



“No Child’s Play: Recognising the agency of former child soldiers in peace building processes”

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Abstract

Engaging with the emerging discourse on children that recognises childhood as culturally specific and that children actively engage with their environment, this paper questions the dominant discourse’s view of children as passive recipients of socialisation. This paper argues that the discourse on children’s agency is a more useful framework for understanding the experiences of former child soldiers and that engaging meaningfully with this discourse will both improve life outcomes and reduce the risk of ongoing instability. This argument is made by an examination of the two discourses; examining their development and arguing for the usefulness of the agency discourse. This provides for an examination of children’s agency in education and skills training programs and of their political involvement (or marginalisation) in three conflicts: Colombia, Sierra Leone and Uganda. Recognising children as agents and engaging with how they navigate their lived experiences after involvement in conflict testifies to children’s resilience and their desire for change. Challenging the dominant discourse through the agency discourse allows for the acknowledgement of former child soldiers as both social and political agents in their own right and of their potential for contributing to stable and lasting peace.

Introduction

Childhood is basically an elaborate and very powerful adult myth, a series of stories and accounts that locates children as subordinate figures in society... Whether we are talking about the ‘abused child’, the ‘street child’ or the ‘child soldier’, through discourse and practice adults produce children as social and cultural subjects

(Wyness 2006: 26).

In the decade after 1985 an estimated two million children were killed in armed conflict, more than six million were permanently disabled or seriously injured and one million were orphaned (Machel 1996). More than half of the approximately 20 million refugees or internally displaced people globally are children (Machel 2007: 19). An estimated 300,000 children are currently participating in conflicts as ‘child soldiers’ (Brett and McCallin 1998 30-31). Children in conflict, both boys and girls, are subjected to multiple violences. They are killed as civilians. They are recruited as soldiers. They starve, suffer from disease and are forced from their homes. They are disabled or killed by landmines. They are subjected to sexual violence including rape and forced marriage. They see their family killed and are forced to kill members of their family and community. This involvement of children in conflict is a global phenomenon.

Children in peace building processes raise unique problems because, having lived through these experiences, their actions frequently do not conform to dominant understandings of the ‘child’. The dominant discourse on children stems from modern Western understandings of childhood. As this discourse has spread through international dialogue and treaty law it has abstracted and universalised conceptions of childhood leading



to homogenised, culturally empty conceptions that do not speak to the lived experience of all children and are in danger of creating false solutions to perceived problems.

These universalised conceptions of ‘child’ and ‘childhood’ are subject to increasing criticism. This emerging debate within the social sciences revolves around what constitutes a child, how to understand children’s experiences, and what value to place on children’s own understandings. In particular, a growing literature holds that the dominant conception of child and childhood is unable to account for the multiplicity of childhoods in the non-Western world. To engage in this discourse is to take the view that child and childhood are socially constructed ideas. Children are active agents in negotiating and shaping their world. This perspective of child and childhood is not merely theoretical, but has implications for understanding the impact certain conceptions of child and childhood have on the “generation of reality and real consequence” (James, Jenks and Prout 1998: 28).

This discourse on children’s agency, as it has emerged against the dominant discourse, opens a crucial space to interpret children’s understandings of their environment and their potential to impact that environment. The importance of engaging with children at all levels of government and society has been recognised to some degree by international policy advisors and national governments. However, for the most part, any engagement has been limited and practiced solely in a way that perpetuates existing power relations and demonstrates little commitment to the meaningful involvement of children in the larger socio-political world.

This lack of engagement with children is of particular concern in peace building activities. Children do not live through the conflict experience without engagement; they both affect and are affected by their situations, and are active agents in negotiating their way through their lived experiences. Documents such as the United Nations Integrated Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration Standards (IDDRS) acknowledge the need to involve children in Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) processes (United Nations Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Resource Centre (UNDDRRS) 2006). However, it is clear from much research and many reports that children’s involvement is often restricted and haphazard, and seen as of limited value in the creation of long term solutions for peace and stability.

