

Universalism versus cultural relativism: improving DDR programming

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As the notion of child soldiering is in direct contradiction to how the West currently understands childhood, the international community has declared child soldiering a grave abuse of children's rights.¹ The issue of child soldiers and their reintegration is part of an on-going debate between the universalism of children's rights and a culturally sensitive understanding of them.² The universalist perspective believes that "childhood constitutes a coherent group or a state defined by identical needs and desires, regardless of class, ethnic, or racial differences".³ Since children across the world are deemed to have the same needs, universalists believe that the same support and protection mechanisms should be applied. Therefore, the universalists favour strictly prohibiting and punishing the use of child soldiers.

Cultural relativists, however, argue that childhood is a social construction: "its meaning is negotiated between different individuals and groups, often with conflicting interests. Thus, childhood is relative".⁴ Cultural relativists' criticism of the universalist approach is that it fails to take into account social, cultural and political diversity in what childhood means in different cultures. What is required is a better understanding of the local conditions and dynamics that define and shape the experiences of child soldiers as well as their perception of these experiences.

These contrasting perspectives influence the development and implementation of the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programmes that are intended to meet the needs of child soldiers. The following presents an overview of what the universalists and cultural relativists argue are the main problems and difficulties of current DDR programmes for child soldiers.

Definition of a child soldier

Post-modern, Western conceptions of childhood regard children as vulnerable and innocent, so from this perspective children should not engage in armed conflict. What distinguishes a child from an adult pertains to responsibility and accountability for one's actions, with children not being held morally responsible for their thoughts and actions and "usually considered as holders of rights, rather than as bearers of responsibilities".⁵ This conception of childhood as a time of innocence, inexperience and vulnerability is transposed to the issue of child soldiers through the development and implementation of international tools that define and regulate the use of child soldiers.

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There are two protocols additional to the Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, which specifically address the issue of child soldiers⁶:

- Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949 and Relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I)
- Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and Relating to the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts (Protocol II)

Protocol I, which applies to international armed conflicts, prohibits the recruitment of children younger than 15. However, there is no explicit prohibition of states parties accepting the voluntary enrolment of children under the age of 15. With regard to non-international armed conflict, Article 4 of Protocol II is a comprehensive ban on the use of children under 15, who “shall neither be recruited in the armed forces or groups nor allowed to take part in hostilities”. This contrasts to Article 77 of Protocol I, which stipulates that states parties “shall take all feasible measures in order that children who have not attained the age of fifteen years do not take a direct part in hostilities”. In other words, children under the age of 15 can voluntarily participate in international conflicts and national liberation wars. However, Article 8 of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court defines “conscripting or enlisting children under the age of fifteen years into armed forces or groups or using them to participate actively in hostilities” as a war crime.

The phrasing of Article 77 of Protocol I is also to be found in Article 38 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), with “persons” instead of “children”. Furthermore, the CRC defines what a child is—something which Protocols I and II deliberately avoid. Article 1 of the CRC states that “a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years”. This definition of a child can also be found in the following legal frameworks, which also set the minimum age of participation in armed conflict at 18 and do not recognize any voluntary recruitment under this age:

- Cape Town Principles on the Prevention of Recruitment of Children into the Armed Forces and Demobilization and Social Reintegration of Child Soldiers in Africa
- African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child
- Convention concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour
- Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict

DDR programmes for child soldiers

The objective of DDR is to enable a peaceful transition from military to civilian life by disarming ex-combatants, demobilizing them and helping them reintegrate into their communities in order to pursue a civilian life, or to integrate them into a new national army or police force.

According to the United Nations *Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards* (IDDRS), the DDR process for child soldiers differs from the adult process because:

Unlike adults, children cannot legally be recruited; therefore, measures that aim to prevent their recruitment, or that attempt to reintegrate them into their communities, should not be viewed as a routine component of peacemaking, but as an attempt to prevent or redress a violation of children's human rights.⁷

A World Bank report concluded that in order to protect child soldiers and meet their special needs, they “must be separated from military authority and protected during demobilization”.⁸ The report also stressed “the wisdom of establishing special reception centers for child soldiers during demobilization” and that the stay should be as short as possible. Furthermore, reintegration of child soldiers “should emphasize three components: family reunification, psychosocial support and education, and economic opportunity”.

Universalist perspective

A variety of studies have concluded that the key to a successful DDR process is family and community acceptance and reconciliation and that successful practices are community sensitization, traditional cleansing rituals, and psychosocial support that is grounded in local social and cultural practices.⁹ Sensitization and awareness campaigns are also important in helping local communities better understand the conditions under which child soldiers have lived and are therefore a necessary first step towards reconciliation. Although more educational opportunities and vocational training programmes can yield success, these programmes must be based on local market analysis that determines whether the local post-conflict economy can absorb and sustain these new economic activities.

