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STOPPING CHILD SOLDIERING, A(N) (IM) POSSIBLE MISSION?

How close are we to halting the problem of child soldiers in war zones across the globe? - A close inspection of the complexity of this issue and the factors which contribute to the persistence of the phenomenon; and an analysis of the measures being taken by various organizations to end the situation.



An image from UNICEF report Beyond Chibok, 2016

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INTRODUCTION

Since the very beginning of my research project I have felt motivated to write about a global issue that can affect anyone and can happen in any country and any continent. However, I have been asked many times why I would ever want to write about a topic that is as extremely shocking and horrifying as child soldiers. Being a teenager myself, I was interested in doing a research about a problem that has significance both for adults and young people. In the world that we know today, wars erupt in all parts of the world and every day we read mass media reports on human rights violations in northern Iraq and Syria. At a time when children have become increasingly affected by armed conflicts, the research on the problems of child involvement in modern warfare seemed to me extremely important in terms of my personal development.

I wanted to get a better understanding of why child soldiers exist, what makes those children join the war and what are the possibilities, if any, of turning a child soldier back to a child. As nearly half of the child soldiers in the world are fighting in Africa, the civil war in Sierra Leone, which lasted from 1991 to 2002, seemed to me to be a good example by which to demonstrate the underlying causes of child recruitment and the lessons learnt in the process of disarmament of former child soldiers.

While doing research on this subject, I read the story of Ismael Beah and his book « A long way gone: Memoirs of a boy soldier », which moved me a lot. It's a true story of a child soldier in Sierra Leone, a boy, separated from his family, who joined the armed forces and committed crimes of extreme violence. With the help of UNICEF he became a civilian and now is the UN goodwill ambassador, speaking up for the thousands of children still involved in war. I became interested to learn how it became possible.

The first chapter of my research work is about experience of Sierra's Leone's children while living in a war zone - and the tools used by international community to bring child soldiers back to a normal life.

It also seemed important to me to gain better knowledge of international laws and policies which exist to protect children from involvement in armed conflicts. I wanted to learn about the success stories and to discuss the challenges of the international community, which

concern child soldiering with the representatives of UNICEF, the main international body dedicated to the rights of the child. I sent my questions to the Swiss Committee for UNICEF. The replies from Ms. Anabel Marques, UNICEF staff member, which I complemented with my own research on UNICEF activities, are exposed in the second chapter of my work.

Finally, I had the chance to assist the conference « Sketching the Way to Peace: Preventing the Use of Children as Soldiers with the Help of Comic Books », held on the 12th of February 2016 at the United Nations office in Geneva. I was surprised to learn that such a complex issue as child soldiering could be addressed through child-friendly comic books, in which the former child soldiers of the Democratic Republic of Congo and Columbia express their feelings and fears and tell readers about their experiences as child soldiers.

The Conference allowed me also to learn more about the activities of non-governmental organisations *Geneva Call* and *Save the Children*, and the obstacles they face in helping former child soldiers to return back to normal life.

The Conference was organized to commemorate the International Day against the Use of Child Soldiers, also known as Red Hand Day. By leaving my symbolic red handprint I didn't only express my support of ending the use of children as soldiers, but became directly engaged in the action against the practice of using children as soldiers. I felt even more convinced that there is no excuse for bringing children into wars!



Reintegration of a former child soldier in the Democratic Republic of Congo¹

¹ Consulted on 02.10.2016, an image from <https://www.child-soldiers.org>

I. CHILDREN AT WAR: SIERRA LEONE'S EXPERIENCE

What, exactly, is a child soldier? Paris Conference² Principles (2007) defined a child soldier as “any person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity”.³ Recruiting and using children under the age of 15 as soldiers is prohibited under international humanitarian law and is defined as a war crime by the International Criminal Court.

Over the last two decades more children have been directly affected by armed conflicts than in past wars. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), around 300,000 children under the age of 18 are currently involved in some thirty conflicts all over the world.⁴ Nearly half a million additional children serve in armies not directly at war.⁵ The children have become an integral part of organized military organisations, rebel and terrorist groups. They serve as fighters, spies, porters, messengers and cooks or are forced into marriage or sexual servitude.

The involvement of children in armed conflicts is global. The example of Sierra Leone is not an exception. The lessons learnt from Sierra Leone are often at the centre of the child soldiers' discussion.

² An international conference entitled « Free Children From War », organized by UNICEF and the French government.

³ The Paris Principles: Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups (February 2007), Consulted on 18.04.2016, available at <http://www.unicef.org/emerg/files/ParisPrinciples310107English.pdf>.

⁴ Consulted on 18.04.2016, see <http://www.unicef.org/newsline/02pr58soldiers.htm>.

⁵ Consulted on 18.04.2016, see <http://www.cfr.org/human-rights/child-soldiers-around-world/p9331>.

I.1. Specificity of the use of children in the civil war in Sierra Leone, 1991-2002

Children played a marked role in a violent civil war in Sierra Leone (1991-2002). They were used widely by every fighting group: the rebels (Revolutionary United Front, RUF), as well as by the government forces and the local militias (Civil Defence Forces, CDF).

