampant. In these areas, insecurity is high. Tribalism perpetuates a cycle of violence as tribes battle to protect and avenge their tribe members.

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- Boys seeking refuge in an armed group to **escape a bad situation in the community** was cited with some frequency. Examples given were committing a crime and getting a girl pregnant. Fearful of repercussions within the community or at the hands of the police, children escape to an armed group.

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- Although cited less frequently, **mistreatment at home and in the community** pushes children to join armed groups. Within the home, this can manifest as physical violence but is more often emotional and verbal abuse. Boys in particular explained that they left home because they could not tolerate their parents humiliating and insulting them.

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- Younger and older boys in all sites reported **high levels of harassment and intimidation** at the hands of the police or the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC) soldiers. Respondents explained that FARDC soldiers order children in the community to run small errands and hassle them for money at checkpoints. A child who is not obliging can be severely beaten. Child respondents also indicated that FARDC soldiers intimidate them, accusing them of being rebels.

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The research shows that the pull factors for boys include:

- Overwhelmingly, **the opportunities** presented by armed groups to live a slightly better day-to-day existence in terms of having basic needs, primarily food. One of the main tasks for boys in armed groups is to steal and loot from communities, which children in this study said is often understood to be a positive because it affords them a certain amount of respect and ensures that they are able to have the food and money that they lack in the community.
- There is a desire for boys to **protect and defend their land, family and community**, especially in Lumbishi and Kitchanga, against attacks from outsiders and other ethnic groups who threaten the peace and steal land and belongings. In these instances, children join less because of the promise of a better life and more because they are fighting to defend a cause and keep the threat at bay.
- By joining the armed groups, boys benefit from a degree of **protection** from any misdemeanour that they may have committed in the community. In these instances, the armed group offers them an option to not be found and held to account so easily.
- Boys seek out an armed group as protection from the harassment and humiliation that they experience in their community. Membership in the militia thus provides an opportunity to regain a sense of dignity that was lost during situations they consider degrading.
- They also are drawn to the **respect** that community members show towards members of armed groups. Respect predominantly comes from having a weapon and is therefore linked to fear. But it is this that ensures that some of the major motivating factors that pushed a child into the armed group in the first place are met, including stealing to eat, protecting one's family and land and avenging the person who has wronged them.

When respondents in all research sites referred to girls associating themselves with armed groups, it was always in relation to them seeking a better life. They were described as actively seeking to have sexual relations or to 'marry' rebel soldiers because of the benefits they receive in exchange. They either go to the armed groups to exchange sex for money or food or to seek a more permanent and stable solution by finding a 'husband' who will provide for them more adequately than boys in the community. In these instances, the relationship appears to be consensual.

Overall, the research found that girls are pulled rather than pushed towards the armed groups by the promise of better opportunities to fulfil their needs; boys are pushed and pulled. The findings show that there are more push factors for boys than for girls.

#### **CHARACTERISTICS THAT INCREASE VULNERABILITY**

Poverty, lack of employment and education opportunities and pervasive hunger are issues that affect many parts

of the DRC. The research, however, found that what exacerbated the problem and made one child more susceptible to joining an armed group over another was often the absence of a stable family environment and, most notably, parental figures. Overwhelmingly, across all sites, orphanhood emerged as a characteristic that made children highly vulnerable to joining an armed group because they do not have family to look after and guide them. Equally, children living in the streets were also regarded as highly vulnerable.

#### **THE WAYS IN WHICH CHILDREN BECOME ASSOCIATED WITH AN ARMED GROUP**

An additional reason why the presence of children in armed groups is so prolific and which adds to the push and pull factors is the relative ease in joining. One of the most striking findings to emerge in all sites was the geographic proximity between armed groups and villages. A child who wants to join an armed group can do so easily. Children are in regular contact with rebel soldiers who come and go to villages to eat, drink and



meet up with their wives. They become acquainted with each other to the extent that some boys and girls acquire the telephone numbers of militia members and stay in contact over time. Indeed, these soldiers are often the children's family members or friends. A child who expresses any interest in joining an armed group will be told who to talk with.

### **THE PEOPLE WHO INFLUENCE A CHILD'S DECISION TO JOIN AN ARMED GROUP**

The biggest influence in the decision to join an armed group – or not – is exerted by friends and other children who are in armed groups. This applies to girls and boys. Friends are reported to tell those not engaged that joining up will provide them access to whatever they want, including decent food and earning potential. Expectations before joining an armed group are therefore high, which on top of the push and pull factors becomes another motivating force.

Parents, on the other hand, are actively discouraging their children, both boys and girls, from joining an armed group by talking to them about the associated risks and providing advice and guidance. It is clear from the data that parents know what the risks of joining are for their

children. In every site where data was collected, mothers and fathers stressed the profoundly difficult conditions within the militias and they rejected the idea that their child should ever be put in these situations. Instances in which parents may encourage a child to join are linked to protecting the family and the community in areas where tribal conflicts are high.

In Kitchanga, male adult respondents reported that armed groups are targeting children in the community and in schools, encouraging them to join with the promise of a better life. In the same site, male and female adult respondents spoke of the enormous influence, direct and indirect, that the national-level political authorities have over the participation of children in the armed groups. They reported that armed groups are funded and supported by political authorities who manipulate them based on ethnic rivalries. Groups of women in Kitchanga explained that political authorities are widely distributing arms and are actively encouraging boys in their constituency to join a militia to protect and defend their community and tribe.



*...what made one child more susceptible to joining an armed group... was often the absence of a stable family environment and... parental figures."*

## **LEAVING AN ARMED GROUP AND REINTEGRATING IN THEIR COMMUNITY**

When it comes to leaving an armed group, girls are more mobile than boys, unarmed and not considered combatants. Their departure was thus described differently. For this reason, respondents focused the discussions about leaving armed groups, demobilising and reintegrating into the community only on boys. Respondents across all sites reported that a majority of boys want to leave an armed group because of the hardships they encounter. Unanimously, respondents said that the reality of life for boys in the armed groups is completely different from what the children had anticipated, which is a significant cause of disappointment. However, leaving is an immense challenge. While it may be easy to join, it is nearly impossible to leave. Children who do leave will either enter the DDR process or return directly to their community.

Respondents raised several challenges with the DDR process: The distances to reach a DDR centre are often great; some children fear being caught by their former group or another group while making their way to the DDR centre; while others believe that they will not be accepted into the DDR process if they do not have their weapon with them. Furthermore, the DDR process does not always fulfil its promises, particularly in relation to the distribution of materials needed to support children's reintegration and vocational training.

Boys who return directly to their community without going through the DDR process encounter additional challenges. The security forces insist that a weapon is required for a child to obtain his demobilisation certificate because

it proves he has been demobilised and that a weapon has been relinquished. Respondents noted that boys who escape rarely leave with a weapon because they need to leave furtively or because they fear reprisals by the armed group. Respondents reported that the threat of being arrested or imprisoned if a child returns to the community without a demobilisation certificate or a weapon is extremely high and that these children risk being severely beaten by the FARDC soldiers or police.

Another challenge that emerged is that parents are required to pay bribes to chiefs, local authorities and security services at every step of the demobilisation process to secure the release of their child – to ensure he is not arrested or imprisoned or caught by the armed group for having escaped.

While families were described as happy and relieved to have their child back, boys encounter a great deal of stigma in the community, especially if he had committed wrongs, typically by stealing, looting and killing. Community members are often suspicious of boys returning from armed groups, blaming them for any wrong that happens in the community and making them feel unwelcome.

Reintegration presents itself differently for girls because their interaction with armed groups is so much more fluid. If a girl is not considered a combatant and did not have a weapon to surrender in the first instance, she does not need to be demobilised or have a demobilisation certificate to be accepted. However, while girls do not return in the same way as boys, their association with armed groups can still pose problems for them; they are often considered prostitutes and suffer high levels of stigma.



*...the DDR process does not always fulfil its promises, particularly in relation to the distribution of materials needed to support children's reintegration and vocational training."*

### **FACTORS THAT PUSH BOYS TO RETURN TO THE ARMED GROUP**

Despite boys' first-hand experience of the levels of hardship in an armed group, respondents of all ages and categories across the sites stated that many of them return to the group. Their re-joining is linked to the same push and pull factors that led them to join in the first place. But the challenges of boys' reintegration also present new push factors, such as a child not able to formally demobilise and thus running the risk of being arrested by the authorities, the DDR process not fulfilling its promises, and community stigmatisation.

## PREVENTION STRATEGIES

The most effective prevention strategy in place at the family and community levels according to the respondents is parents helping to support and provide their children with income-generating activities (IGA). These include running a small business, such as a shop or hairdressing, cultivating land and animal husbandry. Another significant deterrent is a family's ability to maintain their child in school. Despite primary schooling in theory being free in the DRC, teachers are not paid. This responsibility is borne by parents, along with several other school-related costs, which can become prohibitive.

Parental advice and guidance is also considered one of the most effective means of preventing children from joining an armed group. Parents discuss the risks associated with armed groups. They emphasize to their children the challenges and hardships that they face as a family and discuss the importance of staying together and doing the best they can to get by. At the community level, there is little support to help prevent children from joining armed groups. The predominant influence is the religious leaders who counsel against engagement with armed groups. Ensuring that children can instead engage in leisure activities, such as playing football, watching sports matches and playing games between youngsters, is also a valued prevention mechanism providing them with something keeping them busy and distracted. NGO support was mentioned as largely responsive, focused on reintegration support for children who have been demobilised. Some prevention work focuses on income-generating activities and vocational training, but coverage is minimal. The onus for most of these strategies is on the parents. There is seemingly little external support to strengthen families who are struggling or to help children who do not benefit from a strong family environment. Community engagement in prevention appears minimal thus leaving children without adequate parental care extremely vulnerable.

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*...respondents clearly outlined that it is not acceptable for individuals in these age groups to be joining the militias and that families and communities need to actively seek out alternatives.”*



## CONCLUSIONS

**1. Different perceptions of who is a child and what is childhood need to be understood and considered:** In the research sites, child and childhood are not defined by age. They relate to clearly defined social, physical and emotional markers that determine when a child is considered to have become an adult. Children are considered to become adults sometime between the ages of 13 and 15. For community members, the children who are joining armed groups are generally not considered to be children per se, given that the vast majority of boys and girls become associated with armed groups from around the age of 14 or 15. That said, respondents clearly outlined that it is not acceptable for individuals in these age groups to be joining the militias and that families and communities need to actively seek out alternatives. An important issue to consider is whether community members' objections are centred around the age of those signing up or on the more general harm that engagement in armed groups poses. This may appear to be a subtle distinction, but it is a crucial one because it necessitates an examination of where communities place the nexus of concern and therefore where the focus of dialogue and interventions should be, or at least start from.

**2. How the term 'voluntary' is understood in this context has important implications for the design of appropriate interventions:** Respondents unanimously defined voluntary child recruitment as a child deciding to join an armed group of their free will. However, framing children's engagement in armed groups when it has not been forced upon them by a gun as voluntary may obscure more than it clarifies. Joining an armed group voluntarily appears to be as much about young people taking what they feel to be the best available means to survive among a limited set of opportunities and of protecting themselves and their family as it is about 'choice'. While children are choosing to join armed groups, it is not helpful to frame a child's engagement in armed groups as voluntary because doing so risks placing the onus of joining on children and, to an extent, their parents rather than on the complex set of social, political, economic and environmental drivers that push them to make this 'choice'.

**3. Gendered distinctions emerge strongly and have considerable implications for how we perceive and respond to the risks and vulnerabilities of girls and boys:** The experience of being in an armed group is significantly different for girls and boys. While girls are not considered to be in armed groups in the same way as boys, they nevertheless do engage with soldiers, commanders and others and sometimes undertake tasks on their behalf. The nature of their engagement with soldiers, commanders and others, which is primarily sexual, exposes the girls to a series of risks. Girls in these communities are just as hungry, out of school and lacking support as boys are. They may not be soldiers, but the conditions that drove them to seek survival from outside the community are the same as for boys. While boys join armed groups and use violence and guns to obtain what they need, girls use their bodies.

**4. There is a myriad of motivations pushing and pulling children towards armed groups that should not be seen in isolation:** Children are not joining armed groups for any one reason. Decisions are motivated by a constellation of factors that together lead a child to choose this path over others. Overwhelmingly, however, household poverty, hunger and highly constrained opportunities stand out as the overriding push factors, as adolescents seek out a life elsewhere. The main pull for boys is that they might have more food and eat better and that this benefit might at times be extended to their family. The reality for many is that, while vengeance and protection play a big part, the everyday living conditions in some communities are so compromised that some drivers are as basic as the need for food.



*While girls are not considered to be in armed groups in the same way as boys, they nevertheless do engage with soldiers, commanders and others and sometimes undertake tasks on their behalf."*



**5. Due to ongoing conflicts, armed groups are considered for many children a better alternative to staying in a community, where opportunities to attend school or eke out a living are limited and where security is compromised:** Poverty is acute, insecurity is high, employment opportunities are virtually non-existent, educational opportunities are extremely limited and opportunities for children to engage in leisure activities safely are not available. Despite the known hardships and violence of life in the armed groups, boys and girls see these groups as having more to offer than the status quo, which is largely considered to be intolerable. With virtually no alternatives for children in communities and with armed groups a strong presence in everyday life, the militias thus present an opportunity to simply survive and earn a living.

**6. Family and parental support and guidance is key to preventing children from joining an armed group:** Parents and families have a critical role in preventing their children from joining an armed group. Throughout the discussions, it was often noted that having parents who advise children about the risks of joining armed groups is what makes the difference between two children facing the same socioeconomic challenges. Efforts to strengthen families to help reduce the risks and vulnerabilities of parents and children are imperative for reducing children's voluntary recruitment into an armed group. Equally, those children who do not live with their parents, such as orphans and street children, are more vulnerable and stigmatised. Communities need to be supported to find ways of absorbing and caring for these children to thus decrease their exposure to voluntary recruitment.

**7. Overcoming the multiple challenges around reintegration is paramount:** Children's effective reintegration into their families and communities is compromised by a number of barriers – personal, relational and structural. Many children who join an armed group and then seek to leave are not able to do so without compromising their own safety and often that of their parents. The focus of international organisations is to ensure that no child participates in an armed group and that those who do can

be demobilised and reintegrated safely and effectively. Reintegration issues, ranging from widespread corruption and stigmatisation to physical abuse and violence, such as beatings and imprisonment, become an additional and significant push factor for children to return to an armed group – even when they are fully aware of the challenges and hardships that await them.

**8. Prevention strategies are essential:** Structural causes predominantly lead these children to engage with an armed group and in armed conflict. Were they not so poor, hungry and exposed to theft, killing and political instability and not so acutely aware of the disadvantages that a lack of education brings, these children would not need to seek a 'better life' in a place that is not better in any way except that it offers resolution to some of the massive challenges they live with.

It is crucial to move the programmatic focus from primarily one of response (interventions to deal with children who have demobilised or left the armed groups) to one of prevention, with a focus on improving everyday circumstances for people in communities more than focusing on the illegality of having children involved in armed groups. Prevention responses warrant a multifaceted approach that looks at the drivers, targeting primarily household poverty reduction initiatives, nutrition-based programmes, education and family strengthening initiatives.

That said, the motivating factors for voluntary child recruitment are inextricably linked to the ongoing conflict and insecurity that characterises North and South Kivu. Efforts are therefore needed on both the micro and the macro levels to ensure that actors at the national and international levels recognise and act on the reality that it will not be possible to resolve the push and pull factors until the conflict is addressed as a whole – not just child recruitment – and that people are assisted to build a secure and meaningful life for themselves.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The overall purpose of the research is to create an evidence base upon which War Child UK and War Child Holland can identify appropriate and sustainable prevention measures at the community and family levels as well as interagency advocacy strategies to reduce the prevalence of children joining armed groups in DRC. The recommendations presented in this section focus on tangible, practical interventions for War Child UK and War Child Holland to reflect upon internally. The intention is to support War Child UK and War Child Holland to define solutions for some of the principal and persistent challenges that emerged from this study. These recommendations are tailored to the context in which these organisations are working and present options that would bolster both programme and advocacy initiatives.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WAR CHILD'S PROGRAMMING FOR CHILDREN ASSOCIATED WITH OR VULNERABLE TO JOINING AN ARMED GROUP

- **Extend the programme's target group from children younger than 18 years to include young adults up to the age of 25 years.** The risks and challenges associated with membership in armed groups transcend age and relate more to the known hardships and possible harm that both children and young adults experience.
- **Target girls:** In addition to the prevention strategies recommended, gender-sensitive strategies are needed that reduce the risks that adolescent girls experience, with a focus on improving access to and quality of sexual and reproductive health interventions in school, communities and primary health care facilities.
- **Increase the focus on prevention strategies** to target the drivers of voluntary recruitment, including the social, political, economic and environmental factors, to create viable, sustainable alternatives. Potential areas for collaborative interventions include household poverty reduction, family strengthening initiatives, alternative care options, education, community-based peace building initiatives and community-based activities providing support and guidance to children.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WAR CHILD'S ADVOCACY INITIATIVES

- **Dissemination of evidence and information:** The research findings indicate the need for an inter-sector approach to alleviate poverty and to provide improved nutrition, education, child protection and security. War Child UK and War Child Holland are in a position to advocate, based on evidence emerging from the research, with influential stakeholders at all levels, including the government, MONUSCO, UNICEF and national and international NGOs, for strategies to address the multiple drivers of child recruitment. This advocacy should push for greater collaboration and coordination among actors, based on a common understanding and an agreed approach to solving the issues.
- **Address reintegration challenges:** The research findings describe a number of challenges that children face upon leaving the armed groups, including corruption among different duty-bearer, inconsistent and inadequate DDR processes, and stigma violence and harassment in the community, which need to be addressed at different levels.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION

Throughout the research, several issues emerged that, for programming purposes, would merit further investigation. These include examining the role of local community leaders in preventing children from joining armed groups; girls' association with armed groups; the role of friends in telling children that life is better in an armed group than it is; and perceptions around sexual violence.



# 1 INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH

## 1.1 OVERVIEW OF CHILD SOLDIERING IN EASTERN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

The phenomenon of children joining armed groups has been documented as a significant problem in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) since 1996, particularly in North and South Kivu. During the war that began in 1998, up to an estimated 40 per cent of armed groups were children. In 2000, the United Nations stated that more than a third of the 300,000 child soldiers around the world were active in the DRC.<sup>1</sup> After the signing of the Sun City peace agreement by the warring parties, former rebels were integrated into the Congolese national army, the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC), embedding these rebels into the official chain of command of the army. With this process began the disarmament, demobilisation and

reintegration (DDR) of child soldiers launched by the Inter-Agency Working Group between 2004 and 2006.<sup>2</sup> DDR services typically provide a package of assistance to meet the basic needs of demobilised soldiers and assist with their reintegration. For children, this may include food and household items upon arrival in their home community or area of resettlement and vocational training. Most children who enter this process follow a series of steps that include identification, verification, relocation, reorientation, family reunification, socioeconomic reinsertion, community reintegration and follow-up.