The majority of DDR services are dispensed through interim care centres (ICCs)—generally considered to be successful in their approach. However, ICCs have come into criticism because they can lead to dependence on the services offered if there is not enough funding to properly support longer-term reintegration efforts. Furthermore, by identifying children as ex-soldiers and by offering much needed services to only one fragment of the local population, ICCs can inadvertently create social tensions. Indeed, one of the main problems identified in the literature is the overwhelming amount of attention and support given to child soldiers to the detriment of other children who have also suffered throughout the conflict. Labelling child soldiers and supporting them in isolation can lead to stigmatization and envy—which are counterproductive to reintegration—and to an increase in the recruitment of child soldiers as more children seek access to the services offered by DDR programmes.

A critical issue is the lack of research on the DDR process for girls. In some contexts being identified as a girl soldier can lead to social stigmatization, exclusion and physical threats. Therefore, some girls purposely avoid a formalized DDR process that would identify them as former soldiers.¹⁰ As a result, many girls spontaneously demobilize and anonymously

reintegrate into their communities. Although the anonymity might protect them in some ways, it also makes it much more difficult to identify their needs and to provide them with support. Girls with children face even greater difficulties, which results in some deciding to stay in the fighting group, as they know that reintegration into their community would be extremely difficult and may threaten their survival.

Cultural relativist perspective

Cultural relativists challenge the three tenets of the post-modern Western conception of childhood and children's rights within the context of child soldiers:

- use of age to differentiate children from adults
- fundamental belief that children should not engage in armed conflict
- vulnerability and lack of agency¹¹ of children

The use of age to differentiate children from adults is often irrelevant to the social-cultural context in which child soldiers live. In many countries rituals, initiations, marriage and childbearing are more appropriate indicators of adulthood rather than age.¹² This has a direct impact on DDR programmes based solely on age, as some child soldiers may not identify themselves as children nor be regarded as children by the communities into which they are being reintegrated. This is especially true for child soldiers who are married or have had children themselves during the conflict and wish to have access to the adult DDR programmes. There have been reported incidences where some children "insisted that they were adults" and "some adolescents wanted to be demobilized as adults so they could receive direct cash assistance and claimed to be above the age of 17".¹³

As for the fundamental belief that children should not engage in armed conflict, cultural relativists provide a variety of examples of cultures and societies where engaging in armed conflict is either a rite of transition to adulthood or is actually promoted and supported by the local community. Others argue that in a context of a civil conflict, many children voluntarily join armed groups out of concern for their social well-being and security. Boys in Teso, Uganda, gave reasons why they had joined the Uganda People's Army (UPA):

The Karamojong raiding saw the number of cattle in Teso fall from about 1 million to just 10,000 by 1991. This was a loss with deep emotional resonance for it represented the loss of wealth, security, and a future. The loss of cattle proved one of the main rallying cries for the UPA military leadership as they sought recruits. It was a lament keenly felt by young boys and men who know that without cattle they could not hope for marriage, a properly established home, rightfully held children, and the full requirements of what it is to be a mature man in Teso social life. They joined the UPA in anger and rebellion against their loss.¹⁴

This example demonstrates that complex and interweaving social, cultural and economic factors compel children to take up arms. Many child soldiers also join in search of the power, authority and regular income a gun can provide in the chaos of a civil conflict. Under these circumstances some children may not wish to demobilize as their engagement with the armed group has brought them prestige, safety, authority and income. As a result, some do not wish to return to a subservient role in society. DDR programmes that are mandated to demobilize and reintegrate every child may be forcing some to do so against their will. In addition, by making it illegal for children to be part of the armed forces, child soldiers are not allowed to become part of the new army or police force. This often takes away what is very often their only marketable skill in a strained post-conflict economy. Many become mercenaries and fight in other regional conflicts, thereby contributing to the destabilization of other states and regions.