The total number of children combating in Sierra Leone for all fighting groups amounted to 10,000 and constituted the majority of the total soldiers in the conflict.⁶ 80% of all fighters of the RUF were boys and girls, aged from seven to fourteen.⁷ The United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) reported that in some cases children of 5 years old were captured and trained to fight.⁸

One surprising and shocking fact was that those children were brought into combat at the very beginning of the war and not at a later point when there were no more adult soldiers.

The abducted girls were forced to become “bush wives” of the commanders or served as sexual slaves to other fighters. Myrian Denov in her book “Child Soldiers: Sierra Leone’s Revolutionary Front” gave numerous testimonies of rape and sexual violence against the girls by RUF fighters: “Girls were dying of rape all around”; “Rape was just normal with the group”.⁹ According to the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL), 50% of sexual slaves were girls under 15 years at the time of abduction.¹⁰

⁶ United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL), Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report for the Children of Sierra Leone, child-friendly version, 2004, p. 15, Consulted on 18.04.2016, available at http://www.sierraleonetr.org/index.php/view-the-final-report/popular-reports/item/truth-and-reconciliation-commission-report-for-the-children-of-sierra-leone?category_id=16.

⁷ P.W.Singer, *Children at War*, University of California Press, 2006, p. 15.

⁸ United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL), Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report for the Children of Sierra Leone, child-friendly version, 2004, p. 15, consulted on 21.09.2016, available at http://www.sierraleonetr.org/index.php/view-the-final-report/popular-reports/item/truth-and-reconciliation-commission-report-for-the-children-of-sierra-leone?category_id=16.

⁹ Myriam Denov, *Child Soldiers: Sierra Leone’s Revolutionary United Front*, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 123-124.

¹⁰ United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL), Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report for the Children of Sierra Leone, child-friendly version, 2004, p. 17, Consulted on 18.04.2016, available at http://www.sierraleonetr.org/index.php/view-the-final-report/popular-reports/item/truth-and-reconciliation-commission-report-for-the-children-of-sierra-leone?category_id=16.

I.2. The underlying causes of children's involvement in war

There are numerous and complex reasons for the involvement of children in these the armed conflicts. They range from poverty, unemployment, lack of access to education and high orphan rates to the increasing number of children in developing countries and the proliferation of light weapons, such as handguns and rifles, easy for them to use.

While the major socio-political and economic causes explaining why children are recruited in armed conflicts are common to the majority of countries using child soldiers across the continents, the individual experiences of different countries are varied.

In the case of Sierra Leone, a small country on the West Coast of Africa, a former British colony with big diamond reserves, there exist various explanations of youth involvement in the war.

By 1987 the government of Sierra Leone was almost bankrupt. The budget cuts in education led to the closure of many schools and colleges. Less than 30 per cent of children were registered in secondary schools.¹¹ As a result, many young people without education and job became vulnerable to be easily recruited by the rebel forces.

At the same time in Sierra Leone it was not only street children who joined the fighting groups. Sometimes families played an important role in leading children to war.

I would like to focus here on the cultural and historical factors that contributed to the use of child soldiers in Sierra Leone.

Susan Shepler wrote in her book "Childhood Deployed: Remaking Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone" that child soldiering in Sierra Leone can't be understood without an understanding of "Sierra Leonean model of childhood and youth... - child labour, secret society institutions, child fosterage, and... apprenticeship".¹²

¹¹ S.E. Young Jang, *The causes of Sierra Leone Civil War, 2012*, p.6, Consulted on 16.04.2016, available at <http://www.e-ir.info/2012/10/25/the-causes-of-the-sierra-leone-civil-war-underlying-grievances-and-the-role-of-the-revolutionary-united-front/>.

¹² Susan Shepler, *Childhood Deployed: Remaking Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone*, New York University Press, 2014, p. 16.

According to Susan Shepler, “labour defines good childhood in Sierra Leone: a child who doesn’t work is a bad child”¹³. This fact explains why using children by all fighting groups to do daily tasks in Sierra Leone was not surprising and widespread. The former child soldiers interviewed by Susan Shepler about their experiences “in the bush” considered this type of labour unremarkable and not worth talking about. The children would do the same kind of labour – cooking and laundry in the time of peace, as in the time of war and for the same reasons that people work generally.

Apprenticeship and fosterage were the process of training children into adulthood. It was a common practice in Sierra Leone. Poor families send their children to be raised by a wealthy person. In a time of war children considered that joining fighting groups would provide them with training and education. The children interviewed by Susan Shepler talked about their commander as a sort of father. Young fighters of the RUF called their leader “Pappy”.¹⁴

Initiation of children into secret societies, where boys and girls are prepared to defend their communities, is seen in Sierra Leone as an important process of the ending of childhood. Secret societies played an important role in the militarisation of the children in Sierra Leone, who considered a war as an initiation, after which they would be reborn as adults. Civil Defence Forces recruited a great number of child soldiers through “secret-society connections” and even “RUF abduction was like secret society initiation”.¹⁵

¹³ Susan Shepler, “The Social and Cultural Context of Child Soldiering in Sierra Leone”, Paper for the PRIO sponsored workshop on Techniques of Violence in Civil War Held in Oslo, University of California at Berkeley, August 20-21, 2004, p.12.