The DRC is signatory to several treaties related to child soldiering. Among the most important is the International

1 ILO, 2003.

2 Child Soldiers International, 2014.



Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention on the worst forms of child labour (1999) that prohibits the “forced or compulsory recruitment of children [persons younger than 18] for use in armed conflict” (article.3 (a)), which the country ratified in 2001. The Government ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child’s Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict, which entered into force in February 2002. This treaty prohibits all recruitment – voluntary and forced – by both State and non-State actors of anyone younger than 18.

In addition, the DRC passed a national law on child protection on January 2009 that banned (article 71) the recruitment (forced or voluntary) of anyone younger than 18 in the national armed forces. In May 2013, the Ministry of Defence issued a directive prohibiting the national armed forces from detaining children for association with an armed group.

In 2012, the DRC Government signed an action plan with the United Nations Organisation Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) and the United Nations’ Children Fund (UNICEF) to prevent the recruitment of children into the armed forces. This action plan significantly reduced the prevalence of children in the FARDC, to the extent that no new underage recruitment was registered in 2015. This reduction in numbers of child soldiers in the national army was confirmed during the data collection for this study (in August 2017). Despite this change, it is apparent that rebel armed groups still active in the East, such as the Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda (FDLR), Rias Mutombokis and Nyatura, continue to use children in combatant and non-combatant functions on a massive scale.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> MONUSCO, 2016a.

## THE SITUATION IN NORTH AND SOUTH KIVU

More than two decades of ongoing violence in eastern DRC has culminated in a proliferation of armed groups in the country's post-independence era and in open wars, such as the so-called liberation war by the Rwandan-backed Alliance des forces démocratiques pour la libération du Congo-Zaïre against President Mobutu's authoritarian regime and the Rassemblement congolais pour la démocratie against President Laurent-Désiré Kabila in August 1998. Two provinces have been at the heart of the conflict in eastern DRC: South Kivu and North Kivu.

The conflict can be traced to ethnic rivalry and unresolved communal tensions.<sup>4</sup> According to Vlassenroot,<sup>5</sup> the most salient characteristic of armed groups in South Kivu is that they rely on ethnicity to rally support and recruits. Yet, behind this observation lies a complex history that links ethnicity to the access of power and land, and turns it into a guiding principle of social, political and administrative organisation. Even though these armed groups have gradually become connected to national and regional actors and political and socioeconomic power struggles, they continue to claim to protect their communities and rarely transcend ethnic or clan divisions. In Fizi, Shabunda, Mwenga and Uvira, the war is between the Banyamulenge, a Congolese Tutsi community, and other ethnic groups because the Banyamulenge are perceived to have come from Rwanda as invaders. In the Kalehe territory, armed mobilisation did not begin on a large scale until the start of the First Congo War in 1996.<sup>6</sup> North Kivu has been the epicentre of war in the DRC. The waves of immigration and the massive expropriation of land, combined with the former colonial Belgian administration's reform of customary rule, sowed the seeds of

conflict. Around a third of the region of Masisi – including some of the best farming land – was earmarked by the colonial administration for Rwandan immigration, European settlement or the Virunga National Park. By the end of the colonial period, these immigrants had contributed to a fourfold increase in population density in both Masisi and Rutshuru, making Banyarwanda – those of Rwandan origin – by far the largest ethnic group in the Petit Nord region. This has generated a multitude of armed groups, with more than two dozen emerging over the past two decades.<sup>7</sup>

Violence in North Kivu as well as in South Kivu has exacerbated tensions between local communities, in particular a rift between so-called indigenous groups – those communities whose presence is most entrenched – and the Hutu and Tutsi populations, many of whom arrived as immigrants during the colonial and post-colonial periods. Most of the fighting today draws directly on this cleavage, hardened by more than two decades of killings on both sides.<sup>8</sup>

Notwithstanding the volatility of the situation in North and South Kivu, it appears that as of December 2017, there are about 70 active armed groups; 20 of them identify as Mai-Mai (self-defence militias). Most of these factions are small and fragmented, with a maximum of approximately 200 soldiers each. Recruitment tends to follow ethnic lines, but this depends on the recent history of each community and the migration pattern of different tribes coming from neighbouring countries.<sup>9</sup> The three armed groups that are active and most powerful in terms of numbers and zones of influence are the FDLR, followed by the Allied Democratic Forces of Uganda and the Nzabampema wing of the Forces nationales de libération of Burundi. Around half of children recruited recently and for which there is documentation from MONUSCO were in these three



*...the DRC passed a national law on child protection on January 2009 that banned (article 71) the recruitment (forced or voluntary) of anyone younger than 18 in the national armed forces."*

4 Vlassenroot, 2013.

5 K. Vlassenroot is a professor of political science and director of the Conflict Research Group at the University of Ghent. He is associated to the Egmont Institute and the Rift Valley Institute ([www.riftvalley.net](http://www.riftvalley.net)), a centre that works in Eastern and Central Africa to bring local knowledge to bear on social, political and economic development.

6 *ibid.*

7 Stearns, 2012. (Stearns was formerly coordinator of the UN Group of Experts on the DRC and is the director of the Rift Valley Institute).

8 *ibid.*

9 Stearns and Vogel, 2015.



***In 2016, MONUSCO reported that North Kivu had the largest percentage of children recruited into armed groups in the whole of the DRC (at 82 per cent), followed by Ituri (10 per cent) and South Kivu (5 per cent).***

groups: FDLR, Nyatura and Mouvement du 23 mars (M23).<sup>10</sup> The other half is assumed to be distributed between the remaining 67 or so armed groups in the region.

Precise figures related to children joining armed groups (forced and not forced) in eastern DRC do not exist. Some broad estimates, however, suggest that significant numbers of children participate in armed conflict. Since 2000, MONUSCO has documented the involvement of more than 31,000 children in armed groups.<sup>11</sup> These numbers represent a significant reduction from the approximately 100,000 children estimated to have been active at any one time in the most intensive years of the war (1996–1999). These widely varying estimates demonstrate the degree of approximation and the extent of variation in available figures. What can be said is that the phenomenon of children joining armed groups in North and South Kivu is not episodic but a systemic challenge. This interpretation is confirmed by MONUSCO's periodic Global Horizontal Notes, annual reports to the Security Council on Children and Armed Conflict and special reports since 2009.<sup>12</sup>

In 2016, MONUSCO reported that North Kivu had the largest percentage of children recruited into armed groups in the whole of the DRC (at 82 per cent), followed by Ituri (10 per cent) and South Kivu (5 per cent). Their most recent figures (2016) include the recruitment of 492 children (63 girls and 429 boys) (and in 2015, it was 488 children, with 26 girls and 462 boys). Also in 2016, according to MONUSCO, 2,055 children (139 girls) were officially demobilised.<sup>13</sup> Documentation by UN agencies and others suggests that approximately half of all children in armed groups were younger than 15 years when they first joined.

At the beginning of 2014, the Government sent troops to dismantle armed groups in the East, including the Mai-Mai and the FDLR in North Kivu. Despite this, there has been a continued presence of armed groups, including the Mai-Mai, Raia mutomboki, Nduma Defense of Congo, Ihana, Bulehusa and the Karahiri. Residents also complain of roadblocks by FARDC and the police that operate as mostly illegal tax-collecting areas.<sup>14</sup>

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10 MONUSCO, 2013, 2015b and 2017.

11 MONUSCO, 2015b.

12 MONUSCO, 2013, 2015a, 2015b, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c and 2017.

13 MONUSCO, 2016a.

14 AFEDEM, 2015.



## 2 RESEARCH RATIONALE, OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 RESEARCH RATIONALE AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There have been a number of studies across Africa, including the DRC, on the involvement of children in armed groups. From these studies, many important findings and assumptions have emerged. Few, however, looked specifically at the voluntary component of child participation in armed groups. Those that did were not in the DRC. Several studies documented children's assertions that they chose to join and were not forced.<sup>15</sup> Although much has been written about

the forced recruitment of children into armed groups in the DRC and across other conflict zones in Africa,<sup>16</sup> there is a dearth of information on the motivations and factors within children's socio-ecology that push and pull boys and girls to join armed groups voluntarily.<sup>17</sup> To fill this gap, War Child UK and War Child Holland commissioned this study of root causes of children joining armed groups in North and South Kivu.

<sup>15</sup> Child Soldiers International, 2017; Clemesac, 2007; de Vise, 2005; ILO, 2003; Lamberg, 2004; MONUSCO, 2015a; Vandenhole and Weyns, 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Annan et al., 2011; Annan and Brier, 2009; Betancourt et al., 2010; Betancourt et al., 2009; Betancourt et al., 2008; Blattman, 2006; Boothby, 2006; Child Soldiers International, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Some notable exceptions are Amnesty International, 2003; Aubrey et al., 2016; Ballesteros Duarte, 2010; Brett, 2003.

In the literature that discusses voluntary recruitment, several published studies argued that forced recruitment, mostly through abduction, is far more prevalent than voluntary recruitment.<sup>18</sup> There are, however, some exceptions: Studies conducted in Sierra Leone, Burundi and the DRC suggest that children join up voluntarily far more often than may be commonly assumed.<sup>19</sup>

Among the most common reasons to join armed groups voluntarily in these contexts is the hope of escaping poverty and the abject social conditions in which children and families live. In these circumstances, many boys and girls and youths see joining armed groups as their only viable means of survival. Other reasons often cited by children and youths include defending their ethnic community, avenging their family or friends whose murder they have witnessed and the hope to protect their family and community from other forces in the region.<sup>20</sup>

It is widely argued that poor quality education and uneven access to an education also drive children's voluntary recruitment.<sup>21</sup> Being in school is understood to be a significant protective factor. It is interesting that children who did not join in West African wars often mentioned they were motivated to stay out of armed groups by the desire to go to school.<sup>22</sup>

The literature on children's engagement in fighting forces in Africa is plentiful on how their participation exposes them to multiple levels of violence and psychosocial distress, including physical and sexual violence (especially for girls), verbal and physical abuse from extended family members and intimate partner violence.<sup>23</sup> High levels of sexual violence within the family and community context

during war time are often presented as a push factor for girls to join an armed group to protect themselves from abuse.<sup>24</sup> Escaping abusive family situations and domestic violence was found in a ten-country study<sup>25</sup> to be a significant driving force, especially for girls, to join an armed group, along with ideological and political commitment to the cause.<sup>26</sup>

There is debate over the median and average age of children at the time of joining armed groups. Some studies on the DRC mention children as young as 5 years old, while others refer mostly to adolescents aged 10 years or older.<sup>27</sup> What is important here is to determine in which age group the majority of children fall and to understand why some outliers are involved.

The general assumption in the literature on child soldiers in Africa is that girls join armed groups nearly as much as boys. While it is extremely difficult to estimate the numbers of girls because very few of them pass through the formal demobilisation process (where the counting tends to happen), a 2015 MONUSCO report noted that most researchers believe that between 30 and 40 per cent of all children who join in the DRC are girls. These numbers stand in stark contrast to MONUSCO's documentation, which puts the percentage of girls at 7 per cent.<sup>28</sup> There are several possible explanations for these contradictory findings (see section 3.3).

Among the influences that encourage children and youth to join an armed group, most studies focus on the role of peers and family. Boys and girls report high levels of peer encouragement in these reports.<sup>29</sup> Community elders, traditional leaders, parents and teachers



*It is widely argued that poor quality education and uneven access to an education also drive children's voluntary recruitment."*

18 Annan et al., 2011; Annan and Brier Moriah, 2009; Betancourt et al., 2010; Betancourt et al., 2009; Betancourt et al., 2008; Blattman, 2006; Boothby, 2006; Child Soldiers International, 2017.

19 Ballesteros Duarte, 2010; Clemesac, 2007; ILO, 2003; Jordans Mark et al., 2012; Lamberg, 2004.

20 Amnesty International, 2003; Ballesteros Duarte, 2010.

21 Aubrey et al., 2016; Ballesteros Duarte, 2010; Blattman, 2006; Bodineau, 2011; Brett, 2003; Child Soldiers International, 2017; Clemesac, 2007; ILO, 2003; Specht and Attree, 2006.

22 Delap, 2005.

23 Annan and Brier, 2009.

24 Brett, 2003; Child Soldiers International, 2017; Specht and Attree, 2006.

25 Specht and Attree, 2006.

26 Betancourt et al., 2008.

27 Lamberg, 2004; MONUSCO, 2013.

28 MONUSCO, 2015a.

29 Aubrey et al. 2016; Clemesac, 2007; Delap, 2005.



are rarely cited as a source of influence.<sup>30</sup> The majority of research also suggests that parents have a pivotal role in preventing children from joining the fighting forces by talking to them about the risks of war, keeping them busy with school or work and providing them with enough food to eat.<sup>31</sup> According to an ILO report on central Africa,<sup>32</sup> among all the factors that influence a child's decision to join, the most influential is said to be having regular contact in their daily life with armed groups.

Studies in other parts of Africa suggest that demobilisation does not always signal the end of children's involvement in armed violence.<sup>33</sup> Some argue that former child fighters may engage in armed blackmail and looting as a consequence of their

war-related experiences, thereby prolonging the conflict.<sup>34</sup> The extent to which these findings apply specifically to children in North and South Kivu is not known. Although comparisons between countries may serve to deepen our understanding of the phenomenon, contextual features clearly have an important role, and some situations cannot be generalised.

Finally, it cannot be assumed that children engaged in armed groups want to leave. Several reports point to a large number of young people who do not want to disarm and that young people who have been forced to demobilise argue that they had no choice but to do so.<sup>35</sup>

## 2.2 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES, THEMES AND QUESTION AREAS

War Child UK and War Child Holland commissioned this research to better understand the root causes of children joining armed groups voluntarily in North and South Kivu. These two organisations work in close collaboration with local communities in these provinces.

The overall purpose of the research is to create an evidence base upon which War Child UK and War Child Holland can determine appropriate and sustainable prevention and advocacy strategies at the community and family levels to reduce the prevalence of children in armed groups in the DRC.

To this end and building on a comprehensive review of the literature, this qualitative study explored whether or not contextual, familial and individual circumstances allow for recruitment to ever really be voluntary and what the 'push' and 'pull' factors are that determine the circumstances under which children join. Within that scope, the study also looked for the potentially

different reasons for boys and girls. The conclusions and recommendations are tailored towards assisting War Child UK and War Child Holland in designing their programmatic work and advocacy role in preventing the enrolment of children in armed groups.

Developing a better understanding of the current situation of children voluntarily joining armed groups in North and South Kivu and the motivational factors on different socio-ecological levels led to four themes and related questions:

### 1. CONCEPTIONS OF CHILDREN, CHILDHOOD AND ADULTHOOD

- How is 'child' and 'childhood' understood and defined from a community perspective?

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- How do you know that someone is a child?

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- When does a child become an adult?

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- How do you know that a child has become an adult?

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30 Aubrey et al., 2016; Child Soldiers International, 2014; Delap, 2005; Clemesac, 2007; MONUSCO, 2015a.

31 Delap, 2005.

32 ILO, 2003.

33 Annan et al., 2011; Annan and Brier, 2009; Betancourt et al., 2010; Crombach et al., 2013; Joon Song et al., 2014; Wessells, 2009.

34 Alusala, 2011.

35 ILO, 2003; De Vise, 2005.

## **2. INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY REASONS FOR AND MECHANISMS FOR RECRUITMENT**

- What does 'voluntary' mean in the DRC context?
- Who in the community is more prone to join an armed group?
- How do children join an armed group?
- Why are children joining voluntarily and why are others not?
- Who is involved in the decision and what influence do they have one way or another?

## **3. EXPECTATIONS AND REALITIES FOR CHILDREN IN ARMED GROUPS**

- What is life in an armed group like for children? Is it as they expected?
- Are children seeking to leave? How and why?
- What happens on leaving an armed group? How are they welcomed back in the community?
- Why are some children re-joining an armed group?

## **4. PREVENTION: WHAT IS BEING DONE AND WHAT MORE COULD OR SHOULD BE DONE?**

- Are there any preventive strategies against children joining voluntarily at the community level (including traditional leaders, community-based organisations, faith-based organisations), at the family level, at the local and international NGO level and at the government level?
- Which additional strategies could be used to reduce the prevalence of children who voluntarily join armed groups?

## **2.3 RESEARCH TOOLS**

The following four tools were used to explore the research questions. All the themes just described were covered with each target group for the semi-structured interviews and the focus group discussions. More specific topic areas were discussed during the testimonies. The data collectors followed a specific guide for each tool, which was discussed and adapted with the local research team during the training phase.

### **1. A REVIEW OF RELEVANT DOCUMENTARY SOURCES**

The starting point for this research was a review of NGO and government assessments, reports, ethnographic and other academic research, project needs assessments and evaluations and other relevant archival materials acquired throughout the study and in the data analysis stage. The purpose was to check what common assumptions were most prevalent in the literature, explore what gaps might exist and further our understanding of children voluntarily joining an armed group. Two members of Child Frontiers reviewed more than 61 documents prior to the field research and then re-checked and augmented their

reading during the data analysis stage.<sup>36</sup> Some of the findings from the literature review are presented in section 1.

## 2. SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

In total, 29 semi-structured interviews were conducted in person with adults in all five research sites (23 male respondents and 6 female respondents).<sup>37</sup> Respondents included local authorities, DDR employees, village chiefs, religious leaders, frontline workers, staff with UNICEF, MONUSCO and civil society organisations working with former child soldiers. A general framework of questions was provided as a guide, but the interviews followed an open interview style, allowing new ideas to be discussed based on interviewee responses. This method was chosen to allow the interviewer to motivate the respondent to share their knowledge of the topic covered. A handheld recorder was used in order to ensure that all

relevant information was captured.

## 3. FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Focus group discussions were conducted with community members in each of the research sites and in DDR centres in Goma and Bukavu to learn more about the general opinion among a group of people regarding children's participation in an armed group. They were designed as a purposeful discussion among people with similar characteristics. This tool was chosen to learn more about children's engagement in and experience with armed groups. Child-friendly techniques were used to ensure that the participating children feel at ease in a relaxed, non-formal environment, including drawings and images following a 'river of life' to explore what happens to children and the different people and circumstances that impact on their experiences and the decisions they make from before they join up until they leave the fighting forces.

### Child respondents covered:

- groups of boys who have left armed groups, via DDR centres only (aged 11–14 and 15–18)
- groups of girls aged 11–14
- groups of boys aged 11–14
- groups of girls aged 15–18
- groups of boys aged 15–18.

### Adult respondents covered:

- groups of female parents and caregivers (of children who had joined and who had not)
- groups of male parents and caregivers (of children who had joined and who had not).

<sup>36</sup> See the References section for a full list of the documents that were reviewed.

<sup>37</sup> This gender imbalance is partly explained by the fact that War Child UK and War Child Holland focal points in all sites were male and who introduced the research team mostly to male actors.



*Tools and approaches were constantly reviewed and adapted to encourage the full participation of the different respondent groups, ensuring that respondents of different age groups and education or literacy levels had the opportunity to fully contribute to the research.”*

Tables 1 and 2 illustrate the breakdown of respondents per research. Each group consisted of approximately eight participants. These sessions explored participants' specific experiences and opinions in an open, flexible and participatory way. Each session was led by one facilitator, and participants' comments and discussions were recorded by a notetaker, who also used a handheld recorder.