The final criticism made by cultural relativists is that the universalist perspective fails to recognize the agency of children and youths in a conflict and post-conflict setting, thereby ensuring that child soldiers cannot be held accountable for their crimes. Indeed, many communities want to hold child soldiers accountable and believe that rights must be counterbalanced with responsibilities. An example in Sierra Leone demonstrates how communities can attribute agency and responsibility to child soldiers whilst DDR programmes promote a different message.¹⁵ Child soldiers who had fought with the Civil Defence Forces were hailed as heroes and not innocent victims manipulated by adults into fighting for their country. As a result, they were accepted by and reintegrated into the communities and many did not participate in the DDR programme. However, the reintegration of the rebel fighters from the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) proved to be much more difficult. The communities did not wish to reintegrate them as they considered them to be the instigators of violence and civil unrest. As a result, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) who implemented DDR programmes took a more hands on approach in order to encourage communities to accept and reintegrate RUF soldiers. They engaged in community sensitization campaigns and often used economic incentives in the form of funding for community schools, while promoting the right to reintegration and the notion of victimhood over agency and responsibility. Furthermore, there is evidence of manipulation of the child soldier discourse by child soldiers themselves, which strongly reflects agency and responsibility.

Among their friends and fellow soldiers, they try to maintain the status that being part of the fighting gives them. They wear combat clothes and sunglasses and brag about firing rocket-propelled grenade launchers. With NGOs they adopt the persona of the traumatized innocent, usually requesting aid in furthering their education. With community members and in school they act like normal kids, never mentioning the past. Thus, their “reintegration” is achieved in social practice across a variety of contexts using a variety of strategically adopted identities.¹⁶

This demonstrates the extreme difficulty in drawing a line between manipulated behaviour and free will, as children navigate through their various social environments and adapt accordingly. Whether the acts of violence were the result of manipulation, agency—or more realistically, a mixture of both—the situation described above, which took place in Sierra Leone, demonstrates how the issue of victimhood promoted by the universalist perspective is one of great contention for local communities who have suffered tremendously and are, in some ways, forced to reintegrate child soldiers in order to have access to much needed funding.

Moving the debate forward

The debate over DDR programmes for child soldiers is currently set up as an impasse between those who advocate a universal rights-based programming and those who criticize the very foundations and assumptions that type of programming is based upon. Consequently, we are left with the following fundamental questions:

- Who is a child soldier?
- Who is in need of DDR support?
- What should DDR programmes for child soldiers entail?

In an effort to move the debate forward, there needs to be a revision of our understanding of the universal rights-based approach:

At the conceptual level, there is a need to move beyond sterile debate around universalism versus cultural relativism in order to engage more fully with the realities of children's lives, which are inevitably shaped by ideas, practices, and power relations that are both local and global. It is essential to recognize that the vision of childhood manifest in the CRC may have only limited relevance for children who lack the social, economic, and political wherewithal to actualize this vision. Instead, they are faced with a set of realities that humanitarians, working in narrow accordance with a "rights-based approach", are currently ill-equipped to comprehend, let alone address.¹⁷

Indeed, it is a serious problem if the rights-based approach set up to protect and defend against various abuses is an obstacle to the proper understanding of the nature and circumstances of these abuses, and therefore an obstacle to the development and implementation of a proper solution or protection mechanism. DDR programmes need to engage in a more cultural relativist approach to properly understand local conditions and factors that will determine what is considered to be a successful demobilization and reintegration according to the child and to the community. There is also a strong need to refocus on the actual causes of the fighting in order to better understand how to demobilize and reintegrate child soldiers. Although, as the cultural relativists have argued and demonstrated, children and youths may

want to engage in armed conflict, this may not be their priority. Indeed, the example of the young Ugandan fighters described illustrates this point. The youths wanted to fight for their cause and the community supported them. However, their priority was to regain access to their cattle in order to be able to make a living and be socially respected. In other words, from the perspective of the youths who voluntarily join armed groups, the problem is not whether they should engage in armed conflict prior to a certain age or whether local social and cultural factors justify their engagement, the problem for them lies in the very reasons that drive the conflict in the first place. We must remember that the number one reason for child soldiers is conflict. Although the cultural relativists have brought forward an important perspective on this issue, by focusing entirely on the local and cultural point of view, focus moves away from the actual causes of conflict, which represents the major concern for the youths involved. Consequently, a better understanding of these causes is necessary for the DDR of child soldiers and will go a long way in promoting and respecting their fundamental human rights.

In order for a more complete picture of a complex reality to emerge, experts from various fields must come together—which is presently not the case. Indeed, the success of DDR programmes for child soldiers will be determined by the understanding of, respect for and adaptability to local factors and conditions.