This paper argues that the agency approach to childhood should inform activities involving children in peace building and reintegration processes. It argues that the dominant discourse is of limited use in understanding the experiences of former child soldiers and that employing the agency approach will both improve life experience outcomes for children and reduce the risk of children being a causal factor of ongoing instability and violence. This argument is made by presenting the two competing discourses and highlighting their inherent flaws and strengths. In this way support is provided for the agency based approach, which is adopted throughout the substantive analysis of former child soldiers in peace building processes.¹ This analysis is undertaken with particular reference to education and skills

¹ This paper is conscious of the exclusionary nature of examining solely ‘child soldiers’ at the expense of surveying the problems facing all children in conflict and post conflict environments and there is an important literature critical of the disproportionate focus on child soldiers and the lack of attention paid to other children affected by conflict including IDPs, child headed households, girls, civilians, children separated from their parents and so on. It in no way confers a special privilege upon the group being studied, but rather it seeks to engage in the critique of the dominant discourse through a “substantive [study] which situate[s] children’s agency in specific settings” (James and Prout, 2008: xiv). As a researcher I cannot speak entirely *for* children in any way. However, I can point to the imperfect nature



training programs; and children's political involvement in Colombia, northern Uganda and Sierra Leone. Children repeatedly and overwhelmingly cite education as their number one priority in terms of ensuring their security, and economic and social stability in conflict affected areas, however many DDR programs fail to produce real world results in terms of providing education facilities or ongoing relevant skills training. There are many valid examples however, of children employing agency to create solutions for themselves in the absence of coherent and long-term strategies and some of these will be highlighted. Additionally the political disenfranchisement of former child soldiers has potentially destabilising effects on the peace building process. Again, examples from the focus conflicts provide support for the claim that engaging meaningfully with children legitimises children as active conflict transformers and recognises their agency in thinking about entrenched political problems.

By remaining unquestioned the dominant discourse promotes an understanding of children as unworthy of study in their own right and thus denies them ontological status. They are studied in terms of what they are becoming, what they will offer (adult) society, and how they will one day function as adults. When discussing conceptions of children with reference to child soldiers they are discussed as changeless objects—much is said *about* them, and very little addresses their own subjective experience in any meaningful way. Much literature about child soldiers focuses on how their conflict experience will affect their future lives without significant reflection on these children's current understandings and interactions with their environment. The use of age as the defining feature of childhood obscures the space for discussion on children's experiences, children's understandings and children's needs or desires. Not recognising the agency of child soldiers creates suboptimal outcomes for peace building and reintegration efforts and in establishing stability and long term peace. Challenging the dominant discourse allows for debate on the best approaches to DDR programs and the acknowledgement of former child soldiers as both social and political agents in their own right.

Child and Childhood

We know nothing of childhood, and with our mistaken notions the further we advance the further we go astray... the wisest writers...are always looking for the man in the child, without considering what he is before he becomes a man

(Rousseau, 1966 [1762]:1)

What is a 'child'?

The accepted international definition of child is found in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) which states that a 'child' is "every human being below the age of 18 years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier" (1989: Article 1). The UN recognises differences and overlaps in understandings of childhood, adolescence and adulthood; and although 'child' is the more frequently deployed definition, it also recognises 'youth' as people aged 15 to 24 and 'young people' as people aged 10 to 24 (UN General Assembly resolution A/36/215 1981). While

of the dialogue which often exists between children and adults and seek to highlight this as a deficiency and challenge others to find means to actively engage with children's agency and actions.



this may appear to be confusing already muddy waters it allows for targeted approaches to work within these age groups.

While this paper focuses on ‘children’ in the peace building process it recognises the usefulness of the term ‘youth’ to account for ‘children’ who have turned 18 since their involvement, thus bridging the two categories. It is conscious of the potential for ‘conceptual slippage’ between the two terms and seeks to avoid using them as substitutes for each other. The need to acknowledge this problem is indicative of the inadequacy and potential irrelevance of the fixed nature of the terms.

‘Concept’ and ‘Conceptions’ of childhood

David Archard explains a theoretical distinction between a *concept* of childhood and a *conception* of childhood. The former “requires children to be distinguishable from adults in respect of some unspecified set of attributes” (Archard 1993: 22). The latter “is a specification of those attributes”; a person has a conception of childhood “in so far as [their] treatment of children and discourse concerning them reveals a particular view of what specifically distinguishes children from adults” (Archard 1993: 22). Philippe Aries’ *Centuries of Childhood*, frequently cited as a foundation text in the study of childhood, claims that society have a *concept* of childhood is a relatively recent occurrence. According to Aries “in medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist”(1973 [1962]: 125) and the way in which the modern world recognises children is as needing separation from the world of adults. Archard, and others, argue that it is a very specific conception of children, influenced by academics such as Aries, that dominates Western thought, in which a child is perceived only in contrast to the complete and rational adult (Archard 1993; Brocklehurst 2006; Wyness 2006).