#### **4. TESTIMONIES**

This tool was used to gather targeted life stories from girls and boys about themselves or other children who had voluntarily joined armed groups or who had deliberately decided not to do so. These in-depth testimonies were designed to illustrate and give meaning to salient issues that emerged from the primary and secondary data. In all, 14 testimonies were collected across the sites from 12 boys and 2 girls. Participants for the testimonies were selected during the focus group discussions. The researchers followed up with the individuals who had shared an interesting

story to see if they were willing to speak about it in greater detail. There were no girls in the DDR centres, which partly explains why girls are underrepresented in the testimonies. In addition, girl groups in Rugari, Lumbishi and Kitchanga tended to be less active than boys groups during the focus group discussions. In some cases, they told the research team that they did not know much about armed groups because only boys were joining in their community.

The tools and approaches were constantly reviewed and adapted to encourage the full participation of the different respondent groups, ensuring that respondents of different age groups and education or literacy levels had the opportunity to fully contribute to the research. Overall, the dynamics in the group discussions were good. Respondents spoke openly and freely about the issues and were engaged, often provoking lively discussions among the respondents.



## 2.4 SAMPLING AND SAMPLE SIZE

Purposive sampling techniques were employed to select specific study sites in each of the selected locations. This means of sampling was chosen to quickly reach a targeted number of respondents and because sampling for proportionality was not the main concern. Using a purposive sample enabled particular research sites to be selected where there was the greatest likelihood of learning about the specific issues under investigation.

War Child staff members, based on their understanding of community dynamics, identified and approached potential respondents, together with local community members and staff working

at the DDR centres. War Child staff used snowball sampling technique, selecting participants by going house to house in the selected villages. They made sure that only one member from a family was selected in the same site. They also provided the selection criteria to local community members who helped them select respondents. Former child soldiers were only targeted directly through the DDR centres in Goma and Bukavu but not in the communities to avoid potential issues of stigmatisation.

Based on the broad selection criteria and to allow for the acquisition of detailed information, the sample size for each of the selected sites included:

**Table 1. Number of focus group respondents, by category in Rugari, Kitchanga and Lumbishi**

Category of respondent	Lumbishi	Kitchanga	Rugari	Target number	Total
Groups of girls aged 11–14	8	9	9	24	26
Groups of boys aged 11–14	11	8	8	24	27
Groups of girls aged 15–18	8	8	8	24	24
Groups of boys aged 15–18	9	8	8	24	25
Groups of female carers	8	8	8	24	24
Groups of male carers	8	8	10	24	26
Total	52	49	51	144	152

**Table 2. Number of focus group respondents, by category in Bukavu and Goma DDR centres**

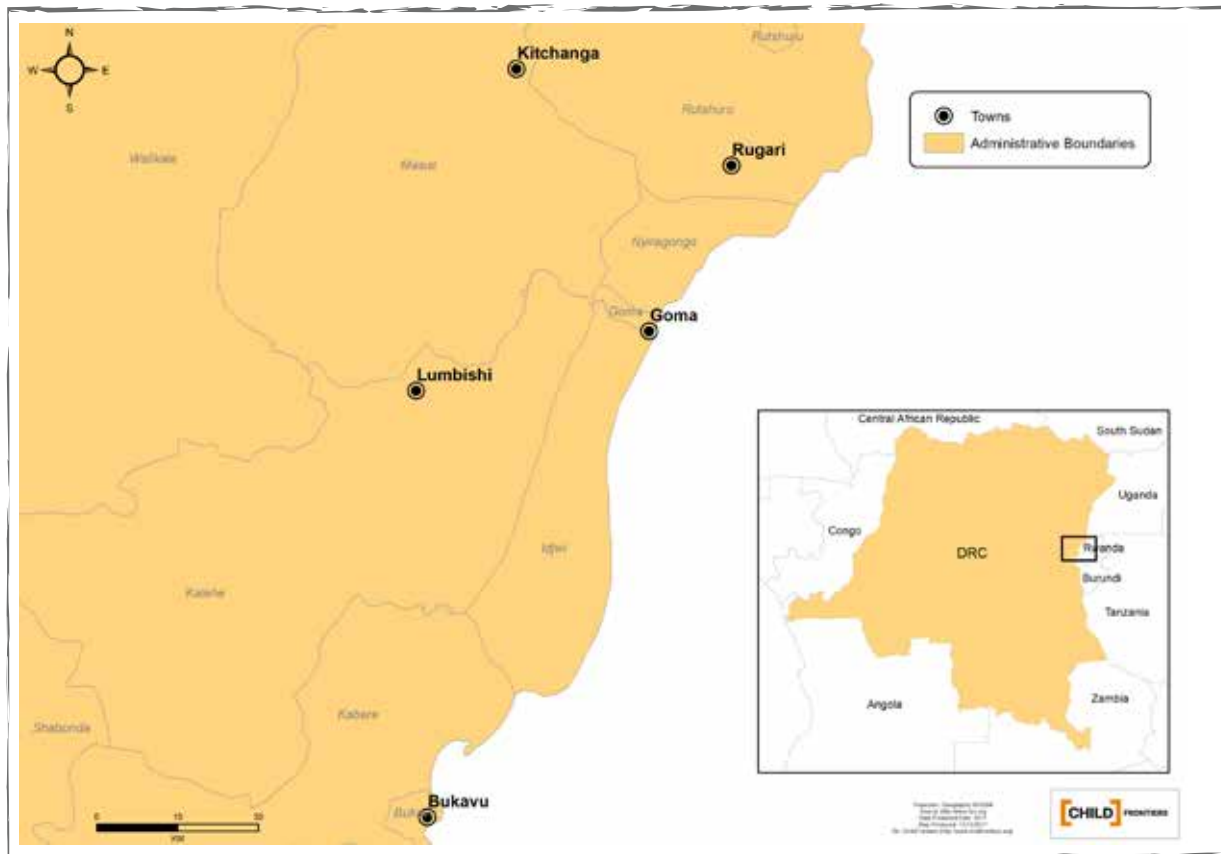
Category of respondent	Bukavu	Goma	Target number	Total
Groups of girls who have left armed groups aged 11–14	0	0	16	0*
Groups of boys who have left armed groups aged 11–14	6	5	16	11
Groups of girls who have left armed groups aged 15–18	0	0	16	0*
Groups of boys who have left armed groups aged 15–18	8	16	16	24
Total	14	21	64	35

Note: \*=At the time of data collection there were no girls present in the centre.

## 2.5 SITE SELECTION

The sites outlined in table 3 were selected for data collection based on discussions between War Child and Child Frontiers. Three communities and two DDR centres in North and South Kivu were selected as research sites. They include rural and peri-urban communities, where the prevalence of voluntary recruitment of children is particularly high and where War Child UK or War Child Holland have a presence. The provincial capitals of Goma and Bukavu were included to reach children who had joined armed groups and who were in transit to a DDR centre at the time of the study.

### SITES WHERE PRIMARY RESEARCH WAS CONDUCTED



**Table 3. Research sites**

Site	Name of community/area	Reason for selection and characteristics
Goma	Centre de Transit et Orientation, Programme d'Appui a la Lutte Contre la Misere in Goma	To reach boys and girls who had joined armed groups voluntarily through a DDR centre
Bukavu	Centre de Transit et Orientation, Bureau pour le Volontariat au service de l'Enfance et de la Santé in Bukavu	To reach boys and girls who had joined armed groups voluntarily through a DDR centre
Kalehe	Lumbishi	War Child Holland presence (ARC project); high prevalence of voluntary child recruitment into local defence militias; ethnic tensions; rural area
Masisi	Kitchanga	War Child UK presence; high prevalence of voluntary child recruitment; active presence of armed groups; rural area, 152 km from Goma
Rutshuru	Rugari	War Child UK presence (SGBV programme and 117 Helpline); high prevalence of voluntary child recruitment; presence of armed groups and local militia with regular foreign interference; peri-urban area, 50 km from Goma

The sites selected for this study all consist of migrants from Rwanda and people claiming to be landowners: Lumbishi in Kalehe, South Kivu; Kitchanga in Masisi, North Kivu and Rugari in Rutshuru, North Kivu. In Lumbishi, people have no common identity or language; they come from other parts of the country as well as neighbouring countries, hence the issue of tribalism features strongly. Rutshuru is mostly made up of groups of migrants who came in two waves: Those who arrived a long time ago from Rwanda and who have become Congolese, and a group of people who came more recently from Rwanda after

the genocide in 1994. Because of this, people living in Rutshuru are more united than in Kitchanga, they speak the same language (Kinyarwanda), and they recognise that they are the same people even if they arrived at different times and are therefore more tolerant of other each, considering themselves to have a common identity. Two groups of people have united in Kalehe (the Tembo and Bashi) and in Masisi (the Hunde and the Nyanga). These people, claiming to originate from these areas, do not tolerate migrants whom they consider to have invaded their lands.

## 2.6 DATA ANALYSIS

Data were analysed using a grounded theory approach.<sup>38</sup> This method relies on the systematic, inductive and comparative review and analysis of data, the coding of emerging themes and ideas and the eventual categorisation and differentiation of findings and their underlying concepts.

Raw data and audio files of the different sessions were transcribed into notes written in French by four national data collectors, working in pairs, together with the senior local researcher who assured the translation from oral Swahili to written French was properly verified. All transcripts originating from the focus group discussions were analysed by the international researchers and inputted into a research matrix that was later colour coded to underline emerging trends and patterns. The matrix was continuously reviewed, analysed and discussed by the international researchers and the senior local researcher. Transcripts originating from the semi-structured interviews and testimonies were analysed by the two international researchers and the senior local researcher, who worked together to compare and contrast trends with those that emerged in the focus group discussions. Relevant and compelling stories that could showcase the more poignant findings were also identified.

Once the main findings were determined, a working draft of the report was shared by email with the local data collectors, to check the consistency of the analysis and comment on the findings and their accuracy (particularly if something was not in line with what they observed during primary data collection). The two international researchers also compared respondents' answers based on different sites and age groups. The senior local researcher was involved in all stages of the data analysis to ensure that all observations made by the data collectors, beyond the verbatim transcript of respondents' answers, were taken into consideration in the analysis of the data and the presentation of the findings.



*Three communities and two DDR centres in North and South Kivu were selected as research sites. They include rural and periurban communities, where the prevalence of voluntary recruitment of children is particularly high and where War Child UK or War Child Holland have a presence.”*

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Glaser and Strauss, 1967.

## 2.7 RESEARCH TEAM

One team of five individuals (two facilitators, two notetakers and one senior local researcher) worked together to conduct interviews, the focus group discussions and gather the testimonies. These individuals included two staff members of War Child UK based in

Goma and two staff members of War Child Holland based in Minova, supported by a senior local researcher who is a professor at the University of Kinshasa. The team was supported in the field and during the training by two team leaders from Child Frontiers.

A six-day training was developed and conducted in Gisenyi for the national data collectors and led by the Child Frontiers team leaders. A range of topics was included to ensure that all were well prepared and had a thorough understanding of the research objectives, methodology and tools. Specific topics included:

- introductions and overview of the research aims, objectives and process;
- significant child protection issues confronting children and specifics of child recruitment;
- overview of the skills and methods involved in qualitative research, in particular with children;
- ethical considerations and the code of conduct for researchers;
- facilitating qualitative research methods, including focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews and collecting testimonies;
- notetaking, including completing data-recording sheets;
- writing up of notes;
- identifying and selecting participants in the research process;
- safeguarding participants in the research process;
- obtaining consent;
- language and translation issues.

Part of the training package included two days spent piloting the focus group discussions and the informant interviews in Goma and Gisenyi with children selected by War Child UK so that the research team could practise the data-collection methods, adjust their appropriateness to the Congolese context and make any amendments necessary. All training materials, tools and support documents were compiled into a research manual and distributed to each member of the research team.

During the data collection phase, the team split to work simultaneously in a given community. The data collectors worked in pairs (one facilitator and one notetaker) to conduct the focus groups discussions, semi-structured interviews and testimonies. The team spent four days in each site for Kalehe, Masisi and Rutshuru and two days per site in Goma and Bukavu. During that time, in addition

to collecting primary data, members wrote up their field notes to share with the international project researchers. Daily debriefing sessions were led by the Child Frontiers team leader at the end of each day of data collection to share initial findings, discuss any challenges – be they logistical or with the tools, review and adapt the tools as necessary and conduct initial analysis with the team. At the end of the data collection, the local research team provided initial impressions of the findings and were subsequently available for email exchanges about the notes that they had translated and written up, seeking clarification and contextual understanding as needed. The local research team was also consulted during the development and editing of the drafts of this report and the PowerPoint presentation that accompanies it, providing additional considerations, clarifications and feedback.



The senior local researcher conducted some of the semi-structured interviews with government and non-government actors in the research sites, participated as an observer in half<sup>39</sup> of the focus group discussions that were organised in all sites and contributed to the daily debriefing sessions in the field. He subsequently supported the data analysis

process through numerous exchanges with the Child Frontiers team by phone and email, providing critical contextual knowledge and understanding to the findings. He inputted directly into the report and PowerPoint presentation and provided additional details and clarity as needed.

## 2.8 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study was designed to minimise risks to the respondents and maximise the potential benefits of their participation. It was designed to comply with internationally and nationally recognised research standards. External ethical approval was sought and obtained locally

from the Université Libre des Pays des Grands Lacs in Goma. Research team members received specialised instruction in the ethical guidelines and principles of the study prior to data collection, and each was required to sign a researcher code of conduct (see Annex I).

The following ethical principles were applied at all stages of the research process:<sup>40</sup>

- The research should have social and scientific value.

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- The research was designed to ensure that the knowledge and learning generated are used to improve child protection and the more general well-being of children and families living in North and South Kivu.

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- The research will have scientific validity.

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- The legitimacy and accessibility of the concepts and terms used over the course of the research were carefully addressed through translation verified by the five local researchers.

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- Subject selection will be fair and transparent.

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- Respondents were selected to represent diverse socioeconomic statuses, ages, varying levels of exposure to armed groups and a variety of religious, ethnic and social factors.

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- Research participants will be protected from harm.

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- Participants were not asked explicitly to talk about personal experiences of violence or abuse. All interactions and engagements with children were not focused on each child's individual experience but rather on what types of things a child who had joined the fighting forces might have felt or might have experienced.

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- The researchers will remain objective and not interpret, direct or influence participants in any way.

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- Participants' responses were recorded and transcribed verbatim, regardless of whether the data collector agreed with the statement expressed.

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- The study team will commit to independent review.

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- External ethical approval was obtained by the Ethics Committee of the Université Libre des Pays des Grands Lacs.

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- All research participation must be voluntary.

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39 Half because the focus group discussions were conducted with two groups simultaneously.

40 A complete description of the ethical considerations can be found in Annex II.

- Informed voluntary consent and children’s assent were obtained from all research participants specifying the right to withdraw from the research at any time, the right to decline to answer individual questions or to participate in specific stages of data collection.

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- Potential and enrolled participants are to be treated with respect.

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- The data collectors adhered to local codes of dress and behaviour, respected participants’ points of view at all times and refrained from criticism of research participants or from acting as a teacher or instructor.

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- Confidentiality and data protection are to be maintained at all times.

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- All information collected during the study has been kept strictly confidential and has not been shared except through the verbal or written dissemination of the findings of the study. It was made clear to all respondents that their participation and opinions would remain anonymous in the report.

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- No compensation will be paid.

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- Research respondents did not receive any monetary compensation for their participation in this study.

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As per the ethical principles, informed consent<sup>41</sup> was sought by all respondents engaged in the research during the participant identification and selection process and again at the start of each focus group discussion, testimony and semi- structured interview. Researchers provided a brief overview of the research, including the purpose of the

research, and what would be done with the information collected. Following the introduction and a request for participants to indicate whether they were happy to take part in the research, focus group discussion and interview participants were asked to sign consent forms, which were subsequently placed in secured files.

## 2.9 CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

This study encountered a number of challenges and limitations, including:

**Inadequate participation of girls in the DDR centres:** While the research team tried to conduct interviews and focus group discussions with girls of different ages in the DDR centres in Bukavu and Goma, it was not possible to do so because at the time of data collection there were no girls in either centre. The centres reported that the numbers of

boys and girls fluctuate significantly and that while girls do attend the DDR centres, they are usually far fewer in number than boys. The inability to learn the experiences and perspectives of girls in this context means that it is not possible to compare their experiences with those of boys or with the data derived from girls in the community.

**Small sample sizes of boys in the DDR centres:** The total number of Congolese boys hosted at the DDR centre in Bukavu was relatively small at the time of our visit. The bulk of children there came from Burundi, and the research team decided not to conduct focus group discussions or gather testimonies with them to avoid including respondents who did not fit the pre-existing sampling frame.

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<sup>41</sup> Assent and consent forms can be found in the research manual.



**Lack of gender balance in data collection team:** All adults and key informants encountered during the field research in all sites asserted that there was no bias created by the fact that the six people (including the Child Frontiers Associate) conducting the data collection were all males. War Child was aware of the team composition from the start. However, there are certainly limitations in terms of the nature and type of data that were collected with different respondent groups. For example, throughout this study, sexual violence against girls at home and in communities was not reported as widely as might have been expected, given the heavy reference to it in the literature; it is worth asking whether or not the lack of data on this subject is a reflection of the reality or that it was men who were asking the questions. Or, did the questions asked in this study – or the way they were asked or the context in which they were asked (group discussions) – not lend themselves to generating this kind of information? Moving ahead, it will be important to explore this issue in greater depth. This will need to be done in the context of ongoing relationships of trust rather through short, one-time snapshot data-collection activities.

**Small sample size of women interviewed:** Among the 29 semi-structured interviews conducted in person with adults in all five sites, only six were with female respondents. This is due to the War Child UK and War Child Holland focus points who helped the

research team in selecting key informants in communities were also all male and introduced the team mostly to male actors. This gender imbalance means that it is not possible to compare and weight their answers with their male peers.



### **3 FINDINGS**

This section explores a range of issues concerning children's enrolment into an armed group, including how they joined and who influenced their decision, what life was like in the armed group, and why participation of children continues to be so prolific in times of 'relative' peace. The array of push and pull factors for boys and girls joining armed groups for the first time are examined as well as children's reasons for returning to an armed group. The section concludes with a look at ongoing efforts to prevent voluntary recruitment in these sites and what more could be done.

The findings in this section are based on an analysis of the data collected in the focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews and the testimonies with different respondents. Similarities and divergences in the experiences and perspectives of communities and groups of males and females of different ages are compared and contrasted throughout. Whenever possible, the participants' own words are provided.

### 3.1 UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF CHILD

Perceptions about who is a child and what influences and determines the transition from childhood to adulthood differ across and within societies. Communities and are influenced by political, economic, historical and socio-cultural circumstances.<sup>42</sup> Governments, UN agencies and international development agencies mostly rely on the international legal instruments that define a child according to age, established as all persons younger than 18 years. In many Euro-American cultures, this age limit differentiates children from adults, and childhood is valued as a time of innocence, learning, leisure and educational opportunities.<sup>43</sup> However, in communities in many other parts of the world, childhood is defined differently and is often perceived as a period of apprenticeship towards adult roles, which is dependent on a set of circumstances rather than a definitive age.<sup>44</sup>

Understanding the voluntary recruitment and engagement of children in armed conflict means understanding more than why a child would join an armed group. It means exploring which children join (and do not join), in what circumstances and with what goal in mind. To do so necessitates an investigation of who is a 'child' in these contexts, and the dynamism and fluidity inherent in these definitions. How is 'childhood' understood and how does it differ from conceptions of 'adulthood'? What does it mean to be a 'child' or an 'adult' in the midst of ongoing political and armed conflict in eastern DRC? Insights into these questions were sought at the outset of the primary data collection and informed the broad framework within which the main research questions have been understood.