¹⁴ P.W.Singer, *Children at War*, University of California Press, 2006, p. 72.

¹⁵ Susan Shepler, *Childhood Deployed: Remaking Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone*, New York University Press, 2014, p. 42.

I.3. Transforming the children into soldiers

“I joined the army to avenge the deaths of my family and to survive, but I’ve come to learn that if I am going to take revenge, in that process I will kill another person whose family will want revenge; then revenge and revenge and revenge will never come to an end...”¹⁶

Ismael Beah, a former child soldier in Sierra Leone

Transforming a child into a fighter begins with recruitment, either forced through abduction, or voluntary involvement. Physical and technical training follows recruitment. “The ultimate aim of the process is to foster the child’s dependency on an armed organisation and inhibit escape”.¹⁷ In addition, the fighting groups in Sierra Leone used to destroy villages from which they abducted children, which made an escape even less likely as it left the children with no place to return to.

To make escapes easier to identify, leaders of the RUF would cut the word “RUF” into children’s chest, arms, and even foreheads.

P.W. Singer in his book “Children in War” noted that the ultimate method of brainwashing of children among any armed groups was to force abducted children to take part in the killings very soon after their abduction, and in the most inhuman ways possible.¹⁸

Ismael Beah, a former child soldier in Sierra Leone, wrote in his book “A Long Way Gone” that killing became “as easy as drinking water”¹⁹. He further noted: “We watched movies at night. War movies, Rambo... We all wanted to be like Rambo; we couldn’t wait to implement his techniques”.²⁰

To reinforce children’s violence and make them unaffected by pain, child soldiers were forced to take drugs or alcohol. RUF child soldiers would be killed if they refused to

¹⁶ Ismael Beah, *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007, p. 199.

¹⁷ P.W.Singer, *Children at War*, University of California Press, 2006, p. 57.

¹⁸ P.W.Singer, *Children at War*, University of California Press, 2006, p. 74.

¹⁹ Ismael Beah, *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007, p. 122.

²⁰ Ismael Beah, *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007, p. 121.

take drugs. By the end of the war in Sierra Leone it was estimated that 80 per cent of the RUF fighters had used drugs.²¹

Many armed groups have also used sexual violence as a reward for young male soldiers. For example, one operation of RUF in Sierra Leone, called “Operation Fine Girl” was aimed to abduct pretty young girls.²² Moreover, the RUF fighters also used rape as a punishment for military failures.



A former child soldier in Sierra Leone during the civil war (1991-2002)²³

²¹ P.W.Singer, *Children at War*, University of California Press, 2006, p. 81.

²² P.W.Singer, *Children at War*, University of California Press, 2006, p. 104.

²³ Consulted on 26.11.2016, see at <https://storify.com/thaliap99/children-during-the-war>

I.4. The disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of child soldiers in Sierra Leone

*“The recovery of lost childhood is one of the most difficult challenges”²⁴
Raised by child soldiers reality.*

The peace process in Sierra Leone went through various stages. A peace agreement was signed in Lomé in 1999, which specified that child soldiers would be given particular attention in the demobilization process, and the UN Mission in Sierra Leone was established. British government intervened militarily in 2000 and brought an end to the fighting.

In fact, the demobilization of child soldiers has already started during the wartime. Whenever possible, UNICEF, child protection NGOs negotiated the release of children from armed groups and traced families with children at war.

When the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR)²⁵ process restarted in 2001, after an interruption by fighting, demobilized children under 15 were sent to care centres, monitored by UNICEF, after which they were reunited with their families. Older children received professional training. By the end of the demobilisation process in May 2002, 6,452 former fighters were placed in school and were provided sponsorship of school fees, textbooks, uniforms and money for living for a period of one year.²⁶

Unfortunately, only 8% of the former child soldiers in the DDR were girls.²⁷ Among the reasons of girls' exclusion from DDR were unclear rules regarding weapons, which stated that turning in a weapon was compulsory to receive assistance. Some demobilization centres required children to present a weapon to be admitted to the programme, which left out many

²⁴ P.W.Singer, *Children at War*, University of California Press, 2006, p. 207.

²⁵ DDR is a UN program which objective is «to contribute to security and stability in post-conflict environments so that recovery and development can begin». Consulted on 18.03.2016, See http://unddr.org/docs/Operational_Guide_REV_2010_WEB.pdf.

²⁶ *The disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of children associated with the fighting forces: Lessons learned in Sierra Leone 1998-2002*, UNICEF, p.18, consulted on 18.03.2016, available at http://www.unicef.org/wcaro/WCARO_SL_Pub_LesLearntChildSoldiers.pdf.

²⁷ *The disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of children associated with the fighting forces: Lessons learned in Sierra Leone 1998-2002*, UNICEF, p.13, consulted on 18.03.2016, available at http://www.unicef.org/wcaro/WCARO_SL_Pub_LesLearntChildSoldiers.pdf

girls who didn't carry weapons, but used to do domestic work or other support tasks in the armed groups.

