REINTEGRATION OF CHILDREN ASSOCIATED WITH ARMED GROUPS AND FORCES:
AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCE OF WAR CHILD UK IN CAR

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"You’re too young for this."

This is the story of Frederique, a child formerly associated with an armed group in Central African Republic. Told in his own words.

I used to live in Bambari and go to school. I was happy.

The militia attacked when I was at school. I was told to go home.

They kicked down the door and forced their way into the house.

My family was hiding so I hid with them.

My brother resisted so they grabbed him and dragged him outside the house.

They made him sit down and executed him.

My mother cried out and attacked the soldier who shot my brother.

So they tied her up and killed her too.

*Frederique’s name has been changed to protect his identity.
PROJECT SUMMARY

This study on War Child UK’s (WCUK) approach to the Demobilisation, Disarmament and Reintegration (DDR) of Children Associated with Armed Forces and Groups (CAAFAG) in the Central African Republic (CAR), as its name indicates, aimed at evaluating WCUK’s work methods on reintegrating and rehabilitating Children Formerly Associated with Armed Groups and Armed Forces (CAAFAG) in CAR. The effectiveness of their methods was analysed in relation to those of other organisations, other countries and to the reality of the field, with the goal to provide recommendations for their improvements in line with WCUK’s theory of change, and to guide future WCUK programmes and its partners in the area of child DDR in CAR.

The context in CAR is marked by deep societal tensions, a dire humanitarian situation and a critical security context, where various armed groups control most of the country, contesting for land, power and resources. Many boys and girls have been recruited within these armed groups, acting as combatants, but also as cooks, spies, carriers.

Several DDR efforts have been implemented in CAR over the years, with limited results. The latest DDR framework was approved during the Bangui Forum in May 2015 and was launched in April 2017, with particular attention being placed on the
release of children associated with armed groups. The Government of CAR and the main actors working on child protection in CAR have established in early January 2016 a "National Strategy for the Community-Based reintegration of CAAFAG", with the aim to establish a common framework for the reintegration of children that were associated with armed groups and forces.

In line with the strategy, WCUK interventions in CAR, funded by UNICEF, are based on a complex and multifaceted process that encompasses 6 main phases: identification and verification, Community Child Protection Network (RECOPE) and Temporary Host Families, awareness-raising campaigns, family tracing, reunification and reintegration.

**METHODOLOGY**

This study focused on four projects implemented by WCUK. It was done combining qualitative and quantitative methods to collect data for the in-depth analysis of WCUK’s approach to the disarmament and reintegration of CAAFAG. The consultancy was carried out between October 2017 and February 2018, while the field study occurred between 27 November and 12 December 2017.

Several tools were used to ensure the generation of relevant and in-depth data that was then analysed mainly in a qualitative fashion to identify trends and compare results between the different categories of respondents (triangulation). The following methods were used: a) an adaptation of the participatory method Most Significant Change (MSC), b) semi-structured interviews, c) Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and d) informal interviews.

A list of indicators was developed by Transition International (TI) and WCUK based on the results frameworks of the different projects and measured against the results of this primary data collection, and WCUK’s internal database. Purposive and snowball sampling were used to collect data, which was collected in Paoua, Boguila, Markounda and Bangui.

In total, 398 respondents were interviewed, including 188 CAAFAG, 29 Other Vulnerable Children (OVC), 10 parents, 15 foster families, 5 Government staff, 11 local leaders and 20 service providers during face to face interviews. Furthermore, 33 community members, 53 children (non-beneficiaries) and 18 RECOPE members were consulted during FGDs.

As a result of the complex and sensitive nature of the research, all data collection followed strict ethical guidelines for conducting research involving children, and TI took precautions to ensure the protection of all respondents, and particularly that of children.

The study encountered several challenges including the need to encompass 4 different projects in 1 set of tools, dealing with sensitive issues with vulnerable groups and the difficult security context.
RELEVANT LESSONS

To explore potential room for improving CAAFAG related programming in CAR, this study compared several lessons learned from child release and reintegration efforts elsewhere with the approaches used by WCUK in CAR. The United Nations’ Integrated Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration Standards (IDDRS) provides the benchmarks for such programming.