#### TRANSITIONING FROM CHILDHOOD TO ADULTHOOD

The DRC ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990, and the DRC Constitution defines a child as anyone younger than 18 years. In this study, people working within a professional sphere and community members who had been sensitised frequently began discussions by affirming that a child refers to all persons younger than 18. As discussions progressed, however, and across all sites, a more nuanced understanding emerged in which the concept of child is not related to age so much as to specific actions, experiences, behaviour and physical maturity and that these elements are understood to be interlinked.

“Here in our community, we don't need to know the age; we need to know the size [of the child] and the actions.”

(Male adult, aged 42, from Lumbishi, Kalehe)

'Children' thus are understood to be girls and boys whose bodies are not yet fully developed, who lack experience and maturity and who require others to care for them. This is not to say that age is of no consequence, rather that it is fluid and interpreted differently depending on circumstances and events. The range of ages mentioned by respondents varied tremendously, although there was some consensus that typically a person younger than 12 would always be considered a child, with an upper limit of 15 years. Between the ages of 13 and 15, children tend to begin the transition to adulthood.

Physical developmental changes are key to this transition, and for girls this includes developing breasts and starting a menstrual cycle. While for boys, it is marked by the growth of a beard and the breaking of the voice.

Physical maturity often presents itself as a precursor to other events and actions that initiate the transition to adulthood for both boys and girls.

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42 Boyden and Berry, 2004; Woodhead and Montgomery, 2002; Weisner, 1994.

43 See, for example, Boyden, 1993.

44 Lo Forte et al., 2015; Mann et al., 2015.

**“ You know, custom is different to the State, and custom dictates that when a boy has a beard and a girl has breasts, they can get married. Without these elements, the person would still be a child.”**

(Male adult, aged 33, from Kitchanga, Masisi)

Dependence on parents also emerged as a clear determinant of who is a child and who is an adult. A boy becomes an adult when he can fend for himself, make his own decisions, become responsible for his own actions and support himself financially. Activities that signal adulthood for males include starting to work and being able to build a house for oneself. For girls, earning a living, such as weaving mats and helping in the fields, are important markers, as are being able to manage personal care and hygiene, undertaking household chores without being asked and caring for younger siblings. For both boys and girls, getting married and having children are clear indicators that a child has become an adult; for girls, this process is likely to happen earlier than boys.

**“ When a boy...goes to the quarry and finds some minerals, he buys himself some trousers. He already sees himself as a grown-up. He sees that he is already big because he starts to get a little money and he can get married. And then the others will say he is already big and can do anything he wants simply because he's starting to be financially self-sufficient.”**

(Boy, aged 16, from Lumbishi, Kalehe)

Participation in and completion of formal schooling is also a determinant of age-related status for boys and girls. A person who is still in school is invariably considered a child; the reverse also can be true when accompanied by other elements, such as physical development and the ability to take care of oneself or others. Adulthood is therefore sometimes achieved earlier than might otherwise have been due to economic and contextual circumstances, such as poverty and insecurity.

Behavioural changes also mark a transition from child to adult. When adults observe that a child is playing less, taking on more responsibility in different gendered realms of domestic and public life and is generally understood to know the difference between right and wrong, they begin to accord the individual greater respect.

For boys, this means being included in adult discussions and decision-making. Girls start to socialise out of the home with friends, imitating what they do and what they wear. When girls and boys start to dress differently, wearing sarongs and trousers, respectively, and begin taking an interest in and flirting with one another, they are understood to be transitioning out of childhood.

**“ I consider myself an adult when I start to talk with grown-ups. When we start to talk to adults or they start to let you speak in a group of adults, then you are no longer considered a child.”**

(Boy, aged 16, from Lumbishi, Kalehe)

When asking about differences between girls and boys, it was noted across the sites that girls grow up more quickly than boys, both in terms of their earlier physical maturity and hence marriageability as well as their earlier assumption of domestic responsibilities, such as cooking and caring for siblings when parents are absent.

**“** *Girls by the time they are 12, they know how to wash themselves and put make-up on, she considers herself grown up while the boy still knows nothing. At 12, the girl is already looking after her younger brothers, whereas a boy of the same age doesn't. The girl prepares their food, washes them and, if the parents are out, she'll look after them while the boy is roaming around outside.”*

(Male adults, aged 58 and 39, respectively, from Kitchanga, Masisi)

In the communities where this study was undertaken, there is also some indication that joining an armed group is one of the means by which children attain adult status. It does not appear that this is the explicit intention of those who join voluntarily but rather a consequence that children note upon reflection.

**“** *Someone of my age, if he goes into the forest to join the armed groups, when he returns with his weapon he has already become a grown-up. We can no longer consider him as a child because here, when we start to carry weapons, we are no longer considered a child.”*

(Boy, aged 17, from Lumbishi, Kalehe)

A boy who fights as a member of an armed group is afforded a certain amount of respect (albeit based on fear) by adults, including those in his home community. What is less clear is whether it is these apprehensions that contribute to a change in age-related status or whether it is being a fighter per se.

But is this respected 'adult' status maintained once a child leaves the armed group and returns to community life? These questions require further investigation and reflection.

The discussions in the communities revealed that by the age of 14 or 15 years, boys and girls alike are transitioning from childhood to adulthood. Strictly speaking, therefore, these communities do not consider children who are joining armed groups beyond this age to be children but rather as adolescents or even young adults who are becoming independent and exercising their own agency. This is an important consideration to keep in mind when digesting the rest of the findings and how we frame our responses.

## **3.2 UNDERSTANDING THE NOTION OF JOINING VOLUNTARILY**

The research sought to understand what the communities where the research took place understood by voluntary recruitment so that discussions could be framed appropriately. A consensus emerged about what it means to join voluntarily, which was understood unanimously to mean joining of one's free will, without force or coercion.

However, respondents articulated a view that a child cannot be separated from the circumstances in which they live and that the decision to join is not straightforward. One group of older boys in Kitchanga (six out of eight of whom were former child soldiers) questioned whether joining an armed group was ever truly voluntary, given that there is always something that pushes a child, such as the levels of hardship endured at home. They argued that a child cannot be happy in his family and make the decision to join an armed group.

Children's joining, even if not coerced, is less about desire and more about a choice made within a limited set of options; were other opportunities available to these children, joining an armed group would not be their first choice. This lack of opportunity set against challenges that children face when in an armed group is examined in part 3 to help contextualise the dichotomy that underpins a child's decision to join.

## **3.3 UNDERSTANDING CHILDREN'S INVOLVEMENT IN ARMED GROUPS IN NORTH AND SOUTH KIVU**

### **3.3.1 SCALE OF THE PROBLEM**

It was widely asserted among respondent groups, particularly in Kitchanga and Rugari, that participation by children in armed groups is on the increase due to rising ethnic tensions, tribalism, ongoing insecurity and a greater proximity of armed groups to villages.<sup>45</sup> It was also suggested that armed groups need to augment their numbers to protect themselves, their assets and achievements to date. Only the groups of girls and male adults in Lumbishi indicated that children's participation is decreasing because armed groups have moved away from the edges of the villages where they were previously located.

In addition to this increased participation of children in armed groups, respondents across ages in all sites asserted that children are joining armed groups voluntarily and in large numbers,<sup>46</sup> which contradicts some of the available reports on this issue in the African region.<sup>47</sup> In Kitchanga and Lumbishi, adults and children stated that 40–45 per cent of boys in a given community might join (not girls, however – an issue discussed in detail in this section). During times when the conflict is considered low-level, as was the case in the research sites at the time of writing, it became apparent that virtually all children in the research sites who had joined an armed group did so voluntarily and that forced recruitment is the exception. In the current situation, the armed groups are not actively fighting each other but act more as a deterrent against potential ethnic attacks.

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<sup>45</sup> This is also confirmed by MONUSCO, 2015a; Stearns and Vogel, 2015.

<sup>46</sup> This assertion followed on from respondents' discussions and agreement on what constitutes voluntary, as outlined in section 1.2

<sup>47</sup> Annan et al., 2011; Annan and Brier, 2009; Betancourt et al., 2010; Betancourt et al., 2009; Betancourt et al., 2008; Blattman, 2006; Boothby, 2006; Child Soldiers International, 2017.



“*In my opinion, there are currently no children who are forced to join armed groups; apart from the CNDP (Conseil National de Défense du Peuple) era, when children were sometimes taken by force... But currently, they leave by their own will.*”

(Female adult, aged 34, from Kitchanga, Masisi)

### 3.3.2 A GENDERED PHENOMENON

Throughout the research, respondents' discussions about children joining an armed group centred much more on boys than girls because communities do not consider girls to have 'joined' in the same way as boys.

Much of the literature pointed to both boys and girls joining armed groups,<sup>48</sup> and the research team sought to understand the experiences of both boys and girls in armed groups. However, respondents in all sites repeatedly asserted that there weren't any girls in the armed groups. On probing further, it transpired that girls and boys interact with armed groups differently and that communities' perceptions of their involvement in armed groups was therefore framed differently. Only children who are combatants and who carry weapons are considered to have 'joined' an armed group. This categorisation applied overwhelmingly to boys, aged 14–17 years. Because girls rarely serve as combatants, their engagement is not framed in the same way as it is for boys. Although in their daily lives, girls may be just as involved as boys in the functioning of these groups, the roles they are given were understood differently by all categories of respondents.

Respondents in all sites argued that girls do not join armed groups for multiple reasons. First and foremost, a female is not supposed to go and fight.

“*Girls don't join because she can't carry a weapon, and there are some jobs specific to boys that girls can't do, like the army.*”

(Girl, aged 16, from Lumbishi, Kalehe)

Girls were considered, by different categories of respondents, to be fearful and more sensitive than boys; they were described as physically weaker and hence not effective combatants. Notwithstanding these views, girls are nonetheless still able to be associated with armed groups in different ways, usually from the age of 14. The specific roles and tasks that girls and boys undertake in armed groups are discussed further in this section.

In Rugari and Lumbishi, this view that girls do not join armed groups was reinforced by the fact that girls are often not living in the 'bush' in the same way as boys. Girls in these settings tend to live in their home communities and to meet up with soldiers, either there or in the bush, for casual sex or as part of a more formal recognised relationship. In these instances, contact for girls with armed groups is much more fluid than it is for boys. They have greater mobility in terms of spending time within and outside of armed groups.

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48 Brett, 2003; Child Soldiers International, 2017; MONUSCO, 2015a; Specht and Attree, 2006.

“*The girls don't join. Maybe those who are wives of soldiers and who live in the community, they can go whenever they want.*”

(Boy, aged 13, from Lumbishi, Kalehe)

“*In our community, only boys join voluntarily. Girls might get married to some of the younger members of the armed groups... However, girls stay in the community and meet up with their husbands in the bush, where they might spend a couple of days before going home. It's the same thing for the boys who sometimes come to visit their wives in their homes.*”

(Male adult, aged 34, from Rugari, Rutshuru)

This research found there to be a gendered distinction in how boys and girls are seen to relate to armed groups. Their experiences within a group also differ, with girls taking on different roles to boys and having greater mobility to come and go. While other reports describe differences in terms of the roles that boys and girls are given in armed groups, the distinction in terms of how a boy and a girl relate to armed groups does not seem to be documented. The other reports do not mention that the relationship girls have tends to be more flexible, with them coming and going between communities and an armed group. It is an important distinction to keep in mind throughout the report because it has an impact on how girls are targeted in terms of prevention and protection responses and their potential reintegration needs.

### **3.3.3 LIFE IN THE ARMED GROUPS**

For boys, life in an armed group is undeniably tough. All categories of respondents across the sites held this view. Boys suffer physical hardship, are denied sleep and in some instances, they lack food, shelter and appropriate hygiene. Boys of all ages sleep in the open air, are vulnerable to all elements and have little access to medicine when they are ill. The level of violence towards them is high, as is the violence they commit towards others, including killings and severe beatings.

Respondents often noted that children follow orders and take revenge without too much questioning. Various respondents and interviewees cited this as one of the reasons why armed groups seek to have children in their ranks.

“*Speaking to leaders of armed groups, they always tell us that they like to have children in their ranks because they are very courageous, don't have much ambition and are not as demanding as adults. As long as they eat, they take each day as it comes. Children also follow orders closely. You can tell them to go and kill, and they will, unlike adults who can easily be bribed with a bit of money.*”

(NGO director in Bukavu)

It also emerged that children often act under duress and that, rather than not caring or not understanding how bad it is to harm or kill another person, a child appears to act without thinking or questioning because he is scared and has no choice, having himself been threatened with severe beating or death if he does not follow orders. The boys who participated in this research, particularly those in the DDR centres, spoke of an ever-present fear of death – in combat, at the hands of superiors for disobeying an order or by community members for having stolen from them.

### 3.3.4 ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES WITHIN ARMED GROUPS

Among the boys within an armed group, there are distinctions between the roles performed by those who are younger (typically from the age of 13) and older (typically from the age of 15). The distinction between 'younger' and 'older' children, however, is made according to physical size and strength more than age. All are made to work hard. Younger boys serve as body guards, which can be tiring, especially because they often must stand guard at night and miss the opportunity to sleep. They also act as spies because people in the community and other armed groups do not suspect them. Young boys are bearers of *gri-gris*,<sup>49</sup> they transport ammunition when they are on the move and are also involved in preparing food and helping care for smaller children.<sup>50</sup> Older boys become soldiers and are trained to use weapons, after which they can be sent to steal, loot and kill.

“For the youngest, they are given housework, such as cooking, laundry, looking after small children. The oldest, from the age of 15, are used in theft, espionage and war.”

(Local leader in Rugari, Rutshuru)

A consistent finding in all research sites is that, while girls are rarely combatants, they are invariably with or associated with armed groups as wives or more casual sexual partners and to take care of domestic chores, such as cooking, cleaning and also caring for the smaller children. They may be used as spies and scouts, which is easily possible because most of them remain living in their community. Thus, they come and go easily and are unlikely to arouse suspicion.

“There are also advantages to having girls because they have the opportunity to move easily in the community, and no one really pays attention to them. So they are sent to spy on the position of enemies without any problem.”

(NGO director in Bukavu)

As with the boys, a distinction is made according to age, with older girls, typically from the age of 14 or 15, becoming 'wives'.

“Girls cook or look after children; older girls act as wives of commanders.”

(Boy, aged 16, DDR centre in Goma)

49 Some of the armed groups are driven by beliefs that they are able to fight without getting killed by a gun. They believe that if one of them is shot and says *mai*, meaning 'water', the bullet becomes pure water on their bodies. To have such these powers, they must hold a magic potion. However, for this potion to stay powerful for long, only a person who has never had sexual relations can hold it in their hands, which is why the younger children bear this role.

50 Children born in the armed group.

### 3.4 UNDERSTANDING WHY CHILDREN BECOME INVOLVED WITH ARMED GROUPS

Despite the levels of hardship that boys endure in the armed groups, large numbers of children continue to join. This section explores the reasons why. The different push and pull factors that motivate children to join or become involved with armed groups are examined; findings are differentiated between boys and girls where notable divergences emerge.

Table 4 summarises the main push and pull factors for boys and girls involved in armed groups, which are ranked according to how frequently they were mentioned to give an indication of prevalence. The rest of this section goes on to discuss these in more detail.

**Table 4. Summary of the push and pull factors for girls and boys**

Push factors			Pull factors		
Factor	Boys	Girls	Factor	Boys	Girls
Household poverty and unemployment	✓	✓	Readily available food	✓	✓
Hunger	✓	✓	Greater access to money	✓	✓
Lack of schooling	✓	✓	Increased protection	✓	✓
Vengeance	✓		Improved status and respect in society	✓	✓
Tribalism	✓		Better option for day-to-day living in the absence of alternatives	✓	✓
Constant looting by armed groups	✓		Cause to defend and protect family and community	✓	
Seeking refuge to escape arrest	✓				
Mistreatment (humiliation) at home	✓				
Mistreatment (harassment and intimidation) by police and FARDC	✓				

#### 3.4.1 FACTORS THAT PUSH BOYS INTO ARMED GROUPS

As table 4 shows, there is no single reason why children continue to join armed groups. Rather, it appears to be a constellation of push and pull factors. Children's participation in an armed group is driven by multifaceted factors that work in concert with one another, pushing and pulling children towards armed groups in different settings and circumstances. That said, respondents of all ages in all sites overwhelmingly cited **household poverty** as the main push for boys in joining an armed group voluntarily, which is also echoed in the literature.<sup>51</sup> Poverty and poverty-related issues were mentioned more frequently than any other motivating factor. In many instances, poverty is so extreme that parents are not able to provide for their children's most basic needs. In these circumstances, **hunger** becomes an overriding push factor. Lack of food at home was mentioned by respondents in all sites as a major concern. Children regularly go hungry. The promise of food that can be obtained directly from an armed group or, when not available, can be accessed through stealing, looting and taxing of communities becomes a big incentive.

<sup>51</sup> Amnesty International, 2003; Ballesteros Duarte, 2010.

Linked to extreme poverty is a complete **lack of opportunity** in the communities where this research took place, coupled with a lack of future perspectives. This vacuum is marked primarily by the absence of opportunities to earn a basic living or to access formal education or vocational training. A child who has nothing to do is highly susceptible to joining an armed group, which is often regarded by children to be the only viable option for survival and for making a life. This view was widely held by people of all ages in all of the research sites.

“*When a child studies and you do not have enough to pay for his studies, he finds nothing; he enters the quarry, he sees that it is not working. He gets into all sorts of things, he thinks it’s not right. He begins to cultivate, he sees that he does not have the strength to cultivate. He goes into the forest, so he steals everything he’s going to eat.*”

(Female adult, aged 25, from Lumbishi, Kalehe)

Boys **not going to school** emerged as a big push factor. This view was widely held by different categories of respondents in all the sites and is also supported by the literature.<sup>52</sup> Because their families cannot afford to pay school fees and related costs, children in these circumstances often end up with nothing to do and hence are more likely to seek engagement in available activities, especially if they offer the potential to improve their life or their family life. This was especially apparent in Lumbishi, where not only do families struggle to pay for the school fees but, until recently, there were physically no secondary schools for children and most adolescents in the area.

**Vengeance** is another major push factor for boys, especially for those who seek to avenge the killing of a parent or family member or the looting or stealing of land. This was cited frequently by different respondent groups in all sites. By joining an armed group, a boy in these circumstances hopes to learn to fight and be armed and thus able to eventually take revenge on the person who has wronged him.