UNICEF has also established a special agreement with local media to produce radio spots in order to educate local communities and help them to overcome the stereotypes that surround ex-child soldiers.

The example of Sierra Leone confirms that where armed conflicts take place children constitute the least protected part of the population. They become an easy target of armed groups, and no local governments are able to ensure their safety. In such circumstances the role of international organizations is severely important.



This picture depicts what a common village in Sierra Leone would look like if unaffected by the war²⁸

²⁸ Consulted on 12.09.2016, an image from <https://25maleeha.wordpress.com/2012/04/18/a-long-way-gone-step-2-photography/>

II. TURNING A CHILD SOLDIER BACK INTO A CHILD

II.1. The International framework to protect children from involvement in armed conflicts

Through the means of different international conventions the international community condemns the practice of child soldiering.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child, approved by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1989, is the most important treaty dedicated to the rights of the child, with 196 country signatories²⁹. Article 38 of the Convention urges governments to take all possible measures to ensure that children are not directly involved in armed conflicts.

The Office of the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General for Children in Armed Conflict was created in 1997, following the Graça Machel's study on the "Impact of armed conflict on children"³⁰, in which she described the brutal impact of war on children. The Machel's report marked a turning point in the international recognition of the role that child soldiers play in armed conflicts.

Since then, the role of The International Criminal Court and special war crime tribunals in taking to court persons who committed serious crimes against children has increased considerably. For example, The Special Court for Sierra Leone condemned four people on charges for the use of children during the civil war.³¹ Such judgements are important as they show that those involved in child recruitment would be brought to justice.

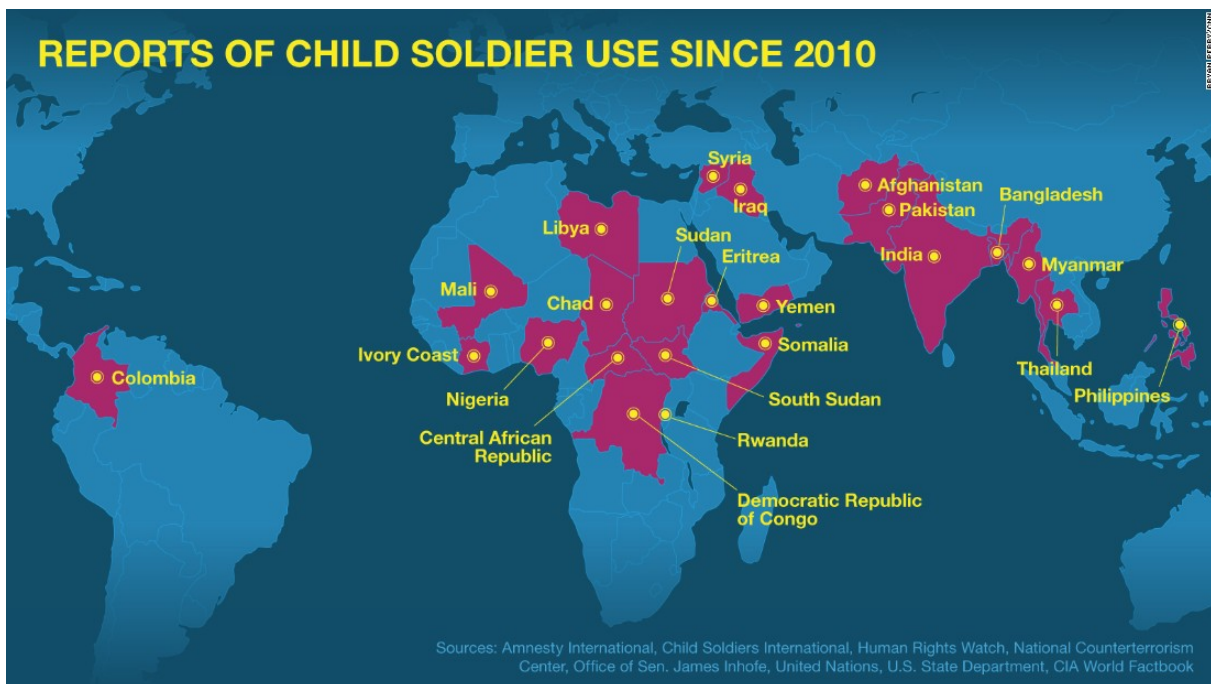
²⁹ Only the United States is not a party to it.

³⁰ Graça Machel, the widow of the Mozambican president Samora Machel (killed in a plane crash in South Africa in 1986) and former Minister of Education of Mozambique was appointed by the UN to lead a study focused on child soldiers. Her report was submitted to the United Nations General Assembly in 1996.

³¹ *Child Soldiers Global Report 2008*, Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008, p. 4, consulted on 07.08.2016, available at

However, the progress in reducing the number of children involved in wars remains slow. Thousands of children under the age of 18 are currently serving as child soldiers around the world. Since the rise of The Islamic State in Iraq and The Levant (ISIL), recruiting children as soldiers in Syria has become an everyday practice. Child suicide attacks involving children in Nigeria and neighbouring countries increased from 4 in 2014 to 44 in 2015³². Somali rebels, Yemen military groups and Colombia's guerrilla are recruiting children to fight.