What is required today is a constructive dialogue on the issue of childhood and children's rights that does not fall into the twin traps of relativism and universalism, that does not ignore the heterogeneity of children's lives or obscure the commonality of ways in which economic and political forces in an increasingly unstable and polarized world have affected the lives and experiences of these children.¹⁸

Children need to be consulted during the development phase of the DDR programme, and not simply presented with a predetermined menu of services. Unfortunately, there is very little information on the opinions of child soldiers themselves. As their experiences can vary tremendously from one child to the next, DDR programmes need to be more sensitive to this complexity. In order to do so, however, much more research highlighting the perspective of child soldiers themselves is needed. Unfortunately, this may be extremely difficult to do in a post-conflict setting, which is in the midst of a complex and shifting redefinition of its social fabric, social roles and local power dynamics.

Conclusion

The universal rights-based approach to DDR fails to take into account important social, cultural and personal influences that lead children to participate in armed conflicts in the first place and which greatly influence if, how and when the children will seek to disarm and reintegrate into civilian life. However, the cultural relativists' narrow focus on the social and cultural factors that impact children's participation in armed conflict fails to recognize the important socio-

economic causes of conflict, which in return greatly shape the environment into which child soldiers are to be reintegrated.

As child soldiers are affected by global and local influences, both as soldiers and as individuals making the transition to a new civilian life, there is an important need to move away from the current impasse of the two dichotomized perspectives. In order to do so, both sides need to shift their focus. This can be done by having experts from different disciplines come together and paint a more realistic picture of the conflict situation and provide a better understanding of the complex causes of conflict as well as the dynamics of reconstruction of post-conflict societies. Finally, more research on the perspective of the child soldiers themselves is needed in order to better understand how former child soldiers navigate through post-conflict society and how they would like to be reintegrated.

Notes

1. This article is based on a paper by the author entitled "Child Soldiers and Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Programs: The Universalism of Children's Rights vs. Cultural Relativism Debate", which appeared online in *The Journal of Humanitarian Assistance* on 23 August 2010.
2. For further information see J. Hart, "The Politics of 'Child Soldiers'", *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2006, pp. 217–26.
3. J. Fernando, "Children's Rights: Beyond the Impasse", *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 575, no. 1, 2001, pp. 8–24.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19.
5. M. Vaha, "Child Soldiers and Killing in Self-Defence: Challenging the 'Moral View' on Killing in War", *Journal of Military Ethics*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2011, pp. 36–51.
6. For more information on the legal frameworks which deal with children and conflict, see J. Doek, "The International Legal Framework for the Protection of Children in Armed Conflict", in this issue of *Disarmament Forum*.
7. United Nations, "5.30: Children and DDR", *Integrated Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration Standards*, 2006, p. 1.
8. World Bank, "Child Soldiers: Preventing, Demobilizing and Reintegration", *Africa Region Working Paper Series*, no. 23, 2001.
9. More recent studies include: L. Stark, N. Boothby and A. Ager, "Children and Fighting Forces: 10 years on from Cape Town", *Disasters*, vol. 33, no. 4, 2009, pp. 522–47; A. Honwana, *Child Soldiers in Africa*, 2006; and N. Boothby, J. Crawford and J. Halperin, "Mozambique Child Soldier Life Outcome Study: Lessons Learned in Rehabilitation and Reintegration Efforts", *Global Public Health*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2006, pp. 87–107.
10. For further information see: M. Wessells, "The Reintegration of Formerly Recruited Girls: A Resilience Approach", in D. Cook and J. Wall (eds), *Children and Armed Conflict: Cross-Disciplinary Investigations*, 2011, pp. 189–204; K. Kostelny, "What About the Girls?", *Cornell International Law Journal*, vol. 37, no. 3, 2004, pp. 505–12; and S. McKay, "Reconstructing Fragile Lives: Girls' Social Reintegration in Northern Uganda and Sierra Leone", *Gender and Development*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2004, pp. 19–30.
11. The terminology "agency" implies liability and accountability.
12. For further information see D. Francis, "'Paper Protection' Mechanisms: Child Soldiers and the International Protection of Children in Africa's Conflict Zones", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2007, pp. 207–31.

13. J. Williamson, "The Disarmament, Demobilizing and Reintegration of Child Soldiers: Social and Psychological Transformation in Sierra Leone", *Intervention*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2006, pp. 185–205.
14. J. de Berry, "Child Soldiers and the Convention on the Rights of the Child", *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 575, no. 92, 2001, pp. 92–105.
15. See S. Shepler, "The Rites of the Child: Global Discourses of Youth and Reintegrating Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone", *Journal of Human Rights*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2005, pp. 197–211.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 198–99.
17. J. Hart, "The Politics of 'Child Soldiers'", *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2006, pp. 217–26.
18. J. Fernando, "Children's Rights: Beyond the Impasse", *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 575, no. 8, 2001, pp. 8–24.