“*When they’ve stolen the only plot that you had, which is very common in our village these days, you don’t know who to complain to because wherever you go, if you don’t have contacts in your family, you’ll never be right. ... All this makes our children join the armed groups so that one day they can come back themselves to settle the score with the person who has stolen your family’s plot.*”

(Female adult, aged 34, from Lumbishi, Kalehe)

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<sup>52</sup> Aubrey et al., 2016; Ballesteros Duarte, 2010; Blattman, 2006; Bodineau, 2011; Brett, 2003; Child Soldiers International, 2017; Clemesac, 2007; ILO, 2003; Specht and Attree, 2006.

Another related aspect is the **constant looting** by the armed groups, which frequently leads to children resigning themselves to the fact that nothing is going to change. In these circumstances, they see no other option but to join, rather than work hard to earn a living and cultivate land only to have the proceeds or crops stolen.

“ *When you are keeping your goat and the troublemakers living in the forest come and take it and eat it, and when this happens two or three times, you decide to join the armed group to also eat other people’s goats.*”

(Boy, aged 17, from Lumbishi, Kalehe)

Occasionally, children spoke of **revenge** being motivated by teachers in their community beating a child or giving him bad grades.

**Tribalism** also emerged as a major push factor for boys in Lumbishi and Kitchanga, where inter-ethnic conflicts between communities are rampant. In these areas, insecurity is high. Tribalism perpetuates a cycle of violence as tribes battle to protect and avenge their tribe members.

“ *Imagine, with the problem of tribalism, a Hutu kills my mother while she’s in the field with machetes. Me, as a Hunde, I want to avenge my mother’s death at all costs, hence why this war never ends.*”

(Girl, aged 17, from Kitchanga, Masisi)

Another push factor that was commonly reported across all the sites was boys’ desire to **seek refuge** in armed groups to escape a bad situation in the community. Examples given are committing a crime and getting a girl pregnant. Fearful of repercussions within the community or at the hands of the police, children escape to an armed group.

“ *It’s a hide-out for those who have committed crimes in the community.*”

(NGO director in Bukavu)

Although cited less frequently by respondents, **mistreatment at home and in the community** also pushes children to join armed groups. Within the home, this can manifest as physical violence but is more often emotional and verbal abuse. Boys in particular explained that they left because they could not tolerate their parents humiliating and insulting them.

“ *They should avoid emotionally abusing children, which is a source of contention between children and their parents.*”

(Boy, aged 14 in a DDR centre, Goma)

The research suggests that boys’ complaints relate more to their maturing and feeling too grown up to be disciplined rather than to abusive language and behaviour by the parents.

Other forms of domestic conflict stem from children who are born into large families, polygamous arrangements or are in the care of stepparents. This latter point emerged in other studies, underscoring the reality that familial disharmony and violence can be drivers for children's engagement in an armed group.<sup>53</sup>

Younger and older boys in all sites reported high levels of **harassment and intimidation at the hands of the police or FARDC soldiers** as a push factor. Respondents explained that FARDC soldiers order children in the community to carry items for them, run small errands or hassle them for money at checkpoints. A child who is not obliging can be severely beaten. Child respondents also indicated that FARDC soldiers intimidate them, accusing them of being rebels. Children's levels of frustration and humiliation can push them to join armed groups in the hope of being able to avenge themselves during attacks.

“*When soldiers come to the community, they ask us to buy them cigarettes and yet we don't have any money. They beat us, and out of anger we decide to enrol in armed groups. We can't accept that happening once, twice, three times like that.*”

(Boy, aged 16, from Lumbishi, Kalehe)

Similarly, within the community, young male respondents referred to children in armed groups who humiliate them in front of their friends and relatives by lording it over them, as a motivation to join.

### 3.4.2 FACTORS THAT PULL BOYS INTO ARMED GROUPS

The major pull for these boys are the opportunities presented by armed groups to live a slightly **better day-to-day existence** in terms of basic needs, primarily food. As previously described, one of the main tasks for boys in armed groups is to steal and loot from communities, which children in this study said is often understood to be a positive because it affords them a certain amount of respect (fear) and ensures that they have the things they lack in the community, most notably food and money.

“*Normally, we used to steal pigs in the village and find food for everybody. Cooking, fetching water, spying, washing clothes, but our main task was stealing.*”

(Boy, aged 17, in a DDR centre, Bukavu)

Respondents in all sites reported that many boys join armed groups with the explicit intention of stealing from communities – their own or neighbouring communities – because they have no means of obtaining food and money to survive in their home. This is likely to have a considerable impact on how boys who demobilise or return home are received in these communities.

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53 Betancourt et al., 2008.

“*There are others who flee poverty in their families because if they cannot eat at home they know that if they go there, they will be entitled to all the crops of the community because with their weapons, no one can stop them from accessing them.*”

(NGO director in Bukavu)

Adolescent boys who join armed groups in the areas where tribalism is a factor, such as Lumbishi and Kitchanga, are pulled towards armed groups to **protect and defend their land, their family and their community** against attacks from outsiders and other ethnic groups who threaten their peace and steal their land and belongings, often forcing villagers to move. In these instances, children join less because of the promise of a better life and more because they are fighting to defend a cause and keep a threat at bay. A term often used is *siraha siyo raha*, meaning ‘the weapon is not happiness’. This is used to remind rebel soldiers that they are not with the militia to seek happiness or an easy life but for a cause and that the weapon must defend that cause.

“*Children join to be a protective force for their family, their ethnic group and their community. They join to protect parents. If you are in an armed group, others won't touch you. If you don't join, you are abandoning your parents to the mercy of the bandits.*”

(Female adult, aged 34, from Kitchanga, Masisi)

It is unclear to what extent social pressure has influence, but there was no indication in the data that boys who do not join armed groups to defend their community would be judged by their peers, families or community members.

By joining an armed group, boys benefit from **a degree of protection** from any misdemeanour that they may have committed in the community. In these instances, the pull for boys is their ‘disappearance’ – that they cannot be found and held to account so easily once they are ensconced in an armed group because they are able to avoid the community where they have committed the offence. Joining armed groups also offers increased protection from the harassment and humiliation that they experience in the community, either by FARDC soldiers and the police or by peers, providing an opportunity to **regain a sense of dignity** that is lost during situations they consider degrading.



Linked to this is the **respect** that community members show towards members of armed groups, which is another element that pulls children. Respect predominantly comes from having a weapon and is therefore linked to fear but it is this that ensures that some of the major motivating factors that pushed a boy into the armed groups in the first place are met, including stealing in order to eat, protecting one's family and land, and avenging the person who has wronged the child.

“ *Some children join because they are looking for respect in the community, which represents protection for their family.*”

(NGO director in Bukavu)

While these different push and pull factors emerged across all sites, vengeance and tribalism are more apparent for boys in Kitchanga and Lumbishi, while in Rugari, boys join an armed group predominantly because it presents more of an opportunity to survive and have something to do in the absence of alternatives.

### 3.4.3 FACTORS THAT PUSH AND PULL GIRLS INTO ARMED GROUPS

Just as with boys, the biggest push factor for why girls interact with armed groups is poverty at home and in the community and not having access to the things they need as young adolescents growing up. These include food, money, clothes, beauty products and make-up. When respondents in all research sites referred to girls associating themselves with armed groups, it was always in relation to them seeking a better life for themselves. They are described as actively seeking to have sexual relations or to marry rebel soldiers because of the benefits they receive in exchange. They either go to the armed groups to exchange sex for money or food or to seek a more permanent and stable solution by finding a 'husband' who will provide for them more adequately than boys in the community. In these instances, the relationship appears to be consensual.

“ *The girls are not really in the armed groups here at home. The girls do not go as soldiers but they go to prostitute themselves with the soldiers in the armed groups to find money.*”

(Boy, aged 16, from Lumbishi, Kalehe)

“ *Girls, they prefer to get married to the boys who are in the forest. Sometimes they are reluctant to marry others who remain in the community who are unemployed and therefore will not be able to take care of them.*”

(Female adult, aged 40, from Kitchanga, Masisi)

## TESTIMONY:

### GIRL, AGED 16, FROM RUGARI, RUTSHURU

“ Me, I’ve never been there with the armed group, but I know girls who have gone there as wives of officers and commanders. Some of them rent houses here in the community, and their husbands often come and visit them. They look as though everything is good there. And you can’t mistake it when someone is living well because money doesn’t hide itself. We can just tell that the wives are doing okay. They can even build houses here while their husbands are in the bush. They really have a lot of money, you don’t have to worry about that.

Girls who go are looking for prestige, just as the boys are. In our community, for example, the wives of these armed groups are very respected. When there are a lot of you queuing for water, for example, and one of these wives comes along with her jerry can, everyone has to let her go first to collect water because if they are mistreated in the community, you can risk your life.”

The benefits for girls are more apparent than for boys because of their status as ‘wife’ of commanders. For girls who are openly married to a soldier, living with him in the bush or not, their links to an armed group affords them numerous benefits, including greater access to food and money, increased security and protection as well as commanding greater respect within the community and among peers. As with boys, this respect is based on fear by their association with the armed group.

“ *If she marries a leader, she benefits from all the protection.*”

(Boy, aged 15, in a DDR centre, Goma)

For some girls, however, their association with an armed group is carefully hidden. Girls might go to a group clandestinely and once they have received what they need (typically money or food in exchange for sex), they secretly go back to their community. If a girl is known to have gone ‘there’, as respondents phrased it, and almost certainly to have been involved in sexual relations with a soldier, her chances of marrying can be shattered. Understanding which girls are more comfortable being openly involved with someone in an armed group and which choose to hide it is unclear and merits further investigation.

Overall, it appears that girls are pulled rather than pushed towards an armed group by the promise of better opportunities to fulfil their needs; boys are pushed and pulled. The findings show that there are more push factors for boys than for girls, which present a hugely complex set of issues to address to reduce their vulnerability to joining armed groups.

## A NOTE ON SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Sexual violence was mentioned by different categories of respondents in relation to rape – girls being forced to have sex against their will by members of armed groups when they encounter them in the fields or at checkpoints.

**“** *Children here suffer because they are sometimes victims of sexual violence. The perpetrators are often the armed groups and youngsters in the armed groups. When children are in the fields, for example, young girls from 12 can be working in the fields, and if youngsters from the armed groups come across them, many can be raped.”*

(Adult male, aged 58, from Kitchanga, Masisi)

However, sexual violence did not emerge from the data as strongly as might be expected, given its prevalence in the literature for DRC and the rest of the African continent.<sup>54</sup> In particular, sexual violence within the family and community context did not emerge from this research as a motivating factor for joining armed groups or as a particularly regular feature of life for girls in an armed group. That this finding did not surface raises a number of questions. Did it not come up because it is not happening on a large, or at least, notable scale?

An issue of perception may also need to be considered. Girls' sexual engagement with armed groups was largely perceived to be consensual by respondents. While various respondent groups in Rugari, Kitchanga and Lumbishi described rape as sexual abuse, they did not talk about child marriage or girls seeking to engage in sex as a form of sexual violence and abuse. On the contrary, having a relationship with or 'marrying' someone in an armed group was framed by the different categories of respondents, including girls, as an opportunity to improve a girl's situation in the absence of better alternatives.

**“** *Girls go as prostitutes and come back to the community with lots of money, so other girls want to do the same.”*

(Girl, aged 17, from Kitchanga, Masisi)

Older boys in Kitchanga highlighted different perceptions. They recognised that child marriage, for example, is considered a form of sexual violence by external actors but that within their communities, families accept that girls who are perceived as having become women can marry.

**“** *It's sexual violence for girls who marry early like that. But here in our community, parents think it is very normal.”*

(Boy, aged 16, from Kitchanga, Masisi)

Different community perspectives on the issue of child marriage, compared with those of the international community, have been documented in several reports in which children and families understand child marriage differently, framed as an opportunity to enhance a girl's social, political or economic status and protect her from a series of risks, most notably becoming pregnant out of wedlock. In these instances, they present benefits that cannot be achieved in any other way due to a lack of alternative life choices in their communities.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Annan and Brier, 2009; Brett, 2003; Child Soldiers International, 2017; Specht and Attree, 2006.

<sup>55</sup> See, for example, Lo Forte et al., 2015

### 3.5 CHARACTERISTICS THAT INCREASE A CHILD'S VULNERABILITY TO JOINING AN ARMED GROUP

Poverty, lack of employment and educational opportunities and pervasive hunger are issues that affect many parts of the DRC. The research, however, found that what exacerbated the problem and made one child more susceptible to joining an armed group over another was often the absence of a stable, family environment and, most notably, parental figures. Overwhelmingly, across all sites, **orphanhood** emerged as a characteristic that made children highly vulnerable to joining an armed group because they do not have family to look after and guide them. Equally, **children living on the streets** were also understood to be vulnerable, particularly so according to younger girls and boys and adult males in Lumbishi and among children in the DDR centres in Goma and Bukavu. From the perspective of child and adult community members, both of these groups of children lack parental support and have nowhere to go, which suggests that their vulnerability to voluntary recruitment is closely linked to the absence of the support, protection and guidance of a family.<sup>56</sup>

“Orphans join a lot because they haven't the means to study or anyone to help them, and their family is really poor so they prefer to join to loot people's belongings in the community.”

(Girl, aged 17, from Kitchanga, Masisi)

In Kitchanga, older boys mentioned that **displaced children** originating from surrounding villages are also at risk of joining an armed group. They tend to relocate in search of better opportunities and do so without their family, which exposes them to greater risks. This suggests the importance not only of membership, belonging and community support but also the reality that many children in these circumstances are displaced multiple times and may not be residing in their home community when they join an armed group. In the Goma DDR centre, **children with drug addictions** were also thought to be vulnerable.

During these discussions, respondents did not specify whether both boys and girls are equally affected by these vulnerabilities or whether one sex is more vulnerable than another. However, it can be assumed that both boys and girls in these categories would face an increased risk of becoming involved with armed groups. The vulnerability of these different groups of children to joining with a group suggests that poverty alone is not the driver. Rather, it is poverty in combination with a constellation of other factors that augment an individual's vulnerability. These groups of children appear more likely to join armed groups because, in the absence of a family, they offer, at least in theory, a refuge and the opportunity to better their lives than in the community, especially in instances in which they are understood to have friends in armed groups, which can provide a semblance of support and stability.

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<sup>56</sup> Clemesac, 2007; Delap, 2005; ILO, 2003.



### **3.6 THE WAYS IN WHICH CHILDREN BECOME ASSOCIATED WITH AN ARMED GROUP**

An additional consideration for why the participation of children in armed groups is so prolific and which adds to the push and pull factors and to the specific characteristics that make some children more vulnerable than others is the relative ease in joining. One of the most striking findings that emerged from all sites is the geographic proximity between armed groups and villages, a situation that appears to be increasingly common. Respondents of all ages in all sites reported that contact between armed groups and communities is extremely fluid, often with no clear divide or separation between the two. Community members generally know who the members of the armed groups are, but the distinction between the two is theoretical only; the once visible line between militias and communities is today less pronounced and, in some cases, almost invisible.

A child who wants to join an armed group can do so easily. Children are in regular contact with rebel soldiers who come and go to villages to eat, drink and meet up with their wives (girlfriends). They become acquainted with each other to the extent that some boys and girls acquire the telephone numbers of militia members and stay in contact over time. Indeed, these soldiers are often the children's family members or friends. A child who expresses any interest in joining an armed group will be told who in the armed group to go and talk with. Other than in an ILO report on central Africa,<sup>57</sup> this degree of contact and familiarity between children and militiamen does not appear to be documented elsewhere in current literature.

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<sup>57</sup> ILO, 2003.

**“** *The children have the phone numbers of the armed groups and can communicate easily.*

*The soldiers come to the community because they are also children of the community, and they take the opportunity to chat with children.*

*These people come, meet and greet their friends. They have ties within the community.*

(Girls, aged 14, 12 and 11, respectively, from Kitchanga, Masisi)

In Kitchanga, male adult respondents reported that children who have family members in an armed group can spend the day at school and the nights with the armed group; some children even spend their school holidays in the bush with the rebels.

**“** *Some children go and spend the nights there and in the morning they go to school. During the school holidays, they are soldiers and when schools go back they become pupils.”*

(Male adult, aged 22, from Kitchanga, Masisi)

These same respondents reported that during this time, children see what life is like in armed groups compared with the life they have at home, and any favourable comparisons can result in their more permanent participation.

The reality is that the protracted political crisis and violence in the DRC have created the conditions for children to join, and armed groups have become part of daily life. For many children, a life surrounded by armed groups is all they have ever known. Their ubiquity and the unremarkable nature of their presence makes armed groups appear accessible to children, which, coupled with the various push and pull factors, can motivate children to become engaged with armed groups.

**“** *We are surrounded by armed groups. Some spend all day here and work at night. Kitchanga is like a battle field. We are surrounded by arms –they are even in our houses. Children have family members there who move about the community freely.”*

(Male adult, aged 58, from Kitchanga, Masisi)

### 3.7 THE PEOPLE WHO INFLUENCE THE DECISIONS WHETHER TO JOIN AN ARMED GROUP

Several actors have influence either way on whether children join an armed group, as described in this section. Ultimately, however, the decision to join is predominantly a child's alone.

#### FRIENDS AND PEERS IN ARMED GROUPS

In all research sites, the biggest influence on the decision to join an armed group was found to be friends and other children who are in a group. This finding applies to girls and boys and is echoed in the literature.<sup>58</sup> Friends were reported to tell those not engaged that joining up will provide them access to whatever they want, including decent food and earning potential. Expectations before joining an armed group are therefore high, which on top of the push and pull factors becomes another motivating force.

“*The children's friends tell each other stories about life in armed groups and deceive themselves, believing that everything is rosy, to trick them into leaving.*”

(Male adult, aged 32, from Kitchanga, Masisi)

An area for further consideration is why friends are overwhelmingly telling children that life with an armed group is so much better than it is. Do children who are in armed groups try to convince themselves of this reality, or do they want the comfort that having a friend might bring? Or is it that no matter how tough life is in the armed group, the few positives it brings are enough for children to convince friends that it is still better than the status quo?

#### PARENTS

Respondents in all categories in Kitchanga and Lumbishi<sup>59</sup> reported that parents are actively discouraging their children, both boys and girls, from joining armed groups by talking to them about the associated risks and providing advice and guidance.

“*There are families who teach their children that even if they have nothing, hurting others or going to join armed groups is a bad thing and that you have to be patient with everything in life.*”

(Male adult, aged 33, from Kitchanga, Masisi)

<sup>58</sup> Aubrey et al., 2016; Clemesac, 2007; Delap, 2005.

<sup>59</sup> The question was not asked in Rugari, so it is not possible to present the relevance of this issue in this site.

It is clear from the data that parents know what the risks of joining armed groups are for children. In every site where data was collected, mothers and fathers stressed the profoundly difficult conditions within the militias, and they unfailingly rejected the idea that their child should ever be put in these situations.

