

The Role of Education in Child Soldier Reintegration

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Despite the practice of recruiting or enlisting persons below the age of eighteen constituting a war crime under the Statute of the International Criminal Court, the practice has become [more common in contemporary armed conflicts](#). An important aspect of reintegrating former child soldiers is education, which faces numerous challenges, including financial constraints, psychological adjustment difficulties, and community acceptance issues. Yet, purposeful schooling is necessary to impart skills many need after leaving school at a young age or never having obtained a formal education. Without it, they may lack the capacity to find work and support themselves and are thus more prone to become [entangled in violence again](#). [Efforts by governments and international civil society actors](#) have often failed to provide [sustained financial assistance](#), have been poorly aligned with the needs of former child soldiers, and have excluded girls from programming and advocacy. This research brief examines how policymakers and practitioners can address both financial and social barriers to provide more effective education for children formerly involved in conflicts.

Children are both forcibly conscripted into and [“voluntarily” entering armed groups](#). However, a minor’s “voluntary” decision to join an armed group typically still entails some form of structural coercion such as the promise of escaping poverty or the need to protect themselves, their families, and their communities. These children rarely possess a comprehensive understanding of what [joining armed conflict entails](#), and their form of involvement varies depending on the needs of an individual armed group. Some child soldiers may engage in direct conflict while others are used in [“support roles,”](#) including cooking, setting bombs/mines, guards, and messengers. Frequently, these children are subjected to [various forms of abuse](#) by their superiors and other armed actors involved in the conflict.

While in many situations, financial barriers to education as the more straightforward obstacle are addressed in [some capacity](#), the myriad complex [psycho-emotional and socio-cultural challenges](#) of educating former child soldiers are not. Due to their exposure to violence (both as victims and perpetrators), post-traumatic stress (disorder), moral injury, and other conflict-related [mental health diagnoses affect](#) many former child soldiers. A popular method to mitigate the effects of these mental health problems within [armed groups is drugs](#), increasing the occurrence of drug addiction amongst former child soldiers. Additionally, former child soldiers often face rejection from their receiving communities, including their own families, due to the stigma associated with their [involvement in organized violence](#). This stigma manifests [in myriad ways](#), including being perceived as continued security threats, or psychologically unstable, which hinders their prospects for education and reintegration into society.

Girls, sometimes [representing up to 30-40% of recruits](#), typically face particularly strong forms of [rejection and isolation](#), for instance, being seen as “impure” due to the [pervasive sexual violence and abuse](#) within many armed groups recruiting children. Additionally, they may be especially socially sanctioned for having [transgressed traditional gender norms](#) through their participation in armed conflict. Despite the special intricacy of their reintegration process, girls are often not [the target of education programs](#) for former child soldiers or even [recognized as such](#) and eligible for reintegration assistance.

There are various actionable steps to address these social barriers to educating former child soldiers. For instance, the [designation of specialized education programs](#) to serve these students is beneficial. This creates spaces which ease the reintegration of former child soldiers into civilian life, allowing them to “catch up” in their education in a less judgemental space, increasing the chance that they do not drop out due to social stigma. It also provides the opportunity for

specially-trained teachers and staff to teach students in [trauma-informed ways](#) and to support them emotionally and behaviourally to [ease their reincorporation](#) into the social fabric of their communities, including through the careful engagement with other conflict-affected groups of children. Furthermore, if available, charters and grants to schools may include resources to train and incorporate psychologists to further aid students, especially those in rural communities where mental health support is limited in availability. In cases where ex-child soldiers suffer from [drug addiction](#), allocating resources to on-site substance abuse counsellors can be crucial.

[Community pushback](#) against former child soldier education and reintegration should equally be addressed. Advocacy for the general importance of this support is a crucial step to increase acceptance for it among community members. Talking points for this advocacy may also include the benefits of literacy and numeracy for [strengthening local economies](#), while also highlighting how education enhances security by keeping young people sustainably away from involvement in violence. It is crucial to recognize the specific challenges faced by female former child soldiers, emphasize the benefits of their participation in the workforce, address the harm caused by stigma, and incorporate these points into efforts to [increase their enrolment](#). Depending on cultural contexts, it may be more effective to frame these programs as assisting conflict-affected children or victims of circumstance, [rather than focusing on their child soldier status](#).

