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When children affected by war go home:
Lessons learned from Liberia

Save the Children

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Of course I would like to thank all the brave and fine young people in Liberia, referred to in the report as ex-child soldiers but who are in reality so much more, for sharing their experiences about the war, the demobilisation and reintegration process with me. They really bring out a message of resilience and courage, and I hope that this is reflected in the report. Also thanks to all those other young people, parents, teachers, trainers, elders, spiritual leaders and chiefs throughout the country, for giving their time and insights on the demobilisation and reintegration process.

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This report is dedicated to the young people of Liberia, in hope of a better future.

Krijn Peters
Bokhoven, April 2001

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Abbreviations and glossary

CAP	Children's Assistance Programme (local NGO established by Médecins Sans Frontières and EU)
DDR	disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration
ECOMOG	Economic Community of West African States Armed Monitoring Group (peace-keeping force, mostly made up of Nigerian soldiers)
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EU	European Union
FTR	family tracing and reunification
LDF	Lofa Defence Force
LPC	Liberia Peace Council
LOIC	Liberian Opportunity and Industrialization Centre
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NPFL	National Patriotic Front of Liberia (Charles Taylor's faction)
SBU	Small Boys Unit in NPFL
Susu	local savings system
ULIMO-j	United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy - Johnson
ULIMO-k	United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy - Kromah
UNHACO	United Nations Humanitarian Aid Co-ordination Office (UN organisation involved in setting up demobilisation sites)
UNICEF	United Nation Children's Fund
UNOMIL	United Nations Observer Mission in Liberia (organisation responsible for demobilisation)
VOA	Sierra Leonean refugee camp in Liberia near the Voice of America (radio station) transmitter near Monrovia
Zo	spiritual leader

Foreword

Following up a group of former child soldiers in the aftermath of a bitter civil war is not an easy undertaking. It is therefore not surprising that, despite the large numbers of children who have been involved in Africa's post cold war conflicts, there are very few studies of their experiences after demobilisation. However, the question: 'who fares best and why?' needs to be asked. The needs of children in the period immediately after their release from the military are highly contested. Some agencies have put scarce resources into individual therapy programmes based on Western cognitive psychology. Others have focused on the social, educational and vocational skills young people will need to earn a living and reintegrate into their communities. However, following the closure of programmes, there has been no systematic effort to analyse what happened next, or to assess the contribution programmes have made to children's reintegration in community life. Questions need to be asked, such as: Do these programmes ease ex-child soldiers' transition back into the mainstream? How do they contribute to children's future wellbeing? To what extent have wider economic circumstances in the families and communities young people are returning to determined the outcome of their reintegration? If this is the 'missing link', the challenge for the international community in future disarmament, demobilisation and rehabilitation programmes is to achieve a better integration between the social and economic dimensions of peace building.

This study does not claim to answer all these questions. Its purpose is to provide some initial evidence, based on the experiences of a small number of young people in Liberia during the 1996/97 disarmament, demobilisation and rehabilitation programme. It asks what actually happened to the young people after the war, what helped them to establish themselves back in their communities, and what stood in their way. Participants in the research include ex-child combatants who went through Save the Children UK transit centres in the period 1997/98, and others who demobilised themselves, receiving little or no assistance from the demobilisation authorities.

The limitations of the study are fully acknowledged. It is intended to better define priorities for programming, and to raise wider policy issues relating to the role of economic interventions in peace building and post conflict reconstruction.

Celia Petty
November 2002

Executive summary

This paper documents a piece of research that aimed to follow up a group of children associated with armed forces in Liberia. The research included three months of fieldwork and took place in 2000. It followed the experiences of children and young people who had been involved in the disarmament, demobilisation and rehabilitation (DDR) process which took place over a period of two-and-a-half months from late 1996 through to early 1997. To date there have been very few attempts to look at the experiences of children associated with armed forces following a demobilisation and reintegration process. This research seeks to address this gap by asking of a relatively small group 'who fared best and why?'. The young people involved in the research could be divided into two groups: (i) those who had been through the official DDR process and had been involved in the Save the Children UK rehabilitation and reunification programme which involved a stay at a Save the Children UK transit centre, (ii) those who had self-demobilised and had not received assistance from official programmes. The research took place a year after the last transit centre closed.

This study must be seen in the context of the situation at the time of the research: the DDR process had been completed three years previously and Liberia seemed to be in relative peace. Since this time hostilities have renewed and the insecurity in Liberia is now as poor as at any other time in its 14 year conflict. This study focuses on the experiences of a relatively small group of children associated with armed forces, and the information collected is, on the whole, very qualitative. The limitations of the study are fully acknowledged, however it is hoped that it provides a useful contribution to better defining priorities for programming in similar situations. The research also provides a contribution to raising wider policy issues relating to: disarmament and demobilisation; resettlement packages; transit centres; features of the transit centres such as education, vocational training, counselling and staff; reunification with families; changed social relationships; and girl child soldiers.

The paper begins with a general look at the key issues around the involvement of children with armed forces. It looks at the reasons children become involved, the dangers to which they are exposed and the longer-term repercussions of these as they grow into adults. The key issues which need to be taken into account when looking at the issue of rehabilitation are listed, as are the key elements identified by Save the Children UK in the successful return of children associated with armed forces to their families and communities.

In Chapter 1 a short background to the war in Liberia is provided and then the scale of the use of child soldiers internationally, and more specifically in Africa, is explored. A picture is painted of the social and economic conditions in Liberia today, into which children associated with armed forces must reintegrate; illustrating how little social and economic opportunity there is for any young person in Liberia today.

In the next chapter three ex-child soldiers talk about their lives, work, worries and hopes as an illustration of the thoughts shared by many of the young people involved in the research.

In Chapter 3 the research methodologies are explained. The research was qualitative involving a literature review, in-depth interviews with 43 ex-child soldiers, and eight group discussions with ex-child soldiers, their families, community and spiritual leaders, community children, teachers, former commanders, Save the Children UK staff and other related programmes. The main emphasis of the project was on learning directly from the young people who went through the Save the Children UK transit centres, though considerable additional fieldwork was used.

Chapter 4 explains the disarmament and demobilisation process. This took place over a period of two-and-a-half months and involved more than 20,000 soldiers, over 4,000 of whom where child soldiers. Many of the young people spoken to had found the process confusing. They had been misinformed or under-informed by their commanders, and in many cases the children who could have benefited from transit care did not make themselves known to the appropriate people.

The Save the Children UK transit centres are described in detail in Chapters 5 and 6, including the daily routine, services available, interaction with the local communities and the problems and dilemmas encountered. The young people interviewed liked the education, vocational training and recreation elements the best. They also liked being able to talk to their carers. The things the young people did not like included fighting and bullying and disappointments with the resettlement packages. There were two key issues for Save the Children UK staff running the centres. The first issue was how to strike the correct balance between providing adequately for the children's needs without them seeming well-off in comparison with the local communities, and particularly in comparison with the family homes to which it was hoped they would return. The other issue was ensuring the education and vocational training curriculum remained appropriate once it became apparent that many of the residents were staying for longer periods than originally planned.

Family tracing and reunification was the basic goal of the Save the Children UK programme. Some of the children interviewed had been reluctant to be reunited with their families. The reasons for this were that they preferred the conditions in the centre, feared returning to their communities where they had committed atrocities or were afraid of who was controlling their home area. In the end the majority of young people did go home. This paper looks (in Chapter 7) at the issues related to this, such as parents' and children's preparation for the reunion, resettlement packages, the lack of planned follow-up visits and what happened to those young people it was not possible to reunite with any family.

Following reunification the extent to which the ex-child soldiers achieved social reintegration is looked at in detail from their own and other community members' perspectives (Chapter 8). Using several indicators it was established that the majority of young people did feel accepted back into their communities, though a minority felt obliged to hide their identities as ex-soldiers for fear of being rejected. The majority of practitioners and parents interviewed were positive about the integration of most children. On the whole, though, they felt children – both ex-soldier and community children – were more challenging since the war. Elders, chiefs and teachers all felt young people's attitudes had changed since the war. Most of the ex-child soldiers interviewed felt they had wasted their time being in a faction and aspired towards further education.

Economic reintegration is also looked at in some detail in Chapter 9. All but one of the young people interviewed had had some form of work or apprenticeship since their demobilisation. The paper looks at the type of work the young people were engaged in, how they had secured the work, and how they spent the money they earned. It was found that many were making considerable economic contributions to their families. The education prospects for young people are also explored in Chapter 10.
Chapter 11 of the paper comments on the role and impact of the war on girls. The report focuses almost solely on boys for a variety of practical reasons, but attempts are made to gain the perspectives of girls. While the total number of girls who took up arms is small in comparison with boys, it has been estimated that numbers could have been as high as 5,000. It was found that girls faced greater barriers to going through the official demobilisation process and greater difficulties related to reunification. Many people interviewed felt girls were vulnerable to exclusion and prostitution.

Practitioners and young people gave recommendations on how to access girls to provide them with the support they need.

The paper draws to a close by summarising (in Chapter 12) the key learning points, specifically the successes and dilemmas that could be drawn from the research.

1. Introduction

In preparing for the fieldwork, documents were studied relating to Liberia and to the wider literature on work with ex-child soldiers. A steering group was established to advise the researchers, and included Patrick Bracken, Consultant Psychiatrist and Senior Research Fellow at the University of Bradford, Celia Petty, Social Policy Advisor for Save the Children UK, and Save the Children UK's Programme Officer for West Africa. A reference group was convened in Liberia to advise on the research, and included Save the Children UK Liberia programme staff and representatives of relevant other agencies such as UNICEF, Don Bosco, the Children's Assistance Programme (CAP) and Calvary Chapel.

The research was carried out by Krijn Peters, Research Co-ordinator, who spent three months in Liberia. He was assisted in Liberia by Edwin Dorbor, Research Assistant, and provided with supervision from Sophie Laws, an independent research consultant based in London. The Research Assistant provided essential help in organising the fieldwork, and also in interpreting during interviews. While young Liberians speak English, those unfamiliar with the Liberian form of English will miss much, and cannot necessarily make themselves understood. On one field trip a young man who had himself been a child soldier further assisted the team.

Definition
'Children associated with armed forces' is the term preferred by Save the Children UK in referring to any child under 18 years of age who is a part of, or is attached to, any kind of armed force, whether or not there is an armed conflict. This definition is not limited to children who are carrying or have carried arms, but includes those involved in any other capacity, such as cooks, domestic workers, porters, messengers, spies, decoys, couriers, guards, and those accompanying such groups other than purely as family members. It includes girls as well as boys, and children recruited for sexual purposes and forced 'marriage'. It applies to all children in armed forces, regardless of whether they have been forced to join, or appear to have done so voluntarily; applying equally to governmental and non-government forces. In this document the term ex-child soldier is also used because it was the term most widely used and recognised in conversations and interviews during the fieldwork conducted in Liberia.

1.1 Debates around the rehabilitation of child soldiers

Children become associated with armed forces for a wide variety of reasons. Many children are forcibly recruited; others are driven to join an armed group by poverty, alienation, discrimination or desire for revenge following atrocities committed against their families and communities.

Participating in armed forces exposes children to severe threats such as death, injury, poor health, drug abuse, HIV/AIDS, unwanted pregnancies, detention and torture. Children are exposed to all manner of abuse including rape and sexual harassment. Association with armed forces inevitably disrupts childhood through both deprivation and the experiences derived from living for years in a militarised environment. Children are deprived of growing up with their families and of the opportunity to develop physically and emotionally in a safe, nurturing environment. Children associated with armed forces also risk long-term or even permanent separation from their families and communities, which makes them vulnerable to further violence, abuse and exploitation. They are denied their right to education. Association with armed forces almost guarantees that some children will be exposed to, and participate in, gross atrocities which are beyond the realm of experience of most human beings. There are a great many factors that need to be taken into account when looking at the

issues related to the rehabilitation of children associated with armed forces. These include;

- whether family tracing is required and how difficult this is likely to be
- the extent to which the family and community accept, and are prepared for, a child's return
- the feelings of the child about returning to his/her family/community
- availability of, and access to, education, health facilities, livelihood support and traditional healing practices
- whether mechanisms are in place to monitor the child's return and prevent re-recruitment
- a child's needs according to their age and gender.

In seeking to address these factors, and using the experience of its extensive programme work, the International Save the Children Alliance has identified five key elements that support children's successful return to their family and community.[1] These are:

- the child's relationship with his/her family and with the community
- the child's access to education/vocational training
- health care, including reproductive and sexual health services
- psychological and social issues
- livelihood support.

1.2 The war in Liberia

A coup led by Sergeant Samuel Doe in 1980 marked the start of Liberia's recent violent history. As a result of arbitrary rule and economic collapse Liberia descended into civil war by the end of the 1980s when dissidents of Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front executed Doe. Fighting intensified as rebel groups splintered and fought each other, the Liberian army and West African peacekeepers. In 1995 a peace agreement was signed and a process, which lead to the election of Taylor as president, was put in place. In 1999 neighbouring countries accused Taylor of supporting rebels in Sierra Leone and Taylor accused Guinea of supporting Liberian rebels (OCHA, 2003).

Liberia is critical to the political and economic stability of the subregion. The governments of Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia have recently traded accusations of fuelling rebellions in neighbouring countries. Evidence suggests that the Liberian Government is directly involved in the Côte d'Ivoire conflict through its control of two Ivorian rebels groups (Global Witness, 2003). In June 2003, the Special Court for Sierra Leone indicted Charles Taylor for his alleged role in crimes committed during the ten-year civil war in Sierra Leone, including the recruitment and use of child soldiers. There is now evidence that Taylor is seeking to further destabilise Sierra Leone to disrupt the functioning of the Special Court.

Armed conflict between rebel groups and government forces again reached the capital, Monrovia, in June 2003. Fierce fighting caused thousands of people to be displaced, it is estimated that in Monrovia alone, there were between 150,000 and 200,000 internally displaced people in July 2003 (Save the Children UK, 2003). The humanitarian conditions throughout the country continue to be dire. At the time of writing there are ongoing negotiations on the deployment of international peacekeeping troops.

Child soldiers have been used in Liberia throughout the conflict by all sides. According to data collected by Human Rights Watch during the disarmament and demobilisation period in 1996/97 it is estimated that over 18 per cent of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) soldiers were children ranging from eight to 17 years in age. UNICEF estimates that 6,000 of the fighters involved in the civil war in Liberia are under 15 years old; this would suggest that children comprise ten per cent of fighters in this conflict (Transafrica Forum, 2003). Recent reports indicate increased voluntary and forcible recruitment of children. There are credible reports of forcible recruitment of child soldiers by both the Liberian Government armed forces and by armed opposition groups, and evidence suggests children as young as seven years old are being recruited (Save the Children UK, 2003).

1.3 International perspectives

The use of child soldiers in Africa
International humanitarian law and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child set 15 as the minimum age for military recruitment and participation in armed conflict. However, a new Optional Protocol (2002) to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)

- prohibits governments and armed groups distinct from the state from using children under the age of 18 in conflicts
- bans all compulsory recruitment of under 18s
- bans voluntary recruitment of under 18s by armed groups distinct from the state
- raises the minimum age and requires strict safeguards for voluntary recruitment.

More and more governments around the world are increasing the age of all recruitment to their armed forces to 18 years and even some non-state armed groups have acknowledged the principle.

The majority of child soldiers are between 15 and 18 years old, but many are recruited as young ten and some are no more than seven or eight years old. Girls and boys are involved. Some children fight on the frontline, while others are used as spies, messengers, sentries, porters, sexual slaves and servants.

It is thought that currently child soldiers are involved in conflicts in more than 30 countries around the world (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, no date). Evidence suggests that the number of children associated with armed forces in the world is increasing. This is partially due to the current proliferation of prolonged conflicts. Children are more likely to be recruited as conflicts drag on and new recruits are needed, and as a 'culture of war' is generated, where the distinction between combatants and civilians becomes blurred. Children are also more at risk of joining armed forces in wars that are in developing countries and 'failed states', for a number of reasons. First and foremost, poverty and related socio-economic factors pushing children into joining armed forces are more prevalent in developing countries, where children may be faced with the choice between watching their families go hungry or joining up. Lack of access to education, and the breakdown of society and traditional protective structures, can also contribute to the recruitment of children. Children may be motivated to join armed forces for personal reasons of revenge. The HIV/AIDS pandemic also leaves many children without families and impoverished.

It is not surprising then that the problem of children associated with armed forces is most critical in Africa and Asia. It is inevitably very difficult to gather accurate

information on the number of children involved, although it is estimated that there are more than 120,000 children currently participating in armed conflicts across Africa. (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, no date). The countries most recently involving child soldiers in their conflicts are Angola, Burundi, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Liberia, Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Sudan and Uganda.

2. Current situation of ex-child soldiers in Liberia's war now – an introduction

Key points from this section
- The economic and social impact of the war on Liberia has far reaching implications for the reintegration of ex-child soldiers.
- Three ex-child soldiers Sam, Ben and Charles give their accounts of being ex-child soldiers.

2.1 Reintegration into what? The present situation in Liberia

The economic and humanitarian situation in Liberia and the continued state of insecurity puts serious limitations on the reintegration of ex-child soldiers into civil society. The economy has been devastated by the war, and unemployment in the formal sector is 85 per cent. Approximately three-quarters of the population lives on less than US$1 per day, with an estimated 52 per cent of the population living in extreme poverty on less than US$0.50 per day. Food insecurity continues to worsen. The price of basic food commodities such as rice and cassava continues to rise. Liberia is one of the most food insecure countries in the world with an estimated 35 per cent of the population undernourished (OCHA, 2003). The agricultural sector, which is the largest sector in the Liberian economy, contributing 57 per cent of GDP (gross domestic product), declined from US$265.68 million in 2001 to US$260.74m in 2002, and is projected to decline further. The majority of ex-soldiers must be absorbed into the agricultural sector. However, tools and seeds are not widely available and often products cannot be transported or traded due to the lack of good quality roads, lack of vehicles and continued insecurity.

The social infrastructure too, has been affected by the conflict, and its recovery may take even longer. The war has cut deeply into Liberian society. An estimated 200,000 people have been killed and the war has resulted in high numbers of externally and internally displaced people; more than half of the population of 2.4m became refugees. Traditional institutions and the role of the elders have been eroded by the war, and new institutions have been emerging. High levels of violence and harassment persist, due to the existence of many different security forces. Life expectancy is 47.7 years, three-quarters of the population has no access to safe drinking water and the literacy rate is only 33 per cent (compared with 58 per cent for sub-Saharan Africa). It is into this socially and economically fragile environment that the reintegration of ex-child soldiers has been taking place.

2.2 Ex-child soldiers talk about their daily life after the war[2]

Before describing and analysing the situation of ex-child soldiers in detail, three ex-child soldiers talk about their lives, their work, worries and their hopes for the future.

Sam
Sam describes reintegration. He has not been reunited with his parents or family. Instead he lives with his wife, their child, and his younger brother. His responsibilities mean that he is not able to go back to school, instead he is working on a European Union (EU) micro-project. He is doing well. Thanks to his job he is able to accumulate some money that enables him to hire the local football team to do the 'brushing' (pulling up the bushes on the farmland) on his farm. Because of the hard work he is doing he hopes that in a few years he will have saved enough to start a

business in town. Although he lives away from his parents he has developed his own ways of gaining support in the community. He clearly understands the value of a good network of people who can help in times of trouble.

"My name is Sam and I am 21 years old. I live with my wife, my eight-month-old child and my smaller brother. He is 18 years old. I stayed with the soldiers for three years. First I was a cook and porter. Later I started to fight. I was in this town when the rebels entered. I ran away together with my mother and father and my brother. But later we came back and the rebels took us to the training base, first to work and later we became soldiers.

After demobilisation I went to the Zwedru Transit Centre. I spent about a year in the Centre. There I followed the catch-up education. I really miss my education now. I did not go to school before the war. As soon as my mother gave birth to my smaller brother I had to take care of him. I liked school but I stopped in Kindergarten 2.

I did not want to go home because there was nobody waiting for us and we had to work hard. First I went to my sister in the Côte d'Ivoire, but that was just for a few weeks. She also had a difficult time.

Now I am working with the EU micro-project for swamp rice production. In the beginning there was no money for school fees and no money even to live on. The work is hard and I cannot write a letter so nobody knows about my problems. I would like to learn a trade but I cannot leave my family. If there was some vocational training centre however I could tell my wife to stay with her mother for the time being. And I also want to start a business.

We do agriculture and hunting. We sometimes hire the football team for L\$250[3] to 'brush' my farm. I can make L\$1,400 a month and keep it myself. But I feed my family with that money. I also lend some money out and get it back later with interest. And I am saving money to start my business. Sometimes I give a little money to the poor and old people in the community. So if I am in need of something or have a problem they can help me. When I wanted to marry my girl, I asked the girl's mother. And if I wanted to build a house my brother would help me and my wife and her mother.

If I have a problem in the community I can go to the village people I gave money to. By giving them money I build up a relationship so if I am in trouble they can help me. I do not know if my friends are doing this as well. And I can go to my EU boss. Or I can go to the chief and explain. But nobody is bothering me now. The community people respect me.

My commander is far away. But soldiers are still powerful. The soldiers can give orders to the town chief but not the other way around.

I think that other young people in other countries are better off. Because there is no war in other countries, those children are educated. And look at me: I cannot do anything. Lack of school fees is one of my problems. But I think that if the EU project closes in June I will have enough money to start my business. In the future I want to expand my business and I want to learn a trade."

Charles

In this account Charles describes his life and problems in his town after the war. Living with his aunt, who he is taking care of, he talks about his farm work and his worries about his education. His situation is not very different from the situation of many ex-child soldiers who returned to their families. Their parents or relatives have been aged by their experiences of the war, and so the young people often find themselves in a situation where they not only have to take care of themselves and pay their own school fees, but also have to take care of, and do the work for, their elderly relatives. This is something that they often have not expected, and sometimes they leave to live by themselves.

"I am 19 years of age and my name is Charles. I am living with my aunt and my bigger brother. I come from this town close to the Guinea border.

I stayed with the soldiers for about three years. I was a fighter. I was captured by ULIMO[4] when I was in Kakata. I was together with my aunt. Then I was taken to Lofa County. There was no way that it could have been prevented.

After disarmament I went to a centre. There I went back to school and I learned a trade. Now, since I left the centre, one thing I really miss are the sporting activities and the sporting supplies. And I also miss some of my friends. But I wanted to go home. They told me about my family. I expected to be reunified with my father or mother because Save the Children UK told me that they had information about them. Instead they had only information about my aunt and I agreed to that because I did not want her to feel bad.

But the education in the centre was helpful. It prepared me to go to the community school. And the carpentry training, it will help me in the future. It was not difficult because I am a smart boy. I was able to go to the community school because of the support of Save the Children UK. I am still going to school, for two years now. I am in the seventh grade. But I pay for my school fees myself. I am self-supporting. I did some carpentry work in the community but I do not have the tools. But mainly I help my aunt in the fields and I have my own farm. One of my problems is that I cannot always afford the school fees. I need support for my school fees.

I am not drinking or smoking and I do not have bad dreams. At the moment I am doing agriculture. The land I am using is my ancestors' land. And my uncle gave me some seedlings. My aunt is responsible for me because I help her on her farm.

I do not know yet if I can take over the land. I first want to finish my education, but it is possible that I may. If I wanted to build a house my relatives would help me but I do not have the money to build it yet. I am thinking about my education.

The money I got during the war, the commander took it all. The little money I had, I used it to buy clothes. During the war life was not easy but now it is difficult too. I missed a lot of my education. I would have finished high school and would be working by now if the war had not come to this country.

My commander went to the USA. I think that military leaders have more power because they have a gun. Although the president has no gun he has power because he is educated.

I like being a young person in Liberia. I am independent and strong. I do not know what is the situation in other countries because I have not been there.

I still have contact with my former comrades. And I have contact with some of my friends from the centre. The people here do not know that I was a fighter, but they respect me because I am calm and respectful myself. Nobody knows about my past and I like to keep it that way. Otherwise they can turn against you and do bad things.

I want to be a doctor in the future and stay in my village. But first I want to finish school. And I want to live a long life."

Ben

Ben did not go to a transit centre after disarmament. Like the majority of the disarmed ex-child soldiers he went straight 'home'. In his case 'home' meant, to his brother's place. To get there he had to sell a part of the provisions that were given to him at the disarmament site. He has not been to school since disarmament because his brother cannot afford to pay the school fees. Ben got involved in petty trade, like so many other young people in Liberia, but his first 'business' failed due to financial problems of his supporter. How he is making a living at the moment is not clear. Living in the slums of Monrovia, with all the luxuries in sight but not in reach, life is pretty grim for him. The good things about his life are easy to count: playing football in the evening and his special relationship with his best friend, another ex-child soldier who saved his life during an ambush.

"My name is Ben and I am 17 years old. I am living with my brother in Monrovia.

I was on the farm of my aunt. My mother had sent me there to help her. Then there was shooting all over the place. Everybody was running and the rebels captured me. They asked me to join them and I was given a gun. Later I returned to my village as a soldier man. My aunt then advised me to disarm but I decided to remain a soldier to protect myself and my people. And I was able to protect them. I was fighting for five years.

I had to wait before I was demobilised. I demobilised together with my friends. I gave in a gun and the ECOMOG[5] soldiers gave me supplies and provisions. I got a bag of bulgur wheat, cooking oil and corn meal. They checked me to see if I was healthy. I did not find it difficult to give in my gun; the war was over and everybody was disarming. And I was happy to go home. I knew that my brother was coming so I knew where to go. I was happy to go to my brother. I had a letter from my big brother, asking me to come home. But I had to sell a part of my provisions to pay the taxi.

I am not going to school at the moment. I went to school before the war but I forgot how to read and write. My brother is not working and therefore he cannot afford to pay my school fees.

Some time ago I started a 'business'. I was selling slippers.[6] A friend of my brother gave me the money to start it. I gave the money I earned to my brother and sister. But I also paid commission to the man who helped me with the business. But the business did not survive because the price of the goods dropped and my brother's friend lost his own job and could not invest in the business anymore.

My brother encouraged me to be a good civilian and to forget about the war. It is my brother who gives me advice. During the war I was aggressive. I did not want to sit down together with civilians. But as long as you did not bother me I would not harm you. Now things are normal but there is still a difference between ex-soldiers and civilians; ex-soldiers lose their temper more easily.

But I am fine although I have nightmares sometimes and I worry about things. I sometimes talk about what happened during the war but that is only with my best friend. I met my best friend at the checkpoint in Gbarnga. He saved my life when we were caught up in an ambush. We demobilised together and now we live in the same area and we see each other every day and we play football in the evening. I have not seen my commander since demobilisation. But I know about a boy who went back to his commander. He was doing nothing all day and he started to think about his past life when he had money, so in the end he joined again.

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I had a girlfriend but she left. There were many girls in the army. You have the commanders' wives and there are girls in the battlefront. The girls were as strong as the boys. I do not know what they do at the moment or what happened to them. My friend was rescued by a girl once, when he was shot in the leg.

My mother lives far away but she has visited me a few times since my demobilisation. I have not seen my father since the war so I am happy with my brother. I prefer to stay in town rather than go to my mother. One of the reasons is that my friend is here."

These three accounts are each unique; the young people's backgrounds, their experiences during the war, and the circumstances they are living in now all differ from each other. However, there are also similarities between these stories; life is not easy for them. Surviving in post-war Liberia is almost a day-to-day struggle and these young men are responding to this challenge in their own ways.

This report looks in close detail at the DDR process for ex-child soldiers in Liberia. It tries to do this from the children's or rather, the young people's perspective, by taking their views and experiences into account and letting them speak for themselves. Other voices are heard as well; the voices of their relatives and the people in the community, and the opinions and experiences of practitioners who worked and are still working with these young people.

3. Methods

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Key points from this section
- The aim of the research was to analyse the impact of the demobilisation process and transit care on ex-child soldier's reintegration.
- The emphasis was to get the young people's views on the process, on what worked and what didn't work, for them.
- The research was qualitative and involved a literature review, in-depth interviews with 43 ex-child soldiers, and eight group discussions with ex-child soldiers, families of child soldiers, community and spiritual leaders, community children, teachers, former commanders, staff of the Save the Children UK programme and other related programmes.
- The majority of ex-child soldiers were male, but a group interview was conducted with girls, and all interviewees were asked about the issues for girls.

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The main emphasis of the project was on learning directly from the young people who went through Save the Children UK's transit centres, but considerable additional fieldwork collected information from practitioners, the families of the young people, and other community members.

The research took place in 2000, a year after the closing of the last transit centre, and involved in-depth interviews with children, now young adults, some of whom had stayed in transit centres, and some of whom had not. The intention was to obtain more insight into the reintegration process, as well as investigating young people's perceptions of their time in the transit centres. The research has also looked at the broader process surrounding the centres – disarmament, demobilisation, family tracing and reintegration.

3.1 Who was interviewed?

One of the main aims of this research was to assess the extent to which the demobilisation process and interim care in the transit centres had helped ex-child soldiers to reintegrate into Liberian society. We have primarily been guided by respondents' (young people's and also adults') own accounts of issues that were important for them. However, we have also included the perspective of ex-child soldiers who did not go through transit centres.

In addition to this, we hoped to investigate the situation of girls who became involved with the factions during the war. Given the constraints of time and personnel, this work remains to be done. However some initial work was carried out through a group interview with young women, and additional information relating to the situation of women in the factions was sought from other key informants.

In addition to interviewing ex-child soldiers, interviews (including group discussions) were carried out with Save the Children UK practitioners: caregivers, recreational officers, centre supervisors, teachers and vocational trainers, as well as the senior managers who established and ran the programme. This material provides another perspective on the experience of demobilisation, transit care and reunification, and may provide insights that are helpful to similar programmes in other countries.

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Interviews were also conducted with the families of the reintegrated ex-child soldiers, and a wide variety of community members, including village chiefs, elders, religious leaders, school teachers, vocational trainers, youth leaders and (former) commanders.

Finally, interviews were conducted with a number of people working with other agencies that worked with ex-child soldiers in Liberia. Agencies included the Don Bosco programme (Don Bosco ran two of the transit centres, and provides many other services to children), Calvary Chapel and CAP.

The table below provides an overview of the total number of interviews conducted during the three months' research. Overall, 107 individual interviews took place and 12 group interviews. In total, 43 ex-child soldiers were interviewed individually; 32 of these were interviewed comprehensively, and these interviews are used in graphs and quantitative information. The other young people provided shorter interviews, which did not cover the same range of material. These have contributed to the qualitative analysis and are quoted in the text.

Table 1: Interviews completed

	Individual interviews	Group discussions
Ex-child soldiers – transit centre	29	3
Ex-child soldiers – no transit centre	14	4
Ex-child soldiers – no transit centre; girls		1
Parents or family with whom the children were staying	8	
Community leaders	3	
Spiritual leaders and healers	1	
Community children	6	1
School and crafts teachers in community	9	
Former commanders	2	
Staff of the Save the Children UK programme	21	1
Staff of other DDR related programmes	14	2
Total	**107**	**12**

Besides trying to interview a wide range of people, we aimed for a fair geographical representation of Liberia. Interviews were conducted in Monrovia and the following counties:
- Montserrado
- Margibi
- Bong
- Lofa
- Grand Gedeh
- Sinoe
- Grand Bassa.

This constitutes more than half of the counties in Liberia. We also tried to achieve a rural-urban balance. The research therefore included children living in urban areas like Monrovia, Gbarnga, Kakata, Zwedru, Buchanan and Greenville, and children from small towns and villages in more rural areas. The age breakdown of the individual ex-child soldiers at the time of interview can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Age of interviewees

Age
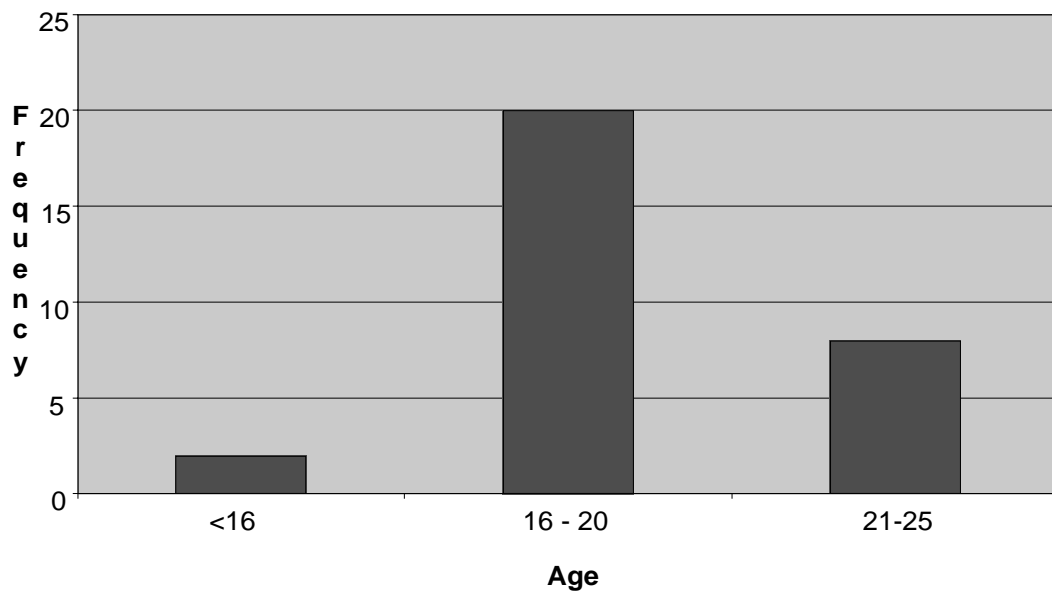
Young people from five different Save the Children UK transit centres, and from two run by Don Bosco, were involved in this study. The spread of respondents by area also enabled us to follow up young people from each of the different centres. Within each geographical area, interviewees were selected from a list that gave the place of reunification for those who had stayed in a transit centre. In other cases, the young people were identified and introduced to us by social workers or by other young people we had already contacted.

3.2 Approaching respondents

Interviews were carried out in an informal and interactive fashion. Questionnaires were prepared for the different groups of people to be interviewed, although they were used only for guidance to ensure that some consistent information was collected. Forms were not completed in front of respondents. No tape recording took place, on the advice of the Liberian reference group.

In approaching young people living in villages, the first visit was to the village chief and the elders. To prevent stigmatisation the term ex-child soldier was not used on these occasions. A range of young people, including those who had not been involved with the factions, were interviewed, thus providing a further comparison group.

In terms of approaching people for interview, all contact started by building up some rapport with the interviewee. Sometimes the interviewee was asked to show the two-man research team around, showing where he was living or where his fields were, and sometimes a game of football was played. The next day the research team and the interviewee met again and the interview took place.
The focus of the research was not on what the young people had done during the war but more on their experiences of disarmament, transit centres and the reintegration process, and to find out if ex-child soldiers – whether or not they had been through transit care – lived differently from other young people. Notes were taken straight after the interview. Sometimes a third visit was made to collect missing information. Overall, many hours could be spent with one interviewee.

Besides the one-to-one interviews several group discussions were held with the young people. During these meetings aspects of daily life in the transit centres were discussed, often in very lively ways.

Analysis

Thirty-two individual interviews with young people, covering all the areas in the interview schedule, were completed. These responses were coded, analysed and summarised in charts. Other interviews which did not cover all the areas, or in which little information was given, were used to support the research, but are not represented in the charts.

3.3 Strengths and limitations of methods used

Although a reasonable number of interviews were completed, it is not possible to see this group as a representative sample of ex-child soldiers, therefore we cannot generalise from these findings. Because of the diversity of the group in question (social background, economic situation, length of time in the faction, different experiences in the faction, the kind of faction, area of reintegration, etc) a very large sample would be required to reach statistical significance. For this reason, the statistics and graphs in this report should be read simply as representing those young people we contacted, not as necessarily offering representative figures for a wider group. They help place the quotations from young people in context by showing something of the balance of different experiences amongst the young people.

The strength of this research is its qualitative approach, which is particularly relevant in situations like this, where very little is known from earlier research on the fate of ex-child soldiers after reintegration. The triangulation (cross-checking) of the data from the ex-child soldiers with information from families, community members and professionals, builds confidence as to its validity. The depth of insight which this approach can bring should enable more informed hypotheses/assumptions to be made in relation to the successful integration of ex-child soldiers, which could then be tested by more comprehensive research and future programming. One of our aims is to bring the preoccupations of the international debate closer to the lived experience of the people in question.

It is hoped that the report will help:
- practitioners working in this field to anticipate problems that may arise
- donors to get a better understanding of the group of children for which they provide funding
- identify those elements in the DDR process that need additional funding
- policy-makers to formulate 'best practice' in working with ex-child soldiers
- academics to gain better insight into the reintegration process of ex-soldiers and the various ways communities are able to absorb these returning ex-soldiers.

4. The disarmament process

Key points from this section
- The 1997 disarmament in Liberia took place over two-and-a-half months, and more than 20,000 soldiers were disarmed; over 4,000 were child soldiers.
- The total number of child soldiers who fought in the Liberian war up to this point may have been as many as 20,000.
- Child soldiers went through the same procedures as adults, but did not have to hand in weapons to benefit from the disarmament process.
- Many children interviewed found the disarmament process confusing and frightening.
- Commanders often deliberately withheld information or misinformed their soldiers about the process. This meant that child soldiers' expectations were raised, or more often that they did not go at all – particularly girls.
- Poor transport provision meant that child soldiers either had to sell their rations to get home or they returned to their commanders.
- Some ex-soldiers self demobilised, others were identified as needing special protection, mostly as they did not know where their families were. Some children who could have benefited from transit care did not go to centres because:
    - they underestimated the difficulties of finding their families
    - they did not understand that the service was available, or did not know whom to approach
    - there were no social workers at some centres
    - they were scared of going to the centre (due to misinformation)
    - they did not trust strangers and therefore did not explain that they needed help
    - they did not want to stigmatise themselves by being associated with ex-child soldiers.

This chapter discusses the disarmament process, which is a critical element of the war-peace transition process for ex-child soldiers. The chapter starts with a description of disarmament. This is followed by a critical analysis of the experience of this process, drawing on the views of the young people interviewed and other relevant interviewees.

4.1 Introduction

Disarmament has a long history in Liberia. The first attempt took place in early 1994. Between 1994 and 1996 spontaneous demobilisation took place on a small scale and in early 1996 another attempt took place with a sizeable number of children demobilised. After two months of fighting and looting in Monrovia in April and May 1996, which resulted in victory for the NPFL (Charles Taylor's faction), the demobilisation programme to which this research is related began.

The official demobilisation started on 22 November 1996 and stopped on 7 February 1997. A total of 21,315 soldiers demobilised, of whom 4,306 were children. One thousand, of those 4,306 children demobilised in Monrovia. However, these figures

may be misleading. Not all these children were actually child soldiers, possibly over 1,000 were street children attracted by the demobilisation package and taking advantage of the more open rules and regulations of the demobilisation of child soldiers (children did not have to hand in a serviceable weapon) (David, 1998). It is likely that another 300 demobilised children passed through the disarmament process more than once, again to benefit from the demobilisation package. This brings the actual number of child-soldiers officially demobilised in the 1996/97 disarmament to around 3,000.

However, the number of children who took part in the war is much higher. Although difficult to estimate, some demobilised ex-child soldiers say that for every child who went through official demobilisation another two or three did not. These children either went straight home by themselves or stayed with their commanders. Finally, very few girls were officially demobilised, although large numbers were abducted by the fighters and used for sexual services and domestic tasks. Some also took part in the war as soldiers.

Many of these children had been involved in the war for several years. Over 1,100 of the children demobilised during the official demobilisation between November 1996 and February 1997 said that they had been in a faction for more than five years. Almost 1,400 fighters were aged 20 when they demobilised (David, 1998). Children were recruited by all the different factions in the war, some voluntarily and some forcibly. The percentages ranged from three per cent of the soldiers being children to 36 per cent. The exact number of child soldiers involved in the war will never be known, but it could have been as high as 20,000 over the seven years of fighting.

4.2 The process

> "We were taken to the demobilisation site by the ECOMOG soldiers. We had to stand in line, and we gave in our weapons. They took a photograph for the ID [identity] card. Then we were given a bag of bulgur wheat, oil and some other provisions." (25-year-old)

Fifteen disarmament and demobilisation sites were established all over the country where ECOMOG peacekeepers and UN Military Observers were deployed. At all sites Save the Children UK family tracers/social workers were present to:
- verify if children who went through the demobilisation were actually soldiers (via interviews)
- identify those children who were separated and in need of family tracing
- ensure proper treatment of children in the DDR process.

Save the Children UK, as a humanitarian organisation, was not involved as an official partner in the National Disarmament and Demobilisation Committee. In order to ensure that more children were disarmed, Save the Children UK Liberia negotiated that children were not required to hand in a weapon to be eligible for demobilisation. The total number of weapons in the Liberian conflict was far outnumbered by the number of fighters and before disarmament these weapons would be given to adult fighters and not to children.

4.2.1 Information about disarmament

In order for disarmament to take place, soldiers needed to be informed about the process. In Liberia soldiers were informed by:
- radio announcements: during special broadcasts information was given about the disarmament process, and soldiers were appealed to by their leaders to surrender their weapons. ECOMOG commanders also made announcements

> "We were informed by the radio and then we had to wait for some time before we were officially demobilised." (25-year-old)

- their own commanders: these commanders on the ground were often in contact with the overall commanders and had better access to information than the soldiers themselves

  > "I had to wait for one week. During that time white and black people arrived by helicopter to inform our commander, later the commander informed us." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

- via ECOMOG and UN soldiers: some Military Observers paid special visits to the camps and barracks to inform the soldiers.

  > "We were based close to ECOMOG soldiers and we were kept updated by them." (16-year-old, ex transit centre)

From the Liberian experience it is clear that it is of paramount importance that accurate and precise information about the DDR process reaches the soldiers in a timely fashion. Often the commanders, for their own benefit, manipulated this information and child soldiers were particularly vulnerable to this.

> "I remember that when the information about disarmament reached our base and the girl-soldiers asked the commander about it, he said that this disarmament had nothing to do with them; that it was only for men." (ex-child soldier)

As a result of misinformation and raised expectations, many ex-child soldiers became disappointed with the DDR process or even did not go to disarmament at all.

> "We were wasting so much time before we went to demobilisation. It was the commander who made us wait. Then, on the last day of the demobilisation I walked for three hours all the way to Zorzor and there the ECOMOG soldiers put me and my friends in a truck and brought us to the demobilisation site in Voinjama. After disarmament they brought us back, the same day. That was at the last day of official demobilisation." (21-year-old)

4.2.2 Seven steps to disarmament

The process at the disarmament sites, and how it was experienced by the ex-child soldiers, differed slightly from place to place, but seven basic steps can be distinguished:

Step 1
Soldiers, both adults and children, arrived at the disarmament site (often a school building, fenced camp, or military barrack) and lined up. They still had their weapons and their commander could still be around.

> "We were with 36 soldiers. We lined up and disarmed voluntarily." (16-year-old, ex transit centre)

Step 2
The soldiers met ECOMOG soldiers and presented their weapons.

> "During the cease-fire the gun was given to the commander. At the official demobilisation the gun was given back to us to present it at the demobilisation site." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

According to the following account this would have been quite a frightening experience for some child soldiers:

> "I gave my weapon to the commander and he gave it to the ECOMOG soldiers. I was afraid to carry my gun to ECOMOG because they were our enemy." (16-year-old)

The ECOMOG soldiers determined whether or not the weapon was serviceable. Adult soldiers who handed in a non-functioning weapon did not receive the same provisions as those who handed in a serviceable weapon. For children it did not matter; they could go through disarmament without handing in a gun.

> "If the weapon was a serviceable one, they gave you more provisions than if you gave in a non-serviceable weapon." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "Some people had spoiled arms but were still soldiers and they did not get anything, no package. Everybody must get the same, even if your weapon does not function anymore." (16-year-old, ex transit centre)

During the process of taking in and checking the weapons priority was given to children; they did not have to stand in line as long as the adults.

Step 3
After the soldiers were disarmed the registration took place. Basic information on, for example, name, age, and faction was gathered. A photograph was taken for the identity card. Not all children and adults were confident about the reasons why this photograph was taken.

> "I refused to let them take my picture. But they gave me provisions." (16-year-old, ex transit centre)

Because of fear, suspicion and misinformation from the commanders, the children often gave false details. Social workers involved in the process described that children would only start to trust them to give correct information after a few days at best. It could take weeks or even months to then get the correct information from the child.

Step 4
United Nations Humanitarian Aid Co-ordination Office (UNHACO) staff interviewed adult fighters on a one-to-one basis. Children went to a special room where UNICEF staff conducted a short interview, asking questions about the kind of weapons the children used and their involvement in the war. Due to the large numbers of children disarming these interviews sometimes did not, and could not, take more than five minutes.