*Countries where children are affected by armed conflicts*³³



The United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), established after the World War II, provides emergency assistance to children affected by armed conflicts and thus plays a vital role in ending child soldiering.

https://www.hrw.org/legacy/pub/2008/children/Child_Soldiers_Global_Report_Summary.pdf.

³² *Beyond Chibok*, UNICEF, 2016, p. 2, consulted on 21.09.2016, available at http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/files/Beyond_Chibok.pdf.

³³ Consulted on 05.05.2016, an image from <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/countries/countries-caac/>

II.2. An overview of the role of UNICEF in combatting child soldiering

UNICEF is the main international body dedicated to the rights of the child. One of its important areas of work is the prevention, demobilization and reintegration of child soldiers.

In order to find more information about the activities of UNICEF in this area, I approached Mr. Daniel Leibundgut, Head of Customer Services from Swiss Committee for UNICEF.

Mr. Leibundgut explained to me that UNICEF Switzerland is a so-called UNICEF national committee and that there are 36 committees in industrialized countries. The main tasks of the UNICEF committees are to raise funds, to inform about UNICEF's work and to accompany the implementation of the Convention of the Rights of the Child. UNICEF programs are not implemented by the committees but by the UNICEF country offices.

My questions were answered by Ms. Anabel Marques from Swiss Committee for UNICEF, responsible for communications and program reporting, based on the information received from the field offices, and not based on her own experiences, since none of the staff of UNICEF Switzerland has experience in field work.

Below are the most interesting answers of Ms. Marques to my questions on UNICEF activities.

Why does the practice of child soldiering still exist, despite the international interventions?

Ms Marques noted, "Children are recruited with force and with false promises. Children living in poverty or with few perspectives are vulnerable to becoming victims of such tactics. In situations of war and conflict, children are often separated from their families or become orphans. Without the protection of adult carers, they are vulnerable to violence and abuse".

What are examples of some post-conflict programs for child soldiers that UNICEF has recently established?

Ms. Marques pointed out "UNICEF works to release children from armed forces and armed groups as soon as possible, even during armed conflict, and help them return to their families.

In doing so, UNICEF supports services that care for the physical and mental health and well-being of such children, provide them with life skills and engage them in positive activities towards their future, including education, vocational skills and livelihoods training”. “More than 100,000 children have been released and reintegrated into their communities since 1998 in over 15 countries affected by armed conflict.”

What are the actions that UNICEF undertakes to prevent child soldiering?

Ms. Marques answered that UNICEF promotes the legal structure related to prohibitions against the use of children by armed groups, in particular, through ratification and implementation of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflicts (OPAC)³⁴, and affirmation of the Paris Commitments and Paris Principles³⁵ to protect children from unlawful recruitment or use by armed forces or armed groups.

As an example of recent success in this area, Somalia ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in September 2015.

What is the example of UNICEF best practices in bringing child soldiers back to normal life?

Ms. Marques mentioned the case of 1,757 children released in 2015 from the ranks of Cobra Faction, an armed group in South Sudan. UNICEF helped provide these children with medical and psychological support, reunited them with their families and enrolled them in learning programmes.

The reintegration programme follows a one-plus-one approach – help provided to each released and reunified child will also be provided to one vulnerable child in the same community to avoid discrimination.³⁶

³⁴ OPAC entered into force in 2002. It increased the minimum age of mandatory recruitment from fifteen to eighteen and prohibited compulsory recruitment of any child under eighteen by all armed forces and groups.

³⁵ The Paris commitments to protect children from unlawful recruitment by armed forces and Paris principles on children associated with armed forces were adopted at the international conference ‘Free children from war’ in Paris, February 2007.

³⁶ Consulted on 23.08.2016, available at http://www.unicef.org/southsudan/media_16448.html.

What are the challenges of UNICEF with regards to child soldiering in the coming years?

In reply to this question, Ms. Marques referred me to the campaign “Children, Not Soldiers”, most recently launched by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict and UNICEF. This campaign aims to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children in conflict by the end of 2016. The countries concerned by the campaign are Afghanistan, The Democratic Republic of the Congo, Myanmar, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and Yemen.

Since the launch of the campaign in March 2014 about 750 children have been released from Myanmar’s army. In Afghanistan, the recruitment of children has declined and Chad has completed all its obligations signed with the UN³⁷.



Boys with their rifles sit at a ceremony of child soldier disarmament, demobilization and reintegration In Pibor, Jonglei state, South Sudan.³⁸

³⁷ Consulted on 23.08.2016, available at <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/children-not-soldiers/>

³⁸ Consulted on 08.10.2016, an image from <http://www.voanews.com/a/hundreds-of-child-soldiers-freed-in-south-sudan/2690267.html>

The participants of the Library Talk were introduced to the educational comic book series jointly developed in 2014-2015 by the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) and Roméo Dallare Child Soldiers Initiative (RDCSI)⁴¹ with the support of the German government. The participants were also introduced to the activities of some non-governmental organizations, such as *Geneva Call* and *Save the Children*.

