

The return and reintegration of 'child soldiers' in Sudan: the challenges ahead

by Chris Robertson and Una McCauley

An evaluation of recent UNICEF support to child disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) in southern Sudan analyses the impact of different ways of addressing demobilisation, care, return and reintegration of 'children formerly associated with the fighting forces' (CAFF).

International child protection agencies used to plan the return and reintegration of CAFF separately from other war-affected and vulnerable children and youth. Increasingly, such planning tends to be merged within a broader framework for a range of vulnerable children and youth.

In 2001-2003 some 20,000 children were removed in two phases from the armed forces of the main southern Sudanese rebel groups, the Sudan People Liberation Army (SPLA) and the Sudan People's Democratic Front (SPDF)¹. During the UNICEF-managed first phase, 3,551 children were demobilised from northern Bahr-el-Ghazal and evacuated to Rumbek where they remained in eight transit centres for six months before being returned to their homes. Responsibility for the second phase was transferred to the SPLA and SPDF. Approximately 16,500 children were locally demobilised and reunited with their families without the use of interim care or provision of individual reintegration packages. The relative success of the second phase demonstrated that a decentralised approach to demobilisation, undertaken simultaneously in many locations and using local staff who had received only essential training, could be made to work – and without recourse to interim care.

A number of factors contributed to the relatively straightforward process of getting children home during both phases. There was a general perception that the children had

been involved in a popular struggle. Many children serving in the armed forces had been based close to home and cohesive southern Sudanese kinship structures facilitated their reunification and initial reintegration.

Neither phase employed rigorous identification, documentation, tracing and reunification procedures traditionally followed in child soldier family tracing and reunification (FTR) programmes. Though largely successful, the 'high volume' approach to family reunification and return made it difficult to address individual needs or to integrate children's views into the decision-making process. This was especially the case where children may have had reservations about reunification with family members other than their parents.² However, this approach was probably the only realistic option given the numbers, timescales, logistical challenges, limited resources and absence of competent child protection agencies across much of the country.

Reintegration approaches

Discussion about reintegration pivots around the perennial debate about the provision of individual assistance to CAFF versus broader community-based reintegration approaches. Arguments in support of individually targeted assistance tend to revolve around two main issues: whether children need a financial or material incentive to persuade them to leave the military and, secondly, whether they need some targeted support to

help them begin to reintegrate. During the first phase children were given kits on arrival at the transit centres and on their return home. Real or perceived promises to provide community infrastructure in northern Bahr el Ghazal which would offer alternatives to the army were not fully realised. In contrast, in the second phase no individual benefits or packages were provided. This policy met with considerable opposition from the local implementers, the civil administration, the families and the children themselves. But while many children expected support, there appear to have been many other, more powerful, reasons for leaving the military than a one-off reintegration package. Reunification with their families, access to education and freedom from the risks and rigid discipline of the military were probably the most significant.

The challenges of social reintegration go deep

The issue of need is more complex. Poverty was often cited as a major factor contributing to voluntary recruitment and it is reasonable to assume that conditions at home did not improve during their time in the military. A returning child would be yet another person for the family to feed and support, and therefore targeted assistance might help in facilitating the child's acceptance. While initially most of the people interviewed favoured a package of some kind, evidence from Sudan actually indicates that other children may be in greater need. Recent evidence from Tam in Upper Nile shows that children being demobilised were generally well fed, shod and clothed while children in the general population exhibited obvious signs of malnutrition, were barefoot and few had clothes.

In southern Sudan the number of children who have deserted from the army is high - further evidence that incentives are unlikely to be necessary to entice children away. It also indicates that individual packages will miss a significant and equally needy group. Providing packages exclusively to children who have been demobilised is seen by some as a reward for involvement with the military, can reinforce the separateness of the ex-child soldiers and provoke resentment and discrimination.

Individual reintegration packages can also generate expectations of continuing support and reinforce dependency. Some children demobilised in the first phase later complained that their clothes had worn out and wanted to know why UNICEF had not replaced them.

When children and adults were asked to make choices about how limited amounts of money should be used, they almost always chose improved educational facilities and other initiatives targeting the whole community. Priority was given to getting all CAFF enrolled in school and initial enrolment during both phases was high. The inter-agency follow-up survey reported that 96% of children who enrolled were still in school by mid 2002 (6-12 months after demobilisation). Anecdotal evidence, however, suggests that actual drop-out rates were much higher.

This was due to:

- Fees: while initial exemptions were negotiated for some demobilised children these have not always been consistently sustained or implemented.
- Age differentials: many older children who spent a significant amount of time in the army missed out on their early years of education and were teased by much younger classmates.
- Curriculum content: a curriculum aimed at younger children may be irrelevant for older children, tempting them to leave to seek other opportunities.
- Vocational training: though in great demand, the range of skills taught in traditional vocational training schemes is often inappropriate in rural environments.

The challenges of social reintegration go deep. Some demobilised children described feeling useless, excluded, discriminated against and unfairly blamed for many community problems. Adults commonly

described behavioural problems and said that the children had become used to having their own way and quickly became frustrated and aggressive when thwarted. Many adults also complained that the children were idle and that their frustrations led them to rejoin the military or leave for urban areas under government control.

Many adults found it difficult to respond to these challenges. The most common response during interviews was that special centres or boarding schools should be created where the children could be 're-orientated' to unlearn bad habits. Some local education officials expressed the need to train and support teachers to cope with these children's challenging behaviour but had no specific ideas about how this might be done.

Reintegration challenges ahead

Future challenges for child DDR in Sudan are enormous. Lessons have been documented but must be learned. With a comprehensive peace agreement about to be signed it is likely that children from all forces will be given priority in national DDR planning and implementation. Both the main parties and all their allied forces are required to demobilise all children in their forces within six months of the comprehensive peace agreement. All other separated children being cared for by or working for members of armed forces and allied militia will be required to be registered for family tracing and reunification within that same period. The remaining number of combatant children is estimated at around 17,000. The relative ease with which children have previously reintegrated will be difficult to maintain.



Remaining young combatants are more likely to have experienced urban life, received financial payments while fighting or been exposed to or possibly converted to Islam. Many thousands will have fought on the 'wrong' side.

At one level local leaders say they do not expect problems absorbing these new children. *"They are all our children...it isn't their fault they have been fighting for the enemy... they were abducted...they had to eat..."* On further reflection, though, this view tends to change. Many are concerned about the impact of Islam and the need to 're-convert' children. Others blame the demobilised children for rising crime and localised conflict and suggest that priority needs to be given to increasing the capacity of the police and the prison service.

Child DDR in Sudan will place enormous pressure on existing infrastructure, particularly on the education sector. In addition to the need for innovative short-term programmes to address educational and other specific needs, there will be an urgent need to:

- address the broader social reintegration needs of both the returnees and the host communities
- develop a holistic, integrated strategy focusing on the needs of all vulnerable children
- involve the community - the children and their families - in identifying needs and developing appropriate responses
- support the development of local child protection structures, owned and operated by the community.

Chris Robertson is an independent consultant. Email: chrisrob_worldwide@yahoo.co.uk

Una McCauley is Protection Officer, UNICEF OLS, Southern Sector. Email: umccauley@unicef.org

¹ Now merged as the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM).

² See the recent multi-agency 'Separated Children's Study' re concerns about foster care within the extended family context.

Kids stripping off their fatigues and putting on civilian clothes at a demobilisation event.