> "The time was too short: there were too many people in line." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

After this interview the children went to Save the Children UK tracers/social workers for another interview in which information was gathered to facilitate the family tracing and reunification (FTR) process, and to determine which children were in need of special protection – transit care.

> "He asked questions about my parents and if I missed them during the war. I had enough time to express my problems and I trusted the person." (16-year-old)

> "I went to the check-up and there I met someone of Save the Children UK who said that they were going to open a centre." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

Step 5
A doctor performed a medical check on both adults and children. This was conducted individually in a special room. According to the accounts of the children this was a quick process, which did not leave a deep impression on them. Often they describe this check as:

> "He gave me a tablet." (19-year-old, ex transit centre), *or*

> "He asked some questions." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

Step 6

After the medical check adults and children received various coupons. There were up to five different coupons, but in the end only one proved to be of any value: the one-month food ration coupon that could be 'cashed' at the disarmament site. Children were asked what they wanted to do after demobilisation – go back to school or attend vocational training – and were given a coupon accordingly. However, subsequently these coupons proved to be of no value. Due to the lack of donor commitment, the funds needed to live up to these promises were not made available.

After the coupons were provided the soldiers could collect their one-month ration, which should have consisted of 25kg of bulgur wheat and one gallon of vegetable fat. In many cases the children were given less than this, and often they had to give it back to their commanders.

Step 7

The disarmament was finished and the disarmed soldiers were entitled to be brought home by special United Nations Observer Mission in Liberia (UNOMIL) trucks. However, there was a serious lack of transportation (partly because of the massive looting of UN property during the April 1996 war) and the trucks were not always used for this purpose. As a result many children had no place to go except to return to their commanders.

> "Some boys went straight home but others went straight back to their commanders."
> (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

Those who were determined not to rejoin their commanders, often had to sell their one-month food ration to pay for their own transport. In Zwedru, where many (abducted) children disarmed secretly in the night, without the permission of their commander, at the ECOMOG checkpoints, Save the Children UK had to arrange a helicopter to airlift these children to safety in Monrovia.

Although the whole disarmament process could easily take a full day, this time was mostly spent waiting around. Altogether the different steps would have taken about 45 minutes.

> "It was a quick process: hand in your weapon; get an ID card and a medical check. And the same day we went back to Zorzor. I did not see anybody of Save the Children UK." (21-year-old)

As one social worker put it: the whole disarmament process was "quick and dirty".

4.2.3 Young people's experience of the disarmament process

Clearly, for many of the young people, disarmament was a frightening and confusing experience. For example when being registered one young man describes:

> "I was afraid for the photo for the ID. I did not want that. And I did not want to go to ECOMOG." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

When asked about what they liked about the actual disarmament process, one interviewee mentioned all the things that were promised. Like so many other children he was tired of fighting and wanted to go back to his family:

> "They told me that I would be sent back to school. And I was told that for those who could not be reunited, Charles Taylor would find a place for them. And I was happy to stop the war and to be able to go back to my family." (16-year-old)

Another young man describes the strange experience of eating together with his former enemy, the ECOMOG soldiers:

> "At the demobilisation site, we, the SBU [Small Boys Unit in the NPFL] boys, and the ECOMOG soldiers cooked and ate together." (19-year-old)

The next account shows what many children experienced as the disarmament process:

> "They treat you and provide medicines and give you a little bit of money. They give provisions and there are trucks for transportation." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

However, some young people realised that their former lives were over and not all the ex-child soldiers were happy about that:

> "In the army I was a big man: a captain. And now I had to lay down my weapons." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

In general these young people who had been loyal to their commanders and had fulfilled many roles for them, felt they had been betrayed.

4.3 To transit care or not

After the disarmament process the children were divided into those who went to a transit centre and those who did not (self-demobilised). This section looks at the reasons why certain children chose transit care and others did not.

4.3.1 Children who did not go to transit care

The main reason children did not go to a transit centre was because they knew, or thought they knew, where their parents or families were.

> "I was informed about a transit centre that could help young people who did not know the whereabouts of their parents. But I left my parents in the village when I went for disarmament and I had to return. I was with my parents during the war." (25-year-old)

In reality, this was not always the case. Almost half of the self-demobilised young people that we interviewed indicated that they did not go straight home after disarmament. Although some children might have lingered on the way home deliberately, clearly a group of children had underestimated the difficulties of going home and finding their parents or families. There is no indication that these children had been made aware of the difficulties that they might face in trying to find their families.

Additionally, not all the boys and girls who knew they were in need of family tracing and transit care identified themselves as being in need. There were several reasons for this. The most obvious reason was that at the disarmament site they were not aware of the transit care or family tracing services, and even if they did know about them, they were not able to make contact with the person who could help them.

> "I saw the man but it was not clear to me." (15-year-old, ex transit centre)

This can be seen by looking at Figure 2; the majority of the self-demobilised young people indicated that they did not have a clear understanding of who could help them at the camp. One self-demobilised young man said:

> "I did not know about the transit centres but if I knew it I would have been happy to go there." (21-year-old)

Figure 2: Was it clear who to go to at demobilisation?

(n=17, 15 no replies)
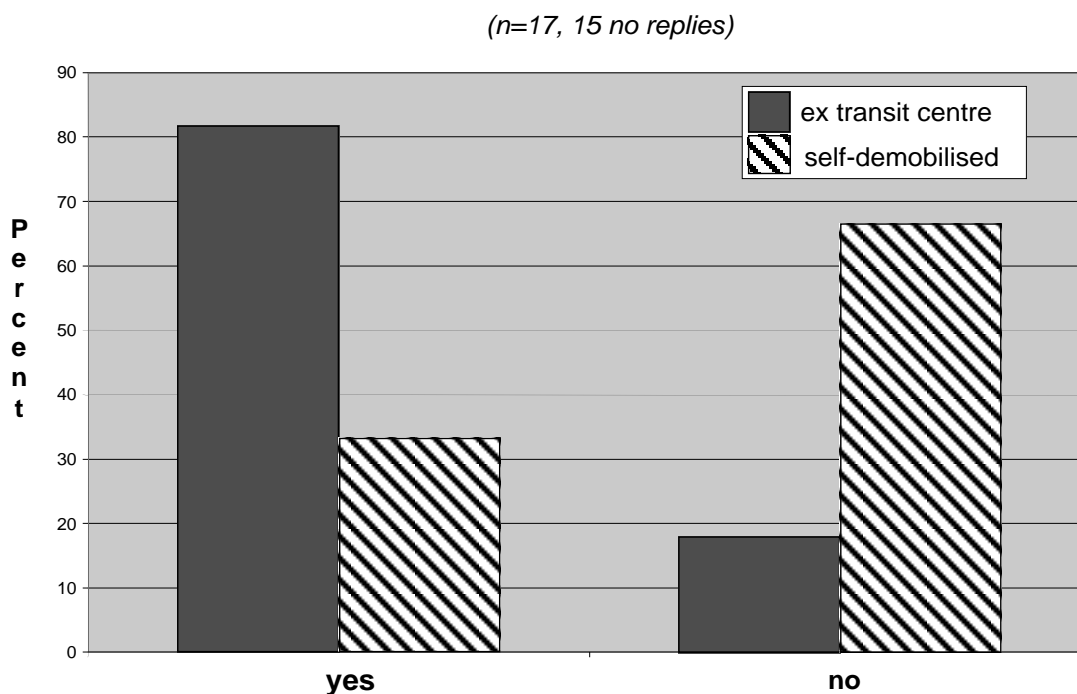
In some cases, due to the quick and confusing nature of the disarmament process there were no social workers at the sites.

> "I did not know about my family and there was nobody from Save the Children UK whatsoever." (16-year-old)

A further reason for not going to the transit centres was that some children were afraid to go. They had been deliberately misinformed by their commanders or friends.

> "After demobilisation I went straight home. I heard about the centre but I thought that the centre was another training camp so I refused to go to the centre." (21-year-old, ex- transit centre)

The difficulties of finding out who could help in the confusing and overwhelming circumstances of demobilisation can easily be imagined. As this young man describes:

> "I was confused: I was little and I did not understand it." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

These difficulties were compounded by the fact that the children had no reason to trust strangers, or to give details about themselves. In addition to this, some children may have felt there was a risk of being stigmatised as an ex-child soldier or war affected youth if they went to a special centre.

4.3.2 What happened to self-demobilised young people?

In this section we look briefly at what happened to those ex-child soldiers who did not go to transit centres. As we know, some of these children went straight back to their commanders, but the majority went home, or at least tried to get home. They all had an idea of where to go and sometimes an adult family member accompanied them. Many had to sell their resettlement packages to get money for transport, although ECOMOG or UNOMIL should have provided trucks. There appear to have been two categories of self-demobilised. One group of self-demobilised ex-child soldiers was able to go straight home:

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> "During the war we fought, but at the end there was no food and ammunition left, so the LDF[7] had to return to Guinea. There we waited till after the disarmament. Then I returned to the place where I was living before the war. I went there together with my mother. But the place was destroyed so we started to build our house in a camp close by the main town." (19-year-old)

> "The ECOMOG brought me to Zorzor. From there I walked straight home. My parents were still somewhere in Guinea. I was living on my own and I was already farming before the demobilisation so I just continued." (21-year-old)

> "After demobilisation we were taken back to Zorzor and than we walked back to our town. I had to come back to take care of my old parents." (25-year-old)

> "I went from Bong Mines to my village. My father said that I had to stay with my grandmother and grandfather." (22-year-old)

> "Because I knew where my parents were staying, I could go straight home." (19-year-old)

> "My mother joined my father in Monrovia and they sent for me to come from Kakata to Monrovia. When I left Kakata, I took two bicycles and two bags of cement. I sold it and used the money to take me and my mother to Buchanan and from the money that was left over, my mother started a business." (21-year-old)

Another group of self-demobilised ex-child soldiers did not have a smooth journey home and were not always reunited with their parents or family at the end:

> "I had a letter from my big brother, asking me to come home. But I had to sell a part of my provisions to pay the taxi." (17-year-old)

> "I never met my parents. At the demobilisation site they gave me some bulgur wheat and rice which I sold to pay my way back home." (16-year-old)

> "From 1996 I started to work as a rubber tapper in Kakata, until 1999. But the work was too hard for me. I was living there with some other boys. Then I went to Buchanan to my aunt because I already lived with her before the war." (19-year-old)

> "After demobilisation I lived with a businessman for a few months who I knew via my brother. Later I started to miss my people and friends and the businessman gave me some money to travel home." (22-year-old)

There was no follow-up of the self-demobilised ex-child soldiers. As soon as a child indicated at the disarmament desk that a family member accompanied him or her, or that they knew the whereabouts of their parents, they were no longer of concern to the demobilisation authorities or social work agencies. As the transportation of the ex-child soldiers was not conducted by agencies concerned with family reunification, it was not possible to check whether the child really arrived home, and whether or not parents or family members were there.

4.3.3 Children who went to the transit centres

Why did some children identify themselves as in need of family tracing and transit care? The most obvious reason is that they did not know the whereabouts of their parents or families. According to Figure 3, twice as many of the self-demobilised children interviewed were living with their parents than former transit care children were. This means that even with Save the Children UK's family tracing, it had been difficult to locate the parents, some of whom may still have been displaced, or may have died during the war.

Figure 3 also shows that more former transit care children were living with their extended families than self-demobilised children. Again it seems that those children who identified themselves as being in need of family tracing and transit care were indeed the ones who lost track of their parents completely and in the end could only

be reunited with extended family members. However, not all the children who identified themselves as in need of transit care were ignorant of the whereabouts of their family.

Unlike the self-demobilised children, almost all of the young people interviewed who had been in a transit centre found out who the specific person was that could help them.

> "There was a Save the Children UK staff member. Because the centre was not open yet they asked me where I was going to live so that they could easily trace me." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

Although many were afraid and uncertain in the beginning, they had the feeling that they were better off at the centre than by themselves.

> "Staff of Save the Children UK told me about the centre and about the good things in the centre." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

Figure 3: With whom were the young people living?

(n=30, 2 no replies)
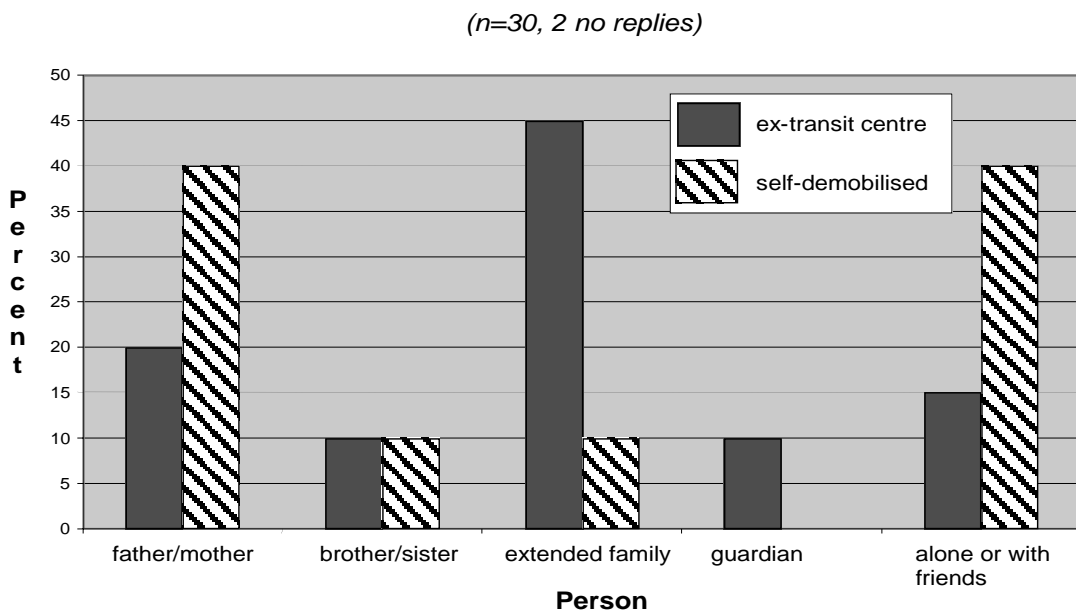
In the next chapter we will follow those ex-child soldiers who went to transit centres. Some children stayed in the centres for much longer than they expected. We will look what they did there and how they experienced the different aspects of the transit centre.

5. The transit centres

Key points from this section
- Five transit centres were set up by Save the Children UK and two by Don Bosco. They aimed to provide short-term care while ex-child soldiers' families were being traced, a 'normalising' and caring environment, basic vocational and educational skills, and to prevent re-recruitment.
- At disarmament, approximately 400 ex-child soldiers needed transit care immediately, and approximately 700 went through the transit centres in total.
- Most of the young people who went through the centres were positive about them.
- The ex-child soldiers interviewed liked the education, vocational training and recreation best. Other things the young people highlighted were the food and equipment, clothes, the way the staff treated them and feeling safe.
- Although many were frightened initially, this was often as they were mixing with ex-child soldiers from other factions and did not know what to expect. Making friends and being told about the centre helped them settle in.
- Things they liked about the centres included being able to talk to the staff about their problems; they liked staff that listened to their problems and took them seriously. They chose to talk to a wide range of people in the transit centres including supervisors, carers and other members of staff.
- Things they did not like in the transit centres included fighting and bullying and disappointments with the re-settlement packages. There were criticisms of the food and the behaviour of some of the staff, including some allegations of dishonesty and failure to intervene in bullying.
- Ex-child soldiers' health problems were treated by the centre or at local health centres.
- The centres were located in the community. Initial problems between the centre children and the community – such as the children's behaviour and the community labelling them as rebels – were improved through sensitisation by workers and by providing family tracing services for the community.
- The community benefited from the centres by gaining access to water, and through free education, vocational training and recreation for their children. The centres also had an economic impact by employing local people and buying supplies locally. The young people in the centres built up relationships with the community children through education and recreation. They also made relationships with adults in the community.
- Many ex-child soldiers remained in the centres for longer than was anticipated, some for as long as three years, leading to concerns about their 'institutionalisation'.

5.1 Introduction

The demobilisation of soldiers in Liberia started within six months of the end of the serious fighting in April and May 1996. During this period, the international

community had evacuated, and most of their property was looted. This left very little preparation time for the different organisations concerned with the demobilisation to gear up. It was not known how many children needed family tracing and transit care, and in the event the numbers were greater than expected. In particular it was not anticipated that so many children (almost 800), would identify themselves as separated. Due to these constraints, and the unexpectedly large numbers of children, it was necessary to establish a temporary interim care facility while family tracing was being conducted. Save the Children UK, Don Bosco and Calvary Chapel established transit centres or 'homes'.

Alternatives to transit care, such as foster care and small group-living projects, were also explored at the time, but could not be mobilised fast enough, or could only provide for limited numbers of children. Although many of the almost 800 children left the demobilisation sites by themselves, and some were reunited immediately with their families, more than 400 were placed in transit centres run by Save the Children UK or Don Bosco, by the end of official disarmament. In addition, throughout the existence of these centres, new children arrived. These children had been identified and the family tracers had negotiated their release from their commanders. They were either living with people who were not their biological family members, or were still under command structures and being used as cheap labourers. Even at the time of writing this report, almost four years after the ending of the conflict, some children – in particular the girls affected by the war – were still not reunited with their parents or families. In total approximately 700 children went through the transit centres.

Save the Children UK established five transit centres (see Figure 4):
- in Virginia (near Monrovia) for children of all the factions
- in Gbarnga (the capital of Charles Taylor's 'Greater Liberia') mainly for NPFL children
- in Zwedru, mainly for children of the Liberia Peace Council (LPC) and ULIMO
- in Greenville, mainly for children of the LPC and ULIMO
- in Voinjama (in the far north close to the border with Sierra Leone and Guinea) mainly for former ULIMO fighters.

Each centre catered for approximately 60 children, although there were large fluctuations in numbers as children were reunited with their families, and new children arrived. The centres were almost exclusively run for male ex-child soldiers. As the name suggests, the centres were for interim or transit care and were temporary – all centres closed down during 1999. At that time almost all the boys and girls were reunited. A very small group of boys were not reunited and alternative solutions, such as group living, were arranged. Among the boys who were difficult to reunify were some Sierra Leonean children who could not return to their families due to the insecurity in their country.

Figure 4: Map of Liberia showing Save the Children UK's transit centres

5.2 Rationale and development of the Save the Children UK centres

This section looks at the rationale of the Save the Children UK transit centres: why did the organisation choose to establish centres to provide interim care for these ex-child soldiers; what kind of discussions took place in advance; how did their rationale develop; and what were the alternatives?

To understand fully the rationale for the transit centres, it is important to look at events during the last two years of the Liberian war. Liberia signed the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child on 4 July 1993. Article 38 of this Convention states that the minimum age for recruitment and participation in armed conflict is 15 years. In 1992 Liberia signed the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (which has not yet been ratified). Save the Children UK has been active in the West African region for many years, starting to work in Liberia in 1992. The programme included emergency support to displaced populations, health and family tracing programmes. In 1995, a steering commission on demobilisation of child soldiers was set up, including CAP, Don Bosco, Save the Children UK and UNICEF. This recommended taking all demobilised children to holding centres for up to one week for documentation and primary care. There, at the holding centre, it would have been decided if a child should:

    (i)   go home
    (ii) go to a transit centre
    (iii) go to foster care.

It was agreed that Don Bosco and Save the Children UK would establish and run the transit centres, as at that time they were the only organisations with sufficient capacity. Unfortunately this plan was overtaken by events: in April 1996 serious fighting and widespread looting took place in Monrovia, forcing all international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to leave the country. At the end of this conflict, the EU – which at this stage was the main external donor and negotiator – pushed for the DDR process to be executed as soon as possible. However, ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) and the Transitional Government, were strongly influenced by the different factions, and in particular by Charles Taylor's NPFL. They

were able to dictate the rules of the DDR to a large extend and stipulated certain conditions. Their demands were:

- no pre-registration of soldiers
- no information about the ages and the location of children in the factions
- no transit centres for soldiers
- no separation of adults and children at the disarmament sites.

According to a senior member of Save the Children UK staff, the commanders wanted:

> "…the children to go straight back to the commanders. The factions, to get rid of those children who were disloyal, often those who were forcibly conscripted, and to keep the loyal children, used the disarmament. This was respectively done by false promises if they would disarm or by strict orders to keep them in the faction."

In reality nearly all the commanders' conditions were met. Although certain steps in the disarmament process separated children and adults, at the end they were allowed to come together again.

Save the Children UK started to run one centre before the official disarmament. Twenty-two ex-child soldiers were living in a former home for blind and deaf people in Virginia community. These young people had been left when another organisation had had to leave the country during the April fighting, and the community had become afraid of them. Save the Children UK staff responded to this immediate need, approaching the centre with sweaters and soap, but the children attacked them. A social worker was asked to work and live with them, on very basic instructions from Save the Children UK, as they were still at a preparation stage in their planning. He managed to calm these scared, aggressive and disturbed children. Thus the organisation started to run a transit centre as an emergency response to the children's immediate needs.

As the moment of official disarmament drew closer, so the need to act became more pressing. Save the Children UK did not have previous experience of running interim care for ex-child soldiers. One of difficulties was the lack of information about the number of child soldiers to be expected. The factions were not willing to give information about the numbers of under-aged soldiers in their ranks. In the end, both Save the Children UK and Don Bosco underestimated the numbers of children who would ask for care. They also underestimated the average time the children were going to spend in the centres, due to the difficulties of family tracing and the insecurity of the country.

The transit centres were created in an emergency situation for children who did not know the whereabouts of their parents, or knew that their parents were still in territory occupied by the former enemy. These children had nobody to go to.

Save the Children UK's position when disarmament was taking place is described by a senior member of staff:

> "There were no such things as specified aims for the transit centres. Save the Children UK stepped in because it felt that other organisations had not taken proper care of these ex-child soldiers in the past. The aim was really to get the children home, to a family member. It was a very unstable situation when it was developing. There was no chance for proper planning and we did not work with terms of reference for the transit centres."

According to this observer:

> "If you provide shelter, food and care, it is better to do it in a constructive way and offer them some education and vocational training. But you must be aware of the

danger of making it too attractive, otherwise it will work as a magnet for the boys in the centres as well as for those outside."

Senior Save the Children UK staff stressed that, due to the emergency situation, there was no time for long-term planning. As time went by, and the situation became more settled, a specific person was employed to supervise all the centres. However, the lack of strategic planning continued. The daily activities in the centres became more structured, and staff in the centres were fully occupied with the day-to-day work with the children. However, the overall aim to provide temporary care for those in need of transit care was still not translated into a detailed plan of action – particularly when it came to an exit strategy. Some of the staff saw these shortcomings.

According to one staff member, the problems with the transit centres were:
- a lack of clarity about the aims and targets of the transit centres
- no clear design of the whole programme
- no exit strategy of the transit centres which should have included
    - the handing over to the community
    - the preparation of the staff for the determination of the centres.

A former transit centre supervisor put it as follows:

"The different phases in the transit centre which eventually had to lead to the reunification of these children, and also what should have been done after reunification, should have been better indicated."

This was even more important when it became clear that a lot of children stayed in the centres for a much longer period then anticipated.

The flexible and organic development of the centres in the first months – during which Save the Children UK responded to the immediate and urgent need to provide interim care for ex-child soldiers – gave way to a situation in which the different aspects of the transit centres were improved but not rethought. The danger of the transit centres turning into longer-term institutions became a possibility.

5.3 Objectives of the transit centres

During the two-and-a-half years that these centres were operating, aspects of the programme changed and adapted to new situations. From the beginning the main objectives of the transit centres were:
- the provision of food, shelter and medical care
- to provide a loving and 'normalising' environment in which children were safe while their families were traced. The final aim was the reunification of these children into the community
- to provide some basic vocational and educational skills which would be useful and facilitate their reintegration into their families and communities
- to prevent re-recruitment of children by commanders. The command structures continued to exist for many months, in some cases years, after the official disarmament.

The ideology behind these objectives, according to a senior member of Save the Children UK staff was that:

"Although it was not a long-term perspective for these boys, staying in the transit centres was still more constructive and long term than their day-to-day lives in the militias. Save the Children UK said that they were welcome as long as their families were not yet traced and the boys made the conscious choice, although temptations were there, not to rejoin. In the end the number that had rejoined the factions was very low."

5.4 Life in the transit centres

5.4.1 Introduction

This section looks at daily life in the transit centres. It starts with a short overview of the different activities that took place during the day. Some of these activities are discussed in more detail in later chapters. It goes on to describe what these young people liked and did not like about living in a transit centre. Issues such as, food, supplies, savings, health, entertainment and sports activities are discussed. It also describes what the staff had to say about these different issues.

5.4.2 Daily life in the transit centres

Although the specific activities provided in the centres changed over time and varied from one centre to another, there were many common activities. After waking up and eating a simple breakfast, the children's day started with 'devotion'. Save the Children UK is a non-religious organisation, but Liberia is a religious country. During 'devotion' the boys prayed,[8] had discussions about various topics (brought up by the boys themselves) and listened to announcements (for example, about which group of boys had to prepare the food that week). Also new rules, often suggested by the children, were discussed.[9]

After 'devotion', catch-up education or literacy training started. This began as a special six-week curriculum (developed by Save the Children UK) that provided basic literacy skills. Many of the boys had missed several years of education. When it became clear that many children were staying in the transit centres longer than anticipated, and to prevent repetition, a six-months curriculum was developed.[10]

In the afternoon the vocational training started, including a range of activities such as agriculture, carpentry, sewing, and baking. The boys could choose their favourite trades and were allowed to sell anything they produced in these sessions. The money was safeguarded and given to them at the time of reunification.[11] After this there was time for recreational activities which enabled the boys to burn off extra energy, learn social skills and build up links with the community children. The day finished with taking a bath and some studying. Depending on their ages, the children went to bed between 8.30pm and 10pm. On Fridays or Saturdays the compound was cleaned, and on Sundays the boys went to church and were allowed to go into the community afterwards.

As we can see, these young people had their days filled with various activities. Normally most activities took place inside the compound of the transit centre. There was daily contact with people from the community, mostly children. This normally happened inside the transit centre (when the community children attended the catch-up education lessons), rather than the centre children going into the community. Activities took place throughout the day; former transit centre staff stressed how important it was to keep the children busy. If they were allowed to sit idle, tension increased and fighting could easily occur.

5.4.3 What the young people liked about the centre

> "The five things I liked about the transit centre? I liked the school, because it prepared me for the future. And the teachers were very encouraging. They taught the lessons over and over again until we got to understand it. I also liked the recreation, football and volleyball. And of course the trade, I did carpentry and agriculture. And there was good food, we liked eating and we cooked our own food. The carers took good care of our food.' (19-year-old, ex-transit centre)

Figure 5: What were their favourite aspects in the transit centres?

(Young people were asked to mention their top 5)
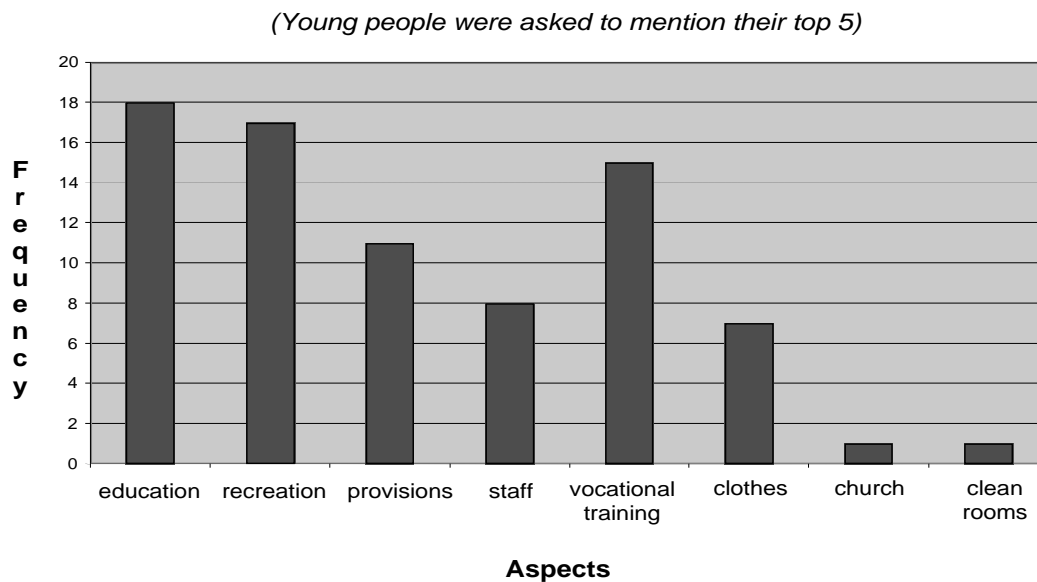
Aspects

Figure 5 shows us what these young people liked in the transit centres. As we can see, the catch-up education was the favourite aspect of the transit centre; 85 per cent of the interviewees mentioned this.

> "If you learn you are not a stupid person in the future." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "We were illiterate so I liked school. And we did not think about the war again." (15-year-old, ex transit centre)

The vocational training was also a popular activity, with more than 70 per cent mentioning this. These two activities are discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

Other aspects mentioned were:
- the provisions offered in the centre (more than 50 per cent)

> "We never had to buy things for ourselves. The carers took good care. And on Sunday we went to church and were going into the community." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "Because of the provisions that were given to us I forgot about the war." (18-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "We got a meal three times a day. And I was sent to the community school and they were paying my school fees. I got clothes and provisions and I loved the sports and the music." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

- the clothes they got (almost 35 per cent)

> "I just came from the bush so I did not have any good clothes." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

- the way the staff took care of them and treated them (almost 40 per cent).

> "The way the staff was taking care of us remind me of my home. And they encourage us not to fight but to practice the agriculture. And of course the provisions, whenever we asked they would give it to us." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "They were taking good care of us and it was a good place: there was no suffering." (18-year-old, ex transit centre)

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> "I liked the food and medical care. And the care of the staff, the advice, and the provisions" (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "They hold us in a good way and there was medical care." (16-year-old, ex transit centre)

Other aspects of the centre that these young people liked included:

> "…like to be taken back to my family. But in the centre I liked the sports, the football. I liked the provisions, the soap, towel and slippers. And it was a good sleeping place." (16-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "The centre was safe: there were no guns around and no recruiting going on. And I liked the staff who encouraged us to behave well, respect older persons and not abuse other people. I came to Liberia during the war and I did not have a mother or father around, so I continued to fight to survive. I felt good to go to the centre because we learned something unlike our friends who did not go. Many of them are now enlisted in the army. For us from the centre we did not like to learn about army anymore." (18-year-old, ex transit centre)

As we can see, for various reasons the young people liked the centres. Below we look at different aspects of the transit centres in more detail.

5.4.4 Recreation

More than 80 per cent of the young people interviewed mentioned recreation as something they liked about the centre. Various recreational activities were held. The more sport-oriented activities included football, basketball, volleyball, jogging, and table-tennis (where available). Other recreational activities held in the centres were plays, singing, dancing.

> "I liked the weekend programme with drama and sports." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

The goals of the recreation, according one of the former recreation teachers, were:
- to keep them busy (in a nice way), otherwise they started to plot
- to stimulate their creativity
- to help them move from bad behaviour to good morals
- to stimulate interaction with the community children
- to help them to restore their self-image and dignity
- to respect others and live together
- to put back childhood activities that they had missed.

We repeatedly heard how important it was to keep the children in the centre busy:

> "Sometimes in the evening there was a campfire. The children loved the traditional entertainment. Sports and games were held in the afternoon to keep them busy and because often community children were participating in this, it also had a bridging function. (former centre supervisor)

The young people too, realised the importance of recreation. When a group of young people were asked what they would have changed if they were the supervisors of the centres, they replied:

> "There is a need for entertainment in the evening, otherwise the children go out in the community at night time."

The young people liked the sport because of:
- the good sports equipment

- the matches with the community
- the fact that there was a good recreation teacher.

It is important to remember that this was a time when many children in the community would not even have had a football, let alone other sports equipment. Indeed this is still the case in much of present-day rural Liberia.

Another goal of the recreational activities was to facilitate the reconciliation process among the children, and also between the children in the centre and those in the community. For example, a football match was held between the children of the Virginia centre (children who had stayed mainly with ULIMO-J and K and the LPC) and those of the Gbarnga centre (mostly former NPFL children). This represented the meeting of ex-child soldiers from different factions. Staff had been nervous about the meeting for days in advance. However, when the bus with the Virginia children in it arrived, one of the children took off his white shirt and held it outside the window. At this sign, all the boys started yelling, applauding, singing, and dancing, and spontaneous confessions took place and forgiveness was given. Although the Gbarnga boys lost the match, the celebrations continued for the whole evening. The recreational activities, therefore, also helped the children on a more individual, psychosocial level (Schembri, 1997).

5.4.5 Supplies and food

Deciding on the kind and amount of supplies (such as clothes, footwear, soap, toothbrushes, etc) that were offered to the children in the centre was not necessarily straightforward. There had to be a balance between, on the one hand, what was necessary, reasonable and helpful, and on the other hand, the quality and quantity of the supplies that were available to most young people in Liberia. In other words, the children in the centres should have access to all basic needs, but should not get used to a standard of living which was unlikely to be available in the communities into which they had to reintegrate. In practice this meant that it was not wise to offer a meal three times a day, if people in the community only had a meal once a day, or to offer these children in the centre shoes, if children outside the centres wore slippers. It meant finding a balance between not offering so much that it will lead to frustration upon their reunification and reintegration, and yet not providing so little that it would make the children start to run away from the centres.

> "Some of my friends did not like the idea of joining us in the centre and eating bulgur wheat. Many of my friends left the centre because they did not like to eat the bulgur wheat. Some of them are with their families and others have re-enlisted in the army. Good food could have helped to keep some of my friends in the programme."

Some of the staff felt that too many supplies were given:

> "The children in the centre just got too much supplies." (former supervisor)

However, the children in the centre did not understand this dilemma. Given a choice they would have opted for more supplies and food. During the war years there was an overall food shortage. Joining a faction was not an automatic guarantee of food, in particular if one was a low ranking soldier. This fostered an attitude of getting as much food as possible when it was available, and this attitude was also visible in the centres:

> "In the centres basic food like rice and porridge were provided. But still children were not able to control themselves and made themselves ill.' (senior Save the Children UK staff)

5.4.6 Health in the centres

Some of the ex-child soldiers arrived in the centres with health problems, such as wounds or other forms of illness. According to eyewitnesses, many of the soldiers who were severely wounded or disabled did not make it to the disarmament sites. Owing to the limited transport available, those who were not able to walk stayed behind and many children were included in this group. At the disarmament site, those people who were wounded were taken to a nurse or hospital. The most common health problems were (bullet) wounds, skin diseases, malnutrition, problems with drugs, hernias as a result of carrying heavy loads or guns and sexually transmitted diseases.

> "I had malnutrition and I lacked clothes. But in the centre they provided clothes." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "The smoke of the gun has irritated my eyes, so I cannot write for long. When I was in the centre, they sent me to a hospital." (15-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "My physical outlook was bad because of my time in the bush." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I had skin diseases and I felt drowsy sometimes." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

At the centres there was a nurse or a specially trained staff member who provided health care, and Save the Children UK supplied basic drugs to the centre. Those who were more seriously wounded or ill were transferred to a nearby clinic or hospital. This was not necessarily a clinic run by Save the Children UK; arrangements were made at local clinics.

> "In the centre the staff helped you every time you were sick."(19-year-old, ex transit centre)

As these children had not been through the traditional 'bush schools', many of them were not yet circumcised. If they wanted to be circumcised, Save the Children UK staff looked for support for this in the community.

5.4.7 What the young people did not like about the transit centres

The young people mentioned fewer things that they disliked about the centre (two did not mention anything negative).

Figure 6: What did they dislike about the transit centres?

(Respondents were asked to name top 5)

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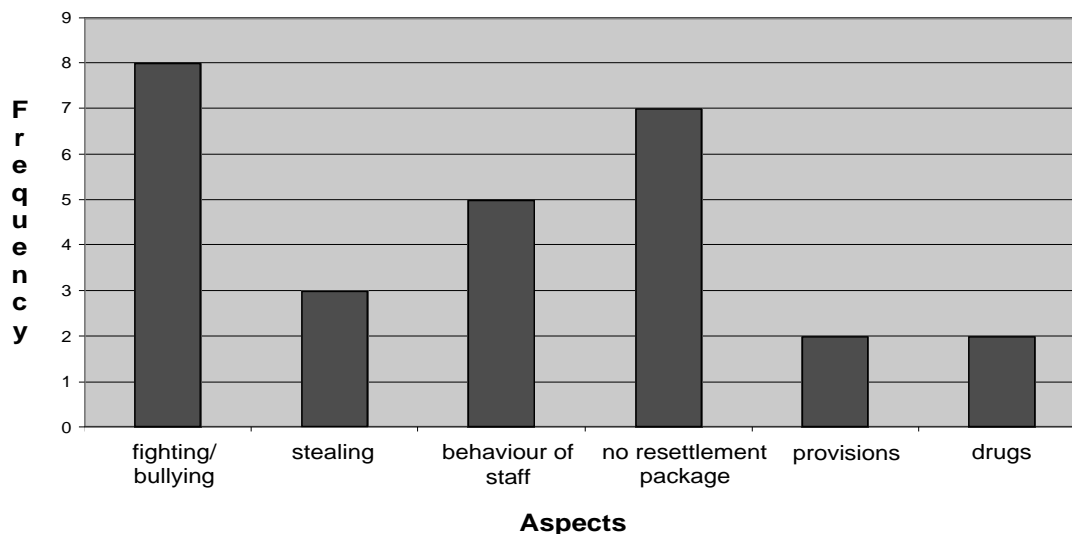
According to Figure 6 (n=20), the seven things that young people mentioned most frequently that they did not like about the transit centres were:

(i)the fighting that took place in the centre (mentioned eight times):

"The smaller children were often beaten by the bigger boys. And some boys of the centre were fighting against the community children." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

"There was dangerous fighting in the centre. Some boys brought in girls. And there was smoking of marihuana going on." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

"There was a lot of fighting going on in the centre, as compared to the community." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

"I did not like the fighting between the small and big boys." (14-year-old, ex transit centre)

"The bigger boys were giving you trouble: they command you and beat you." (18-year-old, ex transit centre)

"Everything was fine but there was fighting and stealing every day." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

(ii) the fact that some of the reunified children did not get a 'resettlement package'
while others did (mentioned seven times), and

(iii) Save the Children UK not following them up:

"Nobody did wrong to me. But at the end I only got the money I earned with the agriculture and I did not get the resettlement package. And they even cheated me with that money earned by doing agriculture. Save the Children UK never came back although they promised it." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

"We did agriculture and carpentry but the staff sold our products and took the money themselves. And although they promised us a resettlement package we never got one." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

"I was the last boy when the centre closed and I was not reunified properly. They carried me to Putu but I wanted to go to Monrovia to my aunt. In Putu it was hard work. And I did not get my resettlement package. The tracer said that I should not depend on Save the Children UK and they did not send me to school." (15-year-old, ex transit centre)

"And Save the Children UK promised to give me a resettlement package and to come back but both they never did." (18-year-old, ex transit centre)

(iv) the behaviour of some of the staff towards the children (mentioned four times):

"I did not like the behaviour of the caregiver. She did not sleep on the campus and then fighting happened." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

"The staff was selling some of our provisions, including the copybooks." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

"The supervisor sold our clothes, the food and the provisions. During devotion we complained but he made us cut the grass. And I did not get a resettlement package. The food was sold by the staff, clothes and the slippers were stolen by supervisor." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

When asked what he would do if he was made the supervisor of a transit centre, this young man answered:

"I would deal with delinquent staff." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

(v) the theft that took place in the centre (mentioned three times), and

(vi) the drug use in the centre (mentioned twice):

"There was smoking *[of marihuana]* going on in the centre. And some boys used abusive language and challenged the staff members. Other boys were stealing our clothes to sell them." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

(vii) as we saw in the previous section, many young people appreciated the supplies and food offered in the centre. However, there were also some complaints about them:

"We had to use our slippers for four months."

"The spoons we had to use were broken."

"No bags or locks were provided to safeguard our clothes."

"No mattresses were provided: we had to sleep on the floor." (group discussion)

"The rice stayed away for five months at one time."

"No mosquito sheets or insect spray were provided." (group discussion)

"One of the problems was sometimes the delay of food supplies, which resulted in us, the boys, disturbing things." (16-year-old, ex transit centre)

"We had to sleep on the floor and we had only bulgur wheat for food." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

By asking the question 'If you were in charge, is there anything you would make sure that is there in the centre', the aspects the young people liked and did not like about the centre became even clearer. Below there are some of their replies:

"I would make sure that nobody was rude against each other and as punishment they would have to cut grass or they would have their food delayed." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

"I would encourage the boys. And I would talk to the community to forgive." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

"I would stop the smoking, fighting, abusing and the bringing in of girls. I would do that by advising them". (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

"I would make sure that the food and the provisions were not sold to the community. And I would give extra blankets. We had only one and that one could not dry in one day." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

"Because I was the president in Greenville I knew the staff very well. I would advise the children to stay at home and study, take a bath every morning. And take the instructions given by the staff." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

"I would give the children support afterwards. The supervisor was lying about the support in the future. And he sold our goods in the community." (15-year-old, ex transit centre)

"I would change the bad behaviour by giving them advice like they did to us. And I would make sure that everything would go to the children." (18-year-old, ex transit centre)

"Every morning a prayer, provide regular supplies, and a prayer before eating and going to bed." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

"I would stop the fighting by making laws and punish those who break them. They must dig holes." (14-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "Provide what children want. And I would make sure that the building was painted and looked like a decent place and that the yard was brushed." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "The supervisor is old and knows more than I do. In the beginning the boys were rude but then they brought in restrictions." (16-year-old, ex transit centre)

In this section we have looked at what the young people liked and did not like about the centres. The accounts above show the benefits of listening to the opinions and views of young people and children.

5.5 Community involvement in the transit centres

This section looks at the extent to which, and the ways that, the community was involved in the activities of the transit centres. Staff, the children and some community members reflect on this. There were some differences of opinion between these groups, which are explored.

5.5.1 Views of the staff and the community members

Save the Children UK deliberately chose to place the transit centres in the community rather than in isolated locations. All centres, except the one in Virginia, were located in a provincial centre. The buildings used were often abandoned schools or training centres. These were chosen in discussions between Save the Children UK, representatives of the town or county and the owner of the building. It was intended that people who lived near a future transit centre would be consulted, but often this was not the case. Owing to the speed at which the facilities were needed, it was not possible to delay the procedure more than absolutely necessary. According to a senior member of Save the Children UK staff:

> "Because it all happened on a very short term, there was no time for community involvement in the establishing of the centres. We informed the community and then tried to convince them of our ideas."

As these centres were created during an emergency phase, the staff employed were experienced in dealing with emergency situations. Although experience like this was very important, later on in the project people with experience in development and community projects were needed:

> "The people who were running the transit centres did not have a lot of experience in community participation projects. I think that people working with ex-child soldiers should not come mainly from the emergency, but from the development field." (senior Save the Children UK staff)

Problems did occur, such as fights, the theft of property belonging to community people, abusive language and the smoking of marihuana. There could be strong, although sometimes justified, prejudice among the community people against these ex-child soldiers:

> "I remember that in the beginning there was fear in the community of the boys in the centre because they were rough and angry. But later this became better and the boys sometimes even helped the people in the community." (community people, Virginia)

This also worked the other way around:

> "In the beginning the boys were afraid of the elders in the community, but then the elders came to the centre for advice and to offer friendships." (former centre supervisor)

According to a senior member of Save the Children UK staff:

> "The staff were treated with suspicion by the community, although later this changed because of the progress of the boys."

Relationships were also helped by the fact that a large proportion of the staff employed in the transit centres came from the community. According to a social worker of the Greenville centre:

> "The relationship with the community was very important. There must be some kind of basic understanding between you and them. If there were problems, some community people came to me. But most times the people in the community came with request for the family tracing of their lost children."

Besides sensitisation, trying to resolve specific cases and misunderstandings, the strongest means the staff had to increase acceptance of the transit centres was the potential for the community to benefit from the centre:

> "We allowed community children to go to the centre schools so that we could ease the negative pressure by the community." (senior member Save the Children UK staff)

The main benefit to the community was the free catch-up education offered to the community children. The community children could also benefit from the recreational activities and in some cases from the vocational training. There was also access to clean drinking water. Another important positive aspect of the centres was that they provided employment for people in the community. This was so for both qualified staff, such as teachers or trainers, and less qualified staff, for example, cooks or night guards. Also much of the centres' provisions were bought in shops in the community.

According to a former supervisor of the transit centre, one centre used several ways to build up a good relationship between the centre and the community:

> "We held regular meetings with representatives of the community."

> "We tried to involve the community in decisions about the centre."

> "Save the Children UK's Family Tracing and Reunification facility had a good impact; some community members had their own children traced by Save the Children UK."

> "There was water available for the people in the community."