IDENTIFICATION, VERIFICATION AND PROFILING
The last decade has stressed the need to expand DDR approaches to include all children associated with armed groups, and not only combatants. Community based approaches to identify CAAFAG have been used to limit their stigmatisation and stereotyping, which would have led many to refuse to go through DDR in the past. While similar approaches are currently used in CAR by WCUK, augmenting the number of OVC would allow more mitigating effects. The process of profiling children is crucial and requires more in-depth training of those in charge of it. Better comprehension of the reasons which lead children to join armed groups is fundamental for the implementation of more effective reintegration programmes for them. The practise that parents negotiate the release of their children should be avoided, and UNICEF and WCUK should be more pro-active in negotiating release.

INTERIM CARE AND TEMPORARY HOST FAMILIES
Due to their vulnerabilities, girls and mothers with young children should be transferred to temporary host families or Interim Care Centres (ICC) immediately. The establishment of such centres should be done by specialists and focus primarily on the safety and security of the children. Caregivers should also be properly trained on the sensitivities and complexities related to the physical, emotional and psychological needs of the children. Furthermore, these centres should enable social interaction and various group activities for children, and their participation in the running of the centre is recommended. ICCs should be a temporary measure. Temporary host families are an effective alternative to ICCs, but proper vetting of families, backed with more regular monitoring is crucial for the welfare of the child. Host families should be provided with economic assistance to better endure the care of an extra child, especially in the case of CAR where poverty is pressing.

RECOPE AND BROADER STRENGTHENING OF CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM
Preparing communities for the return of children and rebuilding child protection systems and structure are essential aspects of child reintegration particularly in a context like CAR where the state presence is very limited if non-existent in most of the country, and child protection systems are mostly absent. RECOPE have played that role effectively in CAR but require further capacity development to improve the understanding of what is expected from them, and further sensitised on the practices and experiences in other countries, with members of RECOPE chosen on the basis of their desire to serve their communities and the children.

AWARENESS-RAISING CAMPAIGNS
The need for a more sustained awareness raising related to the prevention, release and reintegration of children at all levels has been identified in CAR. Awareness raising, and communications are essential at every stage to mitigate expectations and to sensitise communities about their involvement in broader child protection issues.

FAMILY TRACING AND REUNIFICATION
Family tracing should be started at the earliest possible stage and occur simultaneously as other activities. There is the need for comprehensive planning and assessment to inform about the process and advise on communities’ perceptions and dynamics as well as children’s fear and doubts. When families are untraceable or if children refuse to return to them, other credible options should be sought, taking the best interest and the safety and security of the child into consideration. It is necessary to set up follow up and monitoring mechanisms to prevent re-recruitment.
SOCIAL REINTEGRATION AND PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT
In order to lessen the serious psychological problems children may encounter upon return, psychosocial support rather than individual therapy is necessary. As such, there is a need to increase the capacities of RECOPE and families in this regard, as well a further sensitisation against stereotyping and stigmatisation. The use of traditional community based transitional justice systems has proven effective in other contexts and could be investigated in CAR. The need for a more comprehensive training on life skills and parenting skills has also been identified.

EDUCATION
Education plays a vital part in the effective reintegration of children, and it is important for children to try to reach (or recover) as high a level of education as possible. Doing so is often complex, due to, among other factors, financial reasons, difficult adjustment from both teachers and students, as well as the lack of educational structure in a context such as CAR. There is a need for investment by the state in addressing the fundamental gaps and completing reintegration activities as DDR programmes can only feed into overall recovery processes and cannot be responsible for them.

ECONOMIC REINTEGRATION
All assistance should support the development of the child with the community, and all should understand who the benefits are for and why. In order to have a more effective economic reintegration, it is necessary to conduct extensive assessments to better understand the markets needs as well as the aspirations of the children. It was found in other contexts that the simultaneous provision of both educational and economic assistance was preferable, and that vulnerable children should be equally targeted.