Resources allocated to the schooling of former child soldiers should address a variety of common material barriers to education. In many cases, former child soldiers join armed groups for [financial reasons](#). Recognizing this, NGOs, international organisations, or governments most commonly provide aid in the form of [fee waivers](#). However, this aid frequently dries up after a few months to a couple of years, forcing many former child soldiers to [prematurely drop out of school](#). Instead, consistent funding should be provided to facilitate a stable and successful education of ex-child soldiers. Identifying the scope and duration of this education during the programme design phase is crucial. This entails [understanding child soldier profiles](#), such as their individual experiences and needs, along with the [implementation context’s larger school trajectories](#).

Addressing these situational necessities involves considering their broader social context. For example, [providing financial and livelihood assistance](#) can help in situations where parents or guardians need youth to work domestically rather than attend school, and where fee waivers and other forms of aid are insufficient. Another solution is to schedule education programs in a way that allows them to be [balanced with domestic economic necessities](#). This is especially important, considering the considerably higher share of former child soldiers being heads of households compared to civilian children. Financial assistance must also be sensitive to [additional material necessities](#) such as uniforms, material supplies, and food.

Beyond systemic social and financial barriers, the education of former child soldiers can benefit from the integration of [peace education](#) curricula to help prevent renewed engagement in violence and encourage the peaceful transformation of conflicts. This pedagogy’s modules entail the integration of specific peace-related lessons on twelve topics including conflict resolution and historical memory. Rooted in the analysis of real-life experiences, students explore [the application](#) of social-emotional skills, such as empathy and conflict resolution, beyond the classroom. These classes further facilitate the healing and personal growth of former child soldiers, and [empower children](#) whose involvement in conflicts was forced or coerced by circumstances beyond their control (such as poverty). In preliminary applications, such as [in Colombia](#), the practice is widely supported by community members and former child combatants.

Considering the complex and multi-layered experiences of child soldiers, it is necessary to construct context-sensitive programming responses. The table below outlines various policy areas concerning former child soldiers, along with action steps, outcomes/success indicators, and case examples to meaningfully address these issues.