> "The community women were allowed to buy the crops produced by the children for a good rate."

> "And of course the free education for the community children."

The need for community involvement throughout the programme became clear in the end, at the point when the centre had to close down and the community could no longer benefit from its facilities. According to the educational officer who was also involved in the closure of the centres:

> "'The community was not involved in the planning process and this made it difficult for them to take over the programme. The community must be involved right from the beginning and must be made responsible for taking over the educational component. Sensitisation and awareness of the community is necessary for the community to see itself as part of the programme."

The main problem was the large number of children from the community attending the free catch-up education. In Virginia, Save the Children UK handed over the school equipment to the community, which had indicated that it was willing to take over the school in the centre. However, after a few months these attempts failed:

> "After Save the Children UK closed the centre and the school, we were not able to take over the school and as a result of that the community children, who were going to the catch-up education, scattered around the place. Therefore Save the Children UK should revitalise the school. A committee comprising of Save the Children UK and the community should be established, and the community could offer teachers and agriculturalists." (community people)

In Gbarnga, Save the Children UK handed over the school material to an existing school, with the guarantee that those children who were benefiting from catch-up education in the centres would be allowed to go to school for one semester without having to pay school fees.

It should be born in mind that the centres were there only for a limited time and with a specific goal. Being able to help the community was a positive effect of the centres, but it was not the main aim.

This section looked at the opinions of both management and local staff about the relationship between the centres and the people in the community. We have seen that in particular the staff who were working in the centres found it important to have a good relationship with the community. The staff in the main Save the Children UK office in Monrovia also realised that community involvement and participation could have smoothed the exit and hand-over procedure of the centres.

5.5.2 The young people talk about the community

This section looks at what the young people thought about the relationship between themselves and the people in the community.

> "We made friends with the community children. They came to the centre to fetch water and to play with us. Some attended the centre school with us. We were not really different from the community children because we did everything together and at times we even shared our bulgur wheat with them and ate together." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

For most children in the centre, the children in the community were their playmates and the ones with whom they went to school.

> "Some of the centre children are rude, but the community children are nice." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I made friends with them but only after some time. In the beginning we did not understand each other." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "We met the community children but the staff did not want us to come close with the community children. But we played together." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "The community children came to the water pump for water and there we build friendships and we did sports together." (18-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "The day after I arrived, the boys introduced me to the community people." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I went to school together with the community children and we played." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I made friends with the boys in my class and with some other boys I met." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "The children in the community came to us because we were the only ones that had a football. We played and ate together." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "We, the children in the centre and those in the community, shared many things in common." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

However, it was not only the community children with whom they built relationships. Some centre children also chose adults from the community to befriend.

> "I made friends with one woman in the community." (14-year-old, ex transit centre)

According to a group discussion with some former transit centre young people, one of the aspects they liked about the people in the community was that they "represented family life."

Some young people reminisced fondly about those days in the centre, when they had built up relationships with the community people. This relationship building was sometimes achieved with Save the Children UK and the staff helping them to explain and sensitise the people in the community about themselves.

> "I made friends in the centre and also with the community children. We played together. At the present moment, while we are here in the community, we find it difficult to make new friends as many consider us rebels but we are trying to make things clear to them, so that we can be reintegrated well in the community."

The young people explained what was really helpful to them in building up these relations with the children in the community:

> "Because I knew a lot about carpentry some children asked me to repair things at their homes, so I helped my classmates at home." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "The centre children were already nice from the first day. I took the initiative to start playing or organise other activities. The bicycles for the staff were also used by us and the community children." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "There was a football team of centre children and community children." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

As discussed earlier, normally the community and centre children met inside the transit centre. The children in the centres were not allowed to go into the community without the permission of a caregiver. On Sunday, all the children who wanted to could go to church, and then afterwards walk around a little bit in the community. However, most of the children also went out at night.

> "We could only go on Sunday. If you wanted to go on another day you had to ask permission of carer." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "Initially we could go around in the community but then there were complaints and we were not allowed anymore. There were guards and a fence." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "Every Sunday we went out for the service. On other days we were not allowed, although we did it sometimes. In general the community children came to us because we could not go to them." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "We had to go out to work on our gardens and sell the products." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

The young people liked the people in the community for various reasons, but the most important one seemed to be that they liked their attitude and that they did not fight. Some of the people in the community built special relationships with the children and gave them advice or tried to help them.

> "Community people are friendly and are moving together." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "They were behaving well and nobody was fighting as they did sometimes in the centre." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "They were my friends and they had a good attitude." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

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"They are not bringing you into confusion and are nice people." (18-year-old, ex transit centre)

"They talked to me in a good way. Some elders of the community took me to church on a regular basis and provided me with goods." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

"They were talking in a good way to us and gave us advice." (14-year-old, ex transit centre)

"There was a church in the community and the community boys encourage me to go there and pray." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

"The community people brought food and shared fun with us." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

"We did everything together. But the centre children acted rude to the community children sometimes." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

The young people clearly saw the difference in behaviour between the people of the community and the adults they were used to meeting in the faction. There were other differences between the children in the centre and the people in the community, as these two former centre residents describe:

"Everything was fine with the people in the community. But the difference is that the community people do not have money to send their children to the community school, so they came to our school." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

"I liked them. But do you know what the difference is: the boys in the centre had clothes but those in the community did not have." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

However, the people in the community did have one thing that the children in the centre did not have:

"In the community you are free. If there was no football around we were getting bored. The community people were free. But it was a good law that we were not allowed to walk free in the community." (21-year-old, ex transit centre).

The people in the community were also a source of income for the children of the centre.

"They bought our garden products and gave us small provisions." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

Inevitably there were problems between the community and the children in the centre once in a while. At the best of times, it is not easy to have a boarding school next door, and it is particularly difficult if the pupils are all ex-child soldiers. The children in the centre could behave badly, which caused negative reactions from the community. Here are some of the problematic community reactions and behaviours mentioned by the young people:

"There was only one incident: the centre boys were not allowed to play on the community field, but that was solved." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

"Most of the time the community children give no problems, but sometimes they can act rude. The centre boys are nice because the social workers are around." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

"The community children sometimes made a mess of the centre children's rooms, deliberately." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

"Someone called me rebel but the staff sensitised the community." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

"At first the community members were afraid of us and treated us as rebels." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "The community women liked to make problems and liked to fight and then the police came." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "The community abused us sometimes." (16-year-old, ex transit centre)

One recurring complaint was that people called ex-child soldiers 'rebels'. Dedicated to leaving behind their lives as fighters, most of them considered this a serious insult.

In section 5.5 we have looked at the role of the community in the transit centres. Whilst community participation is positive and necessary, it is time-consuming to establish and is therefore difficult to achieve in an emergency situation. The section has also shown the young people's perspectives on their contact with the community while they were staying in the centres. Although some problems did arise, the material presented above strongly speaks in favour of locating transit centres within communities.

5.6 The staff of the transit centres

The transit centres were made for the ex-child soldiers, but they could not have functioned without the work, time and dedication of the staff. This section looks at the people – the vast majority of whom were Liberians – who had the exceptional job of helping ex-child soldiers in their transition from military to civilian life. It covers management issues, employment, and what they thought about the work in the transit centres. It also describes what the young people who stayed in the centres thought about the staff.

> "I love working with these ex-child soldiers. They are open for discussion, especially if it is related to their activities during the war. But what I do not like about them is that sometimes they have difficulties in responding if you ask something or want them to do some work. They are different from community children in the way that they are aggressive, difficult to comprehend, and hard to talk to." (agriculture teacher)

This reaction is fairly characteristic of people who have worked with ex-child soldiers. They all liked the work and looked back on it as a useful experience and an exciting job. On the other hand, they were realistic and described the difficulties they had with the children.

> "I liked the work I did. It also taught me something about how to react to my own children if they do something wrong. It makes no sense to flog them. That is what I learned. But the work was also dangerous. The children in the centre could be aggressive. Because of that Save the Children UK should pay more, some kind of insurance, for instance." (recreational officer)

The first few months after the opening of the centres had been a hectic and stressful time for the staff, both in the centres and at management level. None of them had experience in running anything like a transit centre.

> "'One of the main difficulties was that Save the Children UK had no real experience in running this kind of centre, so they had to develop their own model." (former supervisor, Gbarnga centre)

Externally, it was a confusing and insecure time, with no guarantees for lasting peace. Moreover, all the local staff had been through the war themselves and had lost family members, some of whom had been killed by under-aged fighters. They now had to work with and care for similar ex-fighters. On one occasion a staff member recognised a young boy who arrived in the centre as being the person who had murdered of her sister in front of her eyes. At such moments, the staff, overloaded with work, had to make time for each other so that their own feelings could be dealt with. In the end the staff member did choose to continue working in the centre.

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> "The staff had only limited training and were not prepared for the possibility of facing their aggressors." (senior Save the Children UK staff)

Meetings of the centre staff, and between the centre staff and management, played a central and vital role at the beginning. The centre in Virginia, about 30 minutes drive from Monrovia, had regular contact with the main office:

> "We both feel that we got enough support from the management. The programme manager visited the centre almost weekly and told us what to do, and what not to do. There were weekly staff meetings plus, if necessary, emergency meetings. They were useful because we, the staff, could do things wrong as well. For instance, if we used a wrong approach or lost our temper if a child was abusing other children or the staff." (former centre supervisor)

Since the Virginia transit centre was located closer to Monrovia than the other centres, the staff felt that they received enough support from the management. However, this closeness also caused problems (which could be undermining for the staff).

> "The suggestions made by the staff were taken into account by the management, for example, the management had too high expectations of the children. Another problem was that the children often went to headquarters to complain to the management. Therefore we asked the management not to pay attention to these boys." (centre supervisor)

The other centres were located further away from the main office. Numerous checkpoints and very bad road conditions meant that the centre at Gbarnga was one or two days' drive away. The journey to the other three centres in Voinjama, Zwedru and Greenville, could easily take three or four days. During the rainy season the roads became even worse. Therefore, if possible, visits were made by helicopter or aeroplane. Communication took place via SSB radio[12] or by post.

> "It was difficult to get information to the centres: it also depended on family tracing and reunification [FTR] teams, which travelled more often to Monrovia. However, there were some troubles between the people of the FTR teams and transit centres, [about] who should get preference."

The difficulties in communication and transportation meant that useful information and experiences gathered in those first few months in one centre could not be easily shared with the others. In general, the supervisors were able to travel to Monrovia once a month, but the junior centre staff – such as the caregivers, teachers and trainers – very seldom had the opportunity to share experiences with staff from other centres. This was also a period in which the quality of the record keeping about the centres and the development of the children was not good.

> "At the emergency phase, the documentation was very poor. No proper records were kept on the different services and there was not much communication between the different programmes of Save the Children UK." (community development staff)

As a former centre supervisor put it:

> "Reports were made on the whole group, not so much on individual children. And these reports were of a bad quality."

Another important issue, which influenced the whole programme, was the quality of the staff. As mentioned above, none of the staff members employed in the centre was experienced in working with these kinds of children. Most of the social workers in the centres were former teachers. As in other developing countries, the skills of qualified people can vary widely in Liberia. Working with ex-child soldiers demands, among other qualities, flexibility, creativity and an ability to function in the absence of strict guidelines. These qualities are not developed in the education system or daily work in Liberia. As a senior Save the Children UK member of staff put it:

"In Liberia meetings are more briefings than discussions."

We have looked at some of the issues for the staff who worked in the transit centres. The staff liked the work but at the same time it was not easy and they had to work under difficult situations. Below we look at what the young people thought about the staff.

5.6.1 What the young people thought about the staff

"I loved the staff at the centre because they encouraged and advised me. Although there were some people who I did not love. If I had a problem, I went to the carer because he was responsible for such things." (16-year-old, ex-transit centre)

The child soldiers would have experienced quite a change when they arrived in the centres. While with their factions, the only adults around for them to respect were their commanders. These commanders often misused the children. They were beaten, used for carrying heavy loads, used as spies and made to fight in the front line. They were taught not to respect civilians. Upon arrival in the centre, these children no longer had the power of their guns, nor did they have to be loyal to their commanders. They met a group of adults who were going to take care of them, help them and listen to them. Most of the children found this difficult to comprehend in the beginning. They were confused, suspicious and found it, as they described it, difficult to accept orders from civilians. After some time this changed and relationships were built.

What did these young people like about the staff? Out of two group discussions the following points were mentioned:

"They were nice. Everyone had his own favoured person. Often this was the room-mother or father."

"They gave us advice on all kind of things."

"They gave care and attention to us."

"They stopped the fighting in the centre."

"They slept in the centre."

"They made sure that the food was on time."

"The recreation officer was good on the line of sports."

"They provided us with some money."

"And they talked to you in a nice way and gave advice."

During individual interviews with these young people, more personal aspects of why they liked the staff, were mentioned:

"I liked those who could hold me." (18-year-old, ex transit centre)

"The staff were living with us and shared among us." (15-year-old, ex transit centre)

"Our social worker talked about the future, what I really liked." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

(n=21, 1 no response, more than one answer possible)
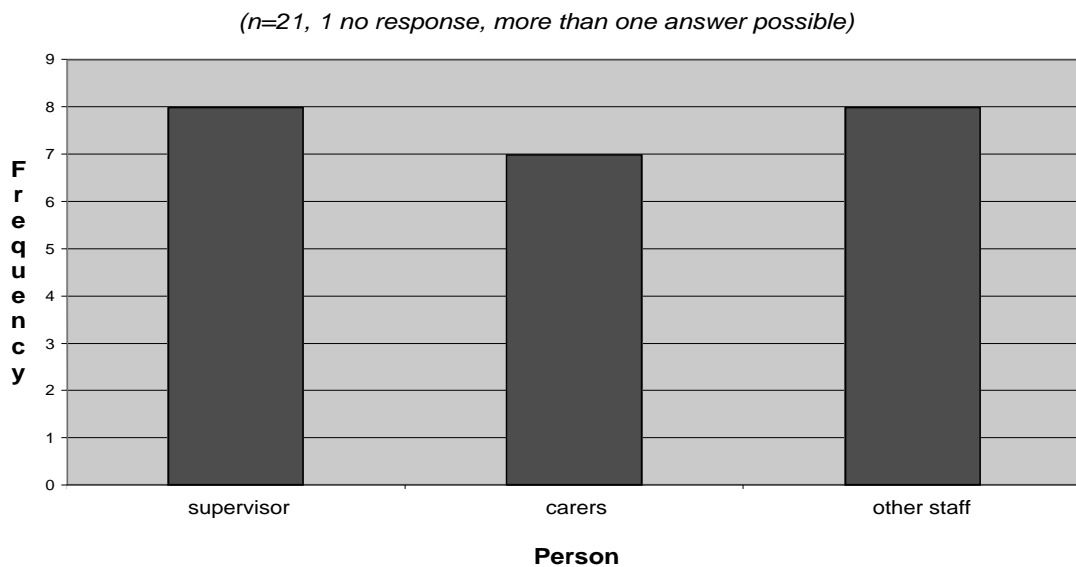
Figure 7 shows the person these children chose to go to if there were problems. We see that the chosen people were equally divided between:

- the supervisor of the centre

    "When I got sick or I was in need of something he helped me." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

- the caregivers or 'father' and 'mother'

    "I went to the caregiver. He was my room father. He helped me by giving some small money." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

- other staff members, like the recreational trainer or a teacher

    "I really liked the literacy teacher, but if I had problems I went to the agriculture teacher." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

The children all selected their own favourite staff member; the person they felt was helping them or listened to their problems. The young people felt that the staff took them seriously; a response that during the war was only achieved by pointing a gun at someone. Some of the young people commented on whether or not they felt the staff took them seriously and listened to their problems:

    "The harassment by the bigger boys over the smaller ones was handled by the staff." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

    "Because I was serious I could interact with the staff well." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

    "We often told the supervisor about our problems." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

    "The staff listened to the problems of the boys, especially to those who were obedient and somehow understanding. But in general, the staff listened to problems of the boys and attached some seriousness in resolving such problems." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

In general, the staff tried to help the children with their problems and requests, though of course, not all problems could be resolved. Delays in the arrival of new provisions could lead to serious conflicts between the staff and the children. This could easily bring about riots and false allegations of staff selling provisions for their own benefit. It also tempted the supervisor or other staff members to make promises that could not be kept, just to calm down the boys. In the end this only caused even more problems.

> "Although they helped us and talked to us, they did not always give us what we requested for. And sometimes the supervisor promised us something he never fulfilled." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

The children too misused the situation for their own gain, as we see in the following example:

> "They fired one staff member because of misbehaviour to the children. So we blackmailed the caregivers to give more, otherwise we would accuse them." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

To conclude this section we will look at some aspects the young people did not like about the staff. There were a few categories the young people complained about. First there was the consistently recurring accusation about the staff taking the centre's provisions for their own use:

> "The staff were not fair about supplies. They sold supplies for themselves, in particular the caregivers."

> "The security officer took food and oil for his own use."

> "The home-head did not give the rice back to us, which the big boys had stolen." (group discussion)

Another complaint of these young people was that not all staff intervened if there was fighting going on in the transit centre. In particular, the young children felt themselves victims of these fights:

> "One staff member did not intervene if there was fighting."

> "There was too little control at night-time."

> "The older and bigger boys behaved in a bad way and the staff did not change it."

> "In absence of staff, the bigger boys were beating the smaller ones." (group discussion)

One young man makes a serious accusation:

> "But sometimes they threatened us that we would be removed from the centre." (18-year-old, ex transit centre)

To some extent this is understandable from the staff's perspective. These children had to live together and follow the rules and regulations. Bad behaviour of one child could easily influence other children. Threatening to exclude children from school also happens in the Western world. The difference is, however, that these transit centres were more than schools. They were the children's (temporary) homes and they had no other place to go, except back to their former commanders.

Another complaint was more about Save the Children UK than about the staff, and related to the organisation's failure to follow up the young people after their reunification, as promised:

> "After my reunification Save the Children UK promised to return but never did." (group discussion)

A final problem mentioned was that some children were transferred several times from one centre to another. This happened to children who were disarmed far from their home, and were transferred to centres closer to home to increase their chances of reunification. In addition, when the first centres were closed, children who had still not been reunified were moved to the Virginia Centre.

> "I found it difficult to move from one centre to another each time." (group discussion)

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Every time they moved, the children had to leave behind old friends and make new friends and build new relationships with the staff.

5.7 Towards institutionalisation?

> "I stayed in the transit centre for more than five months." (17-year-old, ex-transit centre)

> "I stayed there, in the centre, for about a year." (18-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I stayed for more than two years in the centre." (20-year-old, ex-transit centre)

Despite the fact that the transit centres were initially set up as a short-term measure, many children stayed much longer than was anticipated. As far as the duration of stay goes the children can be divided into three groups:

- Approximately one-third of ex-child soldiers stayed only a brief period in the centre; from one or two weeks to about two months. Some returned to their commanders, some left with family members who were also ex-soldiers but demobilised later on in the DDR process. Some were close to their place of birth and were recognised and collected by family members, and others had detailed information about the identity and location of their parents and could be reunified quickly.

- One-third stayed in the centres for any period between two months and one year. Their reunification took longer, either because they came from places a long distance from the centre or which were difficult to access, or because their parents were still refugees. Some were afraid to go back and did not give correct information about their parents. Only after sufficient rapport had been built and they were confident enough about their acceptance, did these children confide the information so that the FTR team could start to search for their relatives.

- The last one-third of the ex-child soldiers who stayed in the transit centres were the most difficult to reunite. For similar reasons as the second group, their reunification could take anywhere between one and more than two years. To these children the transit centre became their home and the staff of the centre their family. The interim care had become institutionalised care. A small proportion of this last group had not been able to return home at all. They were living by themselves in a group home, or, for those non-reunified ex-child soldiers from Sierra Leone, in a Sierra Leonean refugee camp.

It is an anathema for Save the Children UK to create and run institutions. The organisation's policy on institutional care states that Save the Children UK believes that a child develops more fully within a stable family environment and so works to ensure that all children living outside the family unit are reunited with their immediate or extended families whenever possible. It is also important to remember that the responsibility for the care of children does not always lie solely with their parents. Throughout sub-Saharan Africa, for example, children are seen as the responsibility of the wider family and as a result, the extended family is very important. This may result in a child being reunited with an uncle or cousin if the parent(s) cannot be found (Schembri, 1997).

A senior Save the Children UK member of staff, who grew up in Liberia, subscribed to the above statement that the children are not the sole responsibility of their parents, and explained about the specific situation in Liberia:

> "It is common practice in Liberia to give your child to a [extended] family member for several years, if that person is more financially capable of raising up your child. Although the child will be treated not completely like his or her own children, for

instance this child might go to a worse school as compared to his own children, it is thought that the child is still better off. The relationship between the child and the biological parents, however, is not broken and it is the expectation of the biological parents that they will benefit from this as well. But in Liberia there has also been a long history with 'institutions': mainly the missionary schools. Here, the children stayed full time and went home only at the holiday period."

This raises the question; to what extent could institutionalisation have been prevented, when it became clear that the majority of the children were staying for more then two months in the centre? In other words, were there alternatives for those children who stayed in the transit centre for a long time, and if so, why were they not realised?

"The institutionalisation of these children should have been prevented, some children stayed for over two years in the centres. Foster care and far more involvement of the community could have been the alternatives." (education officer)

6. The transition from military live to civilian life – the role of the transit centres

Key points from this section
- The transit centres aimed to assist ex-child soldiers to move from a military to a civilian life by providing a 'normalising', loving environment, offering education and training and creating space for young people to talk about their experiences.
- All the young people interviewed felt that they changed during their stay in the centre, mostly adapting their behaviour, such as stopping fighting or smoking cigarettes and marihuana. The things that contributed towards this were: the 'tough love' regime, living in a family setting, children's participation, counselling, the education and vocational training and recreation.
- Elements of family life were integrated into the centre structure with caregivers being referred to as 'parents' and older boys as 'brothers'. This helped protect younger children from being bullied by older ones, and allowed children to express grievances. The sense of belonging to something broke down links to the command structures.
- The children were encouraged to take responsibility for themselves; they decided on their own rules and monitored them. Young people also elected presidents from among the groups.
- There was no formal counselling or debriefing of the young people. This took place informally during daily religious assembly, through one-to-one discussion with members of staff, and by talking to each other.
- The major problems in the centres were fighting – especially between boys of different factions – and bullying of younger boys by older boys. Other problems highlighted were theft and drug abuse.
- The centres provided an accelerated education course. Local community children attended, increasing the acceptance of the centres, and assisting the reintegration of the centre children. The educational level of the children was low; they had missed school and the Liberian schools had been disrupted during the war. The education was highly valued by the young people in the centre.
- Vocational training in agriculture, carpentry and home economics aimed to teach basic skills, build self-confidence and keep the ex-child soldiers busy. As with education, the vocational courses were highly valued by the young people interviewed, especially the agriculture training. Practitioners criticised the training for being too basic – especially for those young people who stayed for a long time in the centres – and for not being tailored towards local needs.

6.1 A new environment

This section looks at how the young people felt when they first arrived in the transit centres. Most of the young people did not know what to expect before they arrived. For many it must have been a big step to go to such a centre, especially if their

commanders had misinformed them about the nature of the centres. Some children refused to go until their peers convinced them.

> "Even after the staff came to me, I did not want to go to the centre. It was only after my friend, who was staying in the centre already, encouraged me to come that I came." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

Others did go by themselves after they heard about the centre.

> "One of my friends told me about the centre. I was living in the community at that time but I did not go to school. I explained to the staff of the centre that I was not attending school so they accepted me. I was happy because I did not have to pay for my school fees now." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

The majority of the children were identified at the disarmament site. Some were living in the community and were identified and informed about the centres by the social workers.

> "The supervisor saw me and asked about my parents. I did not know about them so he wanted to take me to the centre. He said that there were many friends. Later, in Greenville, my father looked for me." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

Some of the young people were in the centre before it was properly up and running.

> "I was the first boy together with one other boy. There was only a caregiver. The room for the supervisor was not yet ready."(19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "After demobilisation I went to Zwedru for one week but because the centre was not yet operating, I went to Virginia and stayed there for one year. After that I went to Greenville for another 3 years, including a year of scholarship. I went to Greenville because that was the place I came from." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

Figure 8: What were their feelings on arrival at the transit centre?

(n=16, 6 no answer)
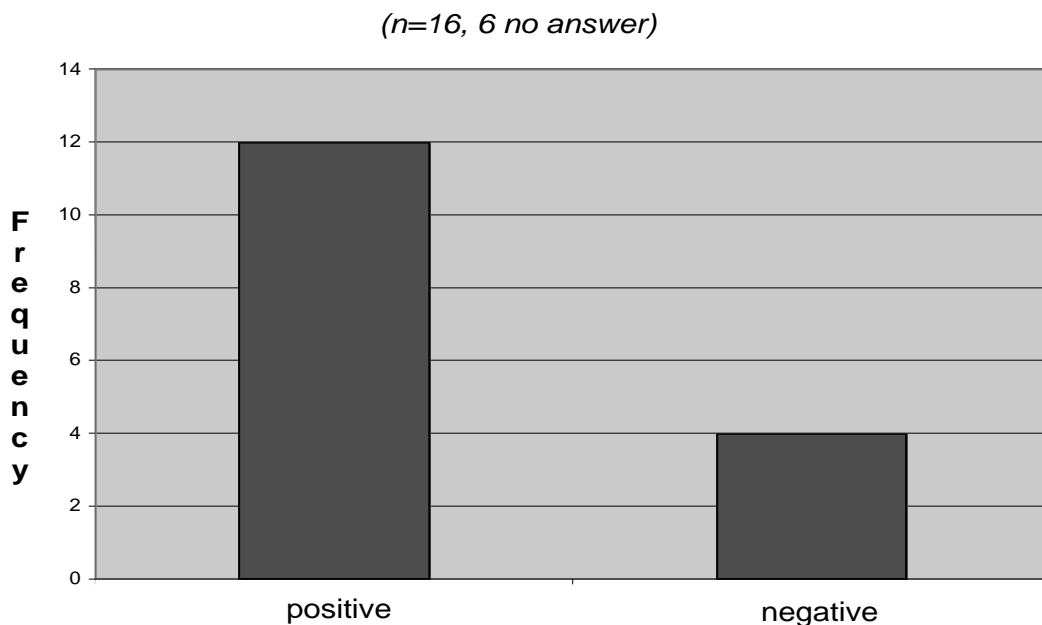
Figure 9: Did they feel safe on arrival at the transit centre?

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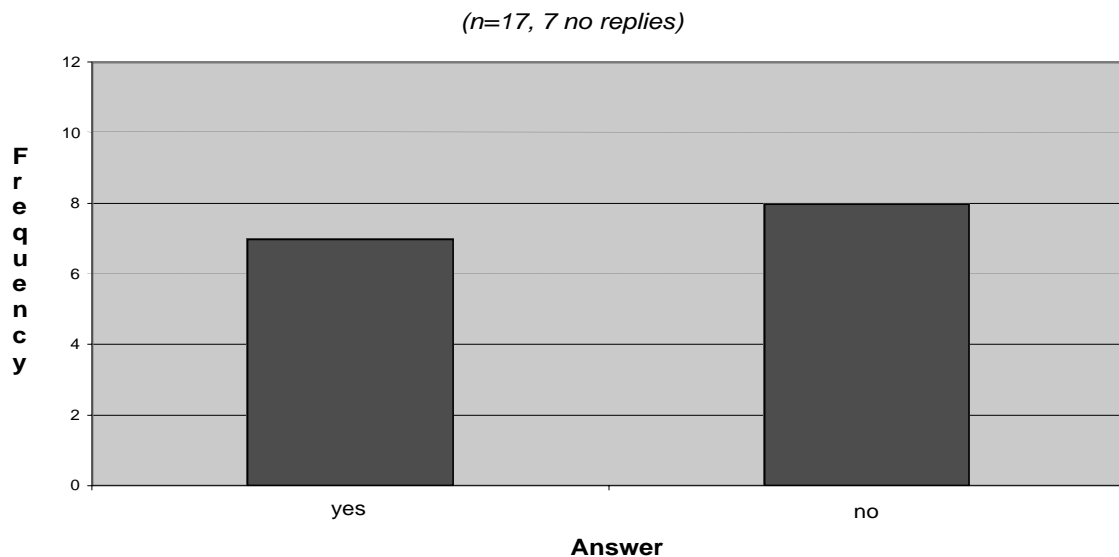
Figures 8 and 9 give insight into how the children felt when they arrived in the centres. Figure 8 shows their overall impression; did they have a positive or negative feeling about this new place? Almost three-quarters of the young people who responded felt that they had arrived in a good place. Several reasons were given; some were to do with the place itself, but for many it was the realisation that their difficult life in the army was behind them. The remaining quarter of the young people did not consider their arrival in the centre as a positive thing at the beginning. The most obvious reason was that they did not feel safe when they arrived. Figure 9 shows that (of those who answered) more children felt unsafe than safe. For most of these it was just the uncertainty of arriving in a new place. As soon as they started to make friends these feelings went.

> "I was feeling bad. But more children were there that were my friends and I made new friends." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "In the beginning we were scared." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I did not feel safe when I arrived but they gave me a room and the boys were in the yard. As soon as I saw my old comrades I felt better." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I was happy when I heard about the place. When I arrived, because I did not know the place, I was not feeling safe. But after some days I felt more comfortable." (15-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I was happy because they gave me slippers. I did not feel safe because I did not know anybody there. But after one week I felt better." (18-year-old, ex transit centre)

One young man refers specifically to the fact that other boys belonged to a different faction. Although from a perspective of reintegration and reconciliation it was a good strategy to put children from different factions together in one centre, it was a frightening and strange situation for the children. Here they had to live with their former enemies:

> "When I entered the centre I met boys from different factions like LPC and ULIMO-K and J which made me a bit afraid. I was the only NPFL boy among the group. But I was impressed by the centre and its location." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

Another reason for the young people to be afraid, had to do with the uncertainty about the nature of the centre. Most of them were used to moving around freely in the community and doing what they wanted. To what extent was this life over?

> "I was feeling lonely, there were only four other boys living there. And the place was separated from the community and new. But later I felt happy." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "Initially I was disappointed. The area was different. I did not like the place in the beginning. Later on, when we started to play football I began to like it." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "In the beginning it was confusing because we were used to being free and could walk around. After two weeks it felt more comfortable. You know, in war time sometimes they keep people behind fences. But me and my brother were together in the centre." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "At first I was afraid and not happy because I did not know for sure what they were going to do with me." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I was not used to the place, everything was new." (18-year-old, ex transit centre)

However, a considerable group indicated that they did feel safe when they arrived. They might have arrived in a group or immediately have seen old friends, or they may have noticed the good things in the centre, like football or similar children to themselves in classes. Others felt that a place where they gave out clothes, slippers and free food could only be a good thing.

> "I was feeling fine. I arrived in daytime and I saw my friends in school." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I met friends from Sinoe county and they welcomed me during devotion and they introduced themselves. The social workers were patient. I felt good because there was a lot of attention on education." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I was happy because I did not know where my parents were." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I was happy and I met a lot of friends there. The staff informed me about the programme." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I was happy. The supervisor lectured me and introduced me to the boys. They were in school because it was nine o'clock in the morning." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I felt happy because I got a mattress and I saw my friends." (14-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I was happy because there was no more war. I saw my friends and I went to school." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I was feeling all right. It was a long journey back to my home country. So I was happy to rest for a while." (16-year-old, ex transit centre)

These observations are important for future programming. Projects working with ex-child soldiers need to establish how to give new arrivals a warm and confidence-building welcome, both to prevent children running away from the centre, and to encourage others who need help to go to the centre. When a new person arrived, the staff gave reassurances about the aims of the centre and explained the rules and activities. The child was shown around, either by a staff member or another child. The child's details were taken and his or her physical needs, such as clean clothes and slippers, were fulfilled.

6.2 Preparation for a return to civilian life – the role of the centres

This section looks at the different approaches used in the transit centres to help ex-child soldiers in their transition from a military to a civilian life. It starts with the

young people's perspective on whether and how they had changed during their time in the transit centres. It goes on to explore the services that were put in place and identifies some of the recurring problems in the centres, linked to the behaviour of the children.

Background to the philosophy of the centres

Save the Children UK has been critical of approaches for working with ex-child soldiers that are based on models of psychiatric disorder, such as post traumatic stress disorder. These are increasingly recognised as being culturally specific (Bracken and Petty, 1998). In this case, Save the Children UK did not aim to use formal debriefing to force children to 'confront' their experiences as fighters. Rather, the approach was to provide a supportive and 'normalising' environment in which they were free to talk about their past experiences and express their worries about the past, present and future, to a person of their own choice, as and when they chose to. As a senior member of staff put it:

> "There was no formal counselling going on. And 'informal counselling' took place only on insistence of the children themselves. The children built up a relationship with their carers and if they wanted to talk with them they could do it, often on a one-to-one basis."

As this young interviewee said:

> "I talked about my experiences in the war with the other boys and with our sports coach at the centre. We were more used to him than to the other staff of the centre. He really treated us nice." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

It is also important to understand the connotations of the word 'counselling' in Liberia. As with the word 'trauma', it was used by the children, staff, elders, teachers and chiefs in many different settings and with various meanings. For most of these people, counselling meant giving advice or just talking about problems and listening, as we can see in the following example:

> "When I was reunified with my mother, the tracer counselled me to behave well and respect my mother." (19-year-old, ex-transit centre)

When the children referred to counselling that took place in the centres, they were describing this broader sense of the word; talking, listening, giving advice, helping with problems, etc. Depending on the specific staff member they were talking to, it might have had a more or less 'therapeutic' character, but formal counselling sessions did not take place.

6.2.1 Did they feel that they changed?

The transition from a violent and military life to a civilian life can be a difficult process. For those ex-child soldiers who went straight home after disarmament it was expected that their parents, family, community, teachers and religious leaders would help in this transition. However, for those children who did not know the whereabouts of their parents or family, the centre had to take on this role. It was one of the objectives of the centres to provide a caring and 'normalising' environment in which children were safe while their families were traced. In Chapter 8 we will explore the extent to which these ex-child soldiers had reintegrated into Liberian society. Here we will look at whether the centre helped in that transition, including asking the staff and the young people if and how they changed during their time in the transit centres.

All young people interviewed felt that they had changed during their stay in the transit centre. For most children this meant a change in behaviour, for example, stopping fighting and smoking.

> "I used to like fighting; if there was a person doing bad things to me I would easily start to fight with the person. But due to the advice of the supervisor I changed." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "Everything changed for me while I was in the centre. That was because of the church and the praying." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I changed because of the talking. In the beginning I was beating small children. And in the beginning I could not sit in a group and I did not want to stay for more than a few minutes." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "My mind was disturbed and I was a big man with the rebels. Now I am different." (15-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I smoked during the war and abused older people, but I stopped doing all this at the centre. The staff members advised me to stop smoking and behave well. But the elders in the community too helped me. And the sport and education activities." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "Before the war I did not like school. I preferred football. But at the centre I took an interest in education." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "The staff gave advice and in the end they trusted me. The advice and the education were really helping me." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "That time I came from the bush and I was rude. Now I respect the people. The counsellor gave advice every day." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

The change in behaviour was also something recognised by the staff.

> "In the beginning, when they arrived, the boys were wild. There were conflicts between the community and the children; vegetable products went missing in the community. This was solved by talking to the community and to the children. And there were also 'faction fights' in the Virginia Centre. In this centre there were children from all factions. I think this is better, although it is also more difficult." (recreational teacher)

Things, however, changed for the better, including the relationship with the community.

> "In the end, the children of the Virginia Centre were sleeping in the community, the community did formal and informal 'counselling' with the centre children, and the children went side by side with adults of the community. Another important aspect was that those children in the centre already for a longer time had a positive influence on the behaviour of the new arrivals." (senior Save the Children UK staff)

According to the former recreation officer of one of the transit centres, the activities that made a real difference to the behaviour of the children were:
- the sport and recreational activities because they also enabled the children to build bridges with the community children
- the 'counselling'
- the catch-up education.

This was described by the following young man:

> "A number of changes took place while at the centre. There were positive changes in our behaviour and attitudes. The centre helped us to forget about our fighting life. The catch-up education, trade and recreation helped me in moving on with my life and made me to forget about my war. What helped me the most was the school and the help of the staff." (19-year-old, ex-transit centre)

According to both young people and former staff, the transit centres had a positive impact on the behaviour of the children and helped in the transition from military to civilian life. Below we look at aspects in the centres which helped in this process of change.

6.2.2 'Tough love'

The Save the Children UK staff in Liberia developed what they called the 'tough love' approach. This was based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, but at the same time taking account of the social and cultural approach to raising children in Liberia. The 'tough love' approach was not so much a manual detailing what to do or how to act in specific situations, but rather it was the guiding principle for helping these children to developing social skills and emotional wellbeing. This guiding principle was found useful by both the staff and the children.

> "In some centres up to 50 rules were made by children, including rules to prevent the breakdown of the 'tough love' approach." (senior Save the Children UK staff)

The 'tough love' approach was executed by all the staff members, from the night guard and the cook to the caregivers and supervisors. The supervisor of one of the centres described it as follows:

> "In the beginning there was no clear direction in how to handle these children. So the 'tough love' approach was developed: 'no matter what you did or do, we still love you.' But you as a child had to work on yourself. And the interesting thing about this was that the 'tough love' approach was also influencing and spreading into the community: the community changed their views and behaviour towards these children."

The 'love' element in this approach was based on the idea that these children had to get used to the idea that someone valued and cared for them. As the recreational teacher explained:

> "'Tough love' is unconditional love. Love that you do not give to ordinary persons, but you give it to these children. Whatever they did, you still love them. But it is not just giving, it is also explaining."

The 'tough' element in the approach said that gaining love and respect must be a mutual process; the children were constantly reminded and encouraged to change their often violent and disrespectful behaviour and to work hard towards a more peaceful and respectful life. They were also encouraged to respect themselves.

> "'Tough love' was a special approach. It was disciplining you by loving you. You are a child so we love you, but only if you love yourself and have self-respect." (senior Save the Children UK staff)

All activities contributed to the 're-socialisation' of the children. As one young person described:

> "The supervisor of the centre encouraged me to study and he constantly advised me to forget about the war and to stop smoking." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

The sports activities had a 'tough love' and 're-socialisation' element as well. As the former recreational officer of one centre put it:

> "Due to the sport activities the children learned to accept defeat. These children never wanted to lose. And they also became more tolerant through playing sports: if someone wanted to take revenge for some action the other boys and staff told him to forget about it."

6.2.3 Living in a 'family'

To facilitate the transition from a military to a civilian life, and to prepare for reunification with parents and reintegration into the community, some elements of family life were built into the centres. For example, the children lived in different groups with each group having a caregiver who was called their 'father' or 'mother'. The supervisor of the Virginia centre explained their slight variation on this concept:

> "The family setting was copied in the centre. The 'father' was the member of staff. The oldest boy, the 'big brother' was in charge of a group of ten to 15 children and all problems had to be passed through him. The rest of the group were the children."

This family structure also provided a way of looking after the smaller children. One of the main concerns expressed by the smaller children during a group discussion was the bullying and fighting of the bigger children.

> "To pay attention to the needs of the younger children in the centre this family structure was put in place, so that the bigger children could help the smaller ones and took responsibility. And of course the staff also looked after them." (centre supervisor)

This structure, however, offered no guarantee that bullying would not take place. In that way it was the same as outside the centre where these things also happen.

> "Sometimes the smaller boys just had to learn to accept the bad things of the bigger boys, but the staff always taught those bigger boys not to do this." (centre staff)

The family structure enabled children to express their grievances more easily. If there were problems they could be discussed first with their roommates and their 'father', 'mother' or 'big brother', rather than saying it in front of all children and staff.

> "At the centre they listened to us. When the staff did something wrong we told them and they listened to us. And we listened to them. We had a family structure at the centre that helped a lot with this. What I have learned in the centre will help me in the future." (18-year-old, ex-transit centre).

This system was also helpful for the staff, as it meant there was an attempt to resolve problems among the children, rather than always going directly to the supervisor. In all the centres there were:

> "…weekly discussions in which possible conflicts between the children and between the children and the staff were discussed. This was all documented. It would have come down hard on the staff if they had made mistakes. Therefore accusations of the children were always checked and tried to be resolved first in the group. In fact there were three levels of discussion: children met among themselves (with room-supervisor); president brought information to the staff; staff meeting."[13]

Beyond this, there was also a psychosocial element to the structure.

> "There was one 'parent' for each group who took the responsibility for 'his' or 'her' children. This increased the sense of belonging to something else than the command structure." (Save the Children UK staff)

The disadvantage of this family structure was the risk of children and staff becoming attached to each other in what was essentially a temporary situation. The challenge was to provide security and emotional support, while communicating the fact that the programme was working to reunify children into their own families and communities. This relationship could raise unreasonable expectations for the young people. Some of them – one or two years after they had left the centre – still spoke about their 'father' or 'mother' in the centre. However, only a few still had contact with these former 'parents'.

The family structure also contributed to the children making friends. For many children their roommates became their first friends in the centre. If we look at the responses to the question about whether they made friends with the other children in the centre, we see that most of the children mentioned their roommates.

> "My first friends were my roommates." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

Some children also mentioned their caregiver.

> "I made friends in the centre, but first with my roommates and my 'father'." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

A lot of time was spent with the roommates, although other activities also contributed to making friend.

> "I first made friends with my roommates and later I met the other boys during the sport activities." (15-year-old, ex transit centre)

Soon the children made a lot of friends in the centre.

> "It was easier after some time. I just introduced myself." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "After some time it was easier to make new friends because I started to know them better." (18-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I got many friends in class." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "We played football in the centre and so we made new friends." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

6.2.4 Child participation

Child participation is a very important principle in Save the Children UK's programmes. The principle recognises the ability of children to have sensible ideas and make constructive contributions, something that is often severely underestimated. If programmes are developed to help children, then the children should be involved in their design, development and implementation. This section explores how this was implemented in the transit centres, by looking at the different aspects of child participation. First, we have seen that through the family structure children were more able to express their thoughts, ideas and worries. Second, it was felt that by letting the children take responsibility for their own actions and behaviour this would be more likely to promote the transition from a violent to a more peaceful way of life than if the staff gave orders and told them what to do and what not to. Therefore the centre children made most of the rules, as well as the punishments for breaking those rules. Third, in some centres boys elected representatives amongst themselves called presidents.

Most of the young people felt that the staff took them seriously and listened to their suggestions, although this did not mean that the staff were always able to act on all their suggestions.

> "They bought a new football if we needed one." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "They were quite understanding." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "Sometimes we wanted to go in town for a game and the staff made it possible." (16-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "Not all the staff listened to us, only some did." (18-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "Regarding the sports they took our suggestions into account but for other aspects not always." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "Sometimes they agreed with us and sometimes they did not." (15-year-old, ex transit centre)

A group discussion with some former centre young people described this third aspect of child participation:

> "We, the children, voted for our own leaders. But if we voted for you to be our 'president', and you were not a good one, you were dismissed."

According to former staff this was a highly specified system:

> "A whole structure was created. The children elected a president for the group, a room supervisor, a chaplain, and it was decided who would cook and when. This was all the young people's idea. And there was a rotation of leadership, every three months new elections were held."

Some of the young people interviewed told with pride in their voices, that they were elected president of a transit centre, often as a result of their good behaviour.

> "In the beginning, because I was living with a lady that gave me food, I did not want to go to the transit centre, but than, when I was at the centre for some time I start to like it and I even became the president of the centre." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

The children made their own rules.

> "All the laws were made by us, the boys. Only the 'bath-rule' was made by the staff. The staff and the elected president had to supervise the rules." (group discussion)

Of course the rules, and the punishments for breaking the rules, were supervised by the staff.

> "Children made their own laws and decided for themselves what kind of punishment would be in place when a law was broken. Often the punishment was not having a meal or to do some cleaning activities. Sometimes the punishment chosen was too hard and the staff had to intervene. For instance, the children wanted to beat someone if he had broken the rule, but of course that was not allowed." (group discussion, staff)

If rules were broken – such as not coming to lessons, going out at night, coming home late or bringing girls to the centre – a punishment was given. The use of abusive language or assaulting the staff was also punished. However, according to this group discussion among young people, the punishments also could have a negative impact:

> "If they withdrew our food as a punishment, this made us go out of the centre into the community to steal food."

Allowing the children to make their own rules and punishments meant that they learned that they had rights, but also responsibilities.

> "We linked the rights to responsibilities. They had to understand that they also had responsibilities, such as: cook their own food; make their own beds; clean the spaces; co-operate; look after their bodies. In the end the children introduced a competition 'Who is 'shining'?' to discuss how to keep clean, wash clothes, brush teeth, and cut hair."[14]

6.2.5 The 'counselling'

> "'Devotion' was the trauma counselling in the African style, that means, talking about respect and good and bad. There were no trained counsellors in the centre, only social workers." (former centre supervisor)

No formal counselling sessions or debriefings with the children took place. However, during 'devotion', the first activity in the morning, issues about the war and their experiences were discussed sometimes.