“*There is not a single parent who wants to see their child join an armed group. Parents can't do that, they cannot influence their children. Joining an armed group is like losing your chances of living.*”

(Male adult, aged 40, from Lumbishi, Kalehe)

A dichotomy presents itself, however, in terms of how armed groups are perceived by community members. On one hand, they are perceived as a menace presenting extreme risks to a child's safety and well-being, one that parents would encourage their children to avoid at all costs. On the other hand, different categories of respondents in all sites also reported that some parents might influence boys to join under certain conditions. The most prominent reason is linked to the perceived protection that armed groups can offer a community during inter-tribal conflicts. In Lumbishi and in Rugari, for example, there is a certain amount of complicity between the community and the armed groups, recognising that they each serve a role that is mutually beneficial. In these instances, communities actively support armed groups that are seen as protecting their own territory. Community members collect items to help feed the combatants and, in return, the armed groups help safeguard communities, acting as protectors against outside attacks. It is under these circumstances, respondents noted, that a parent might encourage a child to join; because having a child in an armed group offers protection from attacks, which in turn safeguards their assets and land. No one will harm the family if they have someone in an armed group, although this does not have to be a child per se.

Additionally, parents and other family relatives who are impoverished might encourage a child to join in the hope of benefiting from whatever money or food the child obtains or steals. But this situation appears to be rare.

There is no suggestion in the data that parents ever encourage girls to be associated with armed groups.

### **NEIGHBOURS AND COMMUNITY LEADERS**

Some of the groups of children in different sites mentioned that neighbours who are in conflict with a boy's family might influence them to join, and adult male respondents reported that community leaders who seek to protect the community against attacks by other armed groups might encourage boys to join. Beyond that, there was little mention of the influence that community leaders might have one way or another.



## ARMED GROUPS

In Kitchanga, male adult respondents reported that armed groups are directly targeting children in the community and in their schools, encouraging them to join up with the promise of a better life. They go to the villages and talk to them, offering money and buying them drinks. The men that took part in the focus groups in Kitchanga reported that it is overt, but that no one in the community can do anything about it without bringing trouble onto themselves.

“*The Government knows who they are, too, but it doesn't want to bother them.*”

(Male adult, aged 32, from Kitchanga, Masisi)

## POLITICIANS

Also in Kitchanga, male and female adult respondents spoke of the enormous influence, direct and indirect, that the national-level political authorities have over children's participation in armed groups. They reported that these groups are funded and supported by political authorities who manipulate them based on ethnic rivalries. Groups of women in Kitchanga also explained that political authorities are widely distributing arms and are actively encouraging boys in their constituency to join to protect and defend their community and tribe.

“*Up there in the mountains surrounding our Kitchanga, there are deputies coming from Kinshasa and distributing weapons to the inhabitants as if they were distributing food. It is because of these weapons that there is proliferation of armed groups everywhere...*”

*These deputies distribute weapons to members of their ethnic group so other ethnic groups have to look to protect themselves. In these mountains that surround us, every child has his weapon, it has become like sticks. These deputies, who are at the root of all these problems, do their thing in Kinshasa in cahoots with some people who live here. It is known to everyone, it's no secret.*”

(Female adult, aged 22, from Kitchanga, Masisi)

In the communities where this research took place, ongoing ethnic tensions and violence run high. These areas are characterised by hugely complex political situations that are manipulated by external actors. The proliferation of arms leaves people extremely vulnerable and in need of defending themselves. Children become especially vulnerable and exposed.

## 3.8 LEAVING ARMED GROUPS AND REINTEGRATING INTO COMMUNITIES

As discussed in previous sections, girls are more mobile than boys, unarmed and not considered combatants. Girls' departure from armed groups was therefore described differently by respondents, who focused the discussions about leaving armed groups, demobilising and reintegrating into the community only on boys and not on girls.

Respondents across all sites reported that a majority of boys seek to leave armed groups because of the hardships they encounter there. Unanimously, respondents said that the reality of life for boys in the armed groups is completely different from what they had anticipated – a reality that leads to much disappointment. Boys begin to recognise that they might not have had all the things they needed at home but at least life was not characterised by the kind of harsh brutality they experienced in the armed group. Despite this recognition, respondents were unanimous that while it is easy to join, leaving is an immense challenge. Permission is never granted; individual children must find an opportunity to flee. They do so by taking advantage of having been asked to run an errand, such as fetching water or wood. While not being watched by supervisors, they try to escape.

“*At times, children leave. In fact, most leave on their own. Some have to flee the armed groups.*”

(Coordinator of Programme National de Démobilisation, Désarmement et Réintégration, Goma)

“*When they send us to fetch water..., we take advantage and escape. They would never give you permission to leave.*”

(Boy, aged 11, in a DDR centre, Goma)

A paradoxical situation exists in which it is extremely difficult to leave, despite child soldiers having significant interaction with communities. Respondents in all sites were categorical that boys cannot leave an armed group permanently or they will be considered to have betrayed the group and suspected of having divulged secrets.

Respondents in all the research sites reported that boys who succeed in leaving an armed group will either return directly to their community or enter the DDR process.

### 3.8.1 ENTERING THE DDR PROCESS

To enter the DDR process, a boy must reach a DDR centre directly or be connected to a centre by someone in a community. According to respondents, people in the community orientate boys towards structures in place that support the DDR process, such as MONUSCO or specific NGOs, because it facilitates their community reintegration.

“*They go directly into protection programmes, and there they are looked after by the transit care centres. We try to give them protection and psychosocial support. And then if agreement with the parents and if the circumstances are right, we reunite the child with his family.*”

(NGO officer, Goma)

In theory, according to a UNICEF informant, the DDR process ensures that a boy obtains his demobilisation certificate and other necessary paperwork, helps him identify the best option for reintegration, offers guidance and counselling and provides skills training and equipment in preparation of return to his community. Relinquishing a weapon is not a requisite for obtaining a demobilisation certificate, which is issued automatically.<sup>60</sup>

In practice, however, there are several challenges to entering the DDR process. The distance to reach a DDR centre is often great. Some children fear being caught by their former group or another armed group when making their way to a centre. While others believe that they will not be accepted into the DDR process if they do not have their weapon with them.<sup>61</sup>

According to respondents, the DDR process does not always fulfil its promises for children, particularly in relation to the distribution of materials needed to support reintegration and vocational training, which do not always materialise.<sup>62</sup>

**“ Promises made by the Government that they will receive support and follow vocational training in an area of their choice, are not held. That’s why they return to armed groups.”**

(Male adult, aged 23, from Rugari, Rutshuru)

One group of women respondents in Kitchanga explained that this was partly due to high levels of corruption among NGO partners in the DDR process, who take the money and materials intended for vulnerable groups of children for themselves to support their families and acquaintances. According to these respondents, this situation is well known within the community. When children in the DDR process are given vocational training and then the materials intended for them disappear, they lose heart and are susceptible to returning to an armed group.

**“ Sometimes our children are given skills training and they are promised that materials will come after the training. But when they finish, the materials arrive but they are not given to the children. We ask ourselves where these organisations are taking the materials. This is a great source of frustration for children, and it can push them to join the armed groups again in search of money.”**

(Adult female, aged 34, from Kitchanga, Masisi)

60 Interview with Programme National de Démobilisation, Désarmement et Réintégration employee, Goma.

61 Interview with Programme National de Démobilisation, Désarmement et Réintégration employee, Goma.

62 DDR challenges are also presented in Child Soldiers International, 2017.

### 3.8.2 OPTIONS FOR BOYS WHO DO NOT ENTER THE DDR PROCESS

Boys who return directly to their community without going through the DDR process face additional challenges. Local authorities in communities insist that a weapon is required for a child to obtain his demobilisation certificate because it proves that he has been demobilised and that a weapon has been relinquished. Respondents noted that boys who escape rarely leave with a weapon because they need to leave furtively or they fear reprisals by the armed group if they leave with one of their weapons. The demobilisation certificate is an official document that is given to a child to prove that they have gone through the official demobilisation and reintegration process. It prevents the person from being arrested for being a deserter and certifies that they are officially demobilised.<sup>63</sup> Exceptions are not made for children, and this poses a serious problem for the boy. This was mentioned frequently by respondents, particularly in Kitchanga and Lumbishi.

“*Lots of children come and then go back to the armed groups because they don't have a demobilisation certificate.*”

(Boy, aged 16, from Kitchanga, Masisi)

The demobilisation certificate is the only thing that protects a boy from arrest and/or imprisonment at the hands of the FARDC and protects him from the risk of being captured by the armed group and taken back. FARDC soldiers were described as part of the problem by various respondents because they harass the children who come back to the community from the armed groups. Respondents reported that the threat of being arrested or imprisoned if a child returns to the community without a demobilisation certificate or a weapon is extremely high and that a child risks being severely beaten by the FARDC or the police. Equally, a demobilisation certificate is critical to a child's successful reintegration into

“*Arriving back in the village [after leaving an armed group], FARDC start to harass them and imprison them for no reason, saying they are rebels and are still in possession of arms.*”

(Boy, aged 16, from Lumbishi, Kalehe)

their community. Often, a child cannot go home without it. This is partly attributed to the labelling of parents as the parent of a rebel and, as such, families who take children back without a demobilisation certificate risk being seen as collaborators.

Another challenge that emerged around the reintegration of children who have not gone through the DDR process is that parents are required to pay bribes to chiefs, local authorities and security services, such as FARDC, the Agence Nationale des Renseignements or the Police nationale congolaise, at every step of the demobilisation process to secure the release of their child, ensure he is not arrested or imprisoned or caught by the armed group for having escaped. Typically, parents pay with goats or cows. It would appear that these payments are fairly systematic. In theory, the bribes guarantee peace for the boy and his family in the community. Yet, many families cannot afford to pay. The options for children whose parents cannot afford to pay are to stay in the armed group or go to another community (to not put their parents' security at risk). Families that can afford to pay negotiate either directly or through the local chiefs with the armed group for their child's release and reintegration.

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63 Interview with Programme National de Démobilisation, Désarmement et Réintégration employée, Goma.

“ You just have to pay bribes. The family who doesn't have money, his child will just stay in the forest. Even if he comes with a weapon, you still have to pay. Otherwise, the child won't be accepted. When the child comes back, you go and see the wise old man 'le vieux sage', who will ask you for a goat, which you give him. The chief will also want something and so will the soldiers. Before you know it, a whole cow has gone just so you can allow your child to return without problems.”

(Female adult, aged 36, from Lumbishi, Kalehe)

### 3.8.3 COMMUNITY ACCEPTANCE

While families were described as happy and relieved to have their boy back, they encounter a great deal of stigma in the community, especially if he had committed wrongs, typically by stealing, looting and killing. The boy's level of acceptance within the community is dependent on his behaviour before he joined an armed group and/or during his time with them. Community members are often suspicious of boys returning from armed groups, blaming the child for any wrong that happens in the community and making him feel unwelcome.

“ When the community blames you each time, then it's better to go back to the armed group.”

(Boy, aged 14, from Kitchanga, Masisi)

“ Children who return to their community are considered criminals because they were obliged to commit crimes in their community when they were in the armed group. So, a lot of effort is needed so that they can be accepted in their community.”

(Child Protection Officer, MONUSCO, Goma)

Reducing the levels of stigma is likely to be a particular challenge, given that one of the major pulls for children towards an armed group is the promise that they will eat better and have more money by stealing from the community. Those who choose to join often do so with the explicit intention of wronging their own or a neighbouring community. In these circumstances, communities may well find it hard to forgive and accept that child.

### 3.8.4 FACTORS RELATED TO GIRLS

As discussed, girls are not considered part of an armed group in the same way as boys – they can come and go more freely, often living in the community, and thus do not need to seek permission to leave in the same way.

“*To leave, if it's a girl, they let you leave without it being a problem. But for boys, they don't let them leave easily.*”

(Girl, aged 15, from Kitchanga, Masisi)

Reintegration presents itself differently for girls precisely because their interaction with an armed group is much more fluid. If a girl is not considered to be a combatant and did not have a weapon to surrender, she does not need to be demobilised or have a demobilisation certificate to be accepted.

While girls do not return in the same way, their association with armed groups can still pose problems for them; stigma levels are high. This view was widely expressed by respondents in all research sites. However brief or permanent their relationship was with a member of an armed group, girls who cease their association with a group are nonetheless considered prostitutes and their chances of marrying in the community are diminished. The risk is that affected girls will leave their community or return to the armed group.

## 3.9 UNDERSTANDING WHY SOME CHILDREN CHOOSE TO RETURN TO AN ARMED GROUP

### 3.9.1 FACTORS THAT PUSH BOYS TO RETURN TO AN ARMED GROUP

Despite first-hand experience of the levels of hardship in armed groups, respondents of all ages and categories across the sites stated that boys frequently re-join, typically because the same push and pull factors that led them to initially join are still in place.

“*Here, a lot of children who leave the armed groups find it hard to adapt to the family's situation. The reasons for joining in the first place are still there. That's why they re-join.*”

(Male adult, aged 57, from Lumbishi, Kalehe)

Children are disappointed by what they come back to in the community. Life in the armed groups may be physically more challenging and more brutal, but it presents an opportunity to eat better and live better (albeit through stealing) than in the community. And it provides a child with something to do. Children therefore vacillate between the two, trying to establish which of the two will offer them the best opportunity.

“*Life there is easy. They easily find food and money. Thirty per cent of demobilised children come back to armed groups because they find life in the community more difficult than in the forest.*”

(Boy, aged 14, from Rugari, Rutshuru)

“ They imagine that they are going back to their village to have a better life than in the community. But once they are back, they realise that it means spending all day without having anything to do. So they tell themselves it’s better to go back to the armed group.”

(Boy, aged 17, from Lumbishi, Kalehe)

The challenges described in the previous section on reintegration present additional push factors for boys to return to an armed group, including children not being able to formally demobilise and running the risk of being arrested by the authorities, the DDR process not fulfilling its promises and community stigmatisation.

“ When there is a case of theft in the community, everyone points the finger at [a returned boy], which leads them to re-join to take revenge. Sometimes, they are arrested by the police on a suspicion simply because they are former rebels. What drives them is contempt.”

(Boy, aged 16, from Lumbishi, Kalehe)

### 3.9.2 FACTORS THAT PREVENT BOYS FROM LEAVING AN ARMED GROUP

For similar reasons as leaving, some boys choose not to demobilise at all. Some consider themselves better off in the armed group than they were in the community. Others fear returning to a situation that is unchanged at home and in the community, including high levels of poverty and hunger, insecurity, limited opportunities to earn a living and fear of arrest or reprisals from other community members for crimes committed. Others choose to stay because they have not achieved what they set out to do, predominantly in the case of vengeance. Or in the case of orphans, because they do not have a family to go back to.

“ Those who don’t want to leave have left problems behind them at home, maybe they’ve killed someone, maybe stolen, owe someone money. If he goes home he’ll be imprisoned. [He’s] better off staying with the armed group than going back to the village.”

(Boy, aged 16, from Lumbishi, Kalehe)

“ In the armed groups, there is a lot to eat and drink. When they were in Kitchanga, there was no work. They wouldn’t have a penny to even buy one cigarette, so they prefer to stay in the armed group.”

(Girl, aged 16, from Kitchanga, Masisi)

The research shows that there is a multitude of challenges around the reintegration of children and a complex set of motivating factors that constantly push and pull children towards the armed groups. This makes it extremely hard for children to establish whether they are better off in an armed group or not. The following testimony exemplifies the challenges that boys experience in their communities, the limited set of options available to them as well as challenges within the DDR process and subsequent community reintegration.



## TESTIMONY:

### BOY, AGED 16, FROM RUGARI, RUTSHURU

“ In 2014, some FDLR soldiers regularly passed by my house, every day they were there. They began to greet me when they passed and began to give me a little money. Sometimes they asked me what we ate at night, and I told them that we did not eat anything. And then they gave me more money so that I could eat. Sometimes I gave the money they gave me to Mum to buy food for the whole family. It was then that I started to become interested in going with them where they live because they showed me that there I will have regular food, I will have money permanently and I will be able to live better than the life that I lead here. As a child, I thought it was a very good proposition because I could escape the hunger that prevailed in my family. Sometimes we slept without eating, so

going to where I would regularly eat was an opportunity not to be missed. After several days of talking to me about it, I decided to go with some friends from the village. It was in 2014 when I was 13 years old. We went with them and spent almost two years there [2014–2016]. In particular, I appreciated life in this armed group because at home I found it difficult to eat, sometimes we slept empty-bellied. But there, we ate very well, and we found food constantly. But if I found an occupation or if I find someone to pay for my studies, I would rather return to the village than stay in the forest because here we can die easily. The majority of children who do not want to leave are those who come from very poor families. They imagine the misery they will encounter at home





*I appreciated life in this armed group because at home I found it difficult to eat, sometimes we slept empty-bellied. But if I found an occupation or if I find someone to pay for my studies, I would rather return to the village than stay in the forest because here we can die easily.*

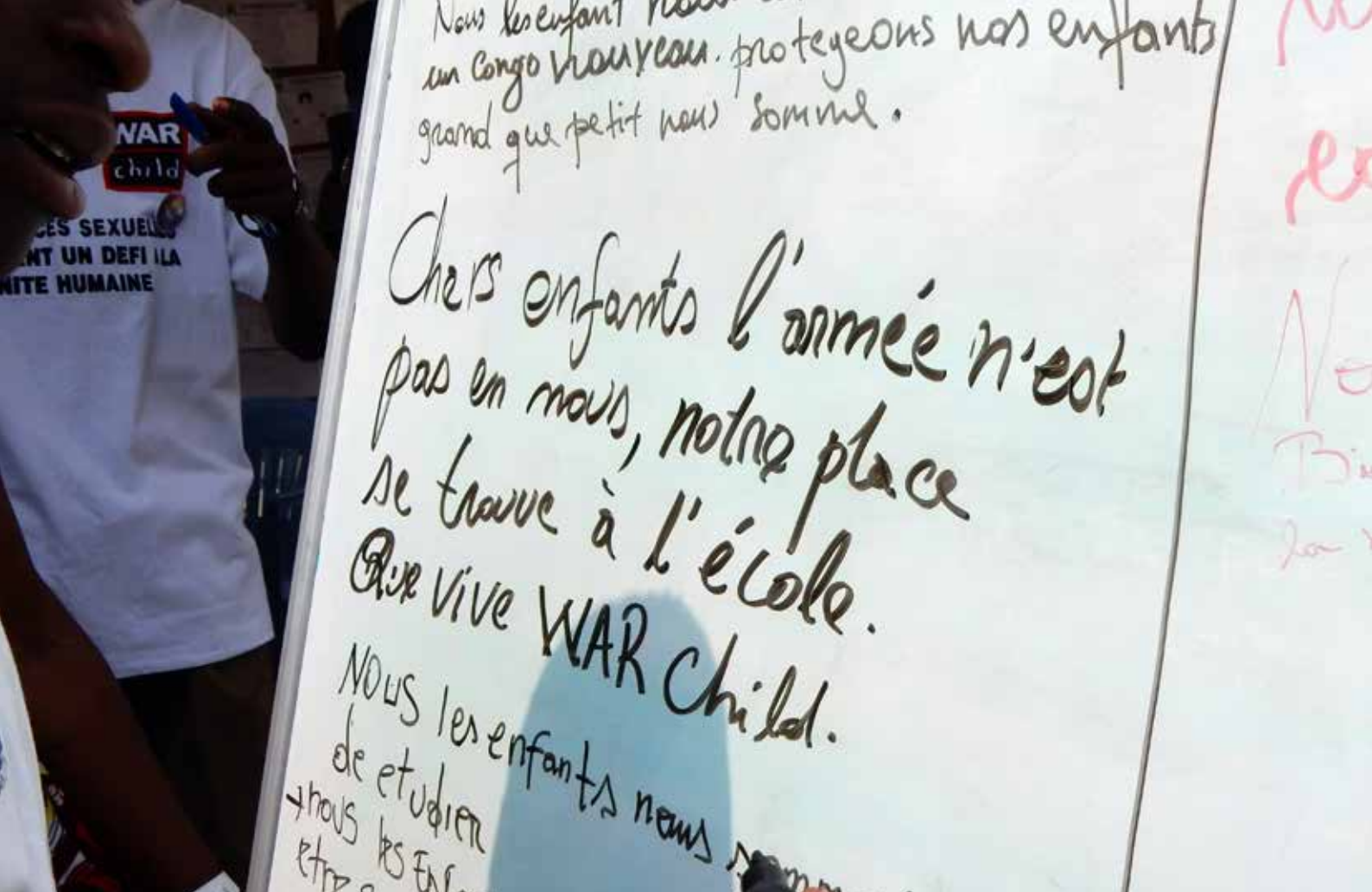
leaving the armed group, and also they worry that their parents will have nothing to pay to prevent them from being pursued in the village. So they prefer to stay in the forest. In early July of this year, my dad finally decided to sell a portion of the only field we have to pay the leaders of the armed group where I was to secure my release. He had come to these chiefs and handed them a sum of money, and then they released me, and that's how I came back to my family here in Rugari. Once I arrived in the village, the soldiers harassed me frequently, and so I went to the UPEDECO association, and they gave me documents that would help my reintegration into the community.