Policy Area	Action Steps	Expected Outcomes/Success Indicators
Transition into Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement a screening process in reception centers, where trained social workers identify the specific(educational) needs of child soldiers and their receiving family situation: facilitate immediate family reunification and counselling or arrange interim care and foster/group homes as appropriate. Integrate interim care centers (ICCs) into transition programs, which are designed to trace and reunite families and provide child soldiers with a guided short-term transition pathway into civilian life. Create bridge courses and Accelerated Learning Programs (APLs) that help former child soldiers catch up with literacy, numeracy and other basic competencies before integrating into formal education. Train educators on inclusive and trauma-informed educational and socio-pedagogical strategies. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Higher family (re)unification figures and thus stronger protective environments and social reintegration support. Increased enrollment figures in formal education. Reduction in dropout rates and better educational attainment. Mitigation of challenges and stress for teaching staff.
Case Example	<p>DRC: In the Democratic Republic of Congo, former child soldiers are placed in transitional care structures, such as Transit and Orientation Centers (CTOs by their French acronym) or with host families, for up to three months before reuniting with their families. During their stay, children receive educational classes or vocational training based on their age and preferences, alongside basic literacy, numeracy, life skills courses, recreational activities and psychosocial support. Liberia: Save the Children UK provided catch-up education in transit centers for former child soldiers. This program utilized a condensed version of the government curriculum, allowing ex-child soldiers and other war-affected children who had missed several years of education to transition smoothly back into formal schooling.</p>	
Specialized & Community-Oriented Education Programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Design specialized curricula tailored to the unique needs of former child soldiers, incorporating key areas such as conflict resolution, communication, and decision-making, alongside Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs. Develop support plans for vulnerable subgroups like children with disabilities, girls returning with their own children, those with substance dependencies, and children with psychological trauma from abuse or exploitation. Create spaces for the reconnection of former child soldiers with family loyalties, religious beliefs, and common moral values in collaboration with persons of traditional civil or religious authority from the community. Combine educational programs for former child soldiers with community development initiatives to create mutual growth opportunities, fostering a feeling of collective advancement. Incorporate specialized modules into school curricula that focus on peace education, children’s rights, landmine awareness, HIV prevention, and civic and health education. Develop vocational education programs with flexible schedules to supplement or replace formal education, especially for older children preparing for the labor market. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Higher attendance and participation rates in educational programs. More personally tailored and equitable education provision across individual characteristics and backgrounds. Accelerated academic process, improved learning outcomes and higher knowledge retention. Observable improvements in behavior, enhanced social cohesion and more peaceful dynamics within peer groups. Improvements in community acceptance through the emphasis on shared values and opportunities (possible mediation through individuals with traditional authority); reduction of stigma. Acquisition and application of essential skills for successfully navigating and adapting to life in post-conflict environments. More successful and sustained labor market integration.
Case Example	<p>Burundi: The USAID-sponsored Community-Focused Reintegration (CFR) program emphasized community involvement by providing leadership training for respected local figures, offering combined vocational and literacy education for both ex-combatants and other community members, and funding small infrastructure projects, all aimed at facilitating the reintegration of former child soldiers while simultaneously rebuilding the community’s social fabric.</p>	
Mental Health & Psychosocial Support (MHPSS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thoroughly screen for mental health issues, utilizing culturally and contextually sensitive assessments to identify children’s unmet MHPSS needs. Implement a bottom-up approach to psychosocial support that addresses the specific mental health requirements of former child soldiers, including aspects relating to their individual physiological needs, safety, sense of belonging, self-esteem, and potential barriers to self-actualization. Offer programs that include engaging care strategies, such as constructing life narratives, peer relation sessions, and therapeutic workshops, to help children express their emotions. Adopt therapeutic best practices from other MHPSS programs for children in crisis situations. Integrate recreational, creative and cultural activities into the school curriculum. Ensure support continues beyond initial demobilization and/or stay in ICCs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Observable reduction in symptoms of trauma, anxiety, depression, and PTSD among former child soldiers. Improved emotional regulation and resilience; greater ability to manage stress and challenging situations. Better compatibility with and adaptation to community social environment. Reduced recidivism and inclinations to continued violence among former child soldiers.
Case Example	<p>Uganda: A study conducted in Northern Uganda explored the use of narrative exposure therapy (NET) for former child soldiers, focusing on treating PTSD through storytelling. In this community-based approach, children worked with local lay therapists to create detailed autobiographies, helping them process their traumatic experiences. The results were promising, with 80% of the participants showing significant improvements in PTSD symptoms. This therapy not only reduced trauma-related symptoms but also helped reintegrate the children into their communities by using culturally relevant and accessible therapeutic methods.</p>	
Funding & Resource Allocation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prioritize funding allocation to programs that demonstrate long-term sustainability and high impact, ensuring that resources are directed toward interventions with proven effectiveness. Secure consistent and continuous funding to prevent delays in reintegration efforts and maintain the trust of beneficiaries, ensuring uninterrupted program implementation. Conduct local political economy and labor market analyses to align vocational training opportunities with local economic needs, ensuring that programs provide sustainable livelihoods for former child soldiers. Improve coordination among organizations engaged in education programing to avoid duplication of efforts and optimize the use of limited resources. Ensure robust follow-up monitoring and long-term tracking of former child soldiers to assess the impact and sustainability of reintegration efforts. Allocate specific funding for these monitoring and evaluation activities. Pursue funding sources from multiple donors to support various aspects of child soldier education programs, ensuring that donor expectations align with the program’s mission and operational capacity. Gather comprehensive information on donor interests and funding parameters to effectively coordinate and secure holistic program funding. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased sustainability of education and reintegration projects, offering higher returns on investment and better scalability. Continuous operation of reintegration programs and the completion of schooling trajectories. Funding commitments from a diverse portfolio of donors with the coordinated and successful integration of various program components (e.g., ICCs, vocational training, psychosocial support). Evidence-based adjustments to program management based on long-term outcomes and feedback. Positive alignment of trained skills with local job market demands, leading to better livelihood potential for children undergoing vocational training.
Case Example	<p>Angola: United Nations Quick Impact Project (QIP) funds and provincial referral services supported apprenticeships for older demobilized child soldiers. For example, tailors were offered favorable terms on sewing machines in exchange for mentoring apprentices, and wages were supported in local restaurants. These programs were more effective than traditional vocational training because they allowed child soldiers to quickly acquire skills and earn income, addressing both immediate economic needs and long-term reintegration. The flexibility and devolved approach of the QIP funding also enabled rural economic activity, helping to distribute resources to isolated areas.</p>	