Archard identifies three aspects that constitute conceptions of childhood: its *boundaries*, its *dimensions*, and its *divisions* (Archard 1993: 22-31). The *boundary* of childhood refers to the point a society understands childhood to end. This boundary can be understood and manipulated from a variety of *dimensions* including legal, cultural, social and physical². All these dimensions are of significance, but do not lead to the same understanding of ‘childhood’. The final aspect is the *divisions* of childhood. These are the internal sub-periods of childhood such as infancy or adolescence which are recognised differently in different cultures (Archard 1993: 26). An understanding of the complexity of what constitutes ‘child’ and ‘childhood’ is significant in discussions of how varying conceptions are negotiated and affect global governance and children in armed conflict. Archard’s ideas inform an analysis of the dominant discourse and elucidate how a particular conception of childhood has become the benchmark for childhood globally.

The Competing Discourses

- The Dominant Discourse

To be a child is to be not yet an adult

² In the legal dimension, children can be defined by the judicial system as being incapable of culpability. In the cultural dimension they can be defined from an “epistemological....viewpoint” through which, by “virtue of their immaturity” they lack ‘adult’ rationality. Within the social dimension age of suffrage makes them unable to participate and contribute to the development of society. The conception of childhood can also be influenced by their physical immaturity; children are unable to reproduce or carry out physically demanding tasks (Archard 1993: 25).

Irrationality, Naturalness and Universality

The modern, dominant discourse on childhood is a legacy of a complicated and confused process, which has at its heart a teleological developmental approach to child and childhood. The development of children occurs in accordance with an innate *telos* (end) within the child that is driving it towards a normative adulthood. The nature of that *telos* varies in different accounts but has led to a particular understanding of child and childhood in the contemporary Western world. The boundary of this childhood is predominantly determined within the legal dimension. At 18 years of age the state recognises a person as a full member of society, able to participate in the political process and be held accountable for their actions³. Three key ideas form the basis for the dominant discourse: irrationality, naturalness and universality. From these principles the ideas of children as ‘innocent’, as biologically determined, and as irrational incompetents in need of protection and separation from the adult world are derived. These conceptions are not in any way exclusive or exhaustive. A detailed analysis of the literature that has contributed to the dominant discourse is impractical in this paper, but it is instructive to look towards these particular conceptions as exemplary and significant.

The ‘innocent’ child: children as inherently good

The ‘modern child’ is the product of a long and complex historical process. However, it is the effects of the Enlightenment that propagated a view of the child that still powerfully influences contemporary thought. It is here that the confused legacy of childhood emerges as ethics, political theories and philosophy were debated by the religiously pious and those critical of the institutions of the church. The Puritanism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries conceived of children as repositories of original sin, and thus essentially given to badness that only strict control and discipline could resolve (Jenks, 2005: 62-64). In contrast Jean-Jacques Rousseau saw children as originally innocent, an idea of the earlier church in which a child embodies the original state of grace before the Fall (Jenks 2005: 62-64). For Rousseau “God makes all things good; man meddles with them and they become evil” (Rousseau 1966 [1762]: 5). This innocence is not empty; highly charged with desires to love and learn, this ‘naturally’ good child needs to be protected from the potential corruption of certain social institutions or practices (Hendrick 1998: 36; Jenks, 2005: 104). Through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries children’s natural closeness to nature became solely a ‘natural’ incapacity and vulnerability, and this innocent, vulnerable and incomplete child became seen as the victim of a corrupt and inhumane environment (Archard 1993: 39)⁴. This deterioration is worthy of note in relation to constructions of child soldiers as ‘victims’ in contemporary media mentioned later. By the twentieth century conceptions of childhood had become negative rather than positive; children were empty of important characteristics or tendencies rather than filled with promise and virtue of earlier conceptions.

Children as ‘becomings’: growth to rationality

Into the twentieth century, conceptions of the child were increasingly legitimised through scientific practice. ‘Growth’ metaphors abound; the child is brought to its *telos* through measurable socialisation and adult guidance (Jenks 2005: 8). Jean Piaget who wrote

³ In terms of political majority voting age globally is predominantly 18. Some countries have lower ages (the lowest is 15 in Iran) and in some countries the voting age is 21 (Brett and McCallin, 1998).