The comics aim to bring to the attention of children, families and local communities in conflict-affected areas the basic protection strategies for preventing the recruitment of children as soldiers. The graphic form, which was chosen to address such a complex problem as child soldiering, is an effective tool to deliver a message of protection and peace and create empathy. The readers not only passively receive information, but also interact with both text and images in order to construct a story.

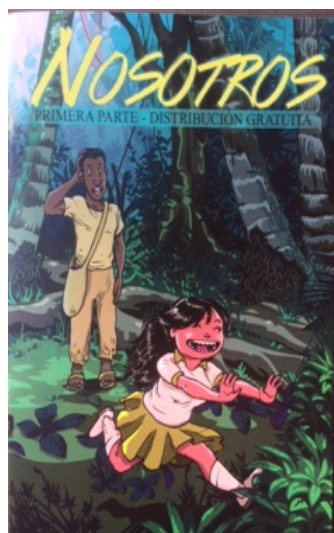
Ms. Svenja Vollmer, from the UNITAR Peacekeeping Training Programme, explained how “Je Choisis la Vie” and “Nosotros” were created out of many personal stories of former child soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo and in Colombia.

The first step was to get together with children and to draw “risk maps”, identifying risk factors around villages. For instance, one of the most risky times of the day and place for children to be recruited is when they go to seek water at rivers far away from home, at sunset or sunrise. One of the means of avoiding the risk of children being recruited is, for example, to send them later during the day, even if it’s hotter.

The second step was to design “body maps”, a technique used in trauma prevention. The children were asked to draw a body on a piece of paper, and to show through the drawings the physical effects and emotional consequences of war times on them. For example, many children drew broken hearts!

The final step was to create the characters, and a story of what they lived through. Thus Mambo and Yoali were conceived in the Democratic Republic of Congo (“Je Choisis La Vie”) and Marcela and Anderson – in Colombia (“Nosotros”).

⁴¹ General Roméo Dallare is a founder of the Initiative. After resigning from his position as Force Commander of the UN Mission in Rwanda, he decided to commit his life to ending the use of children as soldiers.



Comic Books given at the conference⁴³

“Je Choisis la Vie” tells the story of a boy, called Mambo, and his sister Yoali, who is abducted, together with her uncle, one night by an armed group. Mambo, seeking revenge, finds the camp of the armed group and “volunteers” as a soldier. The heroes witness and commit violent crimes, but manage to escape at the end.

“Nosotros” is a story of Marcela and Anderson who love each other. They are recruited by an armed group and have to fight. When Marcela gets pregnant, Anderson helps her to escape but has to stay with a fighting group himself.

Although the narratives of the two comics are different, the underlying goal is the same – to help the local communities prevent the recruitment and use of children as soldiers.

Ms. Caroline Nehmé, from *Geneva Call*, presented the approach of Geneva Call, a non-governmental organization, which specifically works with armed non-State actors (ANSAs)⁴⁴. She pointed out that the work is very challenging, as non-State actors are not parties to relevant international treaties. *Geneva Call*’s work is focused on child protection

⁴³ Comic Books distributed at the end of the Conference held on the 12.02.2016, consulted on 26.11.2016, available at <https://www.unitar.org/unitar-launches-child-soldier-comic-books>

⁴⁴ Organized armed groups that are involved in armed conflict, which operate outside State control, for example, armed groups, national liberation movements.

from the effects of armed conflicts, prohibition of sexual violence in armed conflicts and banning the use of anti-personnel mines.

Geneva Call has developed an innovative mechanism, the “Deeds of Commitment”, documents reflecting international rules, which armed groups can sign and thus commit themselves to respecting these rules and allow *Geneva Call* to monitor their respect for humanitarian norms.⁴⁵

Through the Deed of Commitment for the Protection of Children *Geneva Call* addresses the topic of children in armed conflicts within the armed groups. It was launched in 2010. To date 18 armed non-State actors have signed the Deed of Commitment and *Geneva Call* is engaged in dialogue currently with some 35 armed groups on the topic of child protection.

The Deed includes negative obligations for armed groups, such as the prohibition of the use of children in armed conflicts, prohibition of recruiting children and forcibly associating them with armed forces, and positive obligations, such as providing children with the aid and care they need, including education and health care as far as armed groups are able to provide such services.

Ms. Nehmé shared with the public a success story about an armed group in Northern Syria, the People’s Protection Units, called YPG, which operates mainly against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL or DAEH), and is known through the Battle of Kobani.⁴⁶

It's an important story because it shows the complexity of the issue of child recruitment. The main challenge for *Geneva Call* with this group is that the group operates in a highly militarized society with a very strong nationalistic, Kurdish resentment. The children want to join this armed group voluntarily. They feel they need to defend their families, communities; or seek revenge; or sometimes they want to escape harmful practices, such as

⁴⁵ Geneva Call has developed three such documents: Deed of Commitment for Adherence to a Total Ban on Anti-Personnel Mines and for Cooperation in Mine Action; Deed of Commitment for the Protection of Children from the Effects of Armed Conflict; Deed of Commitment for the Prohibition of Sexual Violence in Situations of Armed Conflict and towards the Elimination of Gender Discrimination.