MONITORING, PRACTICE AND SYSTEMS
It was observed in CAR that monitoring systems and practices are weak. It is necessary to set up follow up and monitoring systems with adequate funding in collaboration with other key national and international actors. These systems should be designed and implemented on a longer-term scale with people with the requisite skills and knowledge, and should continue after projects are stopped

Vital to this process is the need to have a well-designed and integrated case management system that guides the process of collecting, processing, analysing, and identifying needs, coordinating approaches and their operationalization and collecting feedback and using them to take corrective measures when required. The case management system promotes efficiency and effectiveness and in the end the quality of outputs, which is essential in achieving the overall objectives of any project or programme.

PARTNERSHIP, COORDINATION AND CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT
Successful DDR cannot occur without understanding/responding to the appropriate context. As such, there is a national responsibility on the part of the state (political actor) to create the enabling environment to facilitate the reintegration of children into stable communities. It is necessary to establish a horizontally integrated partnership and coordination mechanisms, with the capacity of local partners to be developed to enable them to function as they should. It is therefore essential that the Government, through the National DDR Commission, with the support of international actors, foster strong partnership and coordination mechanisms, with the capacity of local actors enhanced to promote sustainable peace.

CREATING AND ASSESSING IMPACT
Reintegration should take between three and five years, which is not currently the case of WCUK’s approach in the areas studied, which is closer to reinsertion, as the activities are implemented on a short-term basis and usually for less than a year. To build on the gains already made and to best support the reintegration of the CAAFA, a comprehensive, well planned and implemented reintegration programme is needed in CAR.
CONCLUSIONS

The projects the research team studied were found to be relevant, timely and necessary for the current context in CAR. The inclusion of OVC in addition to CAAFAG is another positive aspect of these projects, although their ratio is too low. WCUK adhesion to the local Government’s guidelines and its work with local organisations is also to be praised, as it contributes to build local capacities and increase the sustainability of any positive impacts.

The Most Significant Change put forward by respondents in Boguila and Markounda was the provision of education assistance, while in Paoua, the liberation and reintegration of children associated with armed groups in the communities was perceived as the Most Significant Change. Most children expressed their satisfaction with the Child Friendly Spaces and the psychosocial support, as well as the health care they received, due to a good referral system and use of implementing partners. The research was not able to do a proper assessment on sexual and gender-based violence.

The community-based approach of the projects allows for buy-in and support of the communities and their leadership. However, the funding cycle is insufficient to ensure sustainable reintegration and continuity of support. As such, the projects and their limited timeframe created high expectations which turned into frustrations, as highlighted in the biggest disappointment expressed by respondents.

The lack of use of a dual approach, through providing educational and economic assistance simultaneously, meant children had a difficult choice over which assistance to select. Furthermore, the limit of schooling support to 1 year left many children and parents with a challenge of sustaining the process after this.

Regarding the UNICEF MRM project, WCUK affirm that of the original target reach of 3000 conflict-affected children, only 1234 children were supported. The explanation given is that the original target reach was overestimated. However, the results of the research team might contradict that statement, showing that many more children were found to be vulnerable and that more children are also associated with local militias.

The economic reintegration component of the projects did not create as much impact as was intended and in the future, it should be enhanced to ensure relevance and effectiveness. The lack of profound follow up of the businesses and the large size of the groups impeded the success and sustainability of the businesses created.

TI highlight the need to improve the case management system, including reporting on the services provided to the children. This certainly requires improvements in the collection, analysis and management of data on the release and reintegration of children. Further, the unsystematic monitoring of data against indicators, and the absence of baseline information should be addressed in future programming in order for managers to check progress, adapt approaches and to allow for more systematic evaluations.

Thus, while the work accomplished by WCUK and its partners Emergencia and AFRBD succeeded in supporting the reintegration of CAAFAG and reducing the vulnerability of some OVC, a much more comprehensive and longer-term approach is needed. It is crucial that WCUK works closely with all relevant stakeholders, as the needs in the areas studied are beyond the capacity of WCUK as a single organisation to address. Fundamentally, longer projects with higher budgets are required.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, this section provides very specific recommendations that WCUK and its partners should take into consideration to enable them to improve on the delivery of support to CAAFAG and OVC in CAR. The recommendations are divided into specific sections for programming for WCUK and policy and advocacy recommendations.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WCUK FUTURE PROGRAMMING