⁴ Space does not permit a more detailed exploration of the history of the development of modern conceptions of child and childhood. Authors who deal with this in more detail include: Hendrick, 2008; Jenks, 2005; Coveney, 1982 and Archard, 1993.



on children's development through most of the twentieth century, is a significant influence on modern conceptions of children⁵. Piaget's child is based on a "genetic epistemology", an attempt to construct a universal theory of social and moral development based on biology (Wyness 2006: 123). Adulthood is reached by clearly explicated stages of intellectual growth in which a child achieves rationality (Jenks 1982: 20). Although Piaget is a constructivist, his constructivism is one in which adults are the constructors of the child's reality. Borrowing Qvortrup's term, children for Piaget are "*becomings*" (1994: 4), "awaiting temporal passage, through the acquisition of cognitive skill, into the social world of adults" (James and Prout 2008: 11):

The child is dependent on the assistance of those other characters who have achieved orderly transcendence through culture or rationality—adults (Lee 2001: 43).

The necessity of assistance, inferred by the need to protect Rousseau's child and the irrationality of Piaget's child, is manifested in the modern responsibility to 'care' for children. The division of labour under capitalism and the emergence of the nuclear family as the key unit of social order compelled the modern developmental state to invest in 'futures' (Prout 2003: 16-17). More than that, these ideas have contributed to

the inauguration of the powerful commitment to children in Western society as a form of 'promise': a 'promise' of unimagined action, but also an extension of our own plans and a hedge against our own actions as yet incomplete (Jenks 2005: 104).

With this promise, the discourse creates children as dependent objects. Jenks (2005: 105-106) argues that childhood is transformed into a form of human capital. To optimise outcomes, children's lives are organised through family and school to enable them to achieve particular markers of development.

Children as the future: institutionalisation and privatisation

The Western developmental state, in creating 'universal' markers of development, reinforces the view of all children as 'the child'. If all children are represented in 'the child' then it is possible to 'institutionalise' childhood, a practice visible in the introduction of compulsory education and children's formal exclusion from the labour force. Concurrently society experienced the rise of the 'privatisation of childhood', which relegated children to 'safe' spaces under the watchful eyes of parents or official carers (Prout 2003; Näsman 1994; Wyness 2006). These practices echo Rousseau's exhortation to "tender, anxious mother[s]" to "raise a wall round [their] child's soul" from the outset (1966 [1762]: 5-6). Olwig and Gulløv (2003: 2) highlight that children are seen only in terms of "their relative status in the generational order of socio-cultural transmission" whereby through protected settings they "are incorporated into the society under the guidance of various senior carers or educators". The removal of children from the public sphere, and the associated regulation and legislation of a 'children's space', reinforces their status as a non-citizen and simultaneously justifies the protectionism of the family, concerned institutions, the state and increasingly, the international community (Nieuwenhuys 2003: 99).

⁵ Texts of particular importance include: Jean Piaget, *The moral judgement of the child*, trans. Majorie Gabain (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1997 [1932]); Jean Piaget, *The language and thought of the child*, trans. Majorie Gabain (London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1960 [1959]); Jean Piaget, *The Child's Conception of Reality*, trans. Margaret Cook (London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1954).



'The child': the dominating Western discourse

The child of the dominant discourse is a product of Western philosophical, psychological and sociological thought. In this way children are unformed subjects, beings *in potentia*, whether it is the potential for the development of rational thought, the potential for corruption or the embodied potential of the future. These varied understandings contribute to the formation of an incomplete, irrational *becoming*: 'the child' of the modern, Western development state. Within the dominant discourse it is "only right and proper" to recognise children in this way because that is "the way to give the desired shape and order to future adults and future society" (Lee 2001: 43). Competence is defined solely in relation to adults' praxis and it is not that children are not active, but that the adult world does not recognise children's praxis—"a suggestion which is all the more powerful since adults are in a sovereign position to define competence" (Qvortrup 1994: 94).

What is of particular significance to this paper however, is the ability of the dominant discourse to establish itself as a complete account of childhood everywhere and at all times. By assuming universality the dominant discourse speaks before any alternative can be offered. With globalisation and the accompanying modernisation of the developing world 'the child' has been exported along with a variety of other Western modes of thought. The promotion of a "well-established but narrowly conceived framework through which we view children" makes it difficult to recognise other ways of thinking about child and childhood (Wyness 2006: 94). Institutionalising the dominant conception of childhood both erases other conceptions from view and establishes this 'Western' construction as the standard to judge non-Western societies (Pupavac 2001: 101-102; see also Wyness 2006: 133-134). This is significant because of the problems that have arisen through the global adoption, in international legislation and normative understandings, of the dominant discourse's conception of child.