Shortly afterwards, UPEDECO promised to train us in hairdressing and to give us solar panels and other materials for us to start up our own hairdressing activities in the village. A few days later, it was no longer UPEDECO, but UNPP who came to train us in carpentry. And they promised to give us tools so that we could start up carpentry here in the village. But alas, at the end of the training, they did not keep their promise. The tools they gave us were insufficient. Five people shared a single work tool, while everyone was supposed to have one each. We realised that it was really difficult or even impossible for us to start our carpentry activities with inadequate materials. My two friends who I was with in the forest suggested that we sell the equipment, and we return to the forest. I advised my friends not to sell them and to wait in case in the future they bring us more. The two friends refused and decided to sell the equipment. They went back to the forest, but I decided to stay at home, given the advice that my father regularly gave me.

Other friends who had previously been trained by UPEDECO were well supervised and found tools that allowed them to initiate income-generating

activities after their training. If they had done the same for us, we would not have the inclination to go back to the armed group. But even, so we recognise the efforts that UPEDECO make for children who leave the armed groups because without them, government soldiers would have already killed us. Even now, I know eight children from our village who were in the forest with me. They escaped, but they still hide in the forest for fear of arriving here in the village and getting caught by the FARDC and the police, who can beat them and even kill them. These friends come to the village at night, and very early in the morning they return to spend the day in the forest so as to not be seen. It is also because of this that some children do not even want to leave the armed groups –they prefer to stay there for fear of being beaten, imprisoned or killed by government forces.

Life is becoming more and more difficult for me. Sometimes we spend the night without eating, and Dad always begs me to endure things and remain by his side. Sometimes, I compare myself with other children in the village who did not join an armed group, and I see that I am not like them. They are very clean and appreciated, compared with us who have nothing. It makes me think a lot and worry too much, but I don't have anything to do. I understand then why some of us are always returning to the armed groups, because they cannot cope with this constant lacking, with no hope of finding anything tomorrow. If I found a small occupation, it would help steady me and continue my life alongside Mum and Dad, like any other child in our community.



## 4 INTERVENTIONS

Translation:  
"Dear children, the  
army isn't part of  
us, our place is at  
school. Long live  
War Child"

This section highlights what the different respondent groups consider to be the most effective preventive mechanisms or strategies in place at the family and community levels, including within and by families, community leaders and NGOs, to keep children from joining an armed group voluntarily. It makes a distinction between direct strategies and indirect strategies.

### 4.1 DIRECT PREVENTIVE STRATEGIES

Respondents in all the research sites argued that one way to prevent the participation of children in armed groups is through the provision of **parental advice and guidance** that focuses on the risks associated with participating in armed groups. Parents' insistence that children should stay by their side was reported as sometimes being the only thing that prevents a child from joining a militia.

“Parents giving advice is the only thing that works.” (Boy, aged 11, in a DDR centre, Goma)

Parents frequently emphasize to their children the challenges and hardships that they face as a family and discuss the importance of staying together and doing the best they can to get by on a day-to-day basis.

“*The advice of parents helps children not join armed groups. When you sit down and you say to them, ‘You see how it is for the others and how much they suffer?’ You talk to them and you caress them. If God blesses you, you’ll see that your child refuses to go there.*”

(Female adult, aged 36, from Lumbishi, Kalehe)

Advice alone, however, is not always enough when conditions at home are hugely compromised. Respondents frequently referred to the need for children in poor homes to be patient and endure the difficulties they face together. This level of resilience in the face of adversity depends on the temperament and personalities of individual children. Some children listen to their parents’ advice and accept to endure the hardships together, while others are more impulsive and decide to join an armed group.

“*God created people differently. Some are more patient than others. They don’t have the same ideas or the same heart.*”

(Boy, aged 16, from Kitchanga, Masisi)

At the community level, respondents lamented that there is little support to prevent children from joining armed groups. **Religious leaders have a predominant role** and they, like parents, counsel against participation in armed groups and are considered by NGO staff to be a good entry point for advocacy initiatives. Religious leaders help organise meetings with children to discuss the risks and organise community activities that help keep young people occupied.

“*The pastors organise groups of children in their churches and organise communal activities. That helps prevent children enrolling.*”

(Male adult, aged 57, from Lumbishi, Kalehe)

Adult male respondents in Kitchanga and Lumbishi also described **local community peace-building initiatives** that have been set up to help combat insecurity within their neighbourhoods. In a protracted, complex situation such as in eastern DRC, where conflict has dragged on for more than two decades due to political instability, regional interventions and a battle for resources, respondents recognised that stabilising the nation is an immense challenge. They noted that security meetings take place in their communities to help protect the residents and have some impact. Examples given were the Cellule de Paix et de Développement du Groupement and the Comité de Pacification. The latter is composed of different communities that sensitise armed groups against.

**NGO support** was deemed by different categories of respondents to be largely responsive, focused on reintegration support for children who have been demobilised rather than prevention-oriented. Income-generating activities and vocational training, such as tailoring, were said to be potentially preventive, but respondents reported that the coverage of such programmes is minimal. Only a handful of respondents mentioned that sensitisation is being done at the community level by NGOs about the risks and consequences of participation in armed groups. This is surprising, given that sensitisation is often a significant part of the NGOs’ prevention strategies. Sensitisation may not stand out for communities because, by and large, adult respondents and children already know what the risks are. Yet, children are still joining these groups. Sensitisation alone may not be considered effective in communities when it is not accompanied by initiatives that tackle some of the push and pull factors.



**TESTIMONY:**

**GIRL, AGED 16 FROM RUGARI, RUTSHURU**

“Poverty here in our community has been a reason for huge numbers of children enrolling into armed groups. DEMERED is helping to reduce enrolment because they are installing electricity in the neighbourhood and are creating jobs for young people. UPEDECO is doing the same – it’s often income-generating activities, catering, rearing goats, etc.

I’m glad we’ve got a RECOPE here sensitising children about the risks of joining armed groups and early marriage. Unfortunately, some still go. I know some girls who even if they are studying, drop out in order to go and marry people in the armed groups.”

## 4.2 INDIRECT PREVENTIVE STRATEGIES

Respondents of all ages across the sites described **parental support** as one of the few indirect responses within communities to help prevent children from joining armed groups. The previous section on push factors highlights that poverty is the most significant driver of children's involvement in an armed group. Perhaps not surprising then, children who are not joining are those whose parents are helping to ensure that their basic needs are met, that they have access to some form of income and that they are able to stay in school.

“Those that stay are those who have a job, those whose parents have some money – he has soap when he needs it, he can go to school, dresses well, he has no worries.”

(Boy, aged 17, from Lumbishi, Kalehe)

Parents helping to support and provide children with **income-earning activities** emerged as the biggest deterrent to participation in a militia. This support is often linked to family-based income-generating activities, thus reinforcing the finding that children without a family environment are more vulnerable. These activities include running a small business, such as shops and hairdressing, cultivating land and animal husbandry.

“I encourage them to work in our fields. It helps them to gain a bit of money at harvest time while still continuing their studies. It keeps them busy and stops them from getting any ideas about joining armed groups.”

(Female adult, aged 22, from Kitchanga, Masisi)

“Children that stay in their father's shop, a hair salon for example, can't think about joining.”

(Président des Démobilisés, from Lumbishi, Kalehe)

In Lumbishi, working in the mines emerged as an alternative to armed groups because it is a flourishing industry that pays well, and many adolescent boys are drawn to it. All the categories of respondents reported that mining is a big presence in the community and presents a means for children to earn some money without joining an armed group. That said, trading life in an armed group for work in a mine is not necessarily a reduction in risk to a child but rather a transfer to a new set of risks.

Families able to **maintain their children in school** was also considered to be a significant deterrent to voluntary child recruitment. Despite primary schooling in theory being free in the DRC, teachers are rarely paid, which becomes a responsibility borne by parents, who also shoulder several other school-related costs, all of which can become prohibitive.

“If I wasn't studying, I, too, would have gone and married a member of an armed group because you see the girls here in the community with all the respect that the community has towards them.”

(Girl, aged 16, from Rugari, Rutshuru)

These preventive strategies, however, are fairly arbitrary and often out of parents' control. Parents who do not have the means to provide their children's basic needs or whose assets are regularly stolen by armed groups are simply not able to provide this support.

The only other indirect strategy that was considered effective by respondents is to ensure that children can engage in **leisure activities**, such as access to recreational spaces, playing football, watching matches and playing games between youngsters. Respondents explained that this provides something for children to do that they enjoy and keeps them busy and distracted.

“*Little groups for football are formed. They play matches against other villages. It helps children forget about what is happening in the forest. If you've got no work, sport [football] is a distraction.*”

(Boy, aged 16, from Lumbishi, Kalehe)

“*As prevention efforts, we organise little activities for them, we supervise them. Every afternoon we are together with the boys and girls, maybe at the football pitch playing with a ball. If we weren't there, there would be no one to take care of these children.*”

(Secondary school headmaster in Lumbishi, Kalehe)

Respondents argued that little is being done directly or indirectly outside of the few strategies that parents and families can conduct. There is seemingly little external support to strengthen families that are struggling or to assist children who do not benefit from a strong family environment, even if under constrained conditions. In the absence of government services, community engagement in prevention initiatives appears to be minimal, thus leaving those children without adequate parental care extremely vulnerable (such as children living on the streets and orphaned children). Without some attention to the needs of these children by the broader community, they will remain the least protected and at highest risk.

In terms of what additional preventive strategies should be in place, respondents in all categories in all sites stressed the need to continue to enhance the efforts previously described to further prevent children from becoming involved with an armed group. In these discussions, the community members, parents and children stressed the need to better help parents to support their children through improved income-generating opportunities and better access to quality education. They argued overwhelmingly for parents, families and community members (in particular, religious leaders and teachers) to give greater guidance and support, counselling their children as much as possible and remaining by their side steadfastly. These strategies are further described and developed in the Recommendations section.



## 5 CONCLUSIONS

This section builds on the findings presented previously and explores their potential implications in terms of understanding the complexity of children joining armed groups voluntarily in the DRC and developing appropriate responses.

### **1. Different perceptions of who is a child and what is childhood need to be understood and considered:**

Concepts of children and childhood are dynamic and are often negotiated and contested. Understanding these dynamics and how they interrelate as well as recognising that different perceptions exist is important to ensure that programme planning at the community level is based on local understandings and realities and is rooted in social constructs that are meaningful and relevant to children, their families and their communities.

In the research communities, 'child' and 'childhood' are not defined by age. They relate to clearly defined social, physical and emotional markers that determine when a child is considered to have become an adult. One's status as a child or an adult is determined in relationship to others, such as to elders, to parents, to younger or weaker people, as well as in relationship to one's actions – what one does and how one behaves. It is not a status that is fixed or independent of others' status; rather, it is determined in the context of relationships and interactions.

In the research sites, children are considered to be adults sometime between the ages of 13 and 15. For community members therefore, the children who are joining armed

groups are generally not considered to be children per se, given that the vast majority of boys and girls become associated with armed groups from around the age of 14 or 15. That said, respondents clearly outlined that it is not acceptable for individuals in these age groups to be joining militias and that families and communities actively seek out alternatives. An important issue to consider is whether community members' objections are centred around the age of those signing up or on the more general harm that engagement in armed groups poses. Would their views be any different, for example, if children taking up arms were 18, as opposed to 15 years old? This may appear to be a subtle distinction, but it is a crucial one because it necessitates an examination of where communities place the nexus of concern and therefore where the focus of dialogue and interventions should be, or at least start from.

**2. How the term 'voluntary' is understood in this context has important implications for the design of appropriate interventions:**

Respondents unanimously defined voluntary child recruitment as a child deciding to join an armed group of their free will. However, framing children's engagement in armed groups when it has not been forced upon them by a gun as voluntary may obscure more than it clarifies. Joining an armed group voluntarily appears to be as much about young people taking what they feel to be the best available means to survive among a limited set of opportunities and of protecting themselves and their family as it is about 'choice'. The reality is, children in the research communities are experiencing high levels of hunger in addition to an absence of opportunities for education, vocational training and employment. Joining an armed group presents them an opportunity to find a way to survive and to make a life for themselves in the absence of alternatives. Ultimately, it is a choice – but one among a highly-constrained set of options.

Therefore, while children are choosing to join armed groups, it would not be helpful to frame a child's engagement in armed groups as voluntary because doing so risks placing the onus of joining on children and, to an extent, their parents rather than on the complex set of social, political, economic and environmental drivers that push them to make this choice.

**3. Gendered distinctions emerge strongly and have considerable implications for how we perceive and respond to the risks and vulnerabilities of girls and boys:**

Engagement in armed groups and who is understood to have joined a militia is determined by the roles undertaken, which are strongly determined by age and gender. The experience of being in an armed group is significantly different for girls and boys. While girls are not considered to be in armed groups in the same way as boys, they nevertheless do engage with soldiers and sometimes undertake tasks on their behalf. The nature of their engagement with soldiers, commanders and others, which is primarily sexual, exposes the girls to a series of risks. Transactional sex brings risks of violence, sexually transmitted diseases (including HIV), pregnancy and reproductive health concerns. Girls in these communities are just as hungry, out of school and lacking support as boys are. They may not be soldiers, but the conditions that drove them to seek survival from outside the community are the same as for boys. While boys join armed groups and use violence and guns to obtain what they need, girls use their bodies.

From a prevention point of view, the situation and needs of girls should therefore be considered and addressed differently from boys because of their different experiences and challenges. Gender-sensitive strategies are needed to address the root causes of child soldiering and prostitution or transactional sex, many of which are overlapping.



**4. There is a myriad of motivations pushing and pulling children towards armed groups that should not be seen in isolation:** Children are not joining armed groups for any one reason. Decisions are motivated by a constellation of factors that together lead a child to choose this path over others. Overwhelmingly, however, household poverty, hunger and highly constrained opportunities stand out as the overriding push factors, as adolescents seek out a life elsewhere.

This study found that there are few benefits for boys joining an armed group. The overriding view is that life is unbearably tough and the fear of death is ever present. The main pull for boys is that they might have more food and eat better and that this benefit might at times be extended to their family.

The reality for many is that, while vengeance and protection play a big part, the everyday living conditions in some communities are so compromised that some drivers are as basic as the need for food. Under these circumstances, when one's basic needs are not being met in the community and hunger is pervasive, the 'benefits' of joining up often override the serious negatives that come with doing so.

The various motivations that push and pull children towards armed groups go beyond child protection and child welfare alone, and necessitate a multi-faceted approach to respond to the issue effectively.

**5. Due to ongoing conflicts, armed groups are considered for many children a better alternative to staying in a community, where opportunities to attend school and eke out a living are limited and where security is compromised:** Following on from point 4, community members, including children, living in the research sites are compromised on many levels. Poverty is acute, physical insecurity is high, employment opportunities are virtually non-existent, educational opportunities are extremely limited and opportunities for children to engage in leisure activities safely are not available.

Despite the known hardships and violence of life in the armed groups, boys and girls see these groups as having more to offer than the status quo, which is largely considered to be intolerable. With virtually no alternatives for children in communities and with armed groups a strong presence in everyday life, the militias thus present an opportunity to simply survive and earn a living. In Lumbishi, the one cited alternative to military engagement for children was work in the quarries; yet, this path carries its own, often significant, risks. That this hazardous work is considered the lesser of two evils is indicative of the limited options available to children and families to ameliorate their circumstances. Programmatic interventions anchored on the provision of viable alternative life options to boys and girls is critical to programme success.

**6. Family and parental support and guidance is key to preventing children from joining an armed group:**

Parents and families have a critical role in preventing their children from joining armed groups, and the role they play is perceived as one of the few effective strategies currently in place at the community level. It is often noted that having parents who advise children about the risks of joining armed groups is what makes the difference between two children facing the same socio-economic challenges. However, faced with multiple socio-economic challenges, these efforts can be compromised. Efforts to strengthen families to help reduce the risks and vulnerabilities of parents and children are imperative for reducing children's voluntary recruitment into an armed group.

Equally, those children who do not live with their parents, such as orphans and street children, are more vulnerable and stigmatised. Communities need to be supported to find ways of absorbing and caring for these children to thus decrease their exposure to voluntary recruitment.

**7. Overcoming the multiple challenges around reintegration is paramount:**

Children's effective reintegration into their family and community is compromised by a number of barriers – personal, relational and structural. Many children who join an armed group and then seek to leave are not able to do so without compromising their own safety and often that of their parents. The focus of international organisations is to ensure that no child participates in an armed group and that those who do can be demobilised and reintegrated safely and effectively. Reintegration issues, ranging from widespread corruption that involves government security forces, community leaders and NGOs, and stigmatisation to physical abuse and violence, such as beatings and imprisonment, become an additional and significant push factor for children to return to an armed group – even when they are fully aware of the challenges and hardships that await them. This is something that needs urgent attention.

**8. Prevention strategies are essential:** Structural causes predominantly lead these children to engage with an armed group and in armed conflict. Were they not so poor, hungry and exposed to thieving, killing and political instability and not so acutely aware of the disadvantages that a lack of education brings, these children would not need to seek a 'better life' in a place that is not better in any way except that it offers resolution to some of the massive challenges they live with.

It is crucial to move the programmatic focus from primarily one of response (interventions to deal with children who have demobilised or left the armed groups) to one of prevention, with a focus on improving everyday circumstances for people in communities more than on the illegality of having children involved in armed groups. Prevention responses warrant a multifaceted approach that looks at the drivers, targeting primarily household poverty reduction initiatives, nutrition-based programmes, education and family strengthening initiatives.

That said, the motivating factors for voluntary child recruitment are inextricably linked to the ongoing conflict and insecurity that characterises North and South Kivu. Efforts are therefore needed on both the micro and the macro levels to ensure that actors at the national and international levels recognise and act on the reality that it will not be possible to resolve the push and pull factors until the conflict is addressed as a whole – not just child recruitment – and that people are assisted to build a secure and meaningful life for themselves.