> "Every morning there was an hour devotion class in which the children talked about their experiences and sang songs." (caregiver)

The activity of 'devotion' had a very practical element to it; centre rules were discussed and daily announcements were made and there were morning prayers. Officially, these prayers should have been both Muslim as well as Christian, but in reality it depended on the religion of the different staff members. In most centres the praying had a predominantly Christian character.

> "In the Virginia centre the children asked for a pastor to exorcise the evil spirits, because during the war many children had charms for protection. But we never involved a *Zo*."[15] (former centre supervisor)

Beyond its practical aspects, the activity of 'devotion' was also part of the ongoing process of psychosocial help and advice by the staff.

> "The staff listened to our complaints and grievances. If there was any problem we discussed it and it was settled. At devotion we prayed, sang songs and had these discussions." (19-year-old, ex-transit centre)

'Devotion' was a good but early start to the day.

> "During 'devotion' we prayed and thanked God, but it was too early in the morning." (young people, group discussion)

Other activities taking place in the centre – for instance some of the recreational activities, like drama and theatre – also had this dual character. On the one hand they were fun and entertaining, on the other they were aimed to help the children socially, emotionally and spiritually. The recreational teacher of one of the centres described these activities:

> "The drama and theatre in the centre was in some ways therapeutic: there were plays about temptation in which there was a good spirit and a bad spirit, for instance. It was an opportunity for the children to reflect on their past, by seeing themselves acting and seeing what was wrong. They could express what they had in mind."

As the supervisor of another centre put it::

> "Activities were kept to sensitise the boys about their behaviour: role plays, debates with children in which they had to make choices by dividing themselves for or against, democratic talks about different issues to find out what made sense and what did not, by children putting themselves in place of another person."

In addition to these group activities, many children chose their own favourite staff member with whom they had individual conversations.

> "Sometimes I talked about the war just with one other person and sometimes we discussed it in a group." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

These conversations were about their experiences in the war as well as about their worries and fears for their future.

> "I did not like it to discuss it with others because they can do something against you.'" (19-year-old, ex transit centre).

The staff members were prepared for this.

> "Staff was trained not to be too emotional if a child was telling about the different atrocities he or she committed. If you are friendly, the child can open up about the war. It is good to talk about it, for these children to have an opportunity to share their experiences with others. But the staff members promised to keep the confided information to themselves." (former centre supervisor)

As we saw in Figure 7, the children's choices for their favourite members of staff to go to if there were problems, were divided equally between supervisors, caregivers and other staff.

From this it can be seen that when the children were free to choose whom they wanted to talk and discuss problems with, they did not always choose a 'professional', like a caregiver. Moreover, the children also chose to talk with each other about their lives and worries.

> "I only talked to my friends about the war while I was in the transit centre." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

Western visitors and journalists were also mentioned.

> "I told it to the supervisor and the coach. But also to two white people who came here at the campus and wanted to know what happened during the war." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

The Virginia centre was located close to Monrovia, and therefore journalists visited this centre more often than any other. At one point, the children had to be protected against too many visits from these journalists and other visitors.

> "The children felt betrayed by these journalists, they felt exposed." (former centre supervisor)

To conclude this section it is important to emphasise that the worries and problems these children had were not only on the emotional and spiritual level, but often practical. When asked why they chose the person with whom they talked, they replied that he or she was friendly or helpful and proved to be a good listener. However, they also chose people who could help with getting small practical items, such as copybooks, soap or slippers, in time of personal need.

> "I went to the caregiver if I had any problems. If I was hungry or in need of slippers he could give me something." (19-year-old, ex-transit centre)

6.2.6 Behaviour of the children

To monitor the psychosocial progress of the children, Save the Children UK staff kept weekly behavioural monitoring sheets on all the children. The social workers (the caregivers) made notes about the behaviour of each child. Progress and setbacks were identified, as well as specific problems. If children were moved to another centre these sheets were taken with them. These documents can give us more insight into the behaviour of the children and to some of the problems the staff dealt with. Unfortunately the sheets are too basic to use for an in-depth analysis of the different psychosocial problems the children may have had.

Case study 'A'

- October 1997 – 'A' is a very stubborn child. He never wants to take instructions and feels that he is too big to obey the staff. He is interested in school, listens to the teachers and participates in the morning devotion sessions on a regular basis. He takes care of his wearing and observes the hygienic rules.
- November 1997 – 'A' has now decided to give the correct information about himself; he has given his name and the name and place of his parents.

- December 1997 – 'A' seems to be active these days; always looking like a gentleman and he is active in the vocational area.
- January 1998 – 'A' has taken special interest in carpentry. He never misses a class. He is very easy going but loves to go out during the night.
- February 1998 – 'A' is still the same. His primary concern is about his education and reunification.
- March 1998 – 'A' has good leadership capacities. He is now the 'president' [elected leader] of the children in his group.

We can see that the child arrived as a stubborn child. Because of lack of trust he kept information about himself and his family secret. However, throughout the weeks he was changing; he became more open about himself and took an interest in carpentry. By the end he had changed and had become the leader of his group, though he was looking forward to reunification.

Case study 'B'

- November 1997 – 'B' is disrespectful to authority and he does not keep himself clean. He does not attend the classes on a regular basis.
- December 1997 – 'B's' behaviour is changing because of the advice we are giving him. But he still can be very rude. To the end of this month he became quieter.
- January 1998 – 'B' has taken interest in vocational training and in the catch-up education. But his relationship with the other boys has not yet improved.
- February 1998 – 'B' is not rude anymore. He even sometimes does things he hated before.
- March 1998 – 'B's' relatives were located and he has been reunified, together with his brother.

As with the boy of case study A, this boy too had changed during his stay in the transit centre. It is important to remember that the re-socialisation of these children was only one of the objectives of the transit centres. It was also important that this boy gained an interest in education and trade during his stay in the centre.

Case study 'C'

- October 1997 – 'C' appears to be a nice boy. He does not walk around during the night but he is involved in hunting and selling grapefruits for money.
- November 1997– His hunting and selling activities continue.
- December 1997 – It has been observed that 'C' can smoke cigarettes sometimes.
- January 1998 – 'C' still smokes but does not go out at night times.
- February 1998 – 'C' started to stay out of class and refusing to go to the vocational training.
- March 1998 – 'C' has a hernia and has been taken to Monrovia for surgery. There he has been reunified.

As we can see from this case study, it was not always the case that the children changed for the better. In some cases a transit centre – a place with so many children having lived such disturbed lives, and with new children constantly arriving – was not the ideal situation for the re-socialisation. The other children could influence both in a positive and a negative way.

Another problem was that many children had nightmares and were worried about the whereabouts of their parents.

> "In the beginning I was fighting a lot but then I was not fighting anymore. But I was worried about my mother." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

As this young person described:

> "I have still nightmares about my parents. That proves to me that they are not alive." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

This young person has created his own meaning for his dream, which may not correspond to that of a Western trained psychiatrist. However, it is in keeping with the view that most of the children in the centres manifested 'normal' responses to abnormal circumstances. The behaviour and responses of the vast majority of children did not provide evidence of underlying psychiatric disorder.

It is beyond the scope of this research to compare Save the Children UK's approach with that of other organisations working with ex-child soldiers. However, the information gathered from young people and their carers does suggest that the more holistic approach – without formal debriefing and counselling – together with a range of useful activities, such as the educational, vocational and recreational programmes, helped them to adjust their behaviour and facilitated the transition from military life to civilian life.

6.2.7 Problems in the centre

Given the context of the situation, it is hardly surprising that there were some problems in the centres. The centres brought together up to 50 children with the violent background of being former soldiers, with staff who had little experience of this situation and no clear guidelines on how to work and live with such children. In addition, the centres were located in an often hostile and suspicious community that was just beginning to recover from many years of war. There was also the ever present danger of re-recruitment by former commanders, and the fragile peace situation in the whole country. In this section some of the problems in the centres – like aggression, threats, drug use and bullying – will be discussed. The aim is to give a realistic picture of what happened in the transit centres.

Fighting
The biggest and foremost problem in the centres, for both staff and children, was the high level of aggression. Fighting between the children seemed to be a daily phenomenon. This started at the beginning.

> "At first the children were hostile and aggressive to each other as well as to the staff. One of the reasons for this was that they belonged to different factions. This aggressiveness resulted in fighting. The way the staff dealt with this was: they controlled their own emotions and talked and walked with the children. Often a tap on the shoulder would make them a bit calmer." (social worker in a centre)

Although it was a conscious decision by Save the Children UK to put children of different factions together in one centre, it did not make things easier, especially at the start.

> "Initially a lot of fighting took place because of the different factions in the centre. Later it changed but it took a long time." (former sports director)

The children too were sometimes afraid of this, and they admitted that a part of the fighting was caused by belonging to different factions.

> "The centre had a mixture of boys from different factions, with some boys from Sierra Leone. We did things in common and played together. But at times we had some misunderstandings among ourselves, but those were quickly settled by our carers." (19-year-old, ex-transit centre)

Fighting is to some extent normal for children of this age, but these ex-child soldiers were so used to fighting – and had learned to fight to kill or severely wound someone – that dangerous situations in the centres did occur.

> "The children used sharp materials in their fights. Therefore the children were searched and checked frequently and there was no glass in the windows and we

had to make sure that no sharp things were scattering around." (former centre supervisor)

According to a group discussion with some staff members:

"In the beginning more then 50 per cent of the time was spent on conflict resolution."

There was also fighting between the children in the centre and the children of the community. As we have seen, there was daily contact between these children during classes and recreational activities. Most often this went smoothly and helped with the transition process, but sometimes there were fights.

"Fights occurred between the community or school children and the children in the transit centre." (former supervisor) [16]

Bullying

Another problem, related to fighting, was the bullying of smaller children by bigger children. During a group session with mostly young ex-child soldiers who stayed in a transit centre the following remarks were made:

> "The older and bigger boys behaved bad towards us. Especially when the staff was absent. Then the bigger ones beat the smaller ones. There was even one staff member who did not intervene when there was fighting. And during the night-time there was too little control. They should have made sure that staff was always there.'

> "Sometimes the big boys had stolen something from the centre and then they accused us and we got the punishment."

Theft

Almost all the young people interviewed complained about the theft that occurred in the centre. Complaints were made against both other children and in some cases the staff, and clearly it was a serious problem. Items from the centre were stolen, for example, mattresses provided for the children to sleep on were sold within two weeks. Centre children were also accused of stealing items from the neighbouring community.

Drugs

Another major problem was drug abuse in the centre. During the war many child soldiers became used to taking drugs, including marihuana, alcohol, valium and crack-cocaine. These were often provided by their commanders, who either traded or raided hospitals for them.

> "During the war I was a captain. I drank and smoked." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

Although being out of the faction made access to drugs more difficult, it is an illusion to think that these children did not use drugs. In particular marihuana and palm wine were easy to get and were relatively cheap. Staff tried to discourage the use of this in all kinds of different ways, as we heard form this young man:

> "During the war I used drugs, was aggressive, had nightmares and I did not trust people. While at the centre we were discouraged from smoking and using drugs. A couple of times we watched movies on the danger of smoking and use of drugs." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

To conclude, one must not underestimate the dangerous and difficult situation in which staff had to work. It was not only the aggression and violence of the children they had to deal with daily, but also with the threat of commanders trying to visit the centres and influence the children. In some cases the children had sought a safe haven in the centre, having disarmed against the will of their commanders. Especially in the beginning the commanders were highly suspicious of the transit centres and sent out 'spies' to find out what was happening. Some children were still loyal to their commanders, and some went to their commanders daily to report what was going on in the centre and who was there. To illustrate the atmosphere immediately after disarmament; the children in the centre had surveyed the surrounding area to establish a good route of escape if necessary. In times of increased insecurity, already reunified children returned to hide in the transit centre. Clearly, the local staff should be commended for the difficult and dangerous job they took on in the transit centres.

6.3 Education in the centres

6.3.1 Introduction

As soon as Save the Children UK chose to provide interim care for ex-child soldiers, it began to provide regular daily activities including catch-up education or an 'accelerated learning programme'. This catch-up education was a daily component of life in all five centres. This section looks in detail at this innovative aspect of the transit centres.

6.3.2 Development of the catch-up education programme

The catch-up education started in the second half of 1996 at the Virginia centre in a very organic way. Save the Children UK had started with a group of ex-child soldiers who had been 'left behind' by another programme due to the uprising violence in 1996. The first Save the Children UK social worker recognised the lack of education that these children had suffered during the war and, with very basic materials – in the beginning no more than a few pens, some pieces of paper and some chalk – he taught a non-structured basic education programme in reading, writing and mathematics.

In March 1997 the Save the Children UK Education Officer started to restructure and improve the educational component in the three centres open at that time. Links were made with the Liberian Ministry of Education, and from this a revised catch-up education curriculum, based on a pre-existing six week enrichment programme, was developed. Partly due to these links the impact of the catch-up education curriculum developed by Save the Children UK spread beyond the transit centres.

Reflecting on their experience of education with these young people, the staff identified the following issues:
- Most of the children were too old, with too little educational experience to enrol smoothly into formal education and to have an academic career.
- Children could be divided into two groups: those who had some previous (irregular) education, up to Grade 5 or 6, and those who had no education at all.
- Older children with no educational background should focus more on vocational skills and the acquisition of some limited basic educational skills.
- Children were staying only for a limited time in the transit centre and therefore the curriculum should be compressed.
- Many of these children had serious problems with concentration and, therefore, the curriculum had to be flexible:
    - The children could comment on what they liked and did not like about the curriculum.
    - The children learned at their own pace; if they did not want to do something at any one time they could do something else for some time.
    - The children were stimulated by the freedom to explore freely around educational topics.

As a result of these observations, the curriculum design took the differences in educational level and the age of the children into account. A beginners and an advanced curriculum was designed with its basic literacy programme covering:

- reading
- writing
- arithmetic
- science
- social studies
- language
- arts.

The curriculum initially lasted for six weeks. Later this was expanded to six months to prevent repetition for those children staying longer in the transit centre. Soon the catch-up education activity became one of the core activities in the centre, valued by both staff and children. As Save the Children UK's Education Officer described:

> "The educational component was important in the daily life of the children in the centre because it was the central activity and took a large part of the day. It facilitated the normalisation of the children's lives."

One important consideration in the development of the catch-up education in the transit centres was whether there was an alternative; for example, could the children have been sent to community schools? Although these children needed a special curriculum, the same was true for many children in the community who had also missed several years of their education. Very soon Save the Children UK found itself in the difficult situation of (i) providing more long-term care for those children who could not be reunified quickly and (ii) running a form of alternative education or 'substitute' schools. However, according to senior staff, there was no real choice:

> "If there was something like a community school the children in the centre might have been able to go to that school. But most of the community schools ceased to function during the war and were not yet rebuilt. The schools that were still existing or had reopened were strongly associated with the church and had limited accessibility: only for those who had a higher level of education. Moreover, the curriculum existing in Liberia was very conservative and not adapted to this particular situation."

Sponsoring of community schools had been considered, but Save the Children UK felt that due to lack of financial and administrative capacity at community level this would not have been effective. Also there was a real danger of long-term involvement, making the community dependent on a foreign organisation for providing education.

6.3.3 Educational level of children

The rationale of the catch-up education curriculum was to develop a creative education programme which enables demobilised child ex-soldiers and other children who have missed years of educational opportunity to learn through a catch-up system. Before we find out what the children liked and did not like about the catch-up education, we will first look at the educational background of these ex-child soldiers.

Figure 10: Schooling levels achieved before the war

(n=27, 5 non-responses)
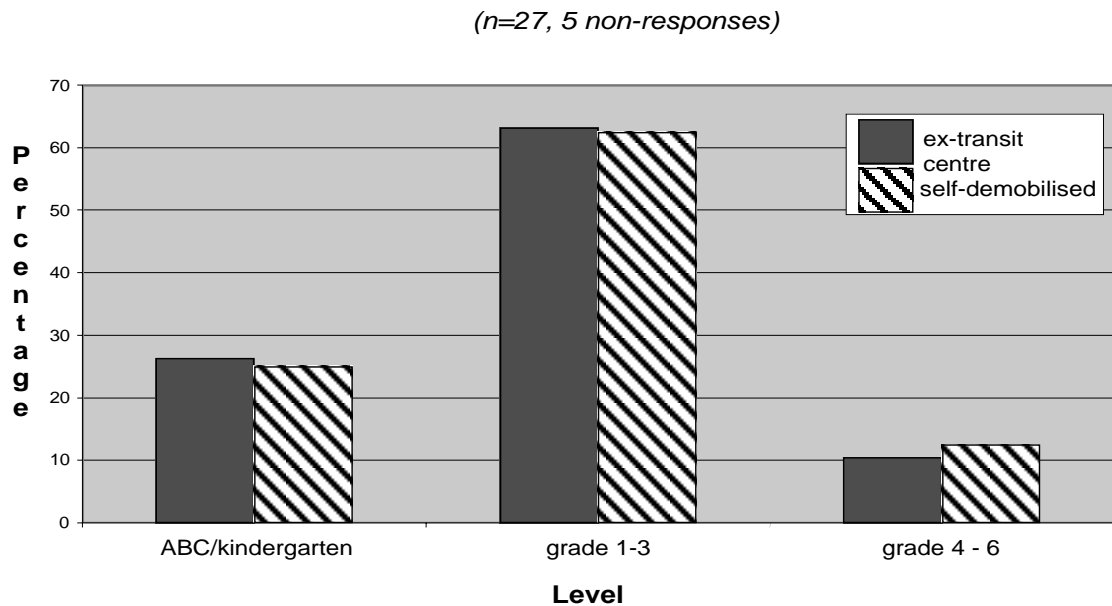
The educational levels of children in the centres varied, but could roughly be divided into two groups: those who had received some education in the past and those with very limited or no education at all. Of the 4,306 child fighters who passed through the demobilisation sites between November 1996 and February 1997, 82 per cent had attended school before the outbreak of war, the majority (just over 3,000) reaching elementary level. Seventy-seven percent wished to continue their education, and of those, ten per cent want to learn a trade. Almost 90 per cent of the interviewed children in transit centres had been to school before the war and all of the self-demobilised children had. However, if we look at the levels achieved it becomes clear why these children needed a special educational catch-up programme.

Figure 10 shows us the educational levels achieved before the war. The majority of the children, both transit centre young people and self-demobilised (slightly more than 60 per cent) stopped between Grade 1 and Grade 3. About 25 per cent of the children had been to Kindergarten. Only 12 per cent reached Grade 4–6 prior to the outbreak of the war.

> "As soon as my mother gave birth to my smaller brother I had to take care of him." (21-year-old, ex transit centre).

The low educational levels of the children can be explained by several factors; many children were conscripted at a young age and spent many years with the forces, so even if they had started to go to school they could not have reached far. Many schools ceased operating during the war, as schools were often the first target of a village attack or looting. However the most significant factor has nothing to do with the war itself. According to the director of an NGO:

> "In Liberia, before the war, children did not always start their education before they reached the age of 12 or 13."

This late start to education is especially the case for children living in remote villages with no schools. Taking into account the high number of children with no or very limited education, and the length of time since they last attended school, the need for some special basic education for all children becomes even clearer.

6.3.4 The catch-up education experienced by the children

The catch-up education was a central activity in the daily lives of the children and helped them with their transition from military to civilian life. In this section we will see how the children valued the education in the centre.

In general, education is valued highly in Liberia, not only by ex-child soldiers who missed out on their chances of education. A boy who had not been involved with the factions described:

> "What I really like is education, because if you work in the bush and you are grown old you have no power anymore. But if you are educated you are better off." (community boy)

For some young people the war has only increased their wish to be educated and to study as hard as possible.

> "I am 20 years. I am now in the ninth grade. Before the war I went to school but I stopped in the first grade. I restarted my education in '96. I feel that education is the key to life. If you are educated people cannot fool you.' (community boy)

More specifically for ex-child soldiers, 77 per cent (David, 1998: p.27) of the total group of disarmed child soldiers said that they wanted to go back to school. Figure 5 showed us what the children liked the most about the centre. Of all the different aspects, education was chosen by 90 per cent as their favoured activity, beating both recreational activities and vocational training. There were several reasons why they liked the catch-up education. Some children saw it as the (re)start of their educational career.

> "It prepared me to go to the community school."(19-year-old, ex transit centre)

Others wanted a career in a trade but realised that they needed some educational skills.

> "You need the theory for the vocational training otherwise you cannot get a job." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "Sometimes you are not allowed to go to a vocational training centre unless you have some educational qualification."[17]

Some children found that by working on their future they could forget the past more easily.

> "We were learning and working on our future. And then you forget about the war." (15-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "The catch-up education kept me busy and also prepared me for the future." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

For some children it was their first opportunity to learn something.

> "I liked the education in the centre because I never learned how to read and write. And now I can do it a little bit." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

Education was seen as something that could be useful in the future and that was helpful, not destructive, to other people.

> "I want to gain knowledge so I can help my friends." (16-year-old)

Another aspect many children valued highly was the assistance they got with their studies. In the first instance this was the assistance of the teachers.

> "Whenever I asked something, he helped me." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "The teacher provided assistance after school and did sometimes revision at home." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

However, the teachers were not the only people they could go to with questions. Peers and other staff would help as well.

> "The teacher was helpful but we also went to boys in higher classes." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "After school the caregiver gave extra instruction." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

Although the education was highly valued, there were of course things the children did not like about it. Whilst the centres were often better equipped than community schools straight after the war, the teaching and practice materials available could still be limited.

> "There was no good supply of books for the education." (group discussion)

Some children started to accuse the staff of selling items from the centre for their own purposes. Although in many cases these were wrong assessments of the situation and the accusations were false, it is known to Save the Children UK that there were cases in which staff sold material and provisions from the centres.

> "The staff should not have sold the school material." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

Another problem that many children raised was the behaviour of others during classes.

> "The education was fine but some boys made too much noise."(21-year-old, ex transit centre)

Young people suggested ways of improving the classes by calming them.

> "You must keep the children under control and encourage them." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

One young person came up with a definite solution:

> "One should look for the rude boys' parents to reunify them quickly." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

Some children were not interested in going back to school. Having left school for such a long time they found it difficult to concentrate and learn. Instead they preferred the more practical skills.

> "I preferred agriculture above the education."

Most of the children (90 per cent) mentioned that they found the catch-up education difficult in the beginning. Even with a special programme these children still had difficulties.

> "I was slow in picking it up, although it were the same lessons as before the war." (16-year-old, ex transit centre)

Some found it hard to concentrate.

> "After one month I learned to remember things."(18-year-old, ex transit centre)

For some of these young people it may not have been realistic to expect a six-week 'compressed' curriculum, or even a six-month curriculum, to catch up those many years of missed education.

> "I was so confused. I spend two weeks before I understood a little bit."(21-year-old, ex transit centre)

However, all the children mentioned that after some time they found the education easier.

> "In the beginning I found it difficult because I was out of school for a long time. Then I became very active in my lessons." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

This child too tells about his progression in education:

> "In the beginning I sometimes missed school because it was too difficult. Later it was easier." (16-year-old)

6.3.5 Community children benefiting from the catch-up education

All the centres were deliberately located in the community to assist in the reintegration of the young people. Interaction between the children in the centre and the community was actively encouraged. One of the most important activities in which centre children and community children came together was the catch-up education. According to Figure 11, half of the children mentioned the catch-up education as an activity that enabled them to build relationships with the children in the community, second only to the recreational activities. Community children attended classes in all centres and sometimes they outnumbered centre children by two to three times. However, there was another reason for the children of the community being allowed to take part in education in the centre. According to a senior member of Save the Children UK staff:

> "The participation of the community children in the catch-up education programme was not only to stimulate the reintegration of the centre boys in the community and the civilian way of life but also to establish a good relationship with the community."

Figure 11: Bridging activities with community children

(n=19, 2 no replies. Respondents could say more than one thing)
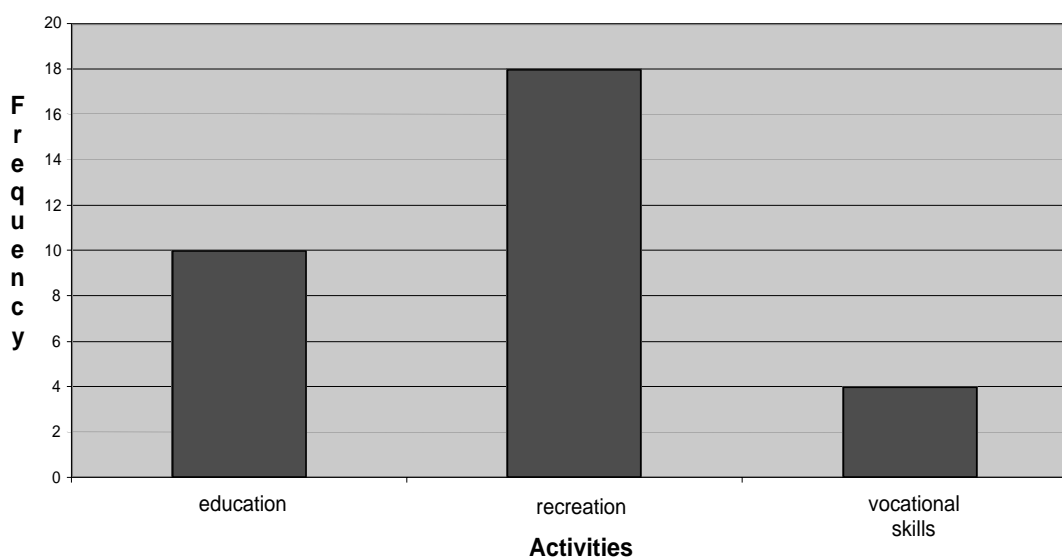
Not everybody in the community was happy with the idea of having a centre with ex-child soldiers in their neighbourhood, but having free education for children changed opinions.

When the transit centres closed, Save the Children UK handed over the school materials to either the community or another school that was operating. Unfortunately, in some cases the community was not able to keep the former centre

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school running. Although a plan was worked out with the community, and some assistance was given in the first period, it seems that running a school was too much for these communities.

6.4 Vocational training in the centre

6.4.1 Introduction

Together with the catch-up education, the vocational training was the other main learning activity in the centre. This daily activity took several hours and was an important element in the 'normalisation' of the children, and of improving their chances of a smooth and successful reintegration into civil society. In this section we first look at the objectives of the training and at how it was experienced by both the children and the staff. The section ends with some comments on the vocational training in the transit centres.

6.4.2 Objectives of the vocational training

In most transit centres the vocational training started in the afternoon, and was compulsory. The amount of time children spent on it varied; some children completed only two hours and spent the extra time on catch-up education. Other children who were particularly keen on learning a skill spent more time on the vocational training, continuing their work after the end of the lesson. According to a senior member of Save the Children UK staff, the purposes of the vocational training were:

> "To teach the children some basic skills that would be of help upon arrival in their community; to increase the children's self esteem and rebuild their confidence; to act as a kind of 'occupational therapy"

The first and foremost objective was to teach the children some basic skills that might be of help after their reunification. It was anticipated that they would have to help their parents on the farm, help with different domestic activities or in some cases assist with (re)building a mud house and providing it with simple furniture. This idea was reflected in the different trades that were taught in the transit centres. The main vocational activities provided were:

- agriculture
- carpentry and construction
- home economics, including:
  - soap making
  - tie-and-dye
  - sewing
  - bakery
  - knitting
  - household studies.

It is important to stress that the vocational training in the centres was not intended to be a substitute for an official vocational training course. The training was basic; it was short and limited in its objectives and did not provide a start up toolkit, nor an official certificate at the end. There was also no economic assessment to identify the skills that were in high demand. To quote a senior member of Save the Children UK staff once more:

> "The vocational training was basic: it taught the children how to make their own chair, house or garden. And there was a psychological effect: the community felt that children had learned something in centres."

This last aspect, the psychological effect of the vocational training, brings us to the next objective; to increase the children's self-esteem and rebuild their confidence. By

teaching useful skills, it was felt that these children would be more likely to be welcomed back into the community, and make a contribution to their income of their families. For example, an aunt of an ex-transit centre child described:

> *"I am happy that he is with me. Since he has arrived he helped me with the farm and together with his brother he has rebuilt the complete house."*

As we will see later, many ex-child soldiers were contributing to the incomes of their parents or relatives, and many were using the skills they learned during the vocational training in the centre.

The last purpose of the vocational training was to act as a kind of 'practical therapy'; by learning something that is useful for the future it is easier to move on from the past. On a more pragmatic level, the vocational training also kept the children busy in a constructive way. Early on the staff found out that when the children had nothing to do this could easily lead to them misbehaving both in and outside the centre.

6.4.3 The vocational training experienced by the young people

As can be seen from Figure 5, the vocational training was valued highly by children. It got 15 'votes', just behind recreation (17 votes) and the most popular activity, the catch-up education (18 votes) (multiple votes were possible). Below we will look at what the former transit centre children did, and did not, like about the vocational training.

Agriculture was taught in all centres. Depending on the area it varied from learning how to make a vegetable garden to learning to grow swamp rice.

> "The trade [vocational skills training] was good, but I also did agriculture which I really liked." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

The children were allowed to sell their products to the centre or the community, which meant that agriculture was chosen by many children as their favoured subject.

> *"I liked the agriculture because we sold our products at the local market."* (18-year-old, ex transit centre)

According to a former agriculture teacher:

> *"I remember that the children were impressed and enthusiastic about the agriculture training. They had no knowledge about farming when they arrived at the centre. We spent two to three hours in the field each day. The produce from their gardens was sold and the money safeguarded. At time of their reunification the money was given to the children as a 'resettlement contribution'. The children liked the agriculture because it brought quick money. In general, for a Liberian farmer, it is possible to earn 3,000 to 4,000 Liberian dollars a month if one pays enough time to the work.'

However, for these "highly materialistic children", to quote a former centre supervisor, agriculture was not the only way to make some money. According to another former supervisor:

> "Carpentry was also a popular activity, because, like agriculture, it was a way for the children to earn a little bit of money by selling their products to the community."

Carpentry was as popular as agriculture.

> "I liked the agricultural training but I really liked the carpentry class. Since I am in this refugee camp I would like to do carpentry to get money, but I have no tools and materials." (16, ex-transit centre)

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The children made much of the furniture for the centres, while other goods were sold to the community.

According to the staff, girls preferred the 'home economics' more than the boys did. The community children participated far less in the vocational training than in the catch-up education, but quite a lot of girls in the community benefited from the home economics training in the centre. Part of this training involved basic accountancy on how to allocate income; rudimentary business training useful for starting work as a craftsperson or to start up a business. Soap-making, using a part of the coconut, was practised by both boys and girls. Tie-and-dye – a kind of batik process for painting cloth – was, however, mainly attended by (community) girls.

> "I did not like the agriculture. I preferred home economics." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

Overall, the vocational training was viewed as useful and interesting. According to former transit centre children in a group discussion, vocational training was a good thing because it:

> "…taught us skills that are helpful in the community", *and*

> "We learned something useful for ourselves, useful for future."

One of the things that came out of a second group discussion was that the vocational training:

> "…taught us things that we did not know before."

Indeed, about 80 per cent of the centre children had not learned a skill, either before or during the war, and the remaining 20 per cent had only farmed.

There were always certain aspects the young people did not like about the vocational training in the centre. Some of the complaints were that not all the skills were available.

> "In the Gbarnga centre there was only agriculture and recreation." (group discussion)

Other young people did not see their favourite skills taught.

> "I loved the transit centre very much because we went to school and learned a trade. I learned agriculture, but I would really have loved to learn mechanics, if the course was offered at the centre." (19-year-old, ex-transit centre)

Another problem had to do with the temporary stay and sudden departure of the children.

> "I could not finish my curriculum." (19-year-old, ex transit centre), *and*

> "We were unable to complete our course." (group discussion)

The limited amount of tools was also a problem to the interviewees.

> "We needed more tools and materials so that everybody could work." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

To make the course more effective, this young man came with the following advice:

> "The teacher must have his own garden so we can see that as an example." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

As with the complaint about staff selling education materials, some of the children complained about staff selling tools and products. Sometimes it was not clear if the materials were stolen by staff or by the children themselves.

"The staff used our agricultural products for their own purposes." (group discussion)

"Tools were stolen and no new ones were provided." (group discussion)

Moreover, some young people felt betrayed because at reunification they did not receive their 'resettlement contribution'; the money they saved by selling their products.

"In the end we were not paid for our agricultural products." (group discussion)

6.4.4 Vocational training – was it helpful?

Although both the vocational training and education were limited, and have been criticised by practitioners, it would be wrong to ignore how useful the young people found them. Both activities built self-confidence.

"What was most helpful in the successful transition from a military to a civilian life was the fact that these children knew that their families were traced and that they learned some skills, that they knew they could take home and were useful." (social worker, NGO).

While the vocational training and education could have been improved, according to the young people they had been, and were still, helpful in their daily lives.

"The lessons in the catch-up education were more difficult than those in the community school. Because of that the community school was not difficult anymore." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

"I did not know how to read and write but now I know it a little bit. In agriculture I am very good because of the training at Save the Children UK." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

"I learned about nursery and about agriculture. Now I am working with the EU micro-projects for swamp rice production." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

"I have a garden and I know how to read and write." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

"I am continuing my education." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

"I understand things better but first I have to find a job." (15-year-old, ex transit centre)

"I am able to make my own farm. And we also went to study class in the centre and I continued to do that when I went to the community school." (18-year-old, ex transit centre)

"Since I left the centre I have not been in school but I have been able to continue my farming." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

"I am doing small carpentry contracts in the community." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

"Every day I have a contract now. Often the soap-making, that I learned in the centre, and sometimes the carpentry work." (16-year-old, ex transit centre)

These accounts are evidence that the vocational and educational training facilities, as they were offered in the centres, were helpful for these young people. At the same time one realises that with a better programme this help could have been even greater.

6.4.5 Criticisms of the vocational training

The main criticisms of the vocational training concerned the appropriateness of the skills taught and the basic level of the training. However, it is important to remember that the centres explicitly chose to provide only very basic short courses rather than longer training leading to formal qualifications. This was to avoid activities that

would run counter to the primary purpose of the centres, which was to provide interim care prior to reunification. Clearly the ex-child soldiers would have preferred 'higher value' qualifications, as would other young people in Liberia. Although it was not the objective to provide a full vocational training that would have enabled the older children to make a living from that skill after reunification, some assessment of the kind of skills that were needed after reunification might have been of use.

> "The children learned basic skills to have some skills to use after the reintegration. However, no pre-economic assessment was done to find out if these skills were relevant. And there has been no evaluation." (education officer)

The different skills – agriculture, carpentry and home economics – are useful in most contexts, but one may question if it is really useful to teach agriculture to a boy or girl with a urban background. For instance, those children staying in the Greenville transit centre, and coming from coastal towns or villages, might have been interested in learning about fishing. As a senior member of Save the Children UK staff put it::

> "The existing vocational training programmes were not adapted to, and specified for, the local situation. Because Save the Children UK's vocational training was given on a smaller scale, as compared to the big vocational training institutes, it could have been better specified to local need and demand."

This becomes even more important given that many children in the transit centres profited from the vocational training for much longer than anticipated. As soon as Save the Children UK realised that the average time the children were staying in the transit centres was not a few weeks, but closer to a year or even longer, it could have changed its vocational curriculum, as it did with the educational curriculum. Vocational training as 'occupational therapy' – to keep the children busy – should have been re-thought. On the other hand, vocational training as a 'start up' for a career in a trade would not have been appropriate for the many young children in the centre, or as a senior member of Save the Children UK staff said:

> "The vocational training in the centres was 'occupational therapy': if you train a 14-year-old boy for ten months, he is not even 15 when he is finished. Has he to start work then?"

Nevertheless, there was a group of older children, who spent one or two years in the centre because of difficulties with the FTR process, who could have benefited from more comprehensive vocational training so that they might have been able to set up a business. The recreational teacher of the Virginia transit centre gave the following recommendation:

> "You have to build the capacity of those children, whose families cannot be traced. They should learn skills to become self-reliant. The knowledge they obtained in the centre was maybe on the educational side enough but on the vocational side it was too limited."

In the end it is a difficult debate; it seems that Save the Children UK made the right decision to teach basic skills that would be useful to most, if not all, of the children. The reasons for limiting vocational training included the age of many of the children, the limited time they spent in the centres and the uncertain date of their departure. However, by making this choice, those older children who spent longer in the centres missed a chance to learn something potentially very helpful for the future.

> "The older children might have gone into apprenticeships after some time, although they often are mistreated and receive low payment in such cases. And a business training would have been useful because in the end many ex-child soldiers get involved in petty trade." (senior member of Save the Children UK staff)

For those children who stayed longer in the transit centres, an expanded vocational training or a link-up with formal vocational training centres, would probably have been a more appropriate approach. The criteria for inclusion might have included the

likelihood of prompt reunification, the accessibility of the child's home area and the probability that their parents were still displaced.

7. Going home?

Key points from this section
- Family tracing and reunification was the basic goal of the programme. The children themselves played an important role in providing information for this process. Some children interviewed had been reluctant to be reunited with their families. Reasons for this were that they preferred the conditions in the centre, feared returning to their community where they had committed atrocities or were afraid of who was controlling their home region.
- In the end, the majority of ex-child soldiers did go home. It was intended that both parents and children were prepared for the reunification. Ideally there would have been introductory visits, but often this did not happen. Some young people interviewed were disappointed at the situation they found at home.
- Some young people received resettlement packages and there were huge problems with these. They were partially made up of vouchers for education, which turned out to be worthless. Ex-child soldiers interviewed expressed disappointment and resentment over their packages. Some young people interviewed said that they did not get the money they had earned at the centres and felt let down all round. Practitioners advised that resettlement packages should be given in cash to the families of the children.
- A small group of young people could not be reunified. As the centres were closed they were either found group homes in Liberia or went to a Sierra Leonean refugee camp.
- Initially it was planned that ex-child soldiers would be individually followed up after reunification to see how they were doing, to assist further if necessary and to feedback information to the programme. This individually focused follow-up became logistically too difficult and many parents and young people interviewed were disappointed that this follow-up did not happen.
- Subsequently a community welfare system was set up to involve local community organisations in identifying and helping a wide range of vulnerable young people, including ex-child soldiers.

7.1 Introduction

In the previous chapters we looked at what life was like for ex-child soldiers in the transit centres. This chapter moves on to see what happened when these children were about to leave the centre, how they were prepared for reunification, and the work of the FTR team, which searched for and identified parents or families. Reunification was not possible for all, and in the end there was a small group of children who were in danger of getting stuck in the centre. Alternatives had to be found for them. The chapter concludes with the follow-up of the former transit centre children.

7.2 Family tracing – preparation for reunification

It was made clear to all the children in the centre, repeatedly, that their stay in the centre was only temporary. As soon as their families were traced the reunification process could start. As the centre staff and the FTR teams worked in two different programmes, news about whether the parents of a child had been traced came unexpectedly to the child. The children influenced greatly the success or failure of the FTR team in identifying their parents. If the children were able to give detailed information on the whereabouts of their parents – such as name, place, occupation, and so on – it was more likely that they or close family could be traced quickly. If the children were unable, or unwilling, to give detailed information, it became much more difficult. In most cases the children wanted to go home as soon as possible and thus gave all the information they could.

> "I wanted to go home." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "Because I did not see my people for a long time I liked to go home." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

Some young people, however, had mixed feelings. For example, this young man explains that he would have liked to go home to see his parents, family and friends, but otherwise preferred to stay in the centre:

> "I liked to see my people but I do not like to stay in the village: it is hard work and I do not like the community school." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

Indeed, many young people indicated that, although they would have liked to see their parents, they much preferred the life in the transit centre to the village life they had lived before the war.

> "You need to go to your parents. But I wanted to stay in the centre. The people in the centre helped me more than my parents." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I did not like to go home because there was nobody for us waiting and we had to work hard. I went to my sister in the Côte d'Ivoire, but that was just for a few weeks. She also had a difficult time." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I went to my uncle but I did not want to go." (15-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I did not like going home because in the centre I was going to school and learning a trade." (18-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I did not like to go home because we were provided with good care in the centre." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

It may seem strange that children would withhold information which would have helped the tracing process. Many of these young people did have genuine reasons for not wanting to be sent home. For example, the young man who was reunified with his uncle did not want to go because he had committed atrocities at home. Additionally, in the first few months after the disarmament, children withheld information because they knew that their homes were still under the former enemy's control. The staff recognised that children, for whatever reason, were holding information back.

> "One problem was that children did not want to go home. They felt that they were better off in the centre or were afraid of their community. One-to-one discussions with these unwilling children were successful in most of the cases." (former centre supervisor)

The fact that the children held back information had an impact on the way the centres functioned, for example, the catch-up education curriculum had to be expanded. Giving feedback about children who already had been reunited with their families was helpful in encouraging and preparing the child for the reunion with his or her family.

The staff also had an interest in these children remaining in the centres, and in slowing down the reunification process. Towards the end of the process, it became clear that many locally employed staff were going to lose their jobs once all the children were reunited.

> "The staff knew in many cases where the parents of the children were; after six months you have had enough time to build up some rapport with the child, of course. But they did not want to say it to the FTR team because they did not want to lose their jobs. For instance, the children in the Gbarnga centre, many came from the Gbarnga area, so they knew where their relatives were staying and so did the staff. Liberian children often know where they come from. And many ex-soldiers fought in their own area.' (Save the Children UK staff)

Again, not all the staff were helpful in this last phase.

> "They did not always sign the reunification certificates for the children, so it looked that there were still many children in the centre. All staff slowed down the FTR process." (education officer)

Although, as we will see later, the centres were not 'closed overnight', regular work is in short supply and employees were clearly unhappy to loose their jobs. In the end, of course, the majority of the children went home. Prior to their reunification, they were informed about their parents or family. The information gathered by the FTR team was shared with the staff of the centre and the children.

> "They told me about my family." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "According to the information of the tracer, my mother died. My brother was in Monrovia and I have no information about my father since I was six. The tracer could not find my relatives although he announced it on the radio." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "They told me that they had seen my parents." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I went there with a social worker and there I learned that my parents were dead and the house destroyed." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "They often give me information." (18-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "They told me that I had to be reunified with my parents. They told me that my mother was doing fine with her selling business. And that I needed to go home to help her." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "They said that I would still go to school if I went home." (14-year-old, ex transit centre)

Ideally, children who were going to be reunited would be taken to their parents or relatives at least once in advance for a short visit. This would mean that they were able to get to know each other again and the process of leaving behind the secure, familiar environment of the centre was more gradual.

> "They took me first for a visit and then we came back." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

However, due to time and transport constraints these initial visits only took place in a few cases. The majority of the children were reunited and left behind on the first visit. For many children this was the last contact with Save the Children UK, although they had been promised a follow-up visit. Although the children and their parents often did not meet prior to the reunion, the parents often knew that their child was coming after the FTR team's visit.

> "Prior to reunification I was visited twice by Save the Children UK and they informed me and asked if I agreed that my son should come back. They said that my boy wanted to stay with me." (mother)

> "Before he was reunited with me the reunification lady explained that she liked my boy but that he had given some problems at the centre." (father)

> "I knew that my child has passed through demobilisation and that he has been in a transit centre in Gbarnga. Before he was reunified, Save the Children UK came by to inform me. They came once." (mother)

> "I was not prepared for the reunification. I met the team and my son at the junction while they were on their way to this village. It was by coincidence. Then I took him with me." (father)

The night before the child was going to leave the centre, often a farewell ceremony was held. According to a group discussion of centre staff:

> "A serious ceremony was held. The night before the child was going to leave we honoured him and sang songs. We all showed our love for the leaving child. The leaving of a child could be hard for others."

7.3 The family tracing and reunification process

While the children were staying in the centres Save the Children UK's FTR teams were constantly searching for their relatives. The FTR programme plays a key role in the whole DDR process: if a FTR runs smoothly and is successful, the duration of the children's stay in transit centres can be limited. The success and effectiveness of the FTR programme is determined, however, by both internal factors (capacity, experience, resources, etc) and external factors (security to travel, co-operation of government and local authorities, quality of infrastructure, etc).

FTR consists of the following steps/phases:
1. the identification of separated children
2. the documentation of the children
3. the tracing of their families
4. the verification of the information
5. the reunification of children
6. the follow-up of the reunified children.

Save the Children UK's FTR programme in Liberia was part of a wider regional network to reunify separated children, including ex-child soldiers. Separated children and their families could be found not only in Liberia itself, but also in Sierra Leone, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire. After the parents or family had been identified, the information was checked and the child reunited. In some cases the parents or family refused to take back the child. Reasons for this were various; the child might have committed atrocities towards them or other members of the community, or, especially for girls, they may have been 'humiliated' (for example raped in front of the community or had a baby – a 'rebel baby' – by a soldier). In these cases the family tracers needed to sensitise the parents, family and community. This could not always be done, according to a senior member of Save the Children UK staff:

> "The FTR process did not [always] include the mediating between the child and the parents or community. This was due to the lack of time, lack of resources and lack of skills of the FTR team."