- **The Agency Discourse**

...children must be seen as actively involved in the construction of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live. They can no longer be regarded as simply the passive subjects of structural determinations.

(James and Prout 2008: 4)

Rationality, Social Construction and Contingency

It is only in the last few decades that a conception recognising children's agency has emerged. This conception re-examines 'natural' boundaries and dimensions of childhood, constructs children as agents of their own identity and not solely subject to adults' representation. In 1990 Alison James and Alan Prout, key sociologists in the field of 'childhood studies', provisionally identified the key features of the "emergent paradigm" of recognising children in their own right:

1. Childhood is understood as a social construction...
2. Childhood is a variable of social analysis... Comparative and cross-cultural analysis reveals a variety of childhoods rather than a single and universal phenomenon.
3. Children's social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right, independent of the perspective and concerns of adults.



4. Children are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live. Children are not just the passive subjects of social structures and processes.
5. Ethnography is a particularly useful methodology for the study of childhood...
6. ...to proclaim a new paradigm of childhood sociology is also to engage in and respond to the process of reconstructing childhood in society (1990: 10).

While for the most part recognising that children are still in a process of development, this emergent discourse does not discount their experiences because of this recognition. It acknowledges that children are able to rationalise and interpret their environment in line with an internal understanding. The agency discourse recognises, as a fundamental component, that a child is socialised into a particular culture and particular time (James, Jenks and Prout 1998: 78). Concurrently, interpretive perspectives encourage an understanding of social reality as not constant but, rather, as created by social actors including children. The recognition that social reality does not pre-exist and is actually socially constructed allows for new investigations into the nature of childhood and the role of children in society.

'Beings' not 'becomings': Granting children an ontological position

Recognising the conditionality of 'childhood' and allowing for the conception of 'childhoods' also allows a questioning of children's roles. If children are actors then it follows that they have agency and thus are *beings* not *becomings* (Qvortrup 1994: 4). This represents a significant departure from the dominant discourse. If they are beings in their own right then they cease being important primarily for their future value, and instead are important in the present. This grants them an ontological position; children can be the purpose of inquiry and not only in terms of what they will be when they 'grow up'. They have "acquired full social status, occupying subordinate positions within the social structure, as 'dependent beings' rather than 'dependent becomings'" (Lee 2001: 47). This confounds the dominant discourse which compares the child to the "ontologically established adult" which is used as the "ideological foundation for [the adult's] 'natural' right to exert power over children" (Qvortrup 1994: 3). These children are very different to *the child* of the dominant discourse. Within the discourse on children's agency children are recognised as "a social phenomenon, as a social institution that is the result of historical, political and economic processes" (Lee 2001: 47). The ageism present in the dominant discourse, which privileges adult knowledge over children's, is replaced by attempts to study children's relations "independent of the perspective and concerns of adults" (James and Prout 2008: 8).

The agency discourse establishes children as worthy of study, which allows it to engage with children to understand how they construct and determine their own lives, the lives of those around them and their societies. In acknowledging that children have a discrete *viewpoint* it follows that children have a discrete *voice*. Through the dominant discourse children speak from a position of ignorance and irrationality, which "gives us reason to doubt whether children are even *capable* of speaking for themselves" (emphasis in original, Lee 2001: 89). The agency discourse recognises children can speak with rationality and experience and allows adults to listen to the voices of children, consult with children and create new ways for children to contribute.

Strategy and tactics: power and agency

It is clear that children are not able to exercise agency in the same way as adults in part because of the structural constraints inherent in society; hence, it is important to ask in