Consulted on 04.08.2016, available at <http://www.genevacall.org/how-we-work/deed-of-commitment/>.

⁴⁶ The Syrian city Kobani has been a key target of ISIL, in part because of its geographical position on the Turkish border. After a several-month battle for Kobani, in January 2015, the Kurdish fighters, aided by anti-ISIL coalition airstrikes, have driven out the ISIL militants.

forced marriage or domestic violence. In addition, in Northern Syria there are no education possibilities for the children that also lead them to want to join the armed group. Moreover, YPG operates in three quite separate enclaves, which makes it hard for the YPG leaders to control the frontline.

In this challenging environment *Geneva Call* in 2013 managed to start a dialogue on child protection with YPG. After various meetings and training sessions with the leaders of the group, YPG finally signed the Deed of Commitment in July 2014. At the time of the signature the group demobilized 149 children, another 65 children under 16 have been demobilized since then. 49 children between 16 and 18 years old have been discharged from military services - they have been given the option to either go home or to go to the centres far from frontlines where they receive education and where they are not allowed to carry out any military function.

Moreover, based on pressure and dialogue from the international community, and from *Geneva Call*, 7 officers have been sanctioned for the child recruitment. Most recently YPG created a monitoring commission that centralizes all the complaints of child recruitment and investigates them. The commission will also regularly inspect the military camps and the recruitment centres at frontlines, and *Geneva Call* will be part of these inspections.

Ms. Nehmé noted that contrary to the image of child soldiers, this story shows another reality of child recruitment, voluntary recruitment, which should also be taken into account. She said that the underlying causes why these children join armed groups voluntarily couldn't be ignored.

Ms. Aurélie Lamazière, from a non-governmental organization *Save the Children*, introduced the audience with to activities in relation to the issue of the military use of schools. Since 2005, armed forces and non-state groups in 26 countries, including Nigeria, Pakistan, South Sudan and Afghanistan, have used educational institutions for military purposes. The presence of fighters at schools and universities is a big problem, because in addition to the risks of death, injury or psychological impact, students may be exposed to recruitment or sexual violence.

Participating in this live event on the issues of child soldiering in the UN Office in Geneva was a very enriching and engaging experience. It allowed me to gain a better understanding of the complexity of the issue of recruitment of children and their use in armed conflicts; to be introduced to some innovative approaches in combatting child soldiering, like comic books, and to personally express my support of “making child soldiers history” by leaving a red handprint.



An assault rifle left inside a classroom of a school occupied by soldiers in Chocò State, Colombia⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Consulted on 22.10.2016, an image from <https://www.hrw.org>

CONCLUSION

This project helped me to realize that child soldiering is a very complex issue.

Despite increased international efforts to protect the rights of children, there are still hundreds of thousands of children used as soldiers all around the world. I came to the conclusion that Sierra Leone's experience is not an exception, that children can be involved in war in any country, and that there are numerous reasons for the youth involvement in armed conflicts.

Is ending child soldiering mission impossible?

It seems obvious to me that numerous reasons which lead to the existence of child soldiers, such as poverty, lack of access to education and jobs, high orphan rates, proliferation of light weapons, will not go away in the near future. This makes the task challenging, but not impossible, as success stories of UNICEF, child-protection NGOs, personal stories of former child soldiers, show that there is a hope that the "Children, Not Soldiers" campaign can succeed.

I'm convinced that bringing an end to the practice of using child soldiers should start with telling people about the brutal impact of wars on children and calling for action. Special events, like "walks against children at war", charity ski races, free concerts or art exhibitions could be organized to collect donations for UNICEF and bring attention to the issue.

A "Red Hand Day" could be organized each year at as many schools and universities as it is possible to collect more red hands, and thus encourage governments and international organizations to undertake stronger actions against children's involvement in wars.

Finally, it seems to me indispensable to organize at school clubs on global issues, so young people could be involved in different humanitarian activities throughout the year, have an opportunity to learn more and educate others. UNICEF high school clubs, which exist already in different American schools, could be a good example of such a club aiming to promote children's issues.

Before starting this research, I had a very basic knowledge of international human rights issues, and this project allowed me to enrich my understanding of different international treaties that condemn the practice of child soldiering, as well as to learn about the activities of the international community to end children's involvement in armed conflicts. I learned about the work of the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), one of the main international children's protection bodies, and about the complementary activities of some non-governmental organizations such as *Geneva Call* and *Save the Children*.

Assisting the UN Geneva Conference on 12th of February 2016 « Sketching the Way to Peace: Preventing the Use of Children as Soldiers with the Help of Comic Books », introduced me to an innovative approach to address child soldiering through reader-friendly comic books, and allowed me to express my support of the fight against children's involvement in wars by leaving my symbolic red handprint.

Finally, this diploma work allowed me to develop personally. It allowed me to get a better knowledge of how to do research, improve my writing skills and most importantly about the topic chosen that has an important personal meaning for me. I acquired valuable learning experience and gained confidence in myself.