In most cases, according to social workers, in the end the child was normally accepted back by his/her family. At the reunification the child was 'handed over'. A reunification form had to be signed by the parents and the family tracer. In some cases the family or community organised a ceremony to welcome the child back.

Realising that children were often reluctant to return home for various reasons, the information given by the FTR and centre staff was often made to seem more positive than the reality. The following accounts from the young people show that they were

all disappointed upon arrival home. Many were shocked by the condition in which they found their homes:

> "My father is just renting the place and my mother is in Monrovia, so I have to cook." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "The whole place was damaged." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I expected that it would be good but there was nothing." (15-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "The house was burnt and they were living in the kitchen." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "There were only a few people living in my village." (18-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "When I came home I saw something totally different from what I had been told. My mother was very poor and struggling to make a living. And my father was working but the pay was not regular." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I did not see my brother, and everything was looted." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

Others were disappointed about the difficult circumstances their people were living in and the lack of support their parents, and Save the Children UK, were able to give them.

> "My aunt cannot pay my school fees so I could not go to the academic school. Instead I am going to vocational school, which is free. Save the Children UK paid for the first year but after that I dropped from academic school." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "Save the Children UK promised to help me with my school fees but they stopped helping me." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I did not expect that I had to work so hard on the farm. Because of that I decided to run away from the place." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

A few children were not happy about who they were reunified with.

> "I expected to be reunified with my father or mother because Save the Children UK told me that they had information about them. Instead they had only information about my aunt and I agreed to that because I did not want her to feel bad." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "They told me about my aunt. She was living in the village and I did not want to go there so I escaped to Monrovia from Virginia. But after some time they caught me and brought me to my aunt." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

It was at the reunification stage that one of the main dilemmas of the transit centres became evident. The aim was to bridge the period between disarmament and final reunification. However, the children's lives in the centres were not only different from their lives in the factions, but were also from the lives they were to return to once reunified.

> "Things were different in the transit centre compared to the community. For instance, if a child insulted or abused anyone, in the centre there was no beating but in the community it was sure that he or she would be beaten as punishment. On the other hand, the rules had to be followed more closely in the centre than rules made for ordinary children in the community." (transit centre teacher)

An ex-child soldier who subsequently became a social worker said:

> "More attention should have been paid to where the children came from: how to break the command or military structures and where the children have to reintegrate into – Liberian society. Look at the community the children came from. They have to

learn how to interact in that community, how things are… that they will have fewer rights and must not show disrespect."

This was also recognised by another social worker:

"I sometimes had the feeling that the Save the Children UK staff were too soft on the children. This is not the way we do it in Africa. And afterwards, they provided some young people with a loan, but these youngsters just used the money for their own fun and then they came back for more. There must be a limit to everything."

7.4 The resettlement package and other disappointments

Whether to give a resettlement package for demobilising soldiers is controversial in any DDR process. The rationale for providing resettlement packages is that if the soldiers return to their communities with nothing, they may prey on that community. It also serves a symbolic function; these former soldiers could bring home useful goods to help in the reconstruction process. Finally it is an incentive for disarmament and demobilisation. There are disadvantages however. The main problem for the community was whether it could be justified on moral grounds. In the eyes of civilians who had suffered for many years during the war, these demobilised soldiers were being rewarded for their atrocities. They might well be in need, but so were the civilians. A further problem is that these packages were open to fraud; some soldiers, both adults and children, disarmed several times to receive multiple resettlement packages. In the case of Liberia, the system of providing packages and vouchers was complicated and did not function well. This section looks at the issue of resettlement packages and the disappointment and resentment they caused.

There is a real danger that organisations raise the expectations of people.

"NGOs have raised high expectations for vulnerable groups. Therefore children sometimes pretend that they are ex-child soldiers or separated children to receive aid or packages. Sometimes their families encourage them." (FTR advisor)

In Liberia, the ex-child soldiers who went to transit centres had the opportunity to benefit from a resettlement package twice; at disarmament and on leaving the centre. At disarmament they received various vouchers, which should have entitled them to education or vocational training. This system of vouchers was put in place in the beginning, during the emergency when things were not well organised. By providing vouchers the authorities thought that they would not lose track of these children. However, in the end the vouchers turned out to be worthless.

The self-demobilised children often had to sell their food packages to pay for transport home, others were made to give their packages to their former commanders. For some the package kept them going for a month but did not help their resettlement in a constructive way.

"I was demobilised in 1996 at Logatun. I took my arm to the site and I was disarmed and given a bag of rice, one carton of oil and one bag of corn meal. I used the provisions for myself because at that time I was living on my own." (19-year-old, ex-transit centre)

The fact that the system of the vouchers did not work is recognised by most parties, including an official of the NPFL who was dealing with the DDR process:

"The UN vouchers had no meaning and the generals did not give a [damn] about their soldiers."

"I spoke to someone from UNICEF and he promised to give us something that could be beneficial to us in the future. But we did not see anything of that except for the bulgur wheat, oil and other provisions. We are therefore feeling bad."

> "Since the war finished, things are not so good for us. There is no help from the Government. We believed and were promised that we would go back to school for free and that our parents would start working again but nothing of that all happened. We had high expectations of this Government." (group discussion)

Some of the children who went to the transit centres were also disappointed, due to:

> "…the high expectations of these children. The children often felt that they did not get enough support, as much as they had expected, and they complained to, and accused Save the Children UK, because they thought that the NGOs had the money that was provided by the UN. Even now, reintegrated children still come to Save the Children UK's health department to ask for supplies and services." (Save the Children UK staff)

Also, some children who had stayed in the transit centres received a resettlement package when others, who left the centre later, did not. The young people who did not receive a settlement package felt resentful towards Save the Children UK. Some felt let down by everyone; they received worthless vouchers, did not receive a package from Save the Children UK and, in some cases, the money they earned through agricultural work in the centre, was not given to them. Additionally, Save the Children UK promised to come back but did not. The young people list their complaints:

> "No reunification package was given to us while the boys that left the centre in the beginning did get one."

> "Our blanket was taken away from us before the reunification."

> "We were depending on Save the Children UK to provide us with food, but they did not do that."

> "They promised to pay our school fees, but they never did."

> "They promised, for those whose families were not yet traced, to bring them to the Virginia centre, but they never did."

> "Our agricultural products were never paid for."

> "As far as the reunification is concerned, we like nothing at all about it."

It is clear that mistakes were made. All the young people in one group discussion valued a resettlement package much more than the help they received while staying in the transit centre. Interestingly, they said that they all had families or relatives to live with, even straight after disarmament, but that a package or loan could have helped them to start income generating activities.

Observations on the resettlement packages from Save the Children UK staff
According to a senior member of staff:

> "Although it is difficult to justify to the civilian population, resettlement packages are necessary to facilitate the reintegration of ex-soldiers. In the case of children, assistance can be focused on the family in which the children reintegrate. However, as in Mozambique, this assistance should spread out over a longer period, two or three years, to keep stimulating the reintegration (…) Assistance should be given in the form of money. The people and the community themselves know best how to allocate the money and what kind of activities could be implemented to facilitate the reintegration. Money makes it more easy and attractive for families to accept their children back. Additionally, some vocational training could be provided."

The former supervisor of one transit centre added to this last point:

> "Resettlement packages should be focused on the work that these children and young people can do after their reunification."

Another staff member with experience elsewhere, described the demobilisation support:

> "In the Congo, the family of the child decides what is in the resettlement package. Although, if the package is given to the family, the child can feel resentment because he or she feels it belongs to him or her. The advantage of some kind of support is that it is less difficult for the family to have another mouth to feed. With support it also prevents families from accepting their children in the beginning but then having to send them away after some time. But the disadvantage of support is that it creates dependency and it assumes that families cannot take care of their children. And of course it might be seen as rewarding the soldiers. The sense of giving the package or support to the parents, rather than giving it all to the child, is also recognised by the young people themselves. During a group discussion with ex-child soldiers and a former commander, the following advice was given; the packages should be given to the parents, because the boys sell it right at the spot."

7.5 Stuck in the centre, nowhere to go?

The basic purpose of the transit centre was to provide temporarily care for those ex-child soldiers who did not know the whereabouts of their parents or families. The majority of the children staying in the centres were reunified with family members, given the difficult circumstances, quite quickly. Less than 20 children were not able to return home at all. Some went on to live by themselves in a group home. The non-reunified ex-child soldiers from Sierra Leone went on to a Sierra Leonean refugee camp.

As the centres were gradually closed, the remaining boys who could not be reunified were brought to the Virginia centre. The FTR process continued, and alternatives were discussed for these children. A few were taken by Don Bosco into one of their homes. The intention for the older young people was to build temporary houses where they could live for two or three years with some support from Save the Children UK and regular visits by a social worker. The temporary nature of the homes meant that by the time the young people were mature, they would be forced to find a place for themselves. However, a mistake was made, and concrete rather than mud houses were built. A senior member of Save the Children UK staff realised that if the boys lived in the permanent homes, the organisation would remain responsible for the boys after they had grown up. It also would create problems with the ownership of the land. Therefore, much to the disappointment of the children who had helped with the construction of these houses, Save the Children UK arranged for a group home in Virginia community for the Liberian boys. The boys from Sierra Leone had a place in the Sierra Leonean refugee camp. This created some resentment.

> "I was happy to go to the centre, because I heard that the people there were taking good care of a friend of mine and that he was learning something. I decided to turn in my arms because I did not want to continue fighting against my brothers. But now I regret that I handed over my arms because what was promised to me was never given." (16-year-old, ex-transit centre)

It is possible that the dependency of those boys living in the refugee camp had been increased.

> "Since the centre was closed and we were brought to VOA, Save the Children UK has not sent me to school. Before, Save the Children UK made us to learn and advance." (16-year-old, ex-transit centre)

Don Bosco took over the concrete houses and used them as a home for vulnerable children, including the young children from the transit centres.

The closing down of the transit centres happened rapidly, within a period of three months. Save the Children UK realised that the children were staying too long and

that some were unlikely to be reunified at all. The organisation was concerned that these children would become institutionalised. Two staff members of Save the Children UK were therefore made responsible for the process of closing the centres. One member of staff explained:

> "At the end of 1998, more than 90 per cent of the children were reunified. In the faraway centres, there were less than ten children. At that time, the facilities in the centre were almost solely for the civilian children and of course, the EU [the programme's funder] did not want to fund this.

> There was a meeting with the management of the Social Welfare department and the supervisors of the centres. We discussed and executed a plan of closing down the centres in different steps: (i) the closing down should be finished in two or three months. An FTR emergency team was established and the majority of the remaining children were reunified in one month. (ii) Save the Children UK had discussions with community key players and a compromise was reached; the community schools got the facilities from Save the Children UK schools and parents of the children going to the centre school got one semester school free, which was monitored by Save the Children UK. (iii) An official hand over ceremony of the school facilities took place. This process took place during the holiday period. In Zwedru we turned the material over to the community school. In Greenville, the former teachers of the centre took over the school. In Gbarnga we handed over the material to a school in Pebe, because there were already schools in Gbarnga. In Voinjama everything went to a church school and in Virginia it was handed over to the community. In the end there were six Liberian children staying in Virginia community, and 12 Sierra Leoneon children staying in the VOA camp, first in foster care and later in their own units."

7.6 Follow-up and the Community Welfare Monitoring System

The aim of monitoring and following up was twofold. Primarily, it was meant to see if the child was doing well in his/her new setting, and if necessary to assist or intervene on behalf of the child. A second aim was to feed back information about the degree of success of the reintegration process, to improve the quality of the demobilisation process (the facilities and opportunities offered in the transit centre).

The process of follow-up could be time and resource consuming. Children reunified in one of the major cities were relatively easy to follow, but with children who had been dispersed throughout the countryside it was far more difficult. It may involve a social worker driving for several hours only to find that the child was working in fields another hour into the bush. In those cases a further appointment has to be set or information about the wellbeing of the child collected via neighbours, village chiefs and teachers.

When the FTR programme was developed it was anticipated that children would be followed up. In reality, this was not possible, which led to some disappointment.

> "The idea was that families would get four or five follow-up visits, but in the end it did not happen." (senior member of Save the Children UK staff)

> "After the reunification there was no support, but they told me that they would come back but they never did. At that time I did not ask for any support, but now I think that some money would have been really helpful, not a social worker or something like that. Support for my family would have been helpful, food and clothes." (mother)

> "On the day they brought him back, I was told that I would get support but nobody has ever came back. There should have been some school fee support and support to the family." (mother)

> "It was good that he was able to do some agricultural training but I think that some support afterwards would have been fine too. I mean something like advice on the mental field and maybe some advice for me. I feel that he came from a responsible place, I mean the transit centre. If he had stayed there, he probably would have

stayed in school and the counselling would have continued. So he would not have been involved in the women business. So I hoped that he could stay in the centre." (father)

"They promised to come back after reunification and they also said that they would pay his school fees, but they never came back and they never paid anything. There was no assistance from whomsoever." (mother)

"There was no support whatsoever. They promised to come back and bring a reunification package but they never did. And he also told me that he had worked and made a farm and that he earned some money and that they should give that too. But they never did that. It was 90 x L$25." (aunt)

"But after they brought him to me they never came back, although they promised to return. So I felt that I did not have enough support." (father)

From this it is clear that when it is known that it is not possible to conduct follow-ups, it is important that hopes are not raised. In fact, some follow-up was carried out, and now that most of the children are reunified, there is more time for this work.

"It is still difficult to do follow-ups. But we are able to do a limited number each day. We do it sometimes informally by asking family and neighbours how the child is doing. Indicators of reintegration that we use are, for instance, how he or she is doing in school and if the child has friends in the community." (Save the Children UK staff member)

Realising that an individually based follow-up process was logistically too difficult, Save the Children UK's FTR programme adjusted to adopt a broader social protection and welfare programme. This involved local community organisations and groups who were better located to identify and help vulnerable young people. A monitoring system was set up (the Community Welfare Monitoring System) which aimed to support a range of vulnerable young people including separated children, disabled children and street children, and which included ex-child soldiers. This project continues to be developed.

8. Social reintegration

Key points from this section
- This section looks at the extent of social reintegration of the young people from their own and other community members' perspectives.
- These young people were living in a variety of different patterns – with their parents or extended families, on their own or with friends, on a plantation, company or mining area, or with the security forces.
- The process of reconciliation was assisted by: social workers sensitising the community; the church, spiritual leaders and village elders and chiefs; and community processes, for example, communal labour projects, often initiated and designed by the young people.
- The majority of young people interviewed did feel accepted back in their communities. Some felt that they were accepted because they had been forced into the army and had behaved well during the war. Others felt that they were accepted because their current good behaviour made up for having been a soldier.
- There remained a group who felt obliged to hide their identities as ex-child soldiers as they felt they would be rejected.
- This report uses several criteria for measuring social integration: whether young people had been able to get support and credit; whether they would be able to take over their family business or farm; friendships and relationships; and membership of community groups.
- The majority interviewed felt that they could get credit; from their family, through reciprocal arrangements with others in the village or from saving schemes. Not being able to get credit was attributed to economic problems rather than their status as ex-soldiers.
- The majority interviewed felt they could call on support to build a house; a third could not. The majority, where relevant, did not think that their status as ex-soldiers would prevent them taking over their family business or farm, although many did not wish to do so.
- Most of the young people interviewed could describe a friendship network and most had both friends from the community as well as among ex-child soldiers. Very few of the young people interviewed maintained contact with their former commanders. Seventy-five per cent of the young people interviewed were single.
- All but two of the young people interviewed were members of a community group. Most of the young people felt that they had someone to talk to about problems; family, friends, teachers and the church were mentioned.
- The majority of practitioners and parents interviewed were positive about the integration of most children, although they identified a group that continued to have problems. They identified young people as being more challenging, and smoking. The elders, chiefs and Zos interviewed highlighted problems that these young people faced, the changed economic situation and role of young people. Teachers interviewed felt that young people's attitudes – both among community children and ex-child soldiers –
had changed since the war.

Key points from this section (continued)
- Although the general sense was of positive reintegration, these young people still faced considerable problems; financial, missing education, and the lack of work and equipment.

- Most of the young people interviewed felt they had wasted time by being in the faction and their main regret – and their perceived cause of their problems – was lack of education.
- Many of the ex–transit centre young people interviewed missed the centres, particularly the free education and the food. For a few this had been a hindrance to their reintegration as they had become accustomed to a higher standard of living.
- There had been a change in relationship between the younger and older generation and some evidence of growing youth independence. The young people were supporting their parents economically and had a positive perspective of being young, rather than older, in Liberia.
- Future hopes of the young people interviewed were about building homes, finishing their education; some wanted to move to the city, others wanted to build their lives where they were.

8.1 Introduction

Different patterns of reintegration were observed among the group of ex-child soldiers interviewed for this study. Some had made what we would consider a successful reintegration. Others lived a life which indicated that they had not been reintegrated, for example, they may have been with their commanders or may have been socially and economically marginalised. However, the majority of ex-child soldiers did find themselves more or less successfully reintegrated into society.[18] The extent to which this happened depended on factors such as whether they were initially forced to join the faction or volunteered, or whether they returned to a rural or urban situation. Most of the young people interviewed for this study had achieved a successful reintegration. The difficulty in accessing those young people who had not made a successful reintegration – for example, those who were still with their commanders, being exploited in mines, or living on the streets – has meant that they are not fully represented in this report. This should be born in mind when reading the following sections.

8.2 Reintegration – a diverse reality

There is virtually no research or information on the medium or long-term reintegration of child soldiers. This is surprising considering the quantity and range of projects that are aimed at helping them. Lack of information on the long-term outcomes for these children could result in programmes that are not effective, based on over-simplistic assumptions of what happens when the child returns. For example, as a member of Save the Children UK staff described:

> "The idea behind many vocational training programmes for these young people was: 'we train them and they can go back to their community. There they can make a living for themselves and at the same contribute to the rebuilding of their community.' But in reality it often happened that qualified boys were eager to leave their communities after reunification because now they were able to make a living, their family would depend on them. In other places, for instance in the cities, these trained young people could start for themselves."

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Or as a security officer of a rubber plantation put it:

> "These young people know that if they go back to their place of birth, their family will depend on them because they are young. Therefore they choose not to go and stay here."

Table 2: With whom were the young people living when they were interviewed?

Who living with	Ex transit centre		Self-demobilised		Total	
	number	percentage	number	percentage	number	percentage
Father/mother	4	20	4	40	8	27
Brother/sister	2	10	1	10	3	10
Extended family	9	45	1	10	10	33
Guardian	2	10	0	0	2	7
Alone or with friends	3	15	4	40	7	23
Total	**20***	**100**	**10**	**100**	**30**	**100**

* two ex transit centre young people did not reply to this question

To illustrate this complexity a few scenarios will be described briefly, as they are to be found in Liberia.

8.2.1 Living with parents or family

The most straightforward option for these ex-child soldiers was to go back to their parents or families after the war, either directly or via a transit centre, if their families needed to be traced. According to Table 2, more than 70 per cent of the interviewees lived with their parents, siblings or extended family.

> "I am living with my mother. She has six other children but they are all older. I am the smallest and the only one still living with her. There is also a friend of mine living here. I brought him in because he was not treated well at his place." (19-year-old)

In Liberia it is usual for sons to stay with their parents, or live in the same compound, until they are relatively old. This has been partly for economic reasons; to live on your own, build a house and take care of your own family requires a steady, reasonable income. Girls, however, often marry young and move away from their parental home. In both cases the children contribute to the household income. In rural areas this is mostly from agriculture related activities.

All the young people interviewed, who were still living with their parents or family, contributed to the general income, and quite often were the main income providers. This was particularly the case in female-headed households. According to some, the war had 'broken the backs' of the older generation. They had witnessed the destruction of all they built up over the years. Rebuilding and reconstruction required the strength and energy of the young; the bush lands, overgrown with weed, needed to be 'brushed', new seeds and tools had to be bought in town, mud had to be made to repair the houses. Some of the young people were willing to take care of and help their parents, others were not.

Many returning ex-child soldiers were disappointed and disillusioned upon their reunification. They had hoped that their parents would be able to give them support in education as they had done before the war, but instead they had to help their parents rebuild their homes and farms. This led some to leave their parents after reunification.

8.2.2 Living on their own or with friends

Living alone, or sharing a place with friends, was quite common for these ex-child soldiers. According to Table 2, nearly a quarter of the interviewees were living like this.

> "Straight after the war I lived with my sister in Monrovia but now I have been living with two friends in Kakata for two months." (16-year-old, ex transit centre)

This number may well be larger if the young people working at plantations, in the mines, or for a big company, and those who joined a security force, were also taken into account.[19] Although there had always been a group of young people who moved away from home to find employment, this relatively high number was an effect of the war. It is almost certain that more ex-child soldiers lived by themselves or with friends than ordinary children. Some felt that they were too old to live with their parents again, or were afraid to go back to their village and were trying to make a living for themselves.

> "I am living on my own. I am too big to live with my parents and do nothing." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

They mostly lived where they could find work. Most had moved to the urban centres, to plantations, mining areas or where big companies – such as the logging companies – were operating. Living on their own was difficult for them; they had to take care of everything.

> "If you are living by yourself you do not have to share the money with your wife or provide for your children. But on the other hand you have to cook and do all your washing for yourself, and you do not have time to make a garden. Therefore most of the boys that are here without family are living together." (group discussion, young people in a plantation)

Many young people decided to live in a group, share the costs of renting a place, cook and wash by turns, and rely on each other if they were sick.

8.2.3 Living on a plantation, at a company's camp or at a mining area

Many of those young people who lived alone or with friends lived in urban areas or worked on a contract basis, for big companies. The fact that they were not living with their families did not mean that the reintegration process had failed for these ex-child soldiers. Indeed, temporary migration of young, rural-based people to urban areas – in particular to the mining, rubber and logging areas – has always occurred. Although most of these companies ceased operating during the war, new investment meant that they were working again. These industries are labour intensive and absorb considerable numbers of young people, often many ex-child soldiers.

> "I think that 40 per cent of the boys who are here live by themselves with no family around. They stayed after the war because they think or know that their places are destroyed and their families displaced. Sometimes, if they have joined a faction, they may have committed atrocities in their villages so they are afraid to go back." (security officer, plantation)

Far away from the social and cultural influence of the chief and elders, social relationships were built around labour. Young people, not ready or not willing to go back to their families and villages, saw this as an alternative way of living.

> "At X logging company, the management takes many young boys. If you have a contact, if you know someone at X, you can join it. Some boys joined X and never came back to Buchanan because of all the bad things they did during the war. They use the money they earn right there, at the logging camp." (19-year-old)

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Sometimes, former commanders who may have got a management position after the war with a company, a rubber plantation, or a mining concession employed ex-child soldiers. These young people may well have been still under the influence of their former commanders (Lawrence and Dew, 1999: p.7), but it could be argued that these working relationships were not necessarily exploitative. After some time, if the young people felt that they were not benefiting from it, they may leave, or indeed the commander might be replaced, while the young people remained working for the company. However, the conditions under which children and young people are working should be carefully examined.

8.2.4 Living with the soldiers and security forces

Some children had not left their command structures. It is estimated that for every child passing through disarmament, two or three did not go through this process. Many children, after giving in their guns at the disarmament site and collecting their resettlement packages, returned to their commanders. Most of them subsequently left their commanders and went home. However, there remained a group of child soldiers who stayed with their commanders. They were not willing to leave the faction, or their commander was not willing to let them go. As such child soldiers become adults, often undisciplined and still armed, they become a burden for the community. There are about seven different security forces in Liberia, spread over the whole country. The young people in these forces often hang around at checkpoints and harassed the local population. In particular women are the victims of their brutal behaviour:

> "The main problem for the girls living in this village is that, on their way to school in town, they are raped by the different security forces and their school material is taken. I know that, to prevent this, some girls go to Monrovia but others drop out of school and just stay at home." (community girl)

The low pay and widespread corruption of the security forces leads to robbery and on-the-spot 'taxes'. Knowing how to handle a gun was the only skill some of the young people interviewed had learned, and, with such a poor economy, it might have been a conscious, rational choice to stay in the army or with a security force; here at least they had power and a guarantee of food and shelter.

Four different scenarios, which could be found in Liberia, have been described above. The aim is not to give detailed information on how the young people were currently living, but rather to adjust the concept of reintegration as a single, straightforward process. The next section looks at whether these young people felt that their families and communities had accepted them, and how the communities saw the reintegration of these ex-child soldiers.

8.3 The process of reconciliation

For the young people and their parents, families and communities, the moment of reunification must have been important and exciting. The first months in their villages or communities, after being separated for a long time and living for years in very different circumstances, would have been difficult and confusing. For all people it was a time of rebuilding their houses, schools and roads, but also of rebuilding social relationships between people who were torn apart by seven years of civil war. As the programme director of an NGO described:

> "Seven years of war can take as much as 14 years for reintegration."

As we will see in the coming sections, these young people had been quite successfully reintegrated into, and accepted back by, the Liberian society. However, people still talked about young people having a 'soldiers' attitude'. There was still a risk for these

ex-child soldiers of being re-conscripted. Overall, the war had made deep wounds that could take many years to heal.

The most difficult period was the first months following the arrival of these ex-child soldiers, and other demobilised soldiers, in their villages or communities. As a senior member of Save the Children UK staff said:

> "In the beginning there was no acceptance of the children by the community. Therefore we had to talk with elders and explain to them that the boys had no power anymore."

Difficulties in accepting the ex-child soldiers back into society occurred everywhere. It was a complex matter because it was not only the children and their parents who must be willing to accept each other. The whole community, including the chief, the elders, the Zo and church, must be ready to forgive and accept. In those cases where children had committed atrocities in the community, the parents might have been willing to accept their child, but the community might not.

> "Sometimes the community had negative feelings about the children. In the transit centres we transformed the perception of the children; we re-introduced the parent-child relationship. But some families needed repeated visits from us to accept their children back." (group discussion, Save the Children UK staff)

The role of the social workers
In those cases where the parents or families were not willing to take back their children, the village authorities and social workers played an important role in the reconciliation process. This process was promoted in several ways. First social workers tried to start a dialogue with the community and explained the need to accept these children.

> "We talked with the family and local leaders about the need to accept the children back. If the child had something to offer or had useful skills it was easier for the community to accept him or her. On the other hand, the communities had their ways to let these children contribute to the community to ease the reconciliation process, for example via low paid labour." (FTR advisor)

All the social workers interviewed described that, although sometimes it could take many sessions and repeated visits over a period of several weeks, in the end all the families did accept the children back.

> "A lot of community and family sensitisation had to be done. Sometimes families rejected their children in the beginning, but in the end all the families did accept them." (former transit centre supervisor)

It should be remembered that if a child had committed atrocities, this was not only a stigma for the children themselves but also for their parents.

There were other issues that created problems for the reintegration process:
- There were different perceptions among fighters (who wanted gratitude for their heroic deeds) and civilians (who wanted apologies and repentance).
- Many people suffered deeply as often the violence and atrocities in this war were targeted at the civilian population. In the aftermath of the war, aggression is often channelled towards children and women.
- Many families suffered from health problems, problems with shelter and most significantly lack of employment opportunities (more than 15 people can rely on one working person).
- There is still ethnic tension, which, it is claimed in some cases, is stimulated by the authorities.

Community reconciliation processes

In many cases there were no social workers available to sensitise the community on the need to accept these children. The communities had their own ways to work on the reconciliation and acceptance. In some cases the children or young people could 'win back' their place in the village by doing communal labour. According to a senior member of Save the Children UK staff:

> "These community projects were the biggest help for the reintegration of these children. The boys themselves came up with a proposal. Often it was a short project, like digging a well or repairing a road."

For those young people who were serious about their reintegration, these projects offered a good opportunity to earn some respect from their communities. Beyond the practical methods, the community also had spiritual mechanisms to increase the acceptance of these young people. The secret societies, although damaged during the war, had regained their strength and importance in the daily life of Liberians. The reports and accounts were mixed, some were positive about the role of these societies in the reconciliation process. Some accounts suggested that all means were used to prevent these young people ever becoming disloyal to the traditional authorities again.

Role of the traditional institutions and spiritual healers

The influence of the elders and village chief on daily life in Liberian villages may be decreasing but it is still strong. These 'institutions', together with the rest of the community, played an important role in the reintegration process of the ex-child soldiers. They also were instrumental in the reconciliation process between these children and the community and, where necessary, their parents and family.

> "We talk with these children, we counsel them. They are counselled by everybody in the community: by their parents, the schoolteachers, the Zo and the church people. They all talk about forgiveness. If you give them a hard punishment it only becomes worse." (town chief)

The role played by the traditional institutions, such as the secret societies and the Zo, should not be underestimated.

> "The old people in the town, including the Zo and elders called me and said that I had to confess. So I confessed to my grandmother and the Zo. The Zo 'washed' me together with four other boys. That ritual took one week. They did this 'washing' for a period of time because there were so many boys. They did five boys a week. It all was a voluntary thing: some boys did not do it. If you do not do it, it did not mean that you were a community outcast. But if you did bad things during the war and you want to remove the bad luck of your shoulders, you could do it."

These traditional healing processes are also familiar in other settings such as in Mozambique and Angola (Green and Honwana, 1999).

The Zo or spiritual leader:

> "…is fighting against bad spirits for the good of society. In the presence of the Zo, witchcraft or black magic cannot survive." (Liberian academic)

The Zo could have an important place in the reintegration process of ex-child soldiers in the community. He could heal the relationship between the child and the spirit-ancestral world and thus smooth the path of reintegration.

> "Now, if some boys have problems because of what happened during the war, I can help them. I can 'wash' them. But I can do that only on the specific request of the parents and the community. I need to talk with these people first. Those children who are experiencing bad dreams, I can help. But those who intentionally and deliberately became wicked and killed innocent people and violated traditional

practices I cannot help so much. I cannot refuse to help them but I am not willing. And I know from the beginning if somebody has been wicked."

The Liberian war had a clear spiritual element in it (Ellis, 1999). For example, accusations were made that soldiers violated forbidden places, which were sacred for the secret societies, although whether this did occur or not is debated.

Role of the church
The church too, played an important role in the reconciliation process. Many Liberians are dedicated churchgoers and the war only increased their faith. They easily combine Christian or Islamic faith with traditional beliefs. Approximately 70 per cent of the interviewed ex-child soldiers indicated that they were members of a church or mosque. As with the role of traditional institutions, the role of the churches and mosques should not be underestimated.

> "The church played an important role in this reconciliation process because it was the only organisation willing to forgive." (director, religious NGO)

The young people, with the help of an adult, sometimes organised themselves to promote reconciliation and forgiveness.

> "Here in school, we have established a social club, giving drama performances and singing songs, to spread the message about forgiveness and forgetting and to enlighten people on the need for education in the community." (principal Zolowu)

Young people taking the initiative to talk about forgiveness and their role and rights in society is something that takes place more often now than before the war. This suggests that besides all the negative aspects, the war also opened the way to more active participation in their communities.

> "What Save the Children UK could do is to establish 'peace clubs' to promote the children's rights and so that we can inform people about children who are in problems. We have started the 'Student Unification Organisation'. We organise ourselves and raise money to help our fellow students if they have become ill." (group discussion, young people)

8.4 Community acceptance – the ex-child soldiers views

So did these young people, as ex-child soldiers, feel accepted by their families and communities? One good indicator of this was whether other people's knowledge of their past history with the factions was seen as a problem. There were three kinds of responses. One group of young people did not consider it to be a problem. The people in the community knew that they had joined a faction, but these ex-child soldiers either argued that they were taken by force or that they did not mistreat civilians.

> "It is not a problem for me that people know it, because I was nice boy during my time in the army, and anyway I was forced." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "It is no problem for me, because I did not bother civilians during the war." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "The community knows that I was with the soldiers. Many boys were forced to join and many boys died." (21-year-old)

A second set of responses, closely related to the first, stressed their current good behaviour. These young people realised that they had done something wrong, but because they were behaving well most of them felt that it was not a problem whether or not the community knew that they had been with the factions.

> "It is not a problem for me because I am a good man now." (15-year-old, ex transit centre)

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> "It does not matter because I am behaving well." (19-year-old)

> "I do not tell the people in the community but I behave well." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

The third set of responses is different. About 30–40 per cent of the young people felt that it was better that no one, or only a few people, should know about their past lives as child soldiers. They did not want to be stigmatised as ex-child soldiers, but they also kept it secret because they did not want trouble.

> "Nobody knows it and I like to keep it that way. Otherwise they can turn against you and do bad things." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "Only one boy knows that I have been with the soldiers." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I do not want to have any problems by saying so because my uncle is not here." (18-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I was fighting in Lofa County so not many people know it. Some friends, if they know it, they will not be my friends anymore." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

It was relatively easy for these young people to keep it secret that they had been with the soldiers. During an attack on a village, people fled and were scattered.

> "I fought around Gbarnga area and not around this place. So many people were happy to see me back. I did not do bad things during the war so there was no need for me to be 'washed.'" (22-year-old)

The fact that children were separated from their parents did not necessarily mean that they were child soldiers. There were many ways that they could have been separated, for example, taken to refugee camps. It was not only ex-child soldiers who had to be reunified; many children were separated from their parents as a result of the war.

A similar range of responses can be found when asked how they felt that they were regarded by people who did not fight. The majority of the interviewees felt that they were regarded in the same way as other young people.

> "I am respected by all members of my village because I am behaving well." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "When I was armed I did not bother the people in the community. I bothered people, but only at the front. So the community people do not mind that I was a soldier." (21-year-old)

> "The war has finished and the people know that I am a good person." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "Everybody is feeling fine. There is no difference between civilians and ex-soldiers." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "The President announced that all people must forgive and forget about it." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "They know I was fighting but they treat me well." (18-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I am well regarded because I never treated people in a bad way. They know I was a soldier but they do not give me bad names." (19-year-old)

A group of ex-child soldiers also subscribed to this:

> "The big people do not give us bad names. They are good to us and understand our problems." (group discussion, young people)

However, there remained a group of young people who were not accepted by their communities. Despite all efforts they were still regarded as 'bad' people and were

called names. Some ex-child soldiers therefore decided to leave their communities and tried to start new, more anonymous lives in the city, in the mining fields or at the plantations.

> "During disarmament they distributed rice to ex-soldiers. Because I was able to get rice, and my friends wondered why, they found out that I was a fighter. Now I am sometimes called a 'rebel boy'." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "People were afraid of me during the war. Now some people call me 'rebel boy.'" (16-year-old)

> "They say that I am a soldier boy and that I have soldier blood in me. Because of that I am living on my own. But now I am a man and I can live on my own." (20-year-old, ex transit centre).

According to a group discussion of both ex-child soldiers and other young people, ex-child soldiers were not stigmatised as much as they had been straight after the war:

> "The community does not call us rebels anymore. We are working on the community farm, although some ex-soldiers can still give some problems to the community. Life is difficult for ex-soldiers, but also for civilians." (group discussion).

Although life was difficult for everyone, they all tried to help one another.

> "I explain my problems to my father and he tries to help me. But my friends too, try to help me. Sometimes they lend me their tools." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "The community members understand me. I explain my problems and sometimes they can help me." (21-year-old)

> "My friends like me very much. They helped me find a job." (16-year-old)

Others who were not receiving help felt that the lack of support had more to do with the difficult circumstances for everybody than the fact that they were socially excluded due to being ex-child soldiers.

> "I talk about my problems with people in the community, but there is no way for them to solve my problems." (22-year-old)

> "I do not have any relatives around so they cannot help me."(16-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "Some of my friends understand my problem but they cannot help me." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I do not think it is good to take all your problems to your friends." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

This section has looked at the extent to which these young people had been accepted by their families and communities, and the kind of reconciliation that had to take place. The majority seemed to feel that they had been re-accepted. Sometimes this was after an initial period when intervention by social workers or local people was needed. The ex-child soldiers felt that they were not really different from, and were not treated in a different way to other young people. Some, however, did not feel that it was wise to inform the community about their past lives. Although it seems that the majority had been accepted, there was a group of ex-child soldiers who had not been accepted by their families or communities. These had left their villages or communities and were more likely to be found living on their own in the cities, on plantations, in mining or logging areas, or with a faction. Some of these young people who left their home as soon as they realised they could not reintegrate, or who had never tried to go home, were now returning to their homes. Four years after the war, they felt that the anticipated hostility has decreased; reintegration is still going on.

"From 1996 I started to work as a rubber tapper in Kakata, until 1999. But the work was too hard for me. I was living there with some other boys. Last year I went to my aunt, because I already lived with her before the war." (19-year-old)

8.5 Measuring reintegration

It is always difficult to measure the degree of reintegration. Belonging to a community and being an accepted member of it has many different aspects; social, economic, cultural, and religious. A person can be fully integrated socially, but can be economically much worse off than other community members. A person can go to the church or mosque regularly and be highly valued as a member of it, but at the same time not be respected by the authority of the elders, chief and secret societies. As mentioned at the beginning of this report, it is easy to forget that the society in which the ex-child soldiers should have been reintegrated had also been greatly disrupted. So what criteria should be used to measure if these young people were reintegrated or not? In this research we have used several indicators, which together with the views of different people from the community, give some idea of the extent to which the young people were reintegrated and what that reintegration looked like. The interviewees were asked to respond to the following questions:

- Who could you turn to if you wanted to borrow money or some goods?
- Do you expect to take over your father's or relative's business/farm after he has grown old?
- Who would you ask/did you ask if you wanted permission to marry?
- If you were building a house, who would help you?
- Who are your friends? Mention some of your best friends.
- Do you have a girlfriend?
- Are you a member of a community group?

We also discussed whether they had anyone to turn to when they had problems, and whether they were in the community or outside it. The first question, 'who you could turn to if you wanted to borrow money or some goods,' tried to find out if these young people had been able to build up good enough relationships with people such that they would trust them to borrow money. It also shows whether they had access to credit, which is an important part of economic re-integration.[20] Of the 25 young people who answered this question, 19 could identify at least one person to whom they could go; six said that they would not borrow money, and two said there was no one they could go to. In terms of who they went to, broadly we can see three kinds of responses. Some young people would first go to their parents or relatives.

"If I want to borrow some money I have to ask my father, because the people in town will say that I am only a small boy." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

"If my aunt does not have any money, I just try to forget about it." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

Another possibility mentioned by these young people was to go to older people in the community. Some had even built up a kind of reciprocal system over time.

"I can go to those people in the village, whom I have given money to in the past. By giving them money I have built up a relationship with them, so if I am in trouble they can help me." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

"Because I am not working it is difficult to get a loan, but maybe I can go to the people in the community." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

"I could ask some older people or some friends and the guy who taught me agriculture." (21-year-old)

"I could go to the businessman I am working for and take a credit from him." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "It is difficult to borrow money but sometimes I withdraw some money from my *susu* [local saving co-operation]." (16-year-old, ex transit centre)

A last option, if they needed money, was either to work for it or to forget about it.

> "In the past I went to the supervisor of the transit centre. Now, if I need money I cut palm nuts and sell them to people in the villages." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I will work for it. I could go to my aunt but she has to struggle for it too. There is a *susu*-co-operation, but they will say that I am too small." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I will not go to anybody because I do not like to borrow money, it can give you problems." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

As we see, most of these young people had some access to money, either from their family or other community members, or by being members of a credit scheme. Those not living with their parents or families had looked for other ways, and had found other people to whom they could go if they needed money. The reasons given for not being able to get credit related to their age, rather than to their past history. From this it would appear that most of the young people were integrated into the community, and did not have to survive on their own.

The next question, 'do you expect to take over your father's or relative's business or farm after he has grown old', attempted to assess if these young people were accepted in the same way as their brothers and sisters who had not joined the fighters. The assumption was that if they were not accepted in the same way, they would be less likely to be able to take over the farm or business. This was not relevant for all the interviewees; it depended if there was a family farm or business. Again we see different responses. Twelve of the 18 people who answered the question said 'yes'. It seems that most of the interviewees did not feel the fact that they had been with the soldiers would prevent them from being allowed to take over the farm or business.:

> "My father is dead but I could take over the farm if I wanted." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I only will take the farm, because the house is rented." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "In the future I will take care of everything for my aunt." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I am the oldest, so I will take care of it." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I will do it together with my older brother." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

It seems that if they were the oldest child in the family, this meant they would be allowed to take over the farm or business. If they were not, they still could take it over if they were interested in it and the other children were not. According to the data collected, no evidence can be found to suggest that parents refused to hand over their properties to children that had been fighting during the war. Indeed, some children may have joined, and even been encouraged by their parents to join the factions in order to protect the family's property. Except for those children who had committed serious atrocities in their families and communities, it seems that for the majority, joining the factions had not impacted on their inheritance. Those children who indicated that they were not likely to take over the farm or business referred to the tradition of the inheritance going to the oldest in the family.

> "We have too many brothers and sisters and I am not the oldest." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "My big brother will take care of it." (14-year-old, ex transit centre)

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> "My other brother is already helping my father but I will be part of it." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

Other young people were not interested in agriculture and preferred to pursue alternative activities.

> "I left my village because I did not like the farming work. Now I have to create my own business." (16-year-old)

> "I do not know yet if I take over the farm. I first want to finish my education. But it is possible." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I do not want to be a farmer in the future." (15-year-old, ex transit centre)

The question, 'who would you ask, or did you ask, if you wanted permission to marry', tried to find out who these young people considered as the authority to consult, if they wanted to make an important decision. The responses indicate that many young people asked their parents or elders for permission, and even relied on them to find a suitable partner.

> "I will ask my big brother and sister in Monrovia permission to marry. But if they do not like it, they can turn it down. And my mother will find a girl for me." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "If I see a girl I like I would ask my aunt to approach the girl. I had a girlfriend before but my aunt told me that I am too young for it, so I left her." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "Because my father is dead and I am staying with my aunt, I will look for my father's relatives and I will ask my aunt permission." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "Because I am living on my own, when I married my wife I asked her mother for permission." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I would ask the elders, I would contact them for advice on that." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I would ask some elders in the community if I cannot contact my parents." (16-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I will ask my mother and uncle for permission but I will also ask advice of my best friends." (19-year-old)

> "I am married. I pointed the girl I liked and my grandmother approached her." (22-year-old)

> "I am still too young but I would ask my mother if she was around or I would go to the church." (16-year-old)

It seems that these young people did not differ from other young people; they respected the authority of their parents in marriage arrangements. In those cases where young people lived on their own, they would ask permission of the elders in the community.

The question, 'if you were building a house, who would help you,' explored the extent to which these young people were able to mobilise other people, relatives or friends, to help them. Traditionally in Liberia building a house is a communal activity and people ask family and friends to help. In exchange for the labour, the future house-owner would cook and provide alcoholic beverages, finishing it with a 'house-warming' party for all the people who have contributed. Nowadays this practice still exists, but people might also expect some payment for their labour. In fact of the 27 young people who answered this, only three could not identify anyone to help them. There were three sets of responses. There was a group of young people who indicated

that their parents or family would help them, either directly with labour or indirectly with money.

> "My big brother and sister will help me with some money for the construction of the house." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "My brother would help me and my wife and her mother." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "My uncle knows how to build a house, so he will help." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I would pay the people but my father and brother would help me." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

Then there was a group who mentioned that their friends would (also) help.

> "I will build the house myself but my friends can help me." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "We can call our friends but we can still pay them." (18-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I have many friends with skills, so they can help me." (16-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "Me and my wife can make the house. My relatives will help me and my friends can help me with the mud." (22-year-old)

The next set of responses shows that building a house, as well as the need to mobilise family and friends also required financial means.

> "I will have to pay for it because my friends are not around." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "Nobody would help me. I stopped building my house because all my friends are busy." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "My friends can help me but I still have to pay them." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I can ask my friends but it takes a lot of money to build a house, which I do not have." (16-year-old)

This last set of responses does not necessarily reflect the inability of these young people to activate labour because they had been disregarded in the community. Rather, it reflects the difficult economic situation for many people in Liberia, surviving from day to day, and therefore unable to invest time and labour in someone else's house without payment.

The question, 'who are your friends? Mention some of your best friends,' tried to find out if these young people had been able to make new friends in the community or whether they were still in contact with their old comrades. The interviewees were asked to talk about three of their best friends (names did not have to be mentioned) and then say if they knew if these friends were ex-child soldiers. Of course, in some cases they did not know, or would not disclose, if a friend had been an ex-child soldier. Of the 28 who answered this question, nearly all could identify three friends. Seven had only civilian friends, and six had only ex-child soldier friends, but the majority had a mixture of both. It is interesting to note that self-demobilised ex-child soldiers had slightly more friends who were ex-child soldiers than civilians, but this difference is small.