what ways children can employ their agency. For Giddens agency is the ability, not only the intention, to do something (Giddens, 1984: 9)⁶. In this way, agency is intimately connected to power; the agent must be able to exercise “consequential control” over the situation (Honwana 2006: 70). Power, for Giddens, presumes “regularized relations of both autonomy and dependence between actors... in contexts of social interaction” (Giddens 1984: 16). Any form of dependence offers a way in which the subordinate can influence the actions of the superior. This view of agency and power recognises how children work within constraints to achieve goals. Honwana combines Giddens’ understanding of agency and power with de Certeau’s analysis of trajectories, strategies and tactics (Honwana 2006: 69-72)⁷. Strategy for de Certeau is the “calculation or manipulation of force-relationships that become possible as soon as a subject of will and power...can be isolated from its environment” (de Certeau 1984: xix). The deployment of strategic agency then denotes an understanding of the power relations of the situation and an ability to project the outcomes of action into the future. De Certeau views tactics on the other hand as actions taken in an environment beyond the agent’s control. A tactical agent “must play on and with a terrain imposed on it” and turn events into opportunities (de Certeau 1984: 37). Tactical agency exploits Giddens’ understanding that loci of power always exist in ways in which subordinates can influence those in power. This analysis of strategic and tactical agency is particularly useful when discussing the ways in which former child soldiers are, or are not, understood and engaged with in peace building efforts.

Who Are The Child Soldiers?

One of the most alarming trends in armed conflict is the participation of children as soldiers...

*Ms. Graça Machel,
Special Representative to the Secretary General
on Children in Armed Conflict,(1996: I.IA.34)*

Literature and Legal Frameworks concerning Child Soldiers

Children’s involvement in conflict is not a new phenomenon⁸. However, the effect of conflict on children has changed dramatically in the last 50 years with the prevalence of intra-state conflicts and guerrilla style warfare. In 1996 Graça Machel submitted her report on children in armed conflict, known as the “Machel Report”, to the UN Secretary-General with valuable follow-up reports in 2001 and 2007 (Machel 1996; Machel 2001; Machel 2007)⁹. The 1996 Machel Report also led to the establishment of a permanent Special Representative

⁶ Giddens’ theory reflects only one, albeit important, view on the structure/agency debate. I do not wish to infer agreement with Giddens’ thesis in entirety. Rather I wish to engage with the way he defines and understands key terms to inform my own discussion.

⁷ Michel de Certeau, “The Practice of Everyday Life,” (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). It is important to note that de Certeau wrote on the practice of culture, and in *The Practice of Everyday Life* he develops a framework to analyse how the consumer can create spheres of autonomous action within the systems of sense-making that are imposed in our culture. Honwana appropriates the idea of weak agent against strong agent. Further analysis of his work is largely irrelevant for the discussion at hand.

⁸ Children have mythologised origins in the Children’s Crusade of the thirteenth century (Singer 2006: 12). More recently Tolley’s (1973) examination of the way children form awareness of conflict, through his analysis of American children and the Vietnam War, and Freud and Burlingham’s (1973) study of British children’s experiences of the Second World War are both significant studies on children’s responses to conflict. Cairns’ (1996) seminal work on the psychological and social impact of ‘political violence’ on children had a dramatic impact on the practice of psycho-social work with children.

⁹ The Machel Report was a comprehensive survey of war affected areas, it included six regional consultations; field visits to areas around the world affected by armed conflict; and meetings with heads of state, human rights organisations, civil society leaders, and women and children affected by conflict.



to the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict (SRSB on Children) who is responsible for reporting to the General Assembly on matters relating to children in conflict (Office of the SRSB on Children 2008).

The Machel Report propelled the issue of child soldiers into the international spotlight. Building on the 1949 Geneva Conventions and subsequent 1977 Additional Protocols, which prohibit the recruitment and use of children under 15 in hostilities (United Nations 1977: Article 4.3.c), the last several decades have seen the implementation of a variety of pertinent international documents¹⁰. Key among these is the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the most widely, and rapidly ratified UN convention¹¹. The CRC confirms 15 as the minimum age for recruitment (United Nations 1989: Article 38.2). This conflicts with the general definition of child in the CRC as anyone under 18 (United Nations 1989: Article 1). This discrepancy was corrected in the 2000 Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (OP-CRC) by raising the recruitment age to 18 (United Nations 2000: Articles 1, 2 and 3). Other international standards reflect a growing consensus that children under 18 should not participate in conflict. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) recognises child soldiering as one of the worst forms of child labour in its 1999 Convention No 182 (1999: Article 3.a).

These documents delineate the scope of responsibility and accountability of both governments and irregular armed forces. In particular, ratification of the CRC means the signatory state must have appropriate laws in place and actively enforce them. The International Criminal Court (ICC) is mandated by the Rome Statute to bring to justice those responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity (Rome Statute 1998). The Rome Statute explicitly considers “conscripting or enlisting children under the age of fifteen years into the national armed forces or using them to participate actively in hostilities” to be a war crime¹². It also recognises intentional attacks on education institutions as a war crime, provides special arrangements for children as victims and witnesses, and exempts children (those under 18) from prosecution¹³.