- It is necessary to further invest on the capacity building for RECOPE, as well as helping the communities to better understand the eligibility criteria for RECOPE members and the voluntary nature of the work;

- Additionally, more local, religious and traditional leaders should be included in RECOPE and the mandates of RECOPE should be reviewed, and support increased, especially in case management and referrals;

- Educational and economic assistance should be provided simultaneously to children. For children under 14, the business start-up support package should be provided to parents/caregivers. For those above 14, vocational training courses and business start-up should be based on local market analyses rather than on the availability of vocational trainers and they should be provided with multiple skills, bringing in trainers from different localities if necessary. At the same time, longer term mentoring and coaching support should be provided by people within the community to those starting a business;

- There is a need for more robust monitoring of the wellbeing of children in host families, and a strengthening of the Child Friendly Feedback Mechanism (CFFM), which needs to be made more visible and available;

- Host families should be provided with specifically tailored economic packages to reduce the level of poverty within their households;

- Campaigns against stereotyping and stigmatisation in communities and CFS should be more systematic, and fully mainstreamed into future interventions;

- The sustainability of CFS and children clubs after the closure of the projects should be assessed;

- It is crucial to invest in designing overarching results frameworks and indicators to collect baseline information and to do more systematic case management, including the creation of a database in which all services provided to each child is recorded. The case information should be shared more with other organisations to enable the monitoring of children who may move from one area/project location to another;

- The one plus approach should be a standard formula used in all future programmes, it emphasises that in targeting a CAAFAG, one child within the community should also be targeted, to strengthen the foundation of the community-based approach, while reducing poverty and associated vulnerabilities affecting other children in local communities;

- Direct negotiations for the release of children should take place with AG leaders, particularly mid-level commanders at the local level. The current practice of parents negotiating the release of their children should be stopped where possible and the identification of CAAFAG should involve a broader group of actors including the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Mission in Central Africa (MINUSCA) and local leaders;
Future projects should have well-planned exit strategies developed at the inception stage to ensure sustainability and adherence to Do No Harm principles;

More support to education services is necessary, which should be done in close collaboration with UNICEF;

Coordination, cooperation and collaboration with other child protection agencies is needed to promote complementarity of efforts, thereby improving on case management of children that might move from one area/project to another and strengthening the impact created through interventions.

POLICY AND ADVOCACY RECOMMENDATIONS

**Government of CAR**

- The Government, with the assistance of its development partners, should mobilise significant resources to implement a 3 to 5-year reintegration strategy for CAAFAG, meaning a need to increase financial and human resources mobilised in the implementation of the national strategy;

- A multi-sectorial and horizontally integrative approach should be promoted by the Government in order to create synergy and harmonisation of activities among the various partners;

- The Government should work with its international partners to provide and maintain an effective referral pathway;

- The Government should be proactive in working with both state and non-state actors in introducing and enforcing legislation and policies geared towards protecting and promoting the rights and welfare of children in the country.

**International community**

- Significant financial and human resource investment is required to implement a comprehensive and effective child reintegration programmes that last between three to five years;

- UNICEF and partners should focus on using a community-based approach that will target both CAAFAG and more OVC within local communities;

- Make a shift to a much more comprehensive and longer-term reintegration approach;

- Put greater emphasis on advocacy and lobbying among national and global actors in order to draw significantly more resources for reintegration programmes;

- For prevention of association, work on changing the perception amongst communities, parents, children and armed groups, that it is the children’s responsibility to protect their communities, with armed groups also propagating that children should pick up arms to protect their communities. This requires for UNICEF and Child Protection Agencies (CPA’s) such as WCUK to work more directly and explicitly with armed group commanders to stop recruiting children and at the same time counter-messaging to such recruitment messages should be developed and disseminated.
This study was conducted for War Child UK in December 2017 by Transition International.

War Child is a non-governmental organization working for the protection of children in countries devastated by conflict. We provide vital 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 the consent of the child and the parent or educator. The photos selected for this report are meant to illustrate this and in no way represent former child soldiers and/or those associated with armed groups. The opinions and statements in this report do not necessarily reflect those of War Child UK.

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