Figure 12: When did they meet their friends?
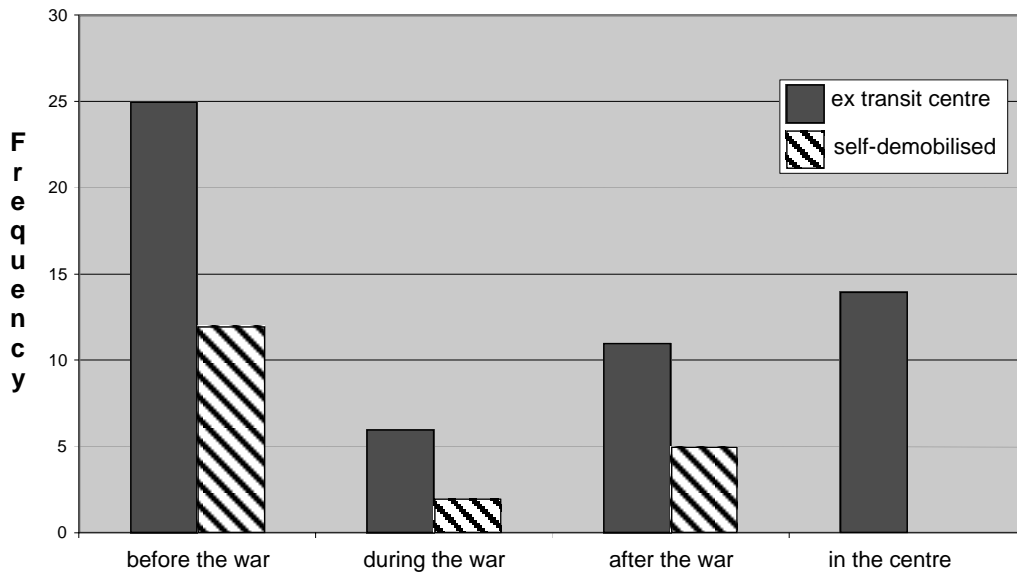
Figure 12 shows us when the young people met their friends; before, during or after the war, or in the transit centre (where relevant). Half of the friends were already known before the war. It interesting to see how few friends were made during the war; only seven young people (out of 28 who answered) listed friends they made in wartime as among of their best friends. This suggests that either the young people were already friends before the war, and were conscripted together, or they met in the transit centre and became friends from then. Indeed, a third of the transit centre children had friends dating from their time in the centre. From this it can be seen that these ex-child soldiers had quite a lot of their friends who were also ex-child soldiers, but very few met during the war itself. It is hardly surprising that the relationships they did build during the war were strong ones, having been together for several years in a faction.

> "I met my best friend at the checkpoint in Gbarnga. He saved my life when we were caught in an ambush. We demobilised together and now we live in the same area and we see each other every day and we play football in the evening." (19-year-old, ex-transit centre).

There were only three interviewees who indicated that all three of their best friends were ex-child soldiers, and two of these had known them before the war. The other interviewee met one of his friends during the war and two afterwards. These young people had relatively high numbers of other ex-child soldiers as friends, but the majority also had civilian children as friends.

Figure 13: Were they in relationships?
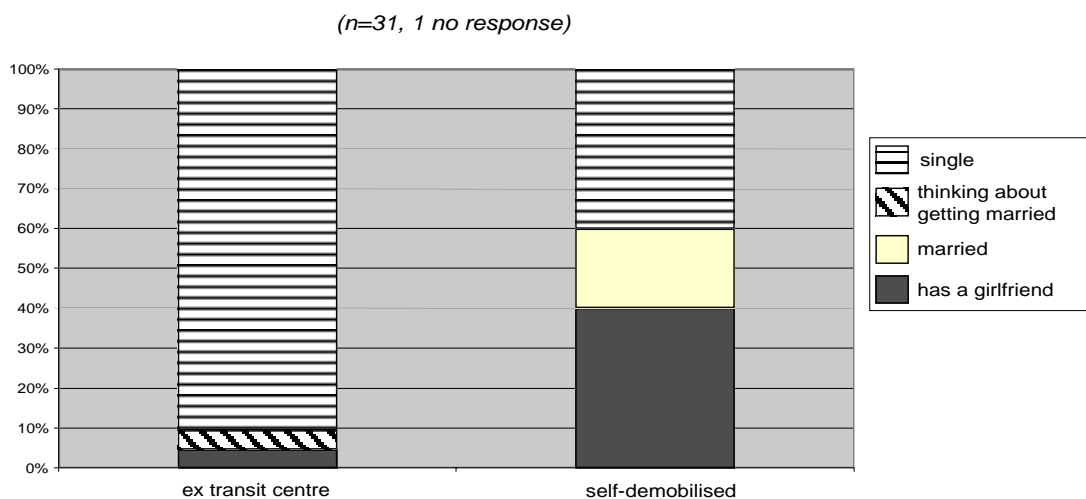
The young people were asked if they had girlfriends. According to Figure 13, about 75 per cent indicated that they were still single. This is not necessarily unusual as boys, unlike girls, do not marry particularly young in Liberia. However, there was a difference between those children who had self-demobilised and those who had gone to a transit centre; the self-demobilised were more likely to be in relationships. Of the ten self-demobilised young people interviewed, only four were single, the others had girlfriends (four) or were married (two); whereas almost all the former centre children were single, two were in relationships and none was married. It is difficult to find an explanation for this and most likely it is a combination of different reasons. As we saw in Figure 3, more of the self-demobilised young people (40 per cent) were living on their own, compared with about 11 per cent of the former centre children. When living alone, they may have been less likely to be dissuaded from having a girlfriend by disapproving relatives. Another explanation could be that those young people who went to the centres were discouraged from getting involved in relationships at a young age. If they wanted to continue with their education they could not afford to have a girlfriend.

> "I am young and it takes a lot of money to have a girlfriend.'"(16-year-old)

It could be that those self-demobilised ex-child soldiers already had girlfriends during the war, which made them reluctant to go to the transit centres and leave the girls behind.

> "My girlfriend lives with her mother. Because I was a captain I had my own wife in the army. She has a two-year-old girl and she claims that it is my child. I give them sometimes some money." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I meet her once in awhile, she still lives with her parents. But I will marry her. Sometimes I give her some money to buy slippers. She was already my girlfriend during the war." (19-year-old)

Those young people with girlfriends, all tried to contribute and support them:

> "…with food and clothing." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I lend sometimes some money to my girlfriend." (25-year-old)

> "I am doing farm work for her." (22-year-old)

> "Sometimes I can give her some money for clothes and to do some trade." (22-year-old)

Figure 14: Were they members of community groups?

(n=29, 3 no responses)
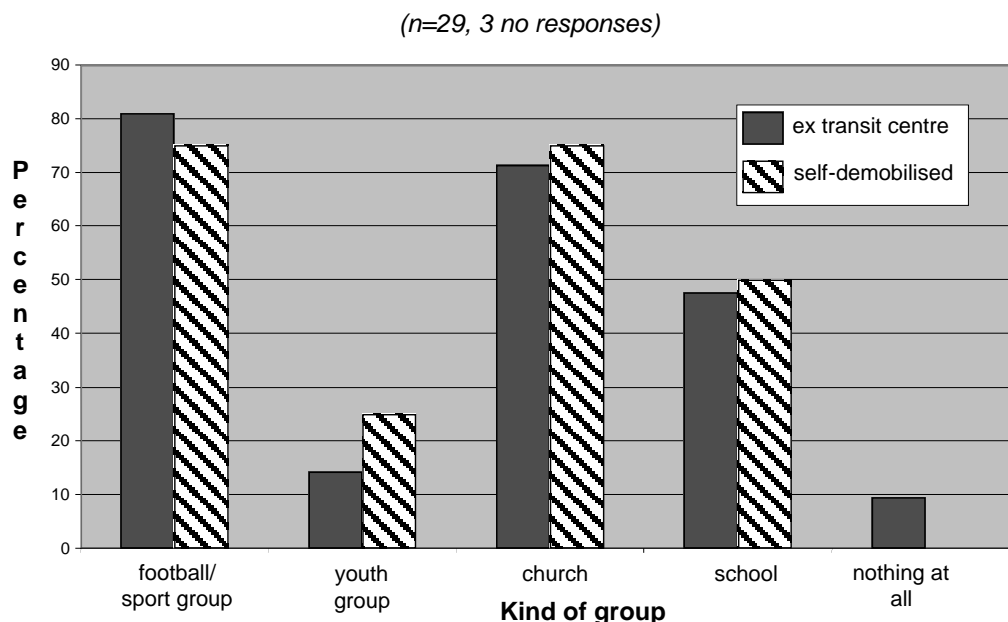
The final question relates to membership of community groups. Figure 14 shows that only two young people, both former centre children, were not members of anything at all, (this included not going to school).

> "I am not a member of anything." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)
>
> "We are not playing football because we do not have a football." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

Most of the young people, almost 80 per cent, were members of a football team.

> "I am the director of the football field." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

Slightly more than 70 per cent indicated that they went to church or the mosque. Almost half went to school.

> "I go to school sometimes." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

Less than 20 per cent belonged to a youth group.

> "I am a member of an artist group. We show entertainment in the community." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)
>
> "I am member of a *susu* and a youth group: the community service work." (16-year-old, ex transit centre)
>
> "We do not have money for a football. But we clean/brush the farms by rotation." (22-year-old)

Being part of a group – whether a football team, youth group or the church – helped these young people to forget about the war and what they had done. It was often a place where they could share experiences and see how other young people with similar experiences dealt with them.

> "I talk with my friends." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)
>
> "When we sit together in a group me and my friends can discuss about that." (22-year-old)

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> "I talk about it in a group, with my friends. Some are ex-soldiers, others are just civilians. Young people can listen carefully." (16-year-old)

These young people also talked about their present problems in these groups. Only one interviewee indicated that he had no one to talk about his problems and worries. The rest had a wide variety of people to talk to; other young people, their family members, in church or directly with God, or teachers.

> "I talk about my problems with my aunt and God." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I try to solve my problems myself or I can go to my former home economics teacher." (15-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I talk about it at the church." (16-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I talk about it with my grandmother." (22-year-old)

> "I keep it for myself because there is nobody to explain it to." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

From the material above it seems that these ex-child soldiers did not differ in their social lives from other young people in Liberia; they had someone to go to if they wanted to borrow money, they expected to take over their families' farms and were members of football groups or went to church. However, there were also some differences. More of them were living by themselves or with extended family, (which could give rise to some difficulties in economic and social life) and the percentage of ex-child soldiers among their best friends was also high. Nevertheless, the interviews suggested that, almost four years after disarmament and demobilisation, the majority of the ex-child soldiers in the study had reintegrated into their communities.

8.6 How successful has the reintegration process been?

We have already mentioned the role of different groups in supporting the reintegration process. In this section we hear the views of various members of these groups.

8.6.1 Practitioners

There were many organisations involved in the reintegration of these young people. A senior member of staff from the Don Bosco programme stated that he would expect a 60 to 85 per cent success rate for reintegration of ex-child soldiers after one year, depending on whether they had joined voluntarily or were forcibly conscripted. The latter were more likely to go back to their communities willingly, and their parents and the communities were more willing to accept them back. Based on pre-war experience, he went on to suggest that reintegration of ex-child soldiers was better than that of street children. In addition, he pointed to the fact that street children, although growing in numbers, were getting younger and therefore were not being made up of ex-child soldiers. A practitioner from another organisation explained that offering a programme to help these young people was by no means a guarantee to a successful reintegration, and identified two separate groups:

> "Amongst those ex-child soldiers who went first to the centres, there are two types; some succeeded in their reintegration, and some are doing worse than before. Of those who went straight home, CAP knows some who have done well, they have gone to school, to training, and some have gone to the university. Others have made their own business, selling small things. You would not know that they are ex-soldiers. Some are with their parents, some are alone, and some are with their friends. The success of their reintegration depends partly on what they did during the war and if they joined to protect their parents."

He continued to explain what would facilitate the sustainable reintegration of these youths:

> "If they are well trained and if their parents are receiving economic support, by means of vocational training or micro credit support, these ex-child soldiers have a good chance to reintegrate. The social reintegration influences the economic reintegration as a cyclic process. But social reintegration should come first."

According to this practitioner, successful reintegration depended on many different factors: economic, social, and cultural circumstances, what they did during the war, if they were forced or joined voluntarily, and psychological factors such as resilience of the individual child. It also depended on the state of the community into which they returned. As a senior member of Save the Children UK staff stated:

> "The majority of these children could have gone home straight after demobilisation, if their communities had still existed."

A few practitioners raised the point that the secret societies, including the bush schools, played an important role in the reintegration of ex-child soldiers and that these structures were stronger upcountry, compared with the coastal counties.

8.6.2 Parents and family

Below we hear what ordinary Liberians, in the villages and towns, thought about the reintegration of ex-child soldiers. We start with the views and experiences of their parents or the family members with whom they were staying.

The majority of the parents or relatives interviewed spoke about their reintegrated children in a positive way; they felt that their child had not changed much during the war and now he or she was helping them, had friends in the community, and was received back into the community.

> "Since my child is with me he is fine. I do not feel that he has changed because of the war. He is nice and does not give me any problems. He has his friends and there are no problems with the community." (mother)

> "There were no problems with him. He was behaving well and he helped me on the farm and he was respecting me. He came and he was like a normal child. There was no difference with the ordinary community children. Although I had not see him for a long time he had not changed a lot. And he is still the same. He shows interest in education. So last month he moved to his aunt at Firestone to benefit from the free education." (father)

The majority of the children who had fought in the war were happy to lay down their arms and go back to their parents to live a normal life and restart their education. Most of the parents or families were happy to have their lost children back. In those cases where the parents or family had some reservations, often these were eased by the economic contribution the young man or woman could make.

> "I am happy that he is with me. Since he has arrived he helped me with the farm and together with his brother he has rebuilt the whole house. There is really no problem. He is a nice boy. He did not change during the war and he still the same since he arrived here. He is no different from the other boys in the community. He is very friendly and was well received in the community." (aunt)

It would be naïve to assume that the reintegration process went smoothly for all ex-child soldiers. As we have seen with the children who stayed in the transit centres, problems like aggression, fighting, drug abuse and being disrespectful were likely to have occurred. The interviews with parents and families took place several years after the initial reintegration process. In addition, parents or relatives may have been unwilling to open up to a stranger and reveal problems they may have had.

Some parents and relatives spoke frankly about some of the problems their child had given them and the community.

> "He can argue with me, but if his father comes he is quiet. Maybe he is more afraid of him. His father can advise him, cools him down and encourages him to continue his farming. Sometimes he cannot listen to me and just takes his own time for things. He is nice but sometimes he can be bad. He has changed because of the war. In the beginning he still had some problems because of the war but not anymore. He is no different from the other young people in the community because he is doing his farming. He is an ordinary boy. Most of his friends like him and the older people in the community like him too." (mother)

The father of this young man said:

> "The best thing is having him back. Although he doesn't always do exactly what I want him to do. He has changed during the war. Before the war he was just small. After the war I had no control over him anymore. He had grown wild. But now he is doing better, staying with his mother on the farm. He is building his own house and he does not fight or talk in a bad way. But he can have flashbacks sometimes. Then suddenly he turns in on himself and becomes stiff. And the other thing he has from the war is the smoking. I accuse him of that and sometimes I have the feeling that he stops for a while. He is not different from the other boys in the community. He will not fight or abuse people. And he has been received in a good way by the other people." (father)

Other people, like this mother of an ex-child soldier who stayed in a transit centre, described the restless character and lack of interest in living a village life, that some of these former ex-child soldiers had, after spending many years in a faction going from one place to the other:

> "After he was reunified with me he only stayed for two weeks here. My interest was in seeing him going to school. But after two weeks he went to his brother in another village, because he felt that the farm work at my place was too hard for him. He stayed with his brother for four months. Then he went to Monrovia to live with his uncle. I think that it was good because here he was influenced by his friends in a bad way. I felt that he was just like the other boys and I do not think that he had learned much bad things during the war. He was still respectful to me. But he only stayed for two weeks with me. And I do not think that he is willing to take over the farm in the future, because he is a lazy guy." (mother)

This section has discussed the views and experiences of those most closely related to the young people. We now go on to look at the views of those people in the community who have an important role in the village – the elders, the village chief and the Zo or traditional healer.

8.6.3 Elders, village chief and Zo

> "Wia-ta's strong sense of community can be seen in its cleanly brushed roads, with the labour done by townspeople and the football team and organised by energetic local leader. Active attempts to promote reconciliation are also being made, with counselling given by the church, and the secret society bush schools playing an important role, 'the devil business here is stronger than the government, and it has helped very much to cool the boys'. Forgiveness is offered to those who repent their actions, and particularly those youth who joined by force are welcomed back home happily. More difficult cases are encouraged to join the football team and put to work for a small wage on the communal farm, 'sometimes work can help them return to us'." (Atkinson, 1999: p.31)

The importance of elders, secret societies and traditional healers (Zo) in the reintegration process has been mentioned. Their perspective was more focused on problems than the perspectives of practitioners, younger people and their families.

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This chief stressed that the young people presented problems in the past, but that most of them had changed:

> "In the past, those children who have joined the soldiers gave some problems to the community. They did not take part in the community work. They were smoking and using drugs and they disrespected other people. Most of them have changed now although some still give us a problem. I feel that they have changed because they are going to school again." (town chief)

The elders also admitted that some of these children still presented problems, but that the majority had changed. They too explain that this process of change had to do with different factors and that the whole community, including the church helped to promote this process.

> "Some children still have that war attitude, some young people still give serious problems. They do not like to go to school, they smoke and drink. We think that sport activities can break this negative attitude. All adult people do counselling and talk with them, but in particular the church and the elders. There is respect of the children for their parents but no satisfaction. The parents cannot satisfy their children by sending them to school so the children will not always help their parents. (village elders).

These elders raised the interesting point about young people's respect for their parents and elders. The young people did still respect them, but because their parents could not provide for them, in the same way as before the war, they would not always do what their parents asked. The difficult economic situation that many older people found themselves in after the war meant that their relationships with their children had changed. Therefore, improving the economic situation of the parents may increase the respect and the quality of the relationship between the child and the parent.

This village chief explained that the reintegration process could be long and slow, and there was the constant danger of young people being re-conscripted:

> "Ex-soldiers are still vulnerable for re-conscription. The process of going from a military life to a civilian life can be slow but going back from a civilian life to a soldier's life can be quick. And many of them have still less discipline and do not listen. They answer like soldiers to your questions and they interact with soldiers sometimes, they smoke together. And the handicapped soldiers, especially in Monrovia, they can give you problems. They are rude and give people a hard time." (town chief)

It seems that although all those interviewed said that things were improving over time, there were still problems with the behaviour of these ex-child soldiers.

8.6.4 Teachers and school principals

Most of the teachers and principals agreed that children in Liberia had changed.

> "Their attitude has changed. They do not listen so well anymore. Another problem is that there is more drug use: smoking and drinking. Some still have that 'soldier' attitude." (school principal)

It is important to realise that in one way or another all children in Liberia have been influenced by the war. Some have become internally displaced or refugees. Some stayed at home but witnessed atrocities and destruction. Others, while not having joined any faction, had daily contact with the military. Therefore, it is wrong to distinguish too simplistically between ex-child soldiers and children who never took up arms.

The behaviour of those children who did not join a faction was still influenced by the war.

> "The majority of the older boys at this school were in some way or another involved in the war. As far as I can see there is only a small difference between ex-child soldiers and ordinary children nowadays. The behaviour of the children who fought in the war has now changed for the better. I think that is because of cultural mechanisms. The societies are strong here in the North of Liberia. Although these societies are not as strong as they were before the war, because many old people have died during the war. Another reason is that it is mainly one tribe here. These children do not want to separate themselves from the other children in whatever way. "(director, training school)

We have seen that there were different reasons why these young people changed for the better; continuation of education, sporting activities, cultural mechanisms. Some, as we will see, were not able to cope and left their villages again. Others stayed and had a more or less successful reintegration. The process of reintegration is on-going. Another reason why some young people were living a normal life is because they had wives and children.

> "Some young people took up arms during the war. During the war the children were aggressive, but now things are improving here at the plantation. I think that some of the boys had to leave because of their bad attitude: they could not cope with the company's rules. The boys are presently employed via the management and not via their former commander; he has left. Some boys came from far and some are originally from here. The boys that came from faraway places had their girls from here during the war and therefore decided to stay." (principal)

These social bonds, such as marriage, also prevented some young people from re-conscription when times were getting more difficult and the level of insecurity increased. It seemed that these young people would always be more vulnerable to (re)conscription than other children, but if they were involved in family life and were able to make a living from their daily labour, the chances of re-conscription became smaller.

> "The problem they have is that some still feel that they are military people. They are more aggressive. And straight after the war these children had no respect. They did not work on the communal farms for instance. They were not willing, but now it is better. And the same you could say about going to school, they were not willing. Now this has changed, although still many want to join the security forces. Many boys went for military training during the Lofa incursion in '99 and many boys joined. But some did not want to leave this town because they had their wives here. Because, if you are involved in family life, you cannot be tempted so easily to join the soldiers." (director, NGO)

Acceptance, reconciliation and reintegration are easily used terms, but in reality they describe a long and complex process with many different players involved. Overall, the success rate of the reintegration process of these ex-child soldiers was perhaps higher than often thought, but that is not to say that there were not, and are not still, problems.

8.7 Reintegrated, but still many problems

The young people still had many problems and worries – mostly related to the difficult economic circumstances in which they found themselves. In Chapter 9 more will be said about this. Here we will look at the more general problems and worries that confronted them in their daily lives.

According to Figure 15 the young people were mostly worried about their immediate expenses. For those still trying to stay in school, these expenses related to school fees and uniforms.

> "For the coming year I do not have any school fees, copybook and shoes." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I cannot always afford the school fees so I need support for my school fees." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I have no uniform and I do not have the good tools for my garden." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "My heart is more in academic knowledge but I cannot afford the school fees. I want to start a business so that I can earn money and could pay my school fees." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I do not have school fees for next year." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I have no money to buy a uniform, that is a L$150. But the farm work is all right." (18-year-old, ex transit centre)

Figure 15: What were their main problems following reintegration?

(n=26: 6 no response)
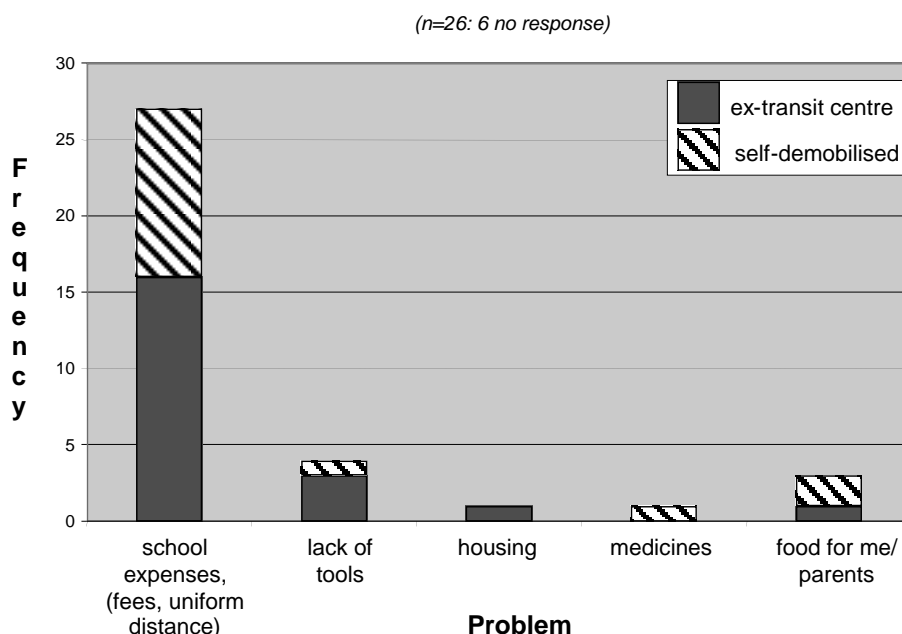
A few young people complained about the lack of tools for their jobs.

> "I do not have seed rice for my farm." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I have no tools." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I lack the right materials for the work I am doing. We grouped together to buy our materials, me and some of my friends. But than one boy ran away with all the material." (16-year-old, ex transit centre)

Others mentioned the lack of work or the difficulties with the jobs they were doing.

> "When I arrived here I started to do small contracts, like cleaning yards and wells. But now the rain season starts and the wells are full. But I need money for school fees." (19-year-old)

> "There is nobody who can support me and the logging work is very dangerous." (19-year-old)

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> "There is no job for me. The only work I am doing is to find passengers for taxis. On a bad day I only earn L$25 and on a good day I can make L$150 maximum." (21-year-old)

> "The work is hard and I cannot write a letter, so nobody knows about my problems. I would like to learn a trade and then start a business here, but I cannot leave my family. If there is vocational training course, I could tell my wife to stay with her mother for the time being." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I do not like the community school. I want to go to Monrovia for education. I know how it is like because I lived close by in Virginia. And I do not like the farming in the village because the work is too hard." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I do not have the school fees to continue my education. And the work I am doing is tedious. I am running from one place to another." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

This young man wanted to leave his village to go to Monrovia:

> "I would like to go to Monrovia but I cannot leave my grandparents behind." (22-year-old)

So what did these young people do if they had a problem? How did they solve it and to whom would they go? As we saw earlier, most of them would go to family, friends or the community to borrow money or get help with building a house. The ex-child soldiers had ways to solve problems which were not that different from other young people in Liberia. They mostly turned to their families, if they were around, or to the elders or village chief, and only one young man mentioned that he would go to his commander.

> "If I need money I can go to my father." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I start to work in the bush to get money." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "If I have problems I can go to the people I build up support with by giving them money. And I can call the chief and explain." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I first go to my guardian and than to the people in the community who are the closest to me." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I go to my uncle or my commander." (18-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I keep myself away from trouble because when I get vex I can get easily in trouble. And if I need money I can go to the businessman." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I complain to the town chief." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I just forget about it." (16-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I complain to the elders before I go to the town chief." (22-year-old)

These strategies do not differ greatly from those that other young people use when they have a problem. One might expect that if they were not reintegrated in their communities, they would leave as soon as they were confronted with problems, since their ties in the community would be weak. If they were not part of the community, they would be more likely to approach their contacts outside the village. To test this hypothesis we asked the young people what they did if they had problems at home or in the community. We wanted to know if they did go to other people or places.

> "Sometimes I go downtown to my friends." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I do not want to lose the small things I have so I do not make any problems." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I complain to the town chief and he advises me." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I wait for my father." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I can contact the businessman: money can do everything." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

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"I take a walk in the bush or to my farm." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

"I do not have problems with the community, only sometimes with my friends." (16-year-old, ex transit centre)

"I am very easy: I never get any problems." (16-year-old)

A further criterion was whether they turned to their former commanders for advice and if they were in regular contact with them. In fact, only three of the interviewees said they had asked their commanders for advice, 20 did not approach the commanders (nine did not answer). Very few young people mentioned that their commanders had tried to re-recruit them. The majority of the commanders had also left the factions. For many young people, their commander was someone they already knew before the war, maybe living in the same community.

"Sometimes I go to him to ask advice. About school and other things." (18-year-old, ex transit centre)

"He came back to ask me if I wanted to rejoin but I refused. He came almost every day." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

"I am in contact with him, but he advises me to go to school. He even wants me to come to him so he can help me with the school fees. But I am responsible for my parents so I cannot leave them." (21-year-old)

"He is in Putu and I can see him there, but I will not ask his advice." (15-year-old, ex transit centre)

"My commander is now in the army and we meet at times and he sometimes asks me what I am doing. I tell him about my farming and he encourages me to continue the good job. He has not encouraged me to join the army again. He saw me in Monrovia and he advised me not to join the boys who are smoking cigarettes." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

"My commander asked me to join the SOD[21], but I refused." (19-year-old)

"I did not see my commander, but the police commander asked me to join the police so I was standing at the checkpoint for two weeks. But I did not like it so I quit." (21-year-old)

The majority of the young people indicated that their commanders had gone and that they had not seen them again.

"He went to the USA." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

"He is far away." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

"He is in Monrovia." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

"My commander died in April '96" (16-year-old, ex transit centre)

"I have not seen him since demobilisation. But I know about a boy who went back to his commander. He was doing nothing all day and he started to think about his past life, when he had money so he joined."[22]

"He is in Monrovia but he is a wicked man." (16-year-old)

The ex-child soldiers who had stayed in the transit centres, as well as those who were self-demobilised, realised that, although they were more or less reintegrated into Liberian society, their years with the factions had had their drawbacks. Most of them indicated that if they had not joined a faction they would have been in school, or would have finished school and begun working.

"I would have been in school if I had not joined a faction. And I would have worked in a business, because my father had a provision shop before the war." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I would have finished high school and maybe would be working." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I would be in school and my father would have supported me like he did before the war." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I would have been a big man and my mother would have supported me in my education." (15-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I would have been out of school by now and I think that my father's place would have been still nice and not destroyed." (22-year-old)

Clearly, they saw for themselves a different future had they not joined, although most of them, realistically or not, regarded their years in the faction mostly as just lost time. The majority did not feel that their futures had been completely destroyed. For instance, most of them did not think that it was more difficult to find a job with their background as an ex-child soldier.

> "It is just hard because of the situation." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "It makes no difference." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "If I know my trade it is not hard. LOIC[23] (a training institute) promised to give me a job after I have finished." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "My friends who were ex-soldiers also have jobs." (18-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "The community people know that there is no more war." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "If you behave like you are still in the war nobody can help you. So you must calm down." (16-year-old, ex transit centre).

Others saw difficulties in their way, not because they had been soldiers but due to their lack of education.

> "It is more difficult to find a job because I missed a lot of my education." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "You do not know how to read and write." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "To find a good job I must first graduate and I am behind in school because of the war." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

Those ex-child soldiers who had stayed in the transit centres for some time, had an extra problem compared with those who went straight home. Although the centres were far from luxurious they had offered the children facilities that were not available to other young people, especially in the difficult circumstances directly after the war. The children in the centres received regular meals, education, vocational training, access to health facilities and sports equipment. On reunification, the things to which they had become accustomed were no longer available.

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(n=20, 2 did not reply, they could list more than one aspect each)
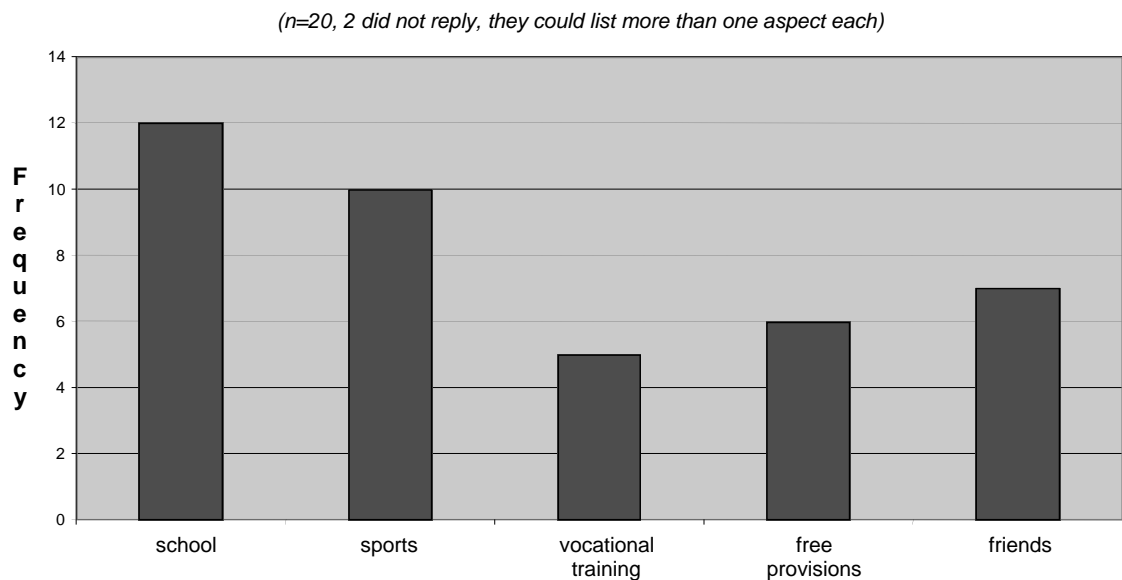
According to Figure 16, the education was something missed by most of them; though the sport activities, free provisions and vocational training were also mentioned.

> "After the centre closed I stopped with my education and also with the football." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I missed the free education and free vocational training. They did anything for me. Then they promised to come back but they came back only one time." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I miss my education. Although I have learned a trade it is not my interest. I must help my aunt but in the centre they took care of us and gave me free provisions." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "Because my father was unemployed I missed school for two years." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I miss the privilege of the education, the clothing and the sports." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I really miss the two meals a day and the education." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

Others mentioned that they missed their friends, the community, or the staff and the way they had taken care of them.

> "I really liked the way they were taking care of us." (18-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "Now I must buy everything for myself and I have sometimes no food. And I miss my friends." (18-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I also missed the community." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I missed sharing fun with my friends in the centre." (16-year-old, ex transit centre)

As we see, there were many things the young people missed after leaving the centre. In most cases this did not lead to major problems and they adapted to the new situation with their families. However, in a few cases the relative luxury in the transit centres did form a barrier to their reintegration. For example, one young man refused to go to the community school because he had been used to the better transit centre school. The programme officer for community development put it this way:

> "The children in the centres received regular meals, as compared to children in communities. This was a reason why reunified children left their parents and went into the streets to look for food themselves. Because at home the food can be limited and they have to work before they can eat."

Determining the appropriate level of material standards in the centres was a genuine dilemma. The aim was to care for the children in a way that was normal for Liberian families, to prepare the children for their reintegration with their families and communities. Thus, no mattresses were provided and the children had to sleep on mats on the floor. While the centres were very basic by Western standards, in comparison to the circumstances many of the children would return to the conditions were reasonably good. There was some concern about children running away or rioting because they were not satisfied with the provisions. However, it was felt that improving the material standards would cause greater difficulties in the long term.

8.8 The young people talk about society

> "Pre-war tensions which contributed to the conflict, including particularly inter-generational tensions relating to processes of modernisation, have deepened during the war, with an associated weakening to some degree of traditional governance mechanisms. Traditional institutions have however remained strong in some areas, playing important roles in maintaining law and order at village level as well as in reconciliation and the re-integration of ex-combatants." (Atkinson, 1999)

In this section we look at how these young people saw their own lives and how they saw the people around them. The impact of a war cannot be underestimated. As described in Chapter 2, deaths, displacement and destruction of infrastructure took place on a massive scale, and in addition there were significant changes in social relationships and institutions. Below we show the way in which the war in Liberia changed the relationship between young people and the older generation. Some young people stated that they were fooled during the war and that was something they would not let happen again. Others said they still respected their parents but that the power of their parents over them was not total anymore.

> "Things are not easy for us. It is the war that brought all the trouble and changed things. But we still respect our parents and the elders in the community." (group discussion)

> "You want to know if we respect old people and if they respect us? We can tell you that the old people do not reject young people because they have joined the soldiers. They still like us. And we still respect them. Orders given by our parents, we follow them but not if they are wrong. For instance, we will not marry someone appointed by our parents if we do not like the girl." (group discussion)

These ex-child soldiers realised that their parents were unable to protect them against conscription. Often they had witnessed the humiliation by military people of the local authorities, the elders and their own parents. In some cases the young people themselves, armed with guns, had humiliated civilians whom they would have viewed with fear and respect before the war. They discovered that the power and authority of the village chief and elders was nothing compared to the power of people with guns in their hands.

The interviewees were asked if they thought that civilians, like their parents, the village chief, spiritual leader or healers, were as powerful as military leaders. The opinions were divided about the present situation, some felt that military people had still more power, others thought that nowadays the chiefs had more power.

> "Soldiers can act by themselves." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "The soldiers can give orders to the town chief but not the other way around." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "The military people are more powerful because everybody is afraid of them." (15-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "A soldier has a gun but the community can get rid of a town chief if they do not like him." (22-year-old)

> "Soldiers are more powerful because they have a gun. The town chief can rule over the civilians but not over the military people." (16-year-old)

Some of the young people indicated that the power of the military people was related to the access they had to the government.

> "They have a gun and access to the president. But as a soldier you cannot do anything you like, the commander is in charge." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "The town chief cannot operate like the military people but the government has the real power." (16-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "Military leaders have more power because they have a gun. Although the president has no gun he has power because he is educated." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

Those young people who indicated that the village chief was more powerful, all subscribed that during the war this was not the case.

> "Right now a town chief is more powerful because he can give orders to arrest someone." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "The village chief is also able to command you or ask a soldier to force you." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "Spiritual leaders can use the black magic and God, and is even more powerful than the military leader." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "The town chief is more powerful because he is the first person you go to." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "Now the soldiers do not have a gun anymore and they must listen to the town chief." (18-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "The town chief is the head of the town and he must be admitted before a soldier can do anything." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "Nowadays military leaders must inform the town chief if they want assistance and this was not the case during the war." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

These statements show that many of the young people interviewed were questioning the absolute authority and power of the village chiefs and elders. If we argue that some kind of youth emancipation had taken place, this process must have started with questioning the authority of those who traditionally had power. On the village or community level this was often the village or town chief. On the family level it was the parents.

All young people indicated that it was good to be a young person in Liberia. Interestingly they did not compare themselves with young people in other countries, but to the old(er) people in Liberia, when they were answering this question. As they had seen the power and authority of the village chiefs decline, so they were seeing the power of their parents declining; the young people still respected their parents but, as some village elders stated, parents were not able to satisfy or support the young people. On the contrary, in many cases it was the young people who helped their parents in daily life.

> "I am strong so I can help my father and mother." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

"You can do something for the people and yourself." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

"If you are young you are able to help and protect your people." (21-year-old)

"I can help to take care of my old parents and do things for myself." (25-year-old)

"If you are young you are able to help yourself and your family." (19-year-old)

Others specifically described the advantages of being young. It is clear that some of them felt that the role of older people had declined in present day Liberia.

"I am independent and strong." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

"You can go anywhere you want and you can go to school." (18-year-old, ex transit centre)

"Young people can do something better." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

"I like to be young but I do not want to live in a village because of the hard work and you grow old quick." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

"I can do a lot of things now that I am young." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

"All the people that are working are young." (18-year-old, ex transit centre)

"If you are old you have no energy." (19-year-old)

"If you are young you are able to help yourself." (19-year-old)

"I like to be young but if you are old you can give advice. So both is good." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

These comments suggest relationships between young people and their elders had changed, possibly influenced by the overthrow of traditional power structures by the military during the war. Whether this had led to 'youth emancipation', and whether this will lead to changes in Liberia, remains to be seen in the coming years.

8.9 Future hopes

"I want to be a mechanic. Before the war my father was a mechanic." (19-year-old)

This chapter concludes by looking at what these young people wanted to be in the future and what they would wish for, if they could make three wishes. Figure 17 shows what they wanted to be in terms of professions.

"I want to do agriculture in the future. I also want to learn how to drive but that takes US$500." (21-year-old)

Figure 17: What did the ex-child soldiers want to be in the future?

(n=28, 4 did not reply. Respondents could say more than one thing)
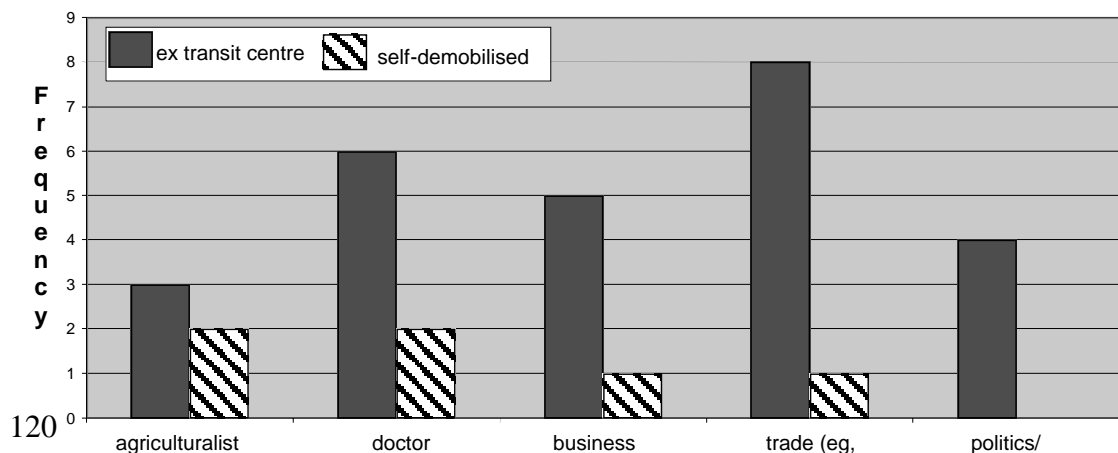
Interestingly, nine of the 32 young people mentioned that they wanted to build a house or re-build their family's house. Of course, a house is very important in Liberia, like it is in the rest of the world, but it also reflects the massive destruction that went on during the war.

> "I like to go out of Liberia if I am educated, so I can help my people and build a house for my family." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "We had already a concrete house but it was destroyed during the war." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I want to build a house and I like to have a data-job." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I want to build my own house." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

Another desire high on the agenda was to finish their education. Education was considered by many as the key to success. They recognised that most of the successful people in Liberia who had good jobs were educated.

> "If I had money I would graduate from school and become the leader of the government or the superintendent." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I like to finish school and complete my sewing training. Later I would like to be a football player." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I want to build a house and become a business man, a money man. But first I want to finish school." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I want to be the Minister of Agriculture and I want money to build a house and help Liberia." (18-year-old, ex transit centre).

Some of the young people did not want to stay in their villages and expressed the wish to go to Monrovia.

> "I want to be a big man, a minister. I want to have a car and money. And I want to live in the city and on my own." (15-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I want to live in Monrovia and be a doctor or mechanic but first I want to finish my education." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I want to become a doctor and go to the city." (21-year-old).

Others, however, did not need to go to Monrovia.

> "I want to be a doctor and stay in my village. But first I want to finish school. And I want to live a long life." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I want to be a doctor or a teacher or a driver. And I want to build a big house in my village." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I want to be a meteorologist and to build a house and make a business." (14-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I think I will make my living here. I have a foundation here. I want to be a carpenter." (16-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I like to be an agriculturist or a doctor like my father. I either want to stay here or go to Monrovia. But after the war it is difficult: each day we have to look for food and we have to rebuild our house." (19-year-old)

This last young man had not seen his mother since the beginning of the war:

> "I want to find my mother next year. I do not know the specific place and I have not saved any money for it yet." (16-year-old)

9. Economic reintegration

Key points in this section
- All but one of the young people interviewed had had some form of work or apprenticeship since they demobilised or left the transit centres. Often they had several different jobs together. The kinds of work were:
  - agricultural work; more than half of the young people interviewed were involved in agricultural work, and considerably more ex-transit centre young people than self-demobilised. Agricultural work was taught in the centres. The work was hard but there was a high demand for the labour. The young people interviewed identified problems of instability of income and lack of tools and seeds
  - skilled vocational work, which required a training such as carpentry, construction, mining, rubber tapping. Fewer ex-child soldiers were involved in vocational work. Those that were had problems of lack of tools (for carpentry)
  - contract work, like short-term 'handyman' jobs that could be agricultural or vocational types of work. This was the most frequently cited job, and many more self-demobilised young people interviewed were doing this than ex-transit centre
  - business/trading jobs like selling gasoline and biscuits. It is said to be common for ex-child soldiers to be involved in petty trade and business although only three of the young people interviewed were selling gasoline or biscuits.
- Most young people got their jobs via their family, by looking for themselves or through friends. Very few got them through their ex-commanders.
- Half the young people interviewed were making a contribution to their families. They spent the money on themselves on clothes and provisions and school fees. Many were also making a considerable economic contribution and were supporting the older generation.

9.1 Introduction

"Me and my friend are living together. He was not a soldier. But we joined together to burn wood for making coal. We sell it and in that way we can pay for our food, clothes and the rent of the house. I am not going to school because there is not enough money left. We have to do everything by ourselves." (ex-child soldier)

As outlined in Chapter 2, the post war situation is depressed with approximately three-quarters of the population living on less than US$1 per day, and an estimated 52 per cent of the population living in extreme poverty on less than US$0.50 per day (OCHA 2003). Big companies are not ready to invest in Liberia on the scale they did before the war. Many people try to make a living by growing crops and try to sell some of the surplus. However, roads have been destroyed and not yet rebuilt, and transport is lacking. For example, the old railroad from the port of Buchanan to the north of the country is now used by the 'rail-track boys', mainly young ex-child soldiers, pushing handmade cars on the track with bags of rice, palm-oil and even passengers. The journey can take up to three days. Going uphill is very slow, but it

can reach a considerable speed downhill which has given it the nickname of 'make-I-red', referring to the colour of blood due to the number of accidents caused.