## 6 RECOMMENDATIONS

The overall purpose of the research is to create an evidence base upon which War Child UK and War Child Holland can identify appropriate and sustainable prevention measures at the community and family levels as well as interagency advocacy strategies to reduce the prevalence of children joining armed groups in DRC.

The research shows that there are a number of macro issues that need to be resolved, most notably conflict resolution and poverty reduction. Much has been written, however, about the need to address these issues, and stakeholders from many sectors continue to work at this level. The recommendations presented in this section focus on tangible, practical interventions for War Child UK and War Child Holland to reflect upon internally. The intention is to support War Child UK and War Child Holland to define solutions for some of the principal and persistent challenges that emerged from this study. These recommendations are tailored to the context in which these organisations are working and present options that would

bolster both programme and advocacy initiatives.

The recommendations are based primarily on the strategies that the research respondents stated as being most effective for preventing children from joining armed groups. They have implications beyond traditional issue-specific child protection and child welfare programming; they propose a multifaceted, multi-sector approach that would allow War Child and other organisations to establish a broader cross-sector, collaborative approach that seeks to comprehensively address the complex and interwoven push and pull factors that perpetuate children's association with armed groups.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WAR CHILD'S PROGRAMMING FOR CHILDREN ASSOCIATED WITH OR VULNERABLE TO JOINING AN ARMED GROUP**

- **Extend the programme's target group from children younger than 18 years to include young adults up the age of 25 years.** The risks and challenges associated with membership in armed groups transcend age and relate more to the known hardships and possible harm that both children and young adults experience.
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- **Target girls:** In addition to the prevention strategies recommended here, gender-sensitive measures are needed to reduce the risks that adolescent girls face, with a focus on improving access to and quality of sexual and reproductive health interventions in school, communities and primary health care facilities. Comprehensive sexual education in school is important, beyond teaching abstinence, because it provides youth with information to make better decisions about their sexual lifestyle and to protect themselves from unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, but it also provides essential information on healthy relationships.
- 

- **Increase the focus on prevention strategies** to target the drivers of voluntary recruitment, including the social, political, economic and environmental factors, to create viable, sustainable alternatives. While many of these interventions are outside of War Child's core mission and capacity, potential areas for collaborative interventions include:

### **Household poverty reduction**

- Initiatives that aim to reduce household poverty, such as income-generating activities so that parents can provide for their children's basic needs. These could include greater encouragement of small start-up businesses for adolescents and youth that parents could support with small amounts of funding, and improved opportunities for children to learn about their parents' activities so that they can enhance their contribution to household earnings.
- The provision of sustained, skills-based technical and vocational training, based on a realistic assessment of local market forces, for out-of-school adolescent girls and boys, increasing their opportunity to earn a living.
- Social protection programmes, such as cash transfers and microcredit schemes helping to decrease household poverty through increased productivity, asset ownership and food security.
- Nutrition-based programmes, which could include agricultural cooperatives to help families and communities pool their resources.

### **Family strengthening initiatives**

- Community outreach programmes to provide services to children and families identified as those most at risk or vulnerable to engagement with armed groups.
- Opportunities for greater intergenerational dialogue for families and communities, involving children, parents, carers and other influencers from older generations, such as religious and community leaders, to provide support and guidance to children at risk of joining armed groups.

### **Alternative care options**

- Support to strengthen kinship care arrangements, informal foster care initiatives and/or short-term residential shelters for children living without families, including orphans, street children and displaced children.

### **Education**

- Better access to schools by improving transport, improving safety and hygiene, as well as providing cash, subsidies, bursaries, scholarships, uniforms and school supplies to encourage the enrolment of out-of-school girls and boys.
- Improved quality of education, centred on teacher training and improving curricula around life skills.
- Construction of schools.

### **Insecurity**

- Community-based peace-building initiatives. Models similar to those described in Kitchanga and Lumbishi can be set up to monitor security more systemically and to sensitise armed groups.

### **Community-based activities to provide support and guidance to children**

- Peer-to-peer education so that children who have left an armed group can meet and talk with children in the community. This will better inform children about the risks and help them understand just how difficult the conditions are for children living with an armed group.
- Participation in social networks, such as youth health associations, school clubs and self-help groups, to offer informal social support. Increased access to and participation in social networks can increase self-esteem and self-confidence but also identity, a sense of belonging, trust and cohesion, which in turn can influence the capacity of girls and boys to make positive life choices.
- Leisure activities (including recreational areas, football matches and other ball games, draughts and bicycling) that provide a forum for working with young people on an individual and collective basis.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WAR CHILD'S ADVOCACY INITIATIVES**

- **Dissemination of evidence and information:** The research findings indicate the need for an inter-sector approach to alleviate poverty and to provide improved nutrition, education, child protection and security. War Child UK and War Child Holland are in a position to advocate, based on evidence emerging from the research, with influential stakeholders at all levels, including the government, MONUSCO, UNICEF and national and international NGOs for strategies to address the multiple drivers of child recruitment. This advocacy should push for greater collaboration and coordination among actors, based on a common understanding and an agreed approach to solving the issues. Only by understanding what the principal drivers of child recruitment are at the local level and addressing them through a multi-sector approach will change occur.
- 
- **Address reintegration challenges:** The research findings describe a number of challenges that children experience upon leaving an armed group, including corruption among duty-bearers, inconsistent and inadequate DDR processes, and stigma, violence and harassment in the community.

**Corruption and bribery** among the security forces, local community leaders and NGOs to secure the release, acceptance and reintegration of children who have left armed groups without going through the DDR process:

- Increase collaboration with FARDC commanders and police, including intensifying sensitisation with FARDC and police officers on children's rights, and ensuring that children leaving armed groups are oriented towards the DDR process and not physically abused or arrested.
- Advocate for each FARDC camp to have focal points to monitor that agreed protocols and processes are respected, as is the case in the 33<sup>ème</sup> région militaire au Sud Kivu.
- Involve FARDC commanders in the DDR monthly coordination meetings.
- Advocate for NGO partner organisations who are involved in the socioeconomic reintegration support for children to respect processes in place and to follow through on the pledges of support and equipment intended for children, especially following skills training.
- Advocate for the increased monitoring of NGO partners to detect and sanction those who are responsible for misappropriating funds.

### DDR challenges:

- Advocate for greater support to local NGOs operating in remote areas to establish focal points and reception centres to ensure that the DDR process is more accessible, thus making it easier and possibly safer for those children seeking to leave an armed group to locate entry points into the DDR process.
- Advocate for improved and meaningful support to children through vocational training and reintegration kits that are relevant and appropriate to their context, based on feasibility studies and financial viability.

### Stigma in the community:

- Encourage religious and traditional leaders to work with their communities to promote tolerance and forgiveness for children who have exited the armed groups, and help family and community members find positive ways to reintegrate children.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION

Throughout the research, several issues emerged that, for programming purposes, would merit further investigation.

- **The role of local community leaders in preventing children from joining armed groups:** There was very little mention of community leaders' role during the research. When they were mentioned, it was often linked to their involvement in corruption during the release of children from a DRR centre and reintegration into their community. It would be useful to better understand how community leaders view their role in relation to children's involvement in armed groups and establish with them how they could be part of the solution.

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- **Girls' association with armed groups:** Some girls are openly associated with an armed group while others choose to carefully hide their association. The benefits and risks of their involvement in an armed group appear to apply to all girls. The targeting of girls will require understanding all facets of what motivates their association with an armed group, which should include exploring whether there are other circumstances and factors at play that mean that some girls are more comfortable being openly involved with armed groups than others.

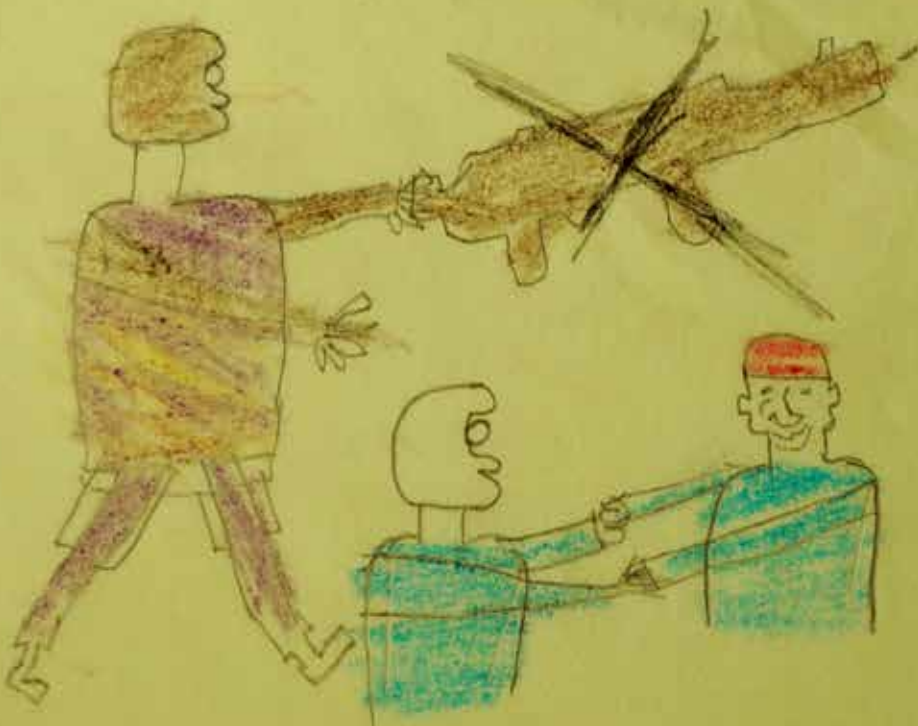
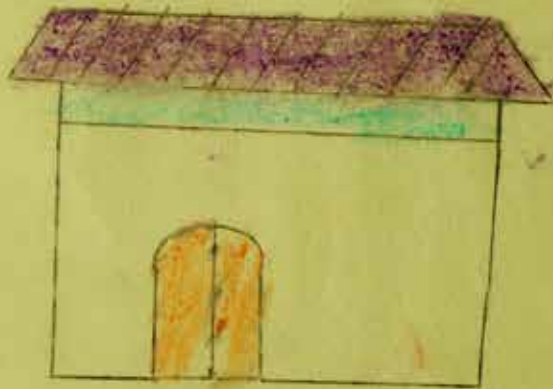
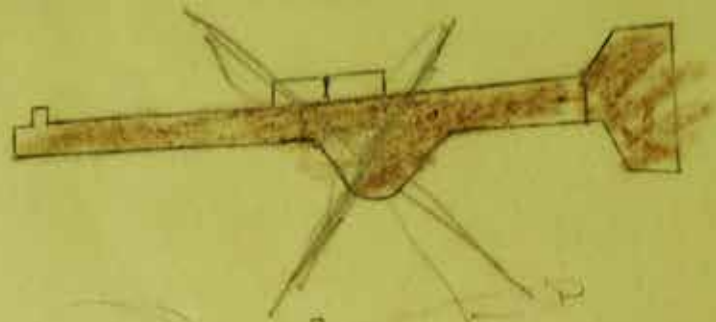
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- **The role of friends:** Friends are overwhelmingly telling their peers that life in the armed groups is positive. However, children's actual experiences are often overwhelmingly negative and hence very different from how they imagined it and how they portray it to others. Exploring why children present their experiences to their peers in this positive light would be useful for informing preventive strategies.

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- **Perceptions of sexual violence:** Sexual violence does not appear to be as significant a phenomenon as might be expected, especially given its prevalence in the existing literature on the DRC and other African countries affected by similar conflicts. It would be useful to understand why this might be the case. Did the issue not emerge strongly because sexual violence is not a regular feature of children's experiences? Or, perhaps the discussions were undertaken without adequate time to build trust in the researchers or were not framed and facilitated in a way that would capture this sensitive information sufficiently? Perceptions of what constitutes sexual violence for families and communities, including girls, should also be considered and explored further because they appear to differ from how the international community defines it.

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# ANNEX I

## RESEARCHER CODE OF CONDUCT

### CODE OF CONDUCT FOR DATA COLLECTORS: STATEMENT OF COMMITMENT

I hereby declare that I have read and understood the ethical protocol for this research and the child protection policy of War Child and that I will comply with the guidelines therein for the duration of this research project.

I have a duty to ensure that no one is put at risk of harm as a result of their participation in this research. I have a responsibility to respect participants' views and experiences and to ensure that participation in the research is in every individual's best interest. I will do my utmost to ensure that participation in this study is a positive experience for all.

While associated with this research, I will never:

1. Share the information acquired from any specific individuals who participated in this study with anyone outside the research team.
2. Hit or physically assault any participant.
3. Behave physically in a manner that is inappropriate or sexually provocative.
4. Use language or offer advice that is inappropriate, offensive or abusive.
5. Act in ways intended to shame, humiliate, belittle or degrade participants.
6. Act in ways that may place a participant at risk of danger, abuse or exploitation.
7. Act in ways that could be deemed coercive, exploitative or abusive.
8. Encourage children to act in ways that are illegal, unsafe or abusive.
9. Develop intimate physical or sexual relationships with participants.
10. Invite a child participant to my room or to stay overnight at my home unsupervised or sleep in the same room or bed as a child participant.
11. Do things for children of a personal nature that they can do for themselves.

I understand that failure to comply with this Code of Conduct may result in disciplinary action, including termination of my contract.

Signed:

Date:

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# ANNEX II

## ETHICAL PRINCIPLES AND GUIDELINES

This study was designed to minimise risks to respondents and to maximise the potential benefits of participation. The following ethical principles and guidelines were applied at all stages of the research process:

The research should have social and scientific value. This research was designed – in collaboration with War Child Holland and War Child UK – to ensure that the knowledge and learning generated are used to improve child protection and the more general well-being of children and families living in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and in particular in North and South Kivu. The research methodology is designed to maximise the scientific rigour of the study. To ensure that the knowledge acquired can be put to effective use, the findings of the study will be disseminated in a way that reaches all those who might benefit from the information contained herein, including the communities who participated in the research.

The research will have scientific validity. One of the questions surrounding concerns about scientific validity relates to the legitimacy and accessibility of the concepts and terms used over the course of a piece of research. Issues of translation have been carefully addressed in the design and implementation of the research. Several steps in the research process helped to bolster the scientific validity of the study. Among these we ensured the results are accurate by thoughtful, careful questioning and by ensuring conceptual clarity was shared between investigators and respondents. We made sure the analysis was grounded in the realities of life in the contexts where data were collected thanks to the help of a local senior researcher. Triangulation of data has been key to ensure that the words that were translated had the same understanding and meaning for all. Every day at the end of the data collection researchers checked in among themselves to make sure the analysis was iterative and emerging issues were dealt with and further investigated as needed.

The research tools have been piloted following the training of the research team and adjusted accordingly before the data collection phase. Information obtained

through the piloting process do not form part of the main study data. Respondent validation – group and individual reflection on the research process and findings – has been conducted daily throughout the period of data collection and at other set points in the process. This approach created the space for the research team to address any potential concerns about validity to the best of its ability and allowed space for adaptations to be made when necessary.

Fair subject selection. The research team developed clear recruitment guidance to ensure that respondents represented diverse socioeconomic statuses, age ranges, varying levels of exposure to explicitly defined vulnerability factors and a variety of religious, ethnic and social factors. These were explored and defined in consultation with War Child staff in country and with the local researchers who are themselves familiar with the communities where the data has been collected. Attention to this issue is critical and has been a priority at all times. The selection of site locations ensured that a variety of locations were included in the study.

Protect research participants from harm. This research principle was sought to ensure that all participants were protected from any emotional or physical harm that might occur as a result of their involvement in the research and to protect their rights and interests. Participants were not asked explicitly to talk about personal experiences of violence or abuse. All our interactions and engagements with children were not focused on each child's individual experience but rather on what types of things a child who has joined the fighting forces might have felt or might have experienced. Data collectors – properly instructed and tested during the training that happened before site visits – avoided asking insensitive questions or probing for information when it was clear that participants preferred not to answer.

The data collectors carefully and clearly explained the study objectives and what will be done with the information gathered, because participants' attitudes towards research are shaped to a large extent by their perception of the purpose of the study and their

expectations about what it will achieve. They also emphasised the lack of immediate, tangible benefits to those participating in the research and have been careful not to make promises to children, adults and communities, especially about future programmes or actions that might improve their situation.

Before the research began, data collectors agreed what actions were to be taken, in accordance with War Child's Child Safeguarding Policy should a child disclose abuse (actual or potential) of themselves or of another child. Similarly, the data collectors followed pre-determined protocol to ensure that distress was immediately recognised and mitigated and that appropriate support was found for ensuring the comfort and well-being of respondents.

Remain objective. Data collectors were advised to remain as objective as possible and have been trained specifically on this before visiting sites. At all times, they encouraged participants to express their own views and opinions and they did not interrupt, make suggestions or engage in personal debates about the views expressed. Participants' responses have been transcribed verbatim and recorded with an audio recorder, regardless of whether the data collector agreed with the statement expressed.

Commit to independent review. Personnel of War Child UK and War Child Holland who were not directly involved in the data collection served as a check on the quality and ethics of this study and provided regular feedback on the development of the research framework, scope and tools development as well as this final research report. External ethical approval has been obtained by the Université Libre des Pays des Grands Lacs in Goma.

All research participation has been voluntary. Informed voluntary consent and children's assent has been obtained from all research participants specifying the right to withdraw from research at any time, the right to decline to answer to individual questions or to participate in specific stages of data collection and/or to limit the use of data provided. In this study, the data collectors were clear about who they were, the purpose of the research, what will be done with the information collected and any potential consequences of the research (Morrow and Richards, 1996; Schenk and Williamson, 2005).

The consent forms have been discussed and reviewed during the training of the data collectors. Revisions to information sheets and consent forms were made as necessary based on the feedback and advice provided by War Child UK and War Child Holland prior to the commencement of the field research.

Respect for potential and enrolled participants.

The data collectors were instructed to respect and adhere to local codes of dress and behaviour. They respected participants' points of view at all times and refrained from criticism of research participants or acting as a teacher or instructor. The data collectors sought at all times ways to minimise power imbalances between them and participants, particularly when working with children.

Confidentiality and data protection. As part of the consent process, all participants were informed that their answers were going to be kept confidential. Responses and comments have been summarised in this final report without the use of names or other identifying characteristics. All interviews and group discussions were conducted in a quiet, private setting, and all efforts were made to avoid interruptions. Interviews between a child and adult (member of research team) were conducted out of hearing, but within sight of others (as per WC Child Safeguarding Policy and Research Tools). Only the data collectors and participants were present on these occasions.

All information collected during the study has been kept strictly confidential and has not been shared except through the verbal or written dissemination of the findings of the study. Once assent and/or informed consent has been obtained, completed forms were placed in secured files. The notes of the data collectors were not shared outside the research team. After all data for the study has been collected, only the lead researchers had ongoing access to the field notes, transcripts and other research materials.

Compensation. Research respondents did not receive any monetary compensation for their participation in this study. However, in focus group discussions, light refreshments were provided.



This report is a collaboration between War Child Holland and War Child UK

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