Regional agreements and charters relating to the use of child soldiers also exist. The 1991 African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child which was agreed upon by the members of the Organization of African Unity uses the CRC definition of child, applies it to a particularly African context and established a committee to “promote and protect the rights and welfare of the child” (Organization of African Unity 1990)¹⁴. The Cape Town Principles and Best Practices reflects a significant consensus among major NGOs in defining child

¹⁰ Much of the pressure on national governments and the UN to develop legal frameworks has come from groups such as the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers. Formed in 1998 it consists of Amnesty International, Defence for Children International, Human Rights Watch, International Federation Terre des Hommes, International Save the Children Alliance, Jesuit Refugee Service, and the Quaker United Nations Office-Geneva. It maintains active links with UNICEF, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and the International Labour Organization and works with regional NGOs.

¹¹ To date only the United States of America and Somalia have not ratified the CRC.

¹² In situations of international armed conflict: Article 8.2.b.xxvi, in situations of armed conflict not of international character: Article 8.2.e.vii.

¹³ Concerning attacks on education facilities in international armed conflict: Article 8.2.b.ix and in non-international armed conflict: Article 8.2.e.iv; protection of child victims and witnesses: Article 68.2 and 3; exemption of children from prosecution: Article 26

¹⁴ Other regional agreements include: Organization of African Unity, “The Yaounde Declaration: Resolution 1659 (LXIV) on the Plight of African Children in Situations of Armed Conflict,” (Yaounde, Cameroon: Organization of African Unity, July, 1996); “Maputo Declaration on the Use of Children as Soldiers,” (Maputo, Mozambique: The African Conference on the Use of Children as Soldiers, April, 1999); “Montevideo Declaration on the Use of Children as Soldiers,” (Montevideo, Uruguay: Latin American and Caribbean Conference on the Use of Children as Soldiers, July, 1999); and the “Accra Declaration on War-Affected Children in West Africa,” (Accra, Ghana: ECOWAS, 2000).



soldiers and developing policy and guidelines for ‘appropriate’ action during DDR (UNICEF 1997). In 2007 the Paris Principles reflected an ongoing commitment by the international community to uphold the Cape Town Principles and continue to work towards the ending of the recruitment of child soldiers (UNICEF 2007). While these documents are important and highly useful, it must be noted that there is a literature that is critical of their practical value, criticising them for being “high in rhetoric and low in practical application” (Prout 2003: 21; see also Rosen 2007; Aginam 2006; and Mawson 2004).

Academic study of ‘child soldiers’ is relatively recent and has occurred largely in the fields of law, medicine, psychology and anthropology, though it is increasingly occurring in international relations. Brett and McCallin’s (1998) survey of child soldiers and Cohn and Goodwin-Gill’s (1994) comprehensive examination of the phenomenon pioneered the academic study of child soldiers. Brocklehurst (2006) problematises the location of children within international relations, and more specifically within security and conflict discourse. Culturally relative views of children have been explored by Honwana (1997) through her ethnographic exploration of culturally specific reintegration of child soldiers in Mozambique and Angola, by Zack-Williams (2001) in his study on the effects of child soldiering on kinship systems in Sierra Leone, and by Veale and Stavrou’s (2007) significant examination of identity in the reintegration of former child soldiers in Uganda. The specific challenges facing girls have been addressed by de Berry (2004) and West (2000). Rosen (2007) challenges the understandings of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) in terms of child soldiers. This is a theme echoed in Aginam’s (2006) argument about the erosion of traditional values in the face of IHL and International Human Rights Law (IHRL). Pupavac’s (2001) criticism of the Western-centrism of children’s rights, and Sheppard’s (2000) examination of the ‘straight-18’ position engage with the growing debate on children’s rights in the international system. The legal culpability of former child soldiers is explored in relation to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in Sierra Leone by Cohn (199) and the creation of flexible understandings of ‘child’ in northern Uganda by Mawson (2004). There have been calls within the field from authors including Boyden (1994) and Wessells (1999), for more community-oriented understandings and solutions to the child soldier phenomenon.

Child Soldiers?

A child soldier is any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers and anyone accompanying such groups, other than family members. The definition includes girls recruited for sexual purposes and for forced marriage. It does not, therefore, only