In this chapter we look in more detail at the economic situation of the young people interviewed to determine to what extent they had become economically reintegrated. As seen in Chapter 8, many of the worries of the young people were related to economic problems. We will see the various ways these young people made their living, like the 'rail-track boys' do. This is explored by asking whether these young people had their own income activities, what kind of work they were doing, and how long had had they this job or apprenticeship. Other questions relating to their economic reintegration included looking at what they did with their earnings.

9.2 How do they make a living?

More than three years after the end of the war – and for those who went to a transit centre, at least a year after their departure from the centre – all the young people, except one, were either working or doing an apprenticeship.[24] The work sometimes only involved assisting the person who gave them the job.

> "I assisted someone who was working with a power-saw. I did it for about three months."
> (19-year-old)

They earned some money and at the same time learned more about the job. They were also building up an important network of people, which might lead to long-term work.

Figure 18: Vocational training/employment since demobilisation or leaving the transit centre

(N=28, 2 no replies/ not applicable)
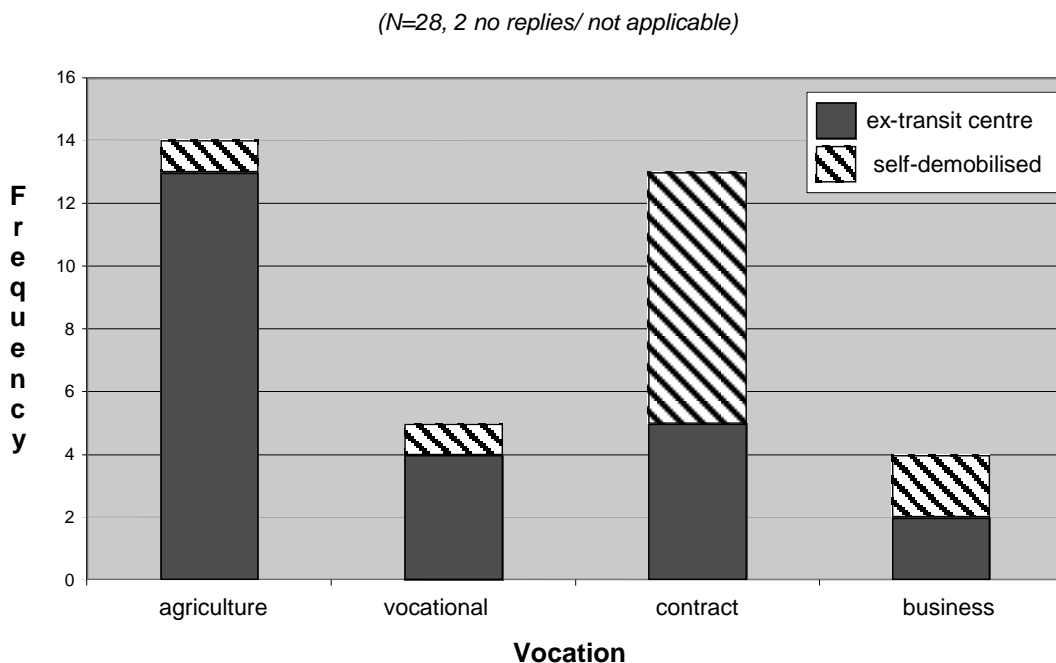
Figure 18 shows the different categories of work that these young people had engaged in since demobilising or leaving the transit centre (they may have done more than one job since then, so each person could be counted more than once). The work that the young people were doing has been divided into four main categories: agricultural, vocational, contract and business (petty trading), although there is some overlap with the categories. For example some work, like mining or gold digging, could be

classified both as vocational work or contract work, depending on the duration and working agreements:

1. agricultural work

    "I do agricultural work and I cut palm nuts to make palm-oil." (22-year-old)

    "I am doing farming and farming contracts." (21-year-old)

2. vocational work, such as carpentry, construction, mining, and plantation

    "I do carpentry contracts and agricultural work". (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

    "I am mining." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

3. contract work, short-term 'handyman' jobs that could be agricultural or vocational types of work

    "I wash clothes for my sister's laundry shop. I am learning to become a mechanic and I do contract work, getting construction sand. But altogether, I earn only a little bit of money." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

    "I do small contracts, like agriculture and brushing the farmland and other small jobs. My aunt and sister help me with the food." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

    "During the war I learned the gold digging as a mean to survive. Now, together with four boys, we pay some money to the owner of the field, and we start digging. That is during the school holiday. We have our own tools. But the gold digging is hard work and I do not want to do it again. But I do not have school fees for next year." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

    "I find passengers for taxis and then the driver pays me and I do agriculture." (19-year-old)

    "I make soap from the palm tree and I do contracts for people." (16-year-old, ex transit centre)

4. trading jobs like selling gasoline or biscuits.

    "I am selling peanuts and slippers." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

    "I am selling gasoline and fuel oil." (16-year-old)

These young people were doing a wide variety of jobs and often they combined several jobs together although most of them had one main income activity. Half of the young people who stayed in a transit centre had had their jobs for less than one year; the other half for one to two years. No one had held a job for longer than two years, but most only left the centres two years before the research. Of the self-demobilised young people, 20 per cent had had their jobs for less than a year, 40 per cent for about one or two years and another 40 per cent had held their jobs for more than two years.

    "The tapping I did for three years and the contract work I do only for a few months now." (19-year-old)

9.2.1 Agriculture

Nearly half of the young people were involved in agricultural activities.

> "I am doing agriculture. The land I am using is my ancestor's land. And my uncle gave me some crops and seedlings to start it up." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

There was a difference between the young people who had been in transit care and the young people who had self-demobilised. Fifty-five per cent of the ex-transit centre young people were involved in agriculture compared with less than 25 per cent of the self-demobilised young people. There are two possible explanations for this difference. Firstly there was a slightly smaller number of self-demobilised young people living alone or with friends – they may not have had such easy access to relatives' land. Secondly there was the potential impact of the agriculture training in the transit centres.

Working on a farm was not considered as the preferred future by many of the young people. According to the programme director of an NGO:

> "Liberia is for 70 per cent a rural country, with mainly agriculture, including some industrial agriculture. But the rural community has lost its workforce: youths are not willing anymore because they are used to money and power."

The farm work is heavy and living in the countryside is considered by many as inferior to living in an urban centre.

> "At the beginning, straight after the war, I was helping my father on the farm. But the work was too hard. Now I am living in town, working for a businessman, selling different kind of items." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

Many of these ex-child soldiers had travelled all over the country and tasted some of the luxuries of city life during the war, and consequently may not have been interested in going back to the rural life to start a farm.

> "I do not want to live in a village because of the hard work and you grow old quick there." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

Many of the young people who went to the transit centre after disarmament were taught farming and learned to value agriculture.

> "The boys had destroyed the land and the gardens of the people during the war, but in the centre they learned the effort that it takes to make a farm." (former transit centre supervisor)

Although for many young people it might not have been their vision of the future, they realised that farming could help them further.

> "For now I really like both the village and the city. I make sure that I am in the bush, in the countryside, for a real reason. I make sure that I have a large farm, a kitchen filled with rice, so I can move to the city. Whenever things get tough, I can return to the village to get some rice to bring it to the city."[25]

According to an agriculture teacher from one of the transit centres these young people did value agriculture:

> "The boys were impressed and enthusiastic about the agricultural training. Most of them had no knowledge about farming when they arrived at the centre. We spent two to three hours in the fields, every day… As far as we know, many reunified ex-child soldiers have found themselves doing agriculture. They have their own farms or backyard gardens. Most of the boys prefer agriculture above other trades because it brings fast money."

A group of ex-child soldiers with their former commander subscribed to this:

> "We are interested in farming, because it gives you a food guarantee and good money. But the work is hard and tedious."

We have seen that, due to agricultural training in the centre, these young people became interested in agriculture. Some of them had already been involved in agriculture before or during the war.

> "The boys often had already some knowledge about how to make farms: they did it for their commanders during the wartime." (senior member of Save the Children UK staff)

There is a high demand for labour in the agriculture sector, and access to land is not a serious problem. As we saw in Chapter 8, the young people did not expect to have problems in taking over their family farm or business. According to the same agricultural teacher:

> "The land issue for farming purposes has not been a problem, even in the Virginia area, which is not too far from Monrovia. In other places, land could be rented or given to you by the community. For ex-child soldiers, to get land, it will depend on their behaviour in the community. Good behaviour will encourage the community to give you land for free to start farming."

In particular in the more remote areas, land is not a scare resource. However, the disadvantage is that external markets are far away, so farmers just practise subsistent farming.

> "The indicators we use if a family is doing all right is for instance, whether or not they have regular access to business services. Food is not the problem any more, as it was during and straight after the war. The problems are the low prices for commodities and the inaccessible markets for many people." (Food Security and Livelihoods Officer, Save the Children UK)

There were plenty of opportunities in the agricultural sector for the young people, but there were many problems and limitations too. Agriculture is labour intensive, the work is hard and the income often is not steady, depending on the harvest.

> "My son and his big brother are living in this house. My son's wife is also living here with us. We make our living by farming. We have our rice farm and we have a lot of land, with rubber and palm trees on it. There are about three people contributing to the income but there are more than six people living on it. Most of our products, we eat them ourselves, we do not sell much. We also help with the communal labour, which is not always easy, but I am not a member of a *susu* saving system. Before the war our situation was fine. Now it is difficult but not really bad. If the rice harvest is good this year we will see. Before the war my husband was working for the government so we had a steady income." (mother)

Although the mother of this ex-child soldier was lucky to have both the young man and his older brother living with her, more people were living from the income than were contributing to it. Also, the example shows that before the war families often had two different sources of income; the wife was working on the farm and was selling a part of her produce, for instance, while a mining company or the government employed the husband.

> "We are living here with my sister and my four children. We do agriculture. We have a rice and cassava farm. It is not a big farm because I am a woman and I do not have many children so there is not enough labour to do a lot of work. In fact it is only me who is contributing to the income. But many people are living on it. Including my brother who is sick for two years now. He has a problem with breathing. So the situation is not good, because I am a single mother." (mother)

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Agriculture in Liberia is labour intensive. It is mostly of a 'slash and burn' type. Poor soil quality means that fields can be used only for two or three years, yielding only two rice harvests. After that, a new bush area has to be cleared or 'brushed'. Ploughing has to be done by hand due to the lack of plough animals and the fact that obstacles, such as tree stumps, cover the fields.

A further problem for agriculture is the lack of agricultural tools, including good quality seeds. Good seeds were all consumed during the war, and due to a lack of infrastructure, there is only limited exchange.

> "The main problem of the people in the community is that they are lacking tools for their farm work." (town chief)

Although the agricultural sector has problems, it is clearly an important area to invest in. However, although agriculture is very important and the main activity in Liberia, it is not the only work there is. In the next section, other jobs that these young people were doing will be discussed.

9.2.2 Non-agricultural jobs

We have seen that less than a quarter of the self-demobilised young people were involved in agriculture. Twice as many self-demobilised young people were doing contract work as ex-transit centre young people. Outside the agricultural sector there were few options for employment: business (petty trading), rubber tapping, etc. These are explored below.

Businesses (petty trading)

The number of young people making their living from a business was small; of the 32 young people interviewed, only three were trading. Practitioners, however did indicate that many ex-child soldiers became involved in trading:

> "Ex-child soldiers are more engaged in selling activities and petty trade. Therefore some business skills would be relevant to teach them." (Save the Children UK staff)

This was particularly true for the urban areas, and especially in certain activities, like the selling of gasoline, or related activities.

> "I find passengers for taxis. Then the taxi-driver pays me some money. I can earn up to L$150 on a good day." (19-year-old).

The problem with such selling activities was that the market for most items was already satisfied and the capital the young people had available to start up was very small. Often young people may have had nothing more then a carton of chewing gum or box of batteries to sell, without making any real profit.

> "I sell biscuits in the city centre and at other places. On a daily basis I make a profit of L$40 to L$50. A part of this profit is used for my *susu* and the balance I give to my mother to pay for her *susu*. Selling is not an easy thing. I walk long distances to sell my biscuits. I have been selling for the last seven months. I started with one carton of biscuits but now I can afford to buy up to four or five cartons. But if the starting capital is not available some children are running a business for someone else." (19-year-old, ex-transit centre)

The following young man was indeed selling for someone else. His vulnerable situation is obvious:

> "I am selling gasoline and fuel oil. The businessman I am doing this for has now two brothers living with him and therefore I am not sure if he still wants me to do the work next year. If I will be sent away I will look for somebody to help me but I do not know anybody who can help." (16-year-old)

According to a group of ex-child soldiers, other young people, sometimes working with their former commanders, were trafficking and selling drugs, in particular marihuana:

> "Many ex-soldiers are selling drugs, like marihuana. They buy it in the north, in Nimba County. They do not have another job because they missed so much of their education." (group discussion young people)

Vocational work

Another option for these young people was to do some kind of vocational work such as carpentry, construction, rubber tapping, mining or work as a mechanic. However, 90 per cent of the self-demobilised young people had no experience with vocational work before the war and only one young man went to a vocational training centre after the war. The only trades for these young people were the relatively simple ones, such as mining or rubber tapping. Sometimes they had been involved in this during the war.

> "I was a rubber tapper for three years, from the end of the war up to last month." (19-year-old)

Although few of the individual young people who were interviewed were working on rubber plantations, generally many ex-child soldiers do, and a group discussion (with both ex-child soldiers and civilian young people) was held in a plantation. The following description comes from this discussion at a rubber camp:

> "We are paid US$65 a month and one bag of rice. Most of us, after four or five years, have saved enough to start a business or to go away to go back to school. But some boys can save considerable money in only seven months. We have a *susu* system and depending on how serious you are and what other costs you have, you can put US$15-30 in it, every month…The job is very tedious. If you get sick, the company provides rice and gives you some little money but only the first two months. After that you are on your own. This rubber tapping is not our career. What we need is some vocational training so that we can learn something else and move away from this place. The company only helps you with a good job if you are a relative of one of the management."

Although the work was tedious, the young people were able to save considerable amounts of money. The main rubber company in Liberia, Firestone, had a project straight after the war for ex-child soldiers. A senior member of Save the Children UK staff described it:

> "As far as post-war labour projects are concerned, I like to take the Firestone project as an example. Ex- [child] soldiers were trained as rubber tappers. In that way they had a real job and a salary and thus a more realistic reintegration. Moreover, there was an element of competition in it. For example, out of the 100 boys who were trained, after a few months only 75 had their contract extended. These kind of commercial labour projects are better than the so called 'food for work' projects, because after a few months the ones who did this, still have nothing."

Although the numbers are small in both cases, there were relatively more ex-transit centre young people involved in occupations that require training than there were self-demobilised young people. Those young people who went to the transit centres at least had received some vocational training and Save the Children UK had negotiated in some cases with vocational training institutes for the continuation of their training. However, lack of training was not the only restriction, as some young people who did learn a skill had found.

> "I tried to do some carpentry work in the community but the problem is that I do not have the right tools. Now I am helping my aunt on the field and I have my own farm." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

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An interesting question is whether or not ex-child soldiers did different jobs than other young people. As we have seen, many ex-child soldiers were found doing contract work, petty trading and working on plantations. Although the research did not include interviews with enough community children to make a thorough comparison, some preliminary observations can be made about this. This young man, who did not join the soldiers, described his way of making a living:

> "The way I make money is like this; together with other boys we have a hairdressing shop and I earn sometimes L$15. Another way is that I can do a small contract, I break wood and sell that or do it on request." (community boy

This does not seem to be different from ex-child soldiers doing contracts. If we want to look at the differences in the type of work done by ex-child soldiers and other young people, we have to look at the differences between these two groups.

Table 3: Comparison between employment of ex-child soldiers and civilian young people

Ex-child soldiers	Civilian young people
Ex-child soldiers have missed a large part of their formal education. They are less likely to have an educational career or be found in high-level jobs. To some extent the same is true for the highly skilled vocational work.	Many other young people have also missed much education during the war; many children have been displaced and many village schools were destroyed.
Ex-child soldiers have moved around in the country and have taken on adults' roles. Therefore, they are more likely to live on their own or with friends in urban areas and have urban-oriented jobs like trading.	Other children and young people have moved around too, during the war, having taken on more responsibilities which could be argued have the weight of adult jobs.
Big commanders, who came out of the war rich, and started businesses, employed their loyal ex-soldiers, including ex-child soldiers.	Former commanders are not the only business people in Liberia, and these other business people may be less likely to employ ex child soldiers.

Table 3 (continued)

International companies active in Liberia, such as logging companies, employed many ex-soldiers including ex-child soldiers, due to interventions by Charles Taylor, who wanted to keep his former soldiers satisfied.	Companies which have already been operating in Liberia for a long time, are less influenced by Charles Taylor's government than the new arrivals. Both new and old companies have been encouraged back and have few restrictions on who they employ.
During the war, commanders confiscated vehicles and to some extent had control over fuel. Although this started to change after the war, many ex-child soldiers can be found in the transport sector and are involved in selling fuel.	The transport sector is changing and more and more civilians are involved in it.
Commanders were often in control of mining areas. Still many ex-child soldiers can be found here.	Work in the mining areas is changing slowly, and is absorbing more and more ordinary young people.
Obviously, ex-child soldiers can be found in security forces and the private security sector for companies, because of their knowledge and contacts.	

This table shows there are differences to be found between ex-child soldiers and other young people, but in general these differences are not that extreme. From the evidence of this chapter and the previous one, it could be argued that many of the ex-child soldiers interviewed lived lives that were not very different from those of their peers who did not join a faction.

It is interesting to look at how these young people got the jobs they were doing. One of the assumptions is that the young people may have acquired their jobs via their old commanders and were working with other ex-child soldiers. As we saw in the last chapter, only a few of the interviewees still had contact with their former commanders. This lack of contact is also reflected in the fact that very few got their jobs in this way. We can distinguish various ways the young people secured their jobs:

1. through family

    "I do the work I am doing because of help of my father and mother." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

    "The land I am using for my farm is my ancestor's land. And my uncle gave me some crops." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

    "I got the farm job via my parents." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

2. looked for the job themselves

    "I looked for it myself." (20-year-old)

    "The people just come to me and ask me if I can do some work for them." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

    "I cut palm nuts and I sold them. From that money I bought some provisions and started my small business." (25-year-old)

    "I did farming already during the war." (21-year-old)

3. via a friend

> "A friend of mine, an ex-soldier, asked me to come to Gbarnga where I met his friend. He was also an ex-soldier. This guy was selling for the businessman and he recommended me to him." (16-year-old)

> "Friends helped me." (19-year-old)

4. given the opportunity or asked to start working.

> "My school provided the materials for the garden." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "A businessman came along in the centre, and asked me to start working for him as soon as I left the centre." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

In the next section we will look at what these young people did with their money and if they minded that they had less money and access to goods than during the war.

9.3 Financial responsibilities

Nearly all the young people had their own income generating activities. Only four did not have their own income generation activities (three of whom were working on their relatives' farms), and two did not reply to this question. This level of involvement with income generation is not unusual since all the young people were in the age range 16–25, which is a normal age to start working. In addition, many were living with extended family members, guardians or on their own, and therefore needed cash to contribute to the household.

Most of the young people used the money they earned for their daily living, to buy food and clothes (65 per cent). About a third were saving money to pay for their school fees. There was no major difference between ex-transit centre and self-demobilised young people. Sometimes parents or family members paid school fees, but almost 75 per cent of the respondents who were going to school were paying for it themselves. Those young people willing to continue their education often had to combine this with work.

There seem to be two trends in how these young people used their money. Figure 19 shows to whom the young people gave their money. One group of young people used the money they earned mainly for their own purposes and did not share it with other people. This is particularly true for those young people living on their own.

> "I pay my own school fees. Although my aunt is responsible for me, because I also help her on her farm." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I pay my school fees and I save something to invest in my business." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I save the money I earn and I use it for myself." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I buy food, agricultural tools, clothes and give some money to my girlfriend and mother." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I buy food and clothes but sometimes I can give money to my girlfriend for her to make a business and then we can also cook together." (22-year-old)

> "I also buy provisions to make a business. What I earn on a daily basis I must give to the businessman for whom I am selling the petrol. He gives me 250JJ[26], that is about L$500 at the end of each month." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "We, my friends and I who live in this house, save the money to buy rice and bulgur wheat. We also have to pay the rent and we are members of a *susu*." (16-year-old, ex transit centre)

Figure 19: To whom did respondents give money?

(n=25, 7 no reply or not applicable)
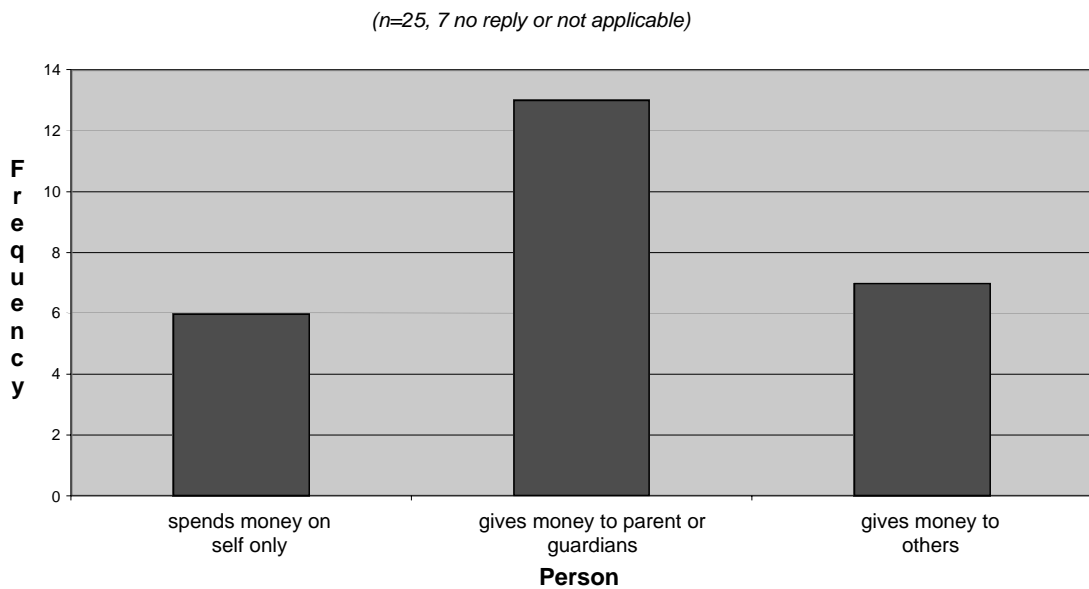
A second group was giving considerable amounts of money to their families, although they also used it for themselves (only one young person did not use any of his income himself).

> "I buy food and clothes for my family." (21-year-old)

> "A part of the money goes to my family and a part is for me to save it to buy clothes." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I help my family in the village. And I buy my food and pay the rent of my room which is L$40." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I had to come back after disarmament to take care of my old parents. When I arrived at their small town I started to cut palm nuts and I sold them. From that money I bought some provisions and started my own business. Now I buy food for my family and give out contracts to brush and clean my farm. So I can take care of my old parents and do things for myself." (25-year-old)

Before the war this sort of contribution to the family had not been necessary to the same extent. If we just look at some of the jobs that the parents of these young people had been doing before the war, this becomes clear:

> "My father worked for the government and my mother was a farmer." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)?

> "My father was burning wood for coal and my mother was a trader." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "My father was a teacher and my mother was a trader." (16-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "Before the war my father was working with LAMCO, the mining company, and my mother was selling." (19-year-old)

Due to the difficult economic situation, many of these young people carried greater responsibility for what they earned and how they spent it.

> "A part of the money I save is used to pay for the bush school of my brother." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

For most, the wartime way of living from one day to the next was over.

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> "The money I acquired during my fighting life was not used properly. I did not really buy anything good with it and in fact I could not use the money in peacetime because the money was already gone. But the money I get from my selling is being used properly and for good purposes." (19-year-old, ex-transit centre).

Some young people saved their money to have enough to start a business. Others were slowly increasing their money like small entrepreneurs. Many of these young people became accustomed to having money and material goods when they were with the factions. This was confirmed in conversation with a group of young people. Their commanders would give them cash, some sold looted goods and they may have stolen from people in villages or at checkpoints:

> "During the war I got more money. I stayed with my commander. He gave me money. Now you have to work for your money." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "Nowadays it is difficult to get money but I do not want to steal it." (15-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "During the war it was easy to get money but also easy to lose it. Now it is just the other way around." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "Presently I do not have much money but during the war we had more." (18-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "During the war I was used to have money. I used that money to buy things for myself." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I got more money and items during the war but they were not properly used as compared to now." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "My friend, the soldier, provided me with money during the war." (14-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "During the war you can get it by force, now you get it by doing some contract for someone. This is the way it should be." (16-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "In the beginning I found it difficult. During the war you could take what you wanted by force. But now I am happy that I left the soldier business." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "We could get money easily but there was nothing to use it for." (21-year-old)

> "During the wartime I used to get things from the frontline which I sold in the community." (22-year-old)

However, not all young people stated that it had been easier to get money during the war. In many cases, they had to give whatever they obtained, to their commander; in the end, they were still children. The commander sometimes re-distributed it among them, to make the soldiers loyal to him.

> "The money I got during the war, the commander took it all. And the little money I had, I used it to buy clothes." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I have more money now. And I did not get things of my own during the war, only together with my friends." (21-year-old ex transit centre)

> "I make more money now than during the war." (25-year-old)

> "During the war I was with the SBU and most of the times I had to give the goods that I had to the commander." (16-year-old)

As mentioned, these young people made major contributions to the family income. In the next section we will study this in more detail. We will see that these ex-child soldiers were by no means a burden to society. On the contrary, if given the right stimulus, they could make a major contribution to the family and national income.

9.4 Economic domination of youth

The previous section shows us to whom the children gave the money they earned. Most of these young people were at least partly economically independent; nearly all respondents kept a part of their money for themselves. Almost half gave a part of the money they earned to their parents, families or guardians with whom they lived. More than a quarter gave the money to someone else, such as a businessman they worked for.

> "I give some food to my mother because she can only eat certain things because of her taboo. She is forbidden from eating cassava." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I give some to my aunt and she takes care of my food." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I give money to my sister and the businessman and to myself." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I give some money to my mother and girlfriend." (22-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I save the money to increase the business." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I give the money to my mother and she pays my school fees." (19-year-old)

> "I took the money I earned to my brother and sister. But I also paid the commission to the man who helped me with the business." (17-year-old)

> "I can take some money to my sister, or me and my friends put money together to cook together." (19-year-old)

Thus the majority of ex-child soldiers interviewed were living an economically independent life, taking care of themselves and were not an economic burden for their families and communities. According to Figure 19, almost 50 per cent of the young people were helping their parents, families or guardians with financial contributions. The parents or relatives of the young people interviewed supported this view of ex-child soldiers as contributors to the family income:

> "I am happy that he is with me. Since he has arrived he helped me with the farm and together with his brother he has rebuilt the whole house. We are living here with the four of us. He, his big brother and his smaller sister and myself. We are living on farming, rice and cassava. We have enough land but we do not have enough labour. It is by reciprocal labour that we do our farming. It is the four of us that are contributing to the income but more depend on it. Because he is the one that is doing the farm work he will be the one that will take over the farm completely in the future." (aunt)

> "I am the mother of (…). It is good having him with me. He is my only help because his father died during the war. He does everything for me. There are no problems with him. He does everything I ask him to do. He helped me with building this house. The house is a mud house, built in the camp outside (…). It is not a good one. And he also helps me on the farm. The farm is not big but we depend on it. We have a rice farm and he is selling biscuits. It is me and my son who work for food but it is only the two of us who are living on it." (mother)

> "It is good to have him home. I was happy to see him back. I lost sight of him in1992. He helps me at the farm. I think that he can take over the farm when I am old. Or maybe he will be working in Kakata in the future." (mother)

Other people in society reinforced the view that these young people helped the older generation. For instance, by this security officer of a rubber plantation said:

> "If you ask me what are the main differences here at the plantation nowadays, compared to the time before the war, I can say that nowadays more youth is involved in the tapping. Before the war the parents were tapping. Now it is the youth because the parents are not able anymore. The children support the parents. I think that almost 95 per cent of the total number of people that are working here at the

plantation is youth. Like I said, the parents are old and cannot tap so well anymore. But also the pensions are not sufficient anymore. And the youth nowadays are married young. They have children at a young age, so they must tap." (security officer at rubber-plantation)

It seems that the older generation depended more on the younger generation than before the war. Respondents were commenting that the war had made the adults grow old; that their resilience had been broken due to multiple displacements, atrocities and the destruction of fields and houses. When asked if they liked being a young person in Liberia, in many cases the young people replied that it was better than being an old(er) person. The interviewees said this about the older generation:

"All the people that are working are young." (18-year-old, ex transit centre)

"'If you are old you have no energy." (19-year-old)

Of course this dependence on the younger generation resulted in heavy workloads for them. This could be too much for some, possibly leading to decisions to leave their villages and families to start a new life for themselves.

"Life is not easy for us. We have to work on the communal land. And at the weekend we have to work on the farms of our parents because they are old. Sometimes children head a household. So we have no time off during the weekend. And we make our own gardens in school so the supervisor will be able to buy extra school material. And there is no entertainment in town. What we need is more sporting facilities." (group discussion, youth)

10. Education in post-war Liberia

Key points from this section
- More than two-thirds of the ex-transit centre young people interviewed continued their education after they left; just over half of the self-demobilised children did. For both groups the time spent in formal education was relatively short, mostly less than two years.
- The education system in Liberia suffered during the war; schools were destroyed and funding was so limited that teachers often went unpaid. The biggest barrier for the ex-child soldiers interviewed was school fees, which was their main concern. Some of the young people interviewed moved to stay with other relatives in areas where the schools were functioning or were free. Many interviewees had to drop out of school completely.
- Teachers interviewed identified the changed behaviour of the ex-child soldiers as a barrier to accessing school. They were older than their school mates and were more challenging to the teachers.
- Potential solutions included vocational training. Different experiences of vocational training have been explored by many organisations and have come across problems, such as the lack of opportunity for work in the poor economic climate, the problem of access to tools, and the need for living expenses whilst training.

10.1 Introduction

This chapter looks at the educational situation of the ex-child soldiers, both those who went through the transit centres and those that did not. It discusses whether they were able to continue their education after the war, and if they did not continue their education it looks at why not. The social and economic problems faced by communities, which prevent the continuation of the education of these children, are explored.

10.2 Continuation of education

Besides learning basic educational skills as an aim in itself, the rationale of the catch-up education provided in the transit centres was to provide a compressed curriculum that would enable children to make a smooth transition back into formal education. About 72 per cent of the children who had stayed in a transit centre were indeed able to continue their education after their departure.

> "In the centre I came to grade 3 and now I am in grade 6."(21-year-old, ex transit centre)

The rest of the children (28 per cent) did not go back to school.

> "I stopped for two years because my father was unemployed."(17-year-old, ex transit centre)

Of the self-demobilised children, about half were able to go back to school. The difference between transit centre children and self-demobilised children in the

enrolment in formal education might be partly explained by the fact that Save the Children UK was paying school fees for some of its former residents.

> "I only continued my education for one year: that was the time that was paid by Save the Children UK." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

Another explanation is that the children in the centre learned to (re)value education during their stay in the centre. Of all the things children really missed after their reunification, education was mentioned the most – more than the sports activities, their friends or the free provisions. In addition, it seems that the higher standard of education provided in the centres also gave rise to disappointments after reunification.

> "Save the Children UK registered me at the village school. But I did not like to go there. We had to work for the teacher after school." (17-year-old, ex transit centre)

The time these children spent in formal schools after transit care or disarmament is relatively short. Only a few children spent more than two years in formal education. None of the self-demobilised children spent more than two years in school after the war. In addition, these self-demobilised children all started their education relatively recently.

> "I started at the end of September 98. I am at school on and off, depending if I am able to pay the school fees. I am now in the seventh grade." (16-year-old)

This is most likely to be explained by the low number of schools that were operating straight after the war.

> "They opened the school this year. It is an evening school. I am now in the first grade." (22-year-old)

10.3 The educational situation in post-war Liberia

Many schools ceased to operate during the war due to insecurity or as a result of being burned or looted. The recovery was, and is, a slow process with many problems still to be overcome. In this section teachers, principals, elders and chiefs explain the present situation and problems with the education system in Liberia. We then look more specifically at the social difficulties around education after the war, including the behaviour of ex-child soldiers in school.

Primary school education has been compulsory in Liberia since the 1970s, but this does not mean that going to school is straightforward. The war had a serious impact on the development of the education system. One problem is the lack of schools, especially in the more remote places.

> "Here in the town we have a school. But like we mentioned, there are many villages around the town and sometimes they are at a far distance. There is no school so the children have to walk a long distance or do not go to school at all." (village elders).

This is not a new problem, but the situation in post-war Liberia has deteriorated because of lack of local and public transport in many parts of the countryside, and the poor condition of the roads. In addition, where schools are operating, it is often under difficult conditions.

> "The present economic situation of Liberia is not good for the school. One-third of the teachers are not paid. There is a need for support, like provisions, help in school fees and the reconstruction of the building because the roof is leaking during the rainy season." (teachers).

However, it seems that the biggest barrier to going to school, for students featured in this research, was their own economic situation.

> "There was no money for school fees and even no money to live from." (21-year-old, ex transit centre)

School fees were around US$4 per semester, which, combined with the cost of providing stationery and uniform, was too expensive for many people.

> "The parents have no money to buy uniforms for their children but we cannot take children out of school for that." (school principal)

As shown in Chapter 8, the main problems faced by interviewees, (both ex-transit care and self-demobilised children) were related to education; getting school fees (almost 60 per cent) and getting a uniform (almost 20 per cent). The other problems mentioned, such as getting food, medicines, housing or agricultural tools, accounted for nor more than 10 per cent (multiple answers were possible).

If people had only one child to send to school, it might be possible to find the money, but, especially in the rural areas, people have many children.

> "Many children drop out of school because they cannot afford to pay the school fees. The people in the village have nothing at all." (village elders)

Nearly all the young people paid their own school fees. More than 60 per cent of the ex-transit care children pay their own school fees, and all the self-demobilised did.

> "I am paying for the school fees myself. I cut palm-nuts in the bush and that is the way I get the money I need for the school fees." (19-year-old)

> "I pay the school fees myself. I first went to another school but that one was too expensive. For this school I pay 2× L$250 for the whole year. But if I cannot pay it I am not allowed to follow the lessons." (16-year-old, self-demobilised)

Only slightly more than 15 per cent of the ex-transit centre children had their school fees paid by someone else; their parents or a relative.

> "My uncle is paying my school fees." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

Another 25 per cent had their school fees paid by Save the Children UK, but only for a limited time.

> "Save the Children UK paid the school fees for the first semester but then they stopped paying, so I had to stop too." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

Clearly the economic situation of these children and their families prevented them from continuing their education, as they could not rely on their parents or families for their school fees. For these families there were only a few options open. One option was to send their child away to a better-off relative.

> "I decided that it was better for him to send him to town so he could continue his education. His older brother, who is working in town, takes care of him. But I know that at the moment he has some difficulties with his school." (mother)

Unfortunately, there were not many people who had relatives who could help in this way. Another option was to try to access cheap or free education.

> "He showed interest in education. So last month he moved to his aunt at the Firestone rubber plantation to benefit from the free education over there." (father)

Even when there was free education, for example on rubber plantations, there were other restrictions to the education. These young people described how they managed to fit education around their work:

> "We wake up at around 5.30. But around 6.00 you have to go to the trees to start tapping. We work non-stop till two o'clock in the afternoon. We make our food and eat it and we get ready to go to school. It takes about 45 minutes to walk to school.

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> The school starts around half-past three. That is the late afternoon session. The school stops at around half-past six because it gets too dark to see. So we have only three hours of school, but if there was a generator we could continue our lessons during the night. Then we walk back to our camp and arrive there late. On Saturday and Sunday we have some time to work in our gardens. And one or two times a week we do something that we call 'double tapping'; then we also tap the rubber in the afternoon." (group discussion)

For some there was no option but for the child to drop out of school completely.

> "Because now there is no support to send him to school and I am too poor to pay the school fees myself. Instead he is working in the streets. He is now selling biscuits, the profit he brings home." (mother)

Thus, many children and young people were likely to remain illiterate throughout their lives as a result of the war. The children who were eight, nine or ten years old at the start of the war, with no or only limited education, were now adolescents. Many had found themselves responsible for their families, leaving no time or funds for going back to school.

> "Most of the older students have gone to school before the war. But the bigger boys who are working for money are not so interested in school like they were before the war. I think this is because they do not get any support and have to take care of themselves. And often for their wives and children too. This is the case especially with the ex-soldiers." (school principal)

10.4 Problems with education due to social circumstances

The previous section looked at the economic problems of education in post-war Liberia.

Beyond these economic issues, there were other barriers to education. Although education was highly valued by these young people, the attitude of students was seen to change during the war.

> "If you ask me if there is any difference between the students before the war and after the war I would say that the attitude of the students has changed. Before the war there was a high enrolment of students. They were easy to deal with and were willing to take instructions. Overall, they were putting more time in studying, also after school. Now, after the war the number is reducing slowly. Children start, but drop out of school, often because of responsibilities at home. They have to help their parents. The average age is also very high. We have many old children in school." (school principal)

This change in attitude is related to economic reasons; even if children were committed to their education they could not make the time available because they had to help their parents. However, there were other issues involved. The young people had changed their behaviour.

> "Their attitude has changed. They do not listen so well anymore. Another problem is that there is more drug use: smoking and drinking. Some still have that 'soldier' attitude." (school principal)

It seems that the war changed the behaviour of the students; smoking and drinking was not a serious problem before the war. During the war many young people became involved in drug use and were still using drugs after the war – mainly palm wine and marihuana, which were cheap and easy to acquire. Other people also referred to the higher levels of aggression and violence and to young people having less respect.

> "If I compare the behaviour of the children before and after the war, I can simply say that it was good before the war and bad now." (teacher)

In some cases teachers refused to teach certain children straight after the war.

"Sometimes the teachers do not teach because certain children have committed atrocities." (director, NGO)

Teachers and principals had been targets of disgruntled ex-students, sometimes because of corruption and blackmail activities by the teachers themselves. In such cases, reconciliation between the teacher and student had to take place, often promoted by the chief and elders of the community.

A further problem was that the young people were studying at a very basic level but were much older than their classmates. Some had held senior positions in the factions, but had to fit into an education system designed for small children. This has led to behaviour problems and possibly a higher drop-out rate.

"It is difficult to estimate but yes, I think the dropping rate is higher for ex-child soldiers. But still many of them are in school. Sometimes they are in their twenties but still go to school, sitting next to small boys. Maybe they are a little ashamed but they want to learn. If you look at the high number of boys and girls that are already between 10 and 18 years of age and are still in the kindergarten. That is one-third of the total number of students." (school principal)

Many older children would find it difficult to sit next to small children, but still they were committed and they realised that they were not the only big boy or girl in the class.

"To be a big boy in the class is not a problem because there are other big boys as well." (16-year-old)

This raises the question of what future do these children have in continuing their education? Have they missed too many years of education to be made up in just a few years?

"There are many old children in the low grades. The only thing we can do is to give them double promotion. In that way we encourage them." (school teacher)

As mentioned, education is highly valued by young people in Liberia and many children, including the older ones, want to continue their education. Education and vocational training can play an important role in the 'normalisation' of the lives of these children.

"What we need in the community to help these children is a good school and vocational training facilities. Because if they are in school, they are doing well and they will forget about their commanders. The problem with an ordinary school is that these children have to sit with small boys. Maybe they are 17 or 18 and are only in grade two." (town chief)

10.5 Other organisations' experiences with vocational training

An important part of reconstruction aid has supported vocational training to develop young people as craftsmen. These programmes were discussed with five agencies in Liberia, which provided vocational training. The programmes ranged from agriculture to metal work, carpentry and construction and were aimed at both ex-child soldiers and other young people. These organisations emphasised that skills training alone was not sufficient and most provided additional business skills and some start-up funding for tools and equipment, often on a small group co-operative basis. Some also had job co-ordinators to actively identify contracts for the students when they graduated.

Problems that these schemes identified are:
- the weakness of the economy, and the training not necessarily leading to work
- prejudice against the young people making it hard for them to gain contracts

- lack of business knowledge and skills among the young people
- the problem for young people training for a long periods of time without being paid, when they have other commitments
- insufficient start-up funds for the projects
- the immediate needs of the young people meaning they often get frustrated and sell their tools for food
- the problems of setting up and maintaining group co-operatives, especially when the young people live far apart
- the need for market assessments of the skills needed
- the need to create businesses where young people have control and responsibility for them and avoid dependence on the NGO
- the need for social integration processes to support economic integration.

The experiences of these programmes show that vocational training programmes are not a straightforward way of tackling the employment problems of these young people. The success of the programme depends on: (i) good preparation of the programme, including the identification of those skills that are needed in society; (ii) good implementation of the actual training, including business training; and (iii) building in mechanisms so that graduates can start working, either by linking them up to already existing companies or businesses, or by offering good 'starters packages' with toolkits. In the end, the success of these projects depends on factors, economic and social, that cannot be influenced by the programme.

11. Ex-child soldiers in Liberia – the girls

Key points from this section
- Most reports on child soldiers have ignored the role and impact of the war on girls. This report too focuses on male child soldiers, but attempts to find out the perspective of girls involved in the factions, through interviewing a group of girls, and also by asking all the interviewees about girls. Case studies about the girls are given.
- The total number of girls who took up arms is small compared to boys, but estimates have been made that as many as 5,000 girls may have been involved in the factions. Very few girls came through the demobilisation process, which means they have not been counted or had access to help in the same way. Barriers to girls' official disarming were that commanders wanted to keep them, and were more reluctant to admit having girl soldiers. Many girls stayed with their commanders as they were far away from their homes and did not know if they could get back alone.
- Girls were involved in fighting, but mostly they were conducting domestic chores such as cooking, or were used as soldiers' wives.
- Very few female ex-child soldiers went through Save the Children UK's transit centres. Special programmes for girls were set up by other organisations, which included counselling, vocational training and basic education. Save the Children UK was involved in family tracing for girls.
- Practitioners and community members interviewed were divided about the reintegration of female ex-child soldiers. Some felt that the girls were being reintegrated in the same way as boys. Others saw the reintegration of girls as more difficult, and that they were vulnerable to exclusion and to prostitution. Reasons given for this were: it is not culturally accepted that girls should fight; they may return having had children and so are not accepted back by their husbands or the community; or they may have been humiliated in front of the community. Much of this is happening in the context of a male dominated society, where women have low status. It was also identified by practitioners and community members that girls were more socially and economically vulnerable than boys if they remained outside their community.
- Recommendations were given by practitioners and young people about how to access the girls, including via health services, through other girls who had been with their commanders and by negotiation with commanders.

11.1 Introduction

> "The question 'Where are the girls?' is seldom raised in discussions about children in armed forces and armed opposition groups, both as soldiers and non-soldiers. Just as the use of child soldiers had been a largely invisible and unacknowledged international phenomenon, scant attention has been given to girls in armed forces, their distinct experiences, the impacts, and gender-specific human rights violations. With the exception of some data compiled by the International Coalition Against Child Soldiers, the majority of reports, international campaigns, and initiatives continue to use the generic term 'child soldiers' or 'children', almost always meaning boys, and do not identify differential impacts for boys and girls before, during, or after armed conflicts." (McKay and Mazurana, 2000)

This report too, has focused mainly on male ex-child soldiers. There have been several reasons for this:

- The number of girls, who took up arms and actively fought, was relatively small in the Liberian war. It is estimated that girls made up less than five per cent of the total number of child soldiers, and girls made up less than two per cent of those going through the demobilisation process.
- Related to this, very few girl ex-child soldiers stayed in Save the Children UK's transit centres, although other programmes had more. Some girls did go to the centres, but they lived in the community and were benefiting from the education and vocational training. One of the major focuses of this research was an evaluation of the centres and their impact on reintegration. It was therefore sensible to focus on the main group of children who stayed in the centres (ie, the boys).
- As both the research co-ordinator and research assistant were men, it was not possible to build up the necessary trust and rapport with the girls. Additionally, the team was advised by the Liberia project advisory team that showing too much interest in the lives of girls, particularly in the rural areas, could lead to misunderstandings and hostilities.

Given these constraints, it was necessary to focus this research on male ex-child soldiers. However, we wanted it to do more than simply make a recommendation that emphasised the need to research girls' experiences of conflict. An attempt was therefore made to include a perspective on the experience of girls and young women. The young men interviewed were asked about what they knew about the girls in the factions. The issue of girls was also raised in all interviews with practitioners, and a small number of civilian women and girl ex-child soldiers were interviewed with female project staff. Because information on girl ex-child soldiers is still so scarce, some interviews are shown in full.