Most importantly, I realized how lucky we, the western model, are to have the chance to live in a country where it is economically and politically is stable, where we have good educational systems and where children are allowed to express themselves. This does not necessarily reflect the reality in other parts of the world. This topic allows me to be grateful; to be more modest and aware of what really happens in the world we live today. Most of us do not realize how we are to live in a stable country; we do not realize that same age groups children suffer atrocities that we think cannot be possible, in most shocking and inhuman ways. Young people need to open their eyes and help those who are in needed, because, when we have a closer view of some global issues, we think twice about the chance and good fortune we have as well as actions we could do if we had deeper knowledge.

I totally understood the value of peace and the meaning of the recent campaign launched by the United Nations to end and prevent the use of children in wars in the nearest future.

**“WE ARE CHILDREN,
NOT SOLDIERS!”**



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A drawing representing the UN Library Talk “ Sketching the Way to Peace: Preventing the use of children as soldiers with the help of comic books”.

⁴⁸Consulted on 08.11.2016, an image from [http://www.unog.ch/unog/website/calendar.nsf/\(httpEvents\)/8E355439BD4D687EC1257F5E00354AC1?OpenDocument&cntxt=64EC5&cookielang=fr](http://www.unog.ch/unog/website/calendar.nsf/(httpEvents)/8E355439BD4D687EC1257F5E00354AC1?OpenDocument&cntxt=64EC5&cookielang=fr)

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ANNEXE

Interview:

I approached Mr. Daniel Leibundgut, Head of Customer Services from Swiss Committee for UNICEF.

My questions were answered by Ms. Anabel Marques from Swiss Committee for UNICEF, responsible for communications and program reporting, based on the information received from the field offices, and not based on her own experiences.

1 Questions Child Soldiers by Arthur Merminod

For general information: <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org>

1. Why does the practice of child soldiering still exist, despite the international interventions?

Definition of a child soldier: A child associated with an armed force or armed group refers to any person below 18 years of age who is, or who has been, recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls, used as fighters, cooks, porters, spies or for sexual purposes. (Source: Paris Principles on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict 2007)

Prohibition under International Law: Human rights law declares 18 as the minimum legal age for recruitment and use of children in hostilities. Recruiting and using children under the age of 15 as soldiers is prohibited under international humanitarian law – treaty and custom – and is defined as a war crime by the International Criminal Court. Parties to conflict that recruit and use children are listed by the Secretary-General in the annexes of his annual report on children and armed conflict.

Children are recruited with force or lured into an armed group with false promises. Children living in poverty or with few perspectives are vulnerable to becoming victims of such tactics. In situations of war and conflict, children are often separated from their families or become orphans. Without the protection of adult caretakers, they are vulnerable to violence and abuse.

2. What are examples of some post-conflict programs for child soldiers that UNICEF has recently established and where? Are there any special programs for girl soldiers and children born into the armed groups?

UNICEF works to release children from armed forces and armed groups as soon as possible even during armed conflict, and help them return to their families. In doing so, UNICEF supports services that care for the physical and mental health and well-being of such children, provide them with life skills and engage them in positive activities towards their future, including education, vocational skills and livelihoods training. A community-oriented approach is adopted that includes support to other vulnerable children who have also been severely affected by the conflict so as to promote reconciliation and avoid discrimination. These actions require a long-term perspective and long-term commitment to these children and to the conflict affected communities into which they return.

More than 100,000 children have been released and reintegrated into their communities since 1998 in over 15 countries affected by armed conflict. In 2010 alone, UNICEF supported the reintegration of some 11,400 children formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups along with 28,000 other vulnerable children affected by conflict.

3. Is there a follow-up of former child soldiers after demobilization? (For example, in Sierra Leone)

You may find the story of UNICEF advocate Ishmael Beah interesting in this context. You can find an article here: <http://www.childrenofsouthsudan.info/unicef-advocate-ishmael-beah-witnesses-impact-of-conflict-on-children-in-south-sudan/>

4. What are the actions that UNICEF undertakes to prevent child soldiering?

UNICEF promotes the legal and normative framework that underpins prohibitions against the recruitment and use of children by armed forces and armed groups, notably through ratification and implementation of the Optional protocol to the Convention on the rights of the child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, and endorsement of the Paris principles and guidelines on children associated with armed forces or armed groups and the Paris commitments to protect children from unlawful recruitment or use by armed forces or armed groups.

“Investing in ways to keep children away from the frontlines, including through education and economic support, is absolutely critical to their future and the future of their societies.” UNICEF Deputy Executive Director Yoka Brandt.

5. What is the example of UNICEF best practices in bringing child soldiers back to normal life? (Particularly, in Africa)

http://www.unicef.org/southsudan/media_16448.html

This story shows vaguely how demobilization can work and what kind of sustainability UNICEF aims for.

6. Can you name some failures/omissions or areas of improvement in UNICEF field work in Africa? (Lessons learned in Sierra Leone or in other conflicts.)

The attached report «The disarmament demobilization and reintegration of children associated with the fighting forces. Lessons learned in Sierra Leone 1998-2002» may contain some interesting information.

7. What are the challenges of UNICEF in regards of child soldiering in the coming years?

<https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/children-not-soldiers-one-year-anniversary/>

This story explains some of the challenges and work ahead of all actors involved in demobilizing children recruited into armed forces.