To set the stage and to get a better understanding of experiences and difficulties of these young women here is the story of a 17-year-old girl ex-child soldier:

> "I am just 17 years old. I want to explain my problem to you but I know you cannot help me. I lived with my parents in Monrovia before the war, and I was going to a good school because my parents were well off. When the war came to Monrovia, I was captured and forced to be one of the wives of a commander of the NPFL. Besides being his wife, I was trained to guard the gate and also trained to fight. I had my own weapon. I fought for NPFL on several times but I escaped to Côte d'Ivoire and then I went to Ghana and Nigeria and to other West African countries, trying to survive.
>
> I returned to Liberia during the cease-fire and I was at one of the Don Bosco centres going to school and learning home economics. I remained at the Don Bosco School until 1996 when the war started again in Monrovia. My sponsor, a lady, was airlifted and I was left alone again. I started to fight alongside the NPFL. After the war I left

the country for a while and later I returned to Buchanan. Here in Buchanan I am frustrated because no one cares for me. I prostitute myself to make a living but I am used to it and I enjoy the pleasure of the money I earn with it. It all makes me forget about what happened during the war." (girl ex-child soldier)

11.2 The invisible girls

Girls who joined the factions
The total number of girls who took up arms was very small compared with the total number of boys. However, many boys categorised as child soldiers in the Liberian disarmament and demobilisation statistics did not carry guns either. According to some estimates based on the weapons handed in during disarmament, the weapon to soldier ratio might be as low as one to ten. Many boys were used as porters, cooks, personal servants, and bodyguards and were stationed at checkpoints in groups with only one or two weapons between them. If these children can be considered child soldiers, then many girls would fall into the same category. In addition girls were often used as sex slaves, and many became victims of sexual violence.

There are several reasons why girls were conscripted into the factions. According to a female counsellor of an NGO programme, who had worked with girl ex-child soldiers and war affected girls:

> "Some were conscripted by force, if they did not want to join, they were beaten. Some looked for food for themselves and the family, if they came from a poor background. Others were just materialistic, and wanted to have nice clothes or were attracted by the soldiers and the adventurous lifestyle."

So why do the Liberian statistics show so few girls as child soldiers? According to a senior member of Save the Children UK staff, drawing on informants in the different factions, this could be explained by the following reasons:

> "It is difficult to estimate the total number of girl child soldiers because the girls in the factions were not clearly visible. It might be as much as 5,000. But only a few were released, so the statistics show lower numbers. The reasons why commanders did not release the girls, as they did with the boys, were in the first place because the boys were not useful to them anymore at peacetime, but the girls could still do domestic tasks and were used as wives. Another reason was that the whole DDR process was a kind of big public relations stunt for the factions: who could demobilise the most soldiers. Nobody in the factions denied the use of boys, it was obvious at the checkpoints. But the girls were a more sensitive group and potentially embarrassing. So the commanders just said that a girl was their smaller sister, wife or niece."

The former supervisor of a Save the Children UK transit centre added to this:

> "The girls were the wives of the soldiers. Often they were, if armed, disarmed in the soldiers' houses."

A group of ex-child soldiers (all male) with their former commander spoke about the girls in the factions:

> "Girls do not see themselves as soldiers. The boys were sent to the front and suffered more than the girls who stayed behind. According to us, some girls became soldiers to fulfil their needs."

This statement gives us a useful perspective on how these male soldiers and commanders thought about girls in the faction. The young people interviewed were also asked if they could say anything about the girls who were with the soldiers during the conflict. These were some of their replies:

> "Some were fighting and some were cooking for the soldiers." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "Some were cooks and some were fighting. But they were not as good as the boys because if they shot a gun, the gunpowder was making them hungry." (20-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "The commander had a wife who was cooking." (18-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "Some were fighting. But sometimes they just took some exercise like jogging.
> We call them 'wise girls': they cooked and joined us in the frontline. The bigger ones sometimes fought." (19-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "I only saw those that were cooking, but I know that some girls were fighting." (16-year-old, ex transit centre)

> "There were many girls in the army. You have the commanders' wives and there are girls in the battlefront. The girls were as strong as the boys. I do not know what they do at the moment or what happened to them. My friend was rescued by a girl when he was shot in the leg." (17-year-old)

> "Some girls were actively involved in combat. They were good fighters. One girl died during an ambush. Even some commanders' wives were fighting. The one that was killed was a commander's wife and was always eager to go to the war front. And some were cooks. You know, only if they were willing, you could have sex with them. There were some girls going through disarmament but I do not know what happened to them." (16-year-old)

> "They had a hard time. Some were soldiers themselves and some were soldiers' wives. Some were raped and some were killed. Nowadays these girls are prostitutes around the clubs here in Buchanan. They move from one man to the other." (19-year-old)

It seems, according to the accounts of the young people, that there were two groups of girls or women with the male soldiers. One group, probably the largest, cooked and conducted domestic tasks, and a second group of girls was actively involved in combat. It seems that this first group was not respected and the girls were used as cheap labour and sex slaves, in exchange for some protection and food. The other group of girls, who were actually fighting, did receive more respect and could not be exploited so easily.

> "The girls can be very tough soldiers, even more than boys." (NGO programme manager)

However, there is little documented evidence of the roles and tasks of girls and young women in factions.

After the war, some girls were afraid to leave their commanders. They were far away from their place of birth and did not know if they could make it back to their families by themselves. Because of this uncertainty, they decided to stay. Some girls may have decided that it was preferable to remain with the soldier/commander who had abducted them, than to leave without any means of support. The situation in Liberia is very difficult for girls living on their own.

> "Some girls are still with their former commanders. If these commanders are still with the security forces they can afford the girl. If they have demobilised and do not have the money anymore, the girls try to leave. To get these girls out, one should sensitise the community. Those with some education before the war might leave their commanders, but the illiterate will probably stay with them." (CAP counsellor)

Impact of the war on girls who did not join the factions
Clearly, the war had an enormous impact on other girls who did not join the factions but who were victims of sexual violence and deception.

"During the war, boys and men were vulnerable for conscription. Therefore the women and girls went out to look for food. As a result they were often raped by the soldiers. The women sometimes made an arrangement with the soldiers at the frontline or at the checkpoint to have a free passage, but because areas changed control so fast, they would meet another group of soldiers of another faction when they returned. Then they were accused of spying and killed or raped." (NGO Liberia official)

Here is a narrative account of a young woman who was captured by a soldier during the war. When interviewed, she was working as a prostitute to get money for her three children. It demonstrates the complexity of girls' situations and the vulnerability of girls affected by the war.

"I met this soldier in Buchanan in 1990. He was really a nice guy. He provided food and money for my parents. He even shared some money with my small brother and he opened a provision shop for me. My parents thought that he was a good husband for me. And he convinced my parents to let him take me to his home in Nimba County. In Nimba, he encouraged me to work and make a peanut farm. I worked hard and I expanded the farm. After that I harvested it. I brought the yield to the market together with the buyer, but she was in fact the other girlfriend of this soldier, which I did not know. So I was fooled by the soldier, who promised to buy goods for me from the money I got by selling the peanuts. So I returned to his village without the money, while he was living with his other wife in another village, which I did not know. And he had all the money of the peanut harvest.

I lived alone in the village together with the mother of the soldier. But I was a stranger and could not understand the language and the people were gossiping about me, I could feel that. My problems with the community increased, they were bullying me. After one incident I was sent to court but not found guilty. After that I returned to the village but the whole community was against me now. Only the mother of the soldier was still nice to me. After some time I decided to leave and started to search for the soldier because he was the only person I knew in Nimba. After three days of walking, I reached his village and I met him on his farm. His second wife was not there but in town. He wanted to talk to me but he had to make sure that his other wife was not coming back. Unfortunately, things went wrong and we all met on the road. There, me and his wife started to have words and started to fight. Community people interfered, but only one person felt sorry for me and took me back to the village of the soldier's mother.

After three weeks, the soldier came back to the village but he treated me so bad that I started to look for a way to escape. But the problem was that I had a child by him and I was pregnant again. I tried to escape twice but both times he caught me and beat me severely. So in the end I decided to stay. Then, the soldier received a letter from his brother in America that he had sent some money to him via his aunt in Danané, the refugee camp in the Côte d'Ivoire. So he and I went there to collect the money. In Danané, he also received a document by which he could travel to the States, but he replied to his brother that he had a wife and two children and could not leave us behind. So his brother sent another document on which I could travel, but only if we were married. But he did not marry me. He took all the documents and left for Abidjan to join the 'Black Money Boys', the big, notorious swindlers. After seven months, in which I was living on my own in Danané with my children, he returned with some money and another wife. Again there was a fight and he and his new wife left. One lady helped me to travel to Guinea, where I started to go out with somebody of an international organisation and I had my last child. It was there that I started to work as a prostitute. Later I managed to go back to Liberia, to Buchanan. Now I live with my three children and my mother. While I am working in the streets my mother takes care of my children."

11.3 Programmes to assist girls

A few programmes were offered to the girl ex-child soldiers and girls affected by war. CAP had special programmes for boys and girls, in which they received vocational training and counselling. One of the female counsellors described her experiences with the counselling of the girls in this programme:

> "It is difficult for girls to say that they have been fighters, even if they are in a special group in the programme. But you can hear and see it by the language they use and their behaviour. Those who became the victims of rape and abduction are more open. After the war, some girls still want to live a free life. If they had bad experiences and are not willing to change something about their lives, I cannot help them. Only if their experiences have not been too bad, but they live a loose life at the moment, I can help them, by teaching them morals. If they had bad experiences during the war and want to change and cope with it, I will be able to help them, depending on the age and the kind of war experiences."

An NGO programme manager described another problem some of these girls had:

> "There were three girl ex-child soldiers in the last education circle. The only way to find out that girls have been ex-soldiers is via counselling. One of the major problems with girls is that almost all of them have used drugs during their time with the soldiers, to feel brave and to be part of the group. Now, at peace time, the drug abuse is still a big concern for us, but now they use it more as a way to forget about the past."

These girls were given counselling sessions, although this programme provided vocational training as well.

> "We have a group of teenage mothers in training. They learn some literacy, hairdressing or tailoring. We also teach them about food preservation and baby care." (NGO programme manager)

The relevance of counselling for ex-child soldiers,[27] and the kind of counselling or psychosocial help that should be provided, remains controversial; there is no clear consensus among international funding agencies. Where NGOs combined psychosocial help with vocational training, this was considered by the young people as very important and useful.

> "To get the girls off the street and prostitution, you have to start some vocational training school for them." (group discussion girl ex-child soldiers)

However, whereas young men could count on some cultural and social understanding, for the girls it was different. Communities found it more difficult to embrace those girls who had fought or who had been the victims of rape.

> "Rape is something not talked about in the Liberian society." (NGO Liberia official)

Another programme was a small vocational training institute for teenage mothers and war affected girls. Importantly, it was located in a rural area. The programme director described it:

> "This programme is for teenage mothers and war affected girls. If we would call it a programme for girl ex-child soldiers, nobody would come because of the stigmatisation by using this term. We first go into the community for an assessment to find how many and where the girls are who are in need. We talk with the head of community, women organisations and just walk around in the community. If we have identified them, we register them. This is important because some girls live in a faraway place, so we have to provide transport for them every day. The curriculum we offer is for nine months. The school starts in the morning and goes on till four o'clock in the afternoon. We do some trauma counselling and legal counselling, to teach them about the morals and their rights. There is literacy training, but we mainly focus on vocational training, including, tailoring, soap making, home economics, tie-and-die and hairdressing. There are also recreational activities like

> kick-ball and football. A very important point of the programme is that we have facilities to take care of their babies, while they are in school. Otherwise, it would have been difficult for these teenage mothers to attend."

The following narrative account is of a girl ex-child soldier, who attended a vocational training programme:

> "After the war I attended the vocational training school of LOIC. I followed classes in agriculture and tailoring. After I graduated, LOIC promised me to give me a starter's package, if I and my fellow students started a co-operation. So we did that, but we never received anything. Now, sometimes I go to my trainer to use his sewing machine. But there are many girls and women going there, so I can use it only for a short time. I am interested in starting a tailor shop or going back to school, like I was doing before the war. Although at the moment I have a bar annex provision shop." (girl ex-child soldier)

This re-enforces the findings stated earlier about the importance of vocational programmes offering more than just the training itself.

Save the Children's programme

As mentioned, only very few girls went through disarmament.

> "Three girls, who came to the transit centre, were referred to an orphanage temporarily, because there were only boys staying in the centre. So there were no girls staying in the centre." (former centre supervisor)

Very few girls stayed in the centres, and some of those who did come to the centre in the beginning had not taken part in the war, but had been separated from their families. According to a female caregiver:

> "The girls were more easy to work with, at least for those who never took part in the war. If you built some rapport with them, they easily confided. Therefore female staff is necessary. Their average stay was about a month in the centre. The FTR was easy because families follow their girls more closely. But after the closing of the centre school, the community girls went home and some got married at a early age. If there had not been a centre school, the girls would not have been in school because of economic reasons, early marriages, and because they feel mature and ashamed to go back to school. Some might become prostitutes in town or in the city."

When community education activities had been established, many girls attended the classes; these may well have included girls who had been associated with the factions. The vocational training, in particular the home economics, and the catch-up education offered unique possibilities for the girls in the community to learn a skill or basic literacy and numeracy. Girls already had limited opportunities in Liberia, and with so much of the education and training infrastructure still in the process of being reconstructed, many girls would have missed out, and still are loosing out.

> "Home economics was mainly followed by girls, but they all came from the community. Girls in Africa have a major disadvantage compared to boys because as soon as they have a child, and because of early marriages and sexual abuse this happens often at a very young age, it is very difficult if not impossible to continue their formal education. This catch-up education in the centres was often the only way to get some useful education." (educational officer)

11.4 Reintegration

This section looks at the reintegration of girl ex-child soldiers and girls affected by war. Opinions differed: some people said that these girls had been reintegrated and

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accepted back by their parents; others stressed how difficult this process had been and that it remained so. Some practitioners felt that the communities had accepted these girls back:

> "Communities accepted the girls and if they have them, their children as well. They are just happy that their children are still alive." (community worker Save the Children UK)

This view was also subscribed to by the a counsellor who made the distinction between those who were forcibly conscripted and those who joined more or less out of free will, a view we saw expressed by the boys earlier:

> "The girls are accepted back by their parents, even if they have a 'rebel child'. That is if they were taken by force. But if the girls did join out of free will, it is more difficult for the parents to accept them back. Although some girls left their parents out of free will because the family could not sustain them any more. The majority of the girls have settled down, both mentally as well as in daily life, going to school or following vocational training. But still, boys as former soldiers are more easily accepted by the community than girls, because there is a taboo on that."

Other practitioners stated that it was still very difficult for girls to be accepted by their family and community:

> "The rebel wives are not accepted by the community. This is even more difficult if they have a child. And if the child is refused, the girls also refuse to live in the community. Because some girls were humiliated, that is raped in front of community, parents and the community find it difficult to accept these girls and young women back." (NGO programme director)

The difficulties for the reintegration of girls had to do with the cultural perceptions of women in Liberia. According to a senior member of Save the Children UK staff:

> "The Liberian attitudes towards women is problematic. There was, and still is, polygamy and FGM *[female genital mutilation]* in the traditional culture, then the ex-slaves brought the experience of the destruction of the family in slavery and promiscuity. A sugar daddy system developed; bringing girls from rural areas at a very young age to the city to get educated, but also to sleep with, eg, their uncle. Liberia has the highest rate of children born out of marriage in the world. In the cities the fostering of children has nearly always an exploitative character, including sexual exploitation. The attitudes to women are appalling; one fifth of women's first sexual experience is rape. For instance, we asked one boy who stayed in the centre, who had raped a woman when he was 12, why he did that. The answer was 'that it was the way we scared people'. Another example is that we talked with a boy in the centre, who had beaten a girl. He said that according to his view, the girl was in his charge. But the attitudes to the female staff at the centres of the boys was also without any respect at the beginning."

The attitude towards girls, in particular in the more remote or rural areas, was stated simply by a school principal who joined the discussion of the group of ex-child soldiers and their commander:

> "Parents think that as soon girls get breast they are too big to learn."

This attitude towards girls is also reflected in the numbers of girls attending school. For example, in one secondary school referred to in the research:

> "There are a few girls in school. Of the total of 240 children only 43 are girls. Girls often have babies while there is no father, and they leave school." (NGO director)

In a second school:

> "The girls are better disciplined, although they are a minority in school. Of the 399 students, 134 are girls. If parents cannot afford to pay school fees for all of their

children, it is the boys who go first to school. We have old boys in school, but as soon as a girl becomes pregnant she leaves school." (school principal)

What did the girls say? In a group discussion with girl ex-child soldiers, the following was raised about the reintegration of girls:

"Many girls left their husband to associate themselves with the ECOMOG soldiers during the war here in Buchanan. Some have babies by them. Now, their pre-war husbands reject them and say that these girls preferred the ECOMOG soldiers above them so that they should go back to their ECOMOG friends. But some husbands accept them because it happened during war time."

It was crucial for the girls and young women to be accepted back by their family or husbands. The young men had the opportunity to start living on their own. However, girls or young women without the support and acceptance of their family would become very vulnerable to prostitution, if they had to live on their own. This was also raised by the following town chief:

"I know about some girls in our community who were sexually abused and raped. And some took up arms as well. They are now reunited with their families. In the beginning they still felt the pain sometimes, but later they started to forget. Their families encourage them to forget about it and are saying that it all happened against their own will. So the family and the community play an important role in helping these children. But the church too helps in dealing with their traumas. The church and the traditional healers. As a result of the war some girls ended up in prostitution. Others have teenage pregnancies and there are single mothers. The death rate is higher because of dangerous abortions. We can help these girls by helping them to start a business. They should get some vocational training in soap making, tailoring or tie-and-die. And they can also learn some boys' trades." (town chief)

A cautious conclusion might be that, as with the boy ex-child soldiers, many of the girls affected by the war had reintegrated and settled. However, there were still girls and young women who were not yet reunified and were living with former soldiers and commanders. Others had returned home, but with one, two or three children, whom they were struggling to care for. Women and girls had low status in Liberia before the war. Prevailing attitudes and perceptions paved the way for much humiliation and hardship. According to a social worker, something needs to be done in the communities to help these girls:

"The girls in Kakata were really affected by the war, because Kakata was captured by different factions over and over again. Now, if we want to help the girls in the community, we must put something in place that embraces them, because after school, there is nothing for them."

11.5 Recommendations for accessing and helping girls

The help offered to girls affected by the war and to the girl ex-child soldiers was very limited. Only 78 girls went to the disarmament sites, less than two per cent of the total number of child soldiers. As soon as it became clear that so few girls were going through disarmament and demobilisation, an alarm bell should have rung. Because more boy child soldiers than were expected needed interim care, girls and others who stayed with the fighting forces were overlooked.

"Very few girl ex-child soldiers were in the programme because they were difficult to identify."(educational officer)

"Save the Children UK never looked for the girls and small boys, the porters. Only for the fighters who were clearly visible. These girls had no education, no livelihood opportunities, no resettlement, and no reunification so they are still with their commanders." (senior Save the Children UK staff)

How could these girls have been helped if so few came to the disarmament sites? In the first place, people concerned with the DDR could have tried to get more girls to the disarmament sites by making sure that the message about the DDR reached all soldiers, including the girls. As we have seen, commanders often manipulated information about the DDR process for their own advantage. There were various ways that could have been used to make sure that the right messages were heard by soldiers, such as using radio and flyers, and by DDR staff going into barracks to explain the process. It was also crucial to provide transport for children affected by the war, to help them get home.

Another way of accessing girls would be via health clinics. As girls often come alone or with their child, information and services could be provided. One suggestion made by a group of young women working as prostitutes – some of whom were ex-child soldiers –was:

> "Girls, still staying with their commanders or soldiers can be identified via other girls. We know exactly which girls are still with their commanders."

The group of male ex-child soldiers with their former commander also came up with a few suggestions:

> "Some are still with their commanders, although some also have contact with their family. It is difficult to escape because after some time the commander knows you and if you escape he can easily trace you and kill you. It is difficult to get them away from their commanders. But on the training base there is a list with children on it who were trained, including the girls. So that list could be used to identify and trace them. You can also try to build up rapport with a commander and use people who already have a good relationship with that commander during the war. Or the girls can leave sometimes through the mediation of another commander."

To conclude this section, a young woman, who also participated in a group discussion of young people in a rural community, explained about the present situation for girls in her town:

> "I like to talk with you in private. At the group discussion I was the only girl, so it is difficult to talk out freely. But I feel that it is important to say these things because life is not easy for us, the girls. Some of the problems we have are that we girls also like to do sports, especially kickball. But the boys can do a contract, a small job, to earn some money to buy a football, but girls cannot do that. The other problem is that our parents often cannot afford to pay for the school fees. So the boys go to school but not the girls. Then we just sit at home or work and we have no social activities. But there are more problems in my town. Many girls become pregnant at an early age and will marry young. The men run after them. And if the girls do not want to work hard, then they just choose to be the girlfriend of a man. So the boyfriends must give her presents and things like that. The only solution I see for that is that we have to keep the girls busy. But the main problem is that the girls, while going to school, are raped by the different security forces and that the school material they have is taken away from them. To escape from this, some girls go to Monrovia and others drop from school and just stay at home. We went to the commander of the Security Forces but no real action was taken. Even if we go with a group or if we are accompanied by the boys. They just take the school materials of the boys and harass them too and they still can rape us. Before the war, raping was not so common. And the boys in the community are fine and they are not changed because of the war but they just cannot prevent it. During the war it was even more dangerous. The girls were raped and if they got a child, the child was not accepted by the father. Girls had to look for food. They were raped but if the men went to look for food they were killed. Some girls joined the soldiers to prevent the harassment. Others were tortured and forced to be the wives of the soldiers."

This chapter started with the question; 'where are the girls'? While there is still a lot to find out, in particular about the reintegration of boy ex-child soldiers, the lack of knowledge about girls is not limited only to reintegration, but also to the disarmament, demobilisation and very importantly how they were/are conscripted and what exactly were/are they doing in the factions. Hopefully, this information has contributed to the process of bringing girls affected by war higher on the agenda of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration.

12. Key learning points – some successes and dilemmas

This chapter explores some of the key learning points and dilemmas, which arise from this research. It pulls out some lessons from the experiences, and where possible recommendations are made. They are grouped into five main areas: disarmament and demobilisation, transit centres, going home, reintegration and issues for girl child soldiers.

12.1 Disarmament and demobilisation

In Liberia the 1996/97 demobilisation process was relatively fast with the sites only open for two-and-a-half months in total. The aim of the organisations responsible for demobilisation was to collect as many arms from soldiers as possible. Commanders influenced the process greatly by insisting on certain conditions. The findings of this research show that when preparing and designing disarmament, the process must incorporate and acknowledge the special needs and rights of children. Save the Children UK did successfully negotiate that children did not need to hand in a weapon to participate in the demobilisation process, and to benefit from the packages. However, there are several key issues that stand out: the importance of transport to allow children to return home; breaking the link with commanders; getting information to ex-soldiers; selection for transit centres; and including girl child soldiers.

Many children sold their demobilisation package to pay for their journey home. Transport was supposed to be provided, but in fact this did not happen. Consideration needs to be given regarding how to prevent this from happening in the future and to ensure that children get home with their packages intact. Transportation away from the site needs to be prioritised and the costs of this should not be underestimated. One suggestion is that transport for children should be organised by children's organisations which could then ensure that children do return home, and that they are kept separate from their commanders.

Many ex-child soldiers did not decide to disarm as they were misinformed by their commanders. Clear and accurate information should be given out about the disarmament process, more directly to children to avoid them deciding not to be demobilised. Very few girl child soldiers went through the demobilisation, and it is therefore especially important to get the information to girls who are with the soldiers.

The ties between the commanders and children must be broken completely upon arrival at the disarmament site and it should be ensured that there is no opportunity for either the children or the commanders to re-establish these ties during or after the disarmament.

Clearly, some ex-child soldiers who would have benefited from going to the transit centres did not go. This was partly because they could not identify the relevant social workers or did not understand what options were available, or were unwilling to disclose their circumstances. Some may have underestimated the problems of going home and finding their families. Social workers at the demobilisation site need to be more obvious and their role made clear to the ex-child soldiers. Consideration needs to be given to making enough time available for social workers to build up a rapport with the children to establish if they need further help. This includes finding out whether they are really clear about where their parents are, genuinely checking their health status, and separating them from their commanders. It had been the original intention of the children's organisations to set up a facility for holding children at the demobilisation centre for a few days. This was prevented by the speed of the

demobilisation process and opposition from the commanders. Providing this type of facility, however, might have become a disincentive to demobilise.

Recommendations
- When preparing and designing a disarmament programme a child's perspective must be taken into account.
- Better information should be given about the disarmament process, targeted directly at children, to avoid children opting out of demobilisation.
- Social workers at the demobilisation site need to be more visible and their role made clear to the child ex-soldiers.
- Coupons and re-settlement packages need to be honoured by donors and the government, otherwise this can lead to feelings of betrayal and disappointment and can seriously frustrate the reintegration process.
- The ties between the commanders and children must be broken completely upon arrival at the disarmament site and it should be ensured that there is no opportunity for either the children or the commanders to re-establish these ties, either during or after the disarmament.
- Transportation away from the site needs to be prioritised and organised by children's organisations which can then ensure that children do return home, and that they are kept separated from their commanders.
- More time needs to be made available for social workers to build up rapport with the children to establish if they need further help.

12.2 Resettlement packages

The demobilisation packages were controversial and led to great disappointments. Firstly, as discussed above, some children had to sell their packages in order to return home, and secondly the coupons to be redeemed later for education or training turned out to be worthless. The young people considered the packages very important and where they had not been delivered as promised, the young people complained bitterly about it several years afterwards. Some ex-child soldiers felt that the packages were unfair because they did not receive their due. Sustainability is an issue linked to the long-term nature of the commitment and linked to the question of what to do if a donor pulls out or changes the focus of the support, especially, for example, if on-going support for education is to be given. There is also an issue of whether the package should be given to the children themselves or to their family on reuniting them.

12.3 Transit centres

The ex-child soldiers valued the transit centres for the protection they offered. The overall package, including the education, accommodation and recreation, worked well. The structures in the centre such as the 'big brother' system, the democratic structures and group parents were felt to be important, as was discussing the rules with children and having them make their own rules and sanctions. The ex-child soldiers also emphasised the importance of making friends and of recreation. Not all children improved their behaviour and this should not be expected automatically, although, most did change. All the activities contributed to the 'normalisation' of their experience.

12.3.1 Role of centres

Some key dilemmas were brought up regarding the role of the transit centres themselves. The temporary nature of the transit centres, the problem of longer stays and the expectations of the young people were all major issues of concern.

The transit centres were set up with the expectation that the children would stay for periods of up to six weeks. However, in reality a fairly large group of young people did not leave the transit centres as planned, and many stayed for up to two years. This meant that the transit centres ended up providing facilities beyond those that had been originally planned. This had implications for the way the centres were run, for example, the necessary extension of the education curriculum and vocational training. The reasons for the longer period of stay were various: (i) family tracing was not successful for a substantial minority of the ex-child soldiers, in the context of the chaotic times in the country. It may have been unrealistic to expect that families could be traced in this short period of time; (ii) the peace was insecure, and some areas remained unsafe; (iii) some ex-child soldiers may have felt it unsafe to return home due to their individual circumstances, for example, they had committed atrocities; (iv) young people may have felt more comfortable in the centres, where meals, education and accommodation were provided, making them unwilling to leave. These extended stays were also allowed to develop through a lack of longer-term planning and exit strategies.

From this experience it is clear that, in any transit situation, it should be expected that there will be two categories of young people: those that can be reunified fairly soon, and a minority for whom this will be more difficult. There is a need to plan for this, and to plan how to move on those for whom family tracing is not successful.

The transit centres should be seen as one element of a programme of support for ex-child soldiers. Young people's placements should be reviewed regularly. One possible recommendation is to have a maximum stay period for transit centres, and then to establish a separate process for children who may stay a year or more, which has a longer-term approach to education and training. This could be combined with incentives to leave, such as packages and the creation of alternative solutions.

Linked to the temporary nature of the centre was the danger of building up expectations among the young people. This occurred in the relationships set up between the young people and the staff, and in young people's expectations of continued support after they left. In addition, there is the dilemma of raising false expectations – regarding standards of living, food and supplies – by providing in the centres more than would be available in the communities into which the young people will return. Many of the young people expressed disappointment about the situations they returned to – that their parents or families were living in worse conditions than they had been led to expect. There is an important role to play in both preparing the children for their return to the community, and in being realistic about what can be provided in terms of initial visits and follow-up.

12.3.2 Features of the transit centres

Fighting and bullying
Key issues that stand out from the transit centres were the fighting and bullying. Fighting is not unusual in this situation, but owing to the training the ex-child soldiers had received, it was potentially very dangerous. Handling violence amongst the ex-child soldiers should be expected and planned for. The centres put in systems of 'big brothers', 'family groups' and democratic systems to try to tackle the problem of bullying. However, it remained an issue for many of the children, and this needs to be addressed. Control at night especially seemed to be a concern.

Education
Education was a continuing theme throughout the research. The ex-child soldiers valued the education provided at the transit centres. It was effective in increasing the numbers who went back into regular schools. Many of the ex-child soldiers had very low levels of education when they went into the transit centres, caused both by their

time with the soldiers and by the disruption of the education system during the war. In many situations, especially in rural Liberia, access to education is generally difficult. The education provided by the transit centres therefore also became a resource for the community children, and this contact facilitated the 'normalisation' of the ex-child soldiers, as well as increasing the acceptance of the centres by the community. In the end, as the numbers of ex-child soldiers reduced, there were more community children in education classes than there were ex-child soldiers.

Continuing their education was a major concern to the majority of the ex-child soldiers interviewed, especially how they were going to pay for the school fees. Teachers interviewed in the research commented on the problems of reintegrating into schools those ex-child soldiers whose attitudes to authority had changed for the worse and those who had to fit back into classes with much younger community children. In addition, many of these young people had responsibilities – older dependents and children to support – emphasising the need to fit education around their other activities. Education of girl children is not prioritised in Liberia and this continues to be a problem for girl ex-child soldiers, especially as they may have children of their own.

There were sustainability issues for the educational programmes, as few of the schools were successfully handed over to the community after the transit centres were closed down. An alternative approach could have been to support local community schools. How feasible this would have been in the post-war social and economic circumstances is questionable.

Vocational training
The vocational training in the centres represented another dilemma while the young people stayed in the centres. The aims of the training were to develop self-esteem, to provide some useful skills to assist in their reintegration and to keep them occupied in the centres. The young people were very positive about the training, and the skills they learned could be useful even if they did not lead to a job – for example fixing furniture, or doing agriculture for themselves.

For the ex-child soldiers who remained in the centres for longer, the vocational training was criticised for providing neither training tailored to the local economic circumstances, nor qualifications. For longer stays, it is important that vocational training is pitched to suit the real situation in the economy. A proper economic assessment, for example, should be made. Any training needs to be good enough to enable trainees to compete in the real world. Organisations which had been providing trade-based vocational training had realised the need for further support, including teaching business skills, and developing micro-credit systems for purchasing tools and setting up in business. However, even with this extra support, there remain real issues about whether the market is available for these products when the economy is so weak, and whether it is possible to sustain these sorts of businesses. Agricultural training was popular with the young people and the findings of the report show that many of the re-integrated ex-child soldiers were using their agricultural skills. Agriculture is a viable way to make a living in Liberia.

Staff
The staff fulfilled a crucial and difficult role in the centres. In any temporary care situation there is an issue about the boundaries of the relationships between carers and young people. In order to try to make a 'normalising' and supportive environment for these young people, they created family type structures within the centres. These were important to break links with commanders and to develop the young people's self-esteem and respect. However, there is a danger of building up expectations and dependency among the young people.

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There clearly is a need for staff support. Considerable emphasis was placed on staff support and training in the Save the Children UK programme. They had to deal with potentially dangerous conflict between the young people, and also needed emotional support in dealing with children who were coming to terms with their recent past. The centres were widely distributed around Liberia and it was difficult to ensure inter-centre learning and support for staff, especially for those in the more isolated situations. It was also noted that, as the centres were developed, the skills required of staff changed – from skills needed for the initial logistics of setting up the centres, to skills linked with community involvement and development processes.

Counselling
In setting up the transit centres a decision was taken not to use Western-based trauma counselling, but rather to focus on the children's practical needs and to provide transitional care that would to equip them for reintegration. The term 'counselling' is used very loosely in Liberia and in the transit centres the counselling was informal, child-initiated and not explicitly therapeutic. Children were allowed to choose whom they wanted to confide in, if they wanted to at all. Save the Children UK is a secular organisation but religion played an important role in the centres. The young people discussed issues in the daily religious assembly. In the communities often traditional healing was used, for example, 'washing' the ex-child soldiers as part of their reintegration process. Within the transit centres the approach that the staff termed 'tough love' was used to convey to the children that they were not seen as wicked, and that their behaviour when they were with the fighters did not make them bad people. In addition, the process of setting up rules, regulations and sanctions gave the children boundaries and responsibility for their actions and the consequences that arise from them.

12.4 Going home

12.4.1 Need for planning and exit strategies

The transit centres were set up rapidly in an emergency situation, and this had implications for the long-term strategy. There was limited involvement of local communities in the process of setting up the centres, and considerable work was required by the staff to gain acceptance within the communities. It is clear from this experience that planning is required and that it is important that community expertise is brought in at an earlier stage. Exit strategies and community liaison need to be built into the planning as soon as possible, (including strategies for longer-term placements), and the implications for the community and staff need to be considered.

12.4.2 Follow-up

The issue of following up children after they leave a transit centre (or indeed of following up children who go straight home after demobilisation) raised some key dilemmas. Follow-up was attempted from the transit centres, but it soon became clear that it was logistically too difficult. The lack of follow-up was felt deeply by some of the families and young people, and they felt let down by it. This experience would indicate that follow-up is an unrealistic goal. The real dilemma it throws up is how can children with serious problems be sent home, and how can families be expected to keep them, without some form of economic help and other support?

12.4.3 Avoiding institutionalisation – alternatives to transit centres

It was clear that, given the conditions in which the transit centres were set up, alternatives were not possible. However, as discussed, longer-term alternatives need to be sought for the children who cannot go home. Two potential longer-term alternatives to institutional care, which have been tried, are foster care (including the

adoption of those orphaned without any known family) and group-home living (children living in small groups with one or two caregivers in houses in the community). Both alternatives are closer to 'family life' than to institutions.

Foster care
The main problem with foster care is identifying foster families that are willing and able to take care of these children – who have a reputation as fighters – when the potential foster families may themselves have been victims of the fighting. Potential foster families can be identified through existing local networks, such as churches and women's organisations, and although some organisations were disrupted during the war, many other organisations survived and remain remarkably strong. Whilst there was some support for fostering among interviewees, this was on the basis of financial support, which could not necessarily be guaranteed on a long-term basis.

Save the Children UK has explored ways of resolving this problem in other programmes, for example, by supporting income generating community projects rather than giving money directly to families. Although this is more sustainable and constructive, it also needs detailed preparation and planning, and close monitoring of the projects, which makes it an unsuitable option for an emergency situation in which hundreds of children are in need of temporarily care.

A further concern is the care and protection of children in foster families, particularly where there is limited capacity for supervision and support for the families.

Group homes
Small group homes – where a group of older children live with one or two live-in, or visiting caregivers – are another alternative for children who cannot return to their families. These caregivers ensure that the children go to school and look after themselves, and they monitor their behaviour. Caregivers are paid by an NGO, which also pays the rent on the house. The group homes are located in the community and provide an experience closer to normal life than large institutions. The Don Bosco organisation supports children in group homes in Liberia, and it is into these homes that Save the Children UK placed those children who could not be reunified.

Apprenticeships
Another possible alternative would be to find apprenticeships for the children. This is particularly appropriate for the older children, who are less likely to be fostered. Apprenticeships could be found with appropriate small business people. The disadvantage, as with any apprentice scheme, is that they require supervision, and young people may not receive payment for their work.

12.5 Reintegration

Comparisons between transit centres and going straight home
The researchers interviewed both young people who had been to transit centres and those who had gone straight home. It is hard to make comparisons across these groups partly because the numbers are relatively small, but also because they are not necessarily
comparable groups. The overall findings of the report are that the differences between these two groups were not substantial, and that their experience of being in a transit centre is only one of a whole series of variables that may influence their reintegration. However, there were some important differences. More transit centre ex-child soldiers were involved in agriculture, and doing less short-term unskilled contract work. More transit centre ex-child soldiers went back to school. This might be influenced by Save the Children UK continuing to support young people in education or vocational training after leaving the centres. However, some transit centre young people

expressed frustration at the experience of community schools after having free education at the centres.

More young people who had gone straight home were living with their parents, which might be expected, as they were more likely to know where they were. However, many ex-transit centre young people were with extended family members.

The process of reintegration
One of the key elements of the research was to look at the reintegration of these young people back into their community. This challenges our notion of what we mean by 'successful' reintegration in the community. The research stressed that the whole of Liberian society went through a dramatic change during the war, both economically and socially, and thus there was no 'normal' situation for the young people to return to. Some may have returned to their families, some were living with friends having moved to urban areas in search of employment, others were living on plantations or other places of work, and a few would have returned to the security forces.

It is hard to assess reintegration, and in this research various indicators were used – developed by the researchers in consultation with the advisory group and Liberian practitioners. The young people were asked about their perceptions of their level of acceptance, through finding out if they minded people knowing that they were ex-soldiers. Other indicators for reintegration including inheriting land, having a job and being able to rely on peers and family support. They were also asked who they would consult on an important event in their lives (getting married) and about their participation in organisations in the community. Young people, parents and other community members discussed these issues, and on these criteria it seemed that the majority of the young men interviewed were successfully reintegrated. Most had some form of employment, although none were working as trades' people such as carpenters, even though this was where some of the vocational training had been pitched. Most were doing agricultural jobs, often doing contract work such as clearing the forest for others or cleaning. Few were in petty trade. Most of the young people felt accepted back into the community, either because they had been forcibly conscripted or because they had, through a series of activities, behaved well enough to be accepted back. Some young people still hid the fact that they had been soldiers, however.

There seemed to be a slight difference in perceptions between the young people and the adults in the community; the latter identified more problems, especially the change in attitudes of the young people. For example, adults in the community perceived young people as having less respect for their elders.

The process of reintegration was facilitated by social workers, who spent time sensitising families and the wider community on the behalf of the ex-child soldiers. Traditional healers, the church and other community members also played important roles. Quite often the young people took the initiative and made some contribution to the village.

Changed social relationships
An interesting finding from the research was that of changed social relationships between the generations. Several of the young people interviewed were supporting elderly parents and playing an important economic role. Many older people had become unable to continue supporting their children in the same way as before the war – either through the impact of the war on themselves or because of the loss of employment. The young people witnessed a change in power from traditional village chiefs and soldiers. Quite a few of the young people felt it was better to be young than to be older in Liberia after the war. Adults interviewed also described these changes –

parents talked of not being able to support their children in the same way, and teachers described the young people as being more challenging and behaving with less respect.

Returning to the forces

One of the aims of the transit centres was to prevent the ex-child soldiers returning to their commanders and to break the links with commanders. Most of the young people interviewed were not in regular contact with their former commanders, although several had been approached to return. Clearly some young people had returned to the armed forces, which may well reflect the lack of employment alternatives.

12.6 Girl child soldiers

All respondents agreed that there was, and still is, a significant problem of girl child soldiers, and that these girls had not been successfully addressed by agencies. Girls were harder to access and very few went through the disarmament and demobilisation process. A clear problem was reaching girls in the first place, since commanders were less likely to admit to having them, and the girls remain useful to the commanders in peacetime. Suggestions on how to reach girls included: through other girls; through health clinics and education for their children; and through community networking. There is clearly a need to find ways of spreading accurate messages about demobilisation to the girls, and of specifically targeting publicity material at girls. Again the issue of transport for girl ex-child soldiers is key; both ensuring that it is provided, but also that its availability is publicised.

Very few girl ex-child soldiers went to the transit centres, reflecting the small number going through the demobilisation process. In terms of reintegration, girls were seen as more difficult to re-integrate and more vulnerable if they were unable to return home. This was partly a result of the stigma associated with having been away with the soldiers. Concern was expressed by agencies about fostering girl ex-soldiers, as they may be vulnerable to exploitation. All services aimed at girls need to cater for the fact that they are likely to be caring for children of their own, and this is an especially important consideration for education and vocational training.

Notes

[1] International Save the Children Alliance 'Policy and Implications for Programming on Children Associated with Armed Forces', June 2003, draft.

[2] The names of the ex-child soldiers have been changed.

[3] L$250 is approximately £3.75 and L$1,400 is approximately £21.

[4] United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy.

[5] Economic Community of West African States armed Monitoring Group (peace-keeping force, mostly made up of Nigerian soldiers)

[6] 'Slippers' in this context refers to 'flip-flop' sandals.

[7] Lofa Defence Force

[8] All religious activities were said to be both Islamic and Christian, although in practice they tended to follow the religion of the staff concerned, ie, predominantly Christian.

[9] See Chapter 6.

[10] See section 6.3 for more details.

[11] See section 7.4.

[12] Single Side Band radio.

[13] Unattributed.

[14] Unattributed.

[15] A Zo is a spiritual leader.

[16] See Chapter 5 for details on the relationship between the community and the centre.

[17] Unattributed.

[18] For instance, according to the Programme Manager of the Don Bosco programme, depending on whether the children have joined a faction voluntarily or have been forced, the rate of successful reintegration after one year is 60 per cent and 85 per cent respectively.

[19] Several group interviews were conducted with young people working in plantations and companies, but the details of the living situation of these young people will not be represented in this sample.

[20] See Chapter 9.

[21] Special Operations Division of the Liberia National Police.

[22] Unattributed.

[23] Liberian Opportunity and Industrialization Centre.

[24] The use of the term apprenticeship in this context is less strict than may otherwise be thought of as a formal apprenticeship. Some may have benefited from a vocational training programme, but for most it would have meant a less formal arrangement.

[25] Unattributed.

[26] The 'JJ' is an old bank note, issued in areas controlled by Charles Taylor, that is no longer legal tender.

[27] See Chapter 6 on Save the Children UK's views relating to counselling for child soldiers.

Postscript

The debates around the issues related to children associated with armed forces are continually evolving. Since the research for this report was carried out the terminology has changed. Young people are no longer referred to as ex-child soldiers but as children associated with armed forces. This more inclusive definition is a reflection of the recognition that it is not just those young people who actually carry and use weapons who require re-integration when they leave armed groups. All children associated with armed groups should have access to the same support whether or not they participated actively in conflict: children are used in many roles – as cooks, domestic workers, porters, messengers, spies, decoys, couriers, guards and for sexual purposes.

This research and further programming experience in Liberia and elsewhere has led Save the Children UK to identify a number of key issues which must be further explored and better addressed if the international community is to effectively assist children associated with armed forces, and their communities, to truly achieve re-integration following conflict.

A broader definition of children associated with armed forces needs to be more generally adopted. It is important that an integrated approach should be taken to programming for children associated with armed forces. The needs of all conflict-affected children need to be addressed within a broad child protection framework.

Girls associated with armed forces require specific efforts to identify and support them. Special attention must be paid to documenting and responding to the specific needs of girls and the specific threats facing them. Their particular needs include greater difficulty in persuading armed forces to release them, and the psychological, physical and social consequences of sexual and physical abuse, forced marriage, and pregnancies. Reintegration is also more difficult for girls, who may be stigmatised as a result of their association with armed forces. Special attention must also be paid to responding to the needs of children conceived or born to girls in armed forces, as well as the particular situation that these mothers face. As recent research suggests that more girls than previously thought are involved in armed groups, it becomes even more important that their specific needs are identified and catered for in programmes to support children associated with armed forces

Long-term commitment is required from the international community. The needs of young people and their communities do not end with demobilisation and reunification. The process of reintegration and rebuilding shattered communities is one that takes many years. There are no quick fixes and external agencies offering support in terms of programmes and funding must recognise this and respond appropriately.

All interventions for children associated with armed forces need to be based on a thorough understanding of the political, socio-economic and cultural context. Where possible, interventions should be community-based, supporting existing protection mechanisms and capacities. A livelihoods-based approach is important to ensure the needs of the young people are explored and supported in a holistic way.

All interventions should take into account the necessity for children to participate meaningfully in all stages of programme planning, and in particular in decision-making on issues that will directly affect them.
The Optional Protocol (2002) to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) was a major achievement in terms of preventing the use of children in conflict by armed groups. This has been signed by 115 States and ratified by 63, which shows progress but also that there is still a considerable way to go. For those States that have

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signed there is a need for the international community to hold them accountable for the undertaking they have made.

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In a number of conflicts around the world children become associated with armed forces as fighters, and also in a range of other roles, such as porters, cooks and guides, as well as for sexual purposes. This report looks at young people in Liberia who had been associated with armed forces. In particular, it explores what happened to these young people after they returned home following the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration process that took place from 1996–97. Through in-depth interviews with young people who had been associated with armed forces, their families and communities, this report seeks to address the question, "who fared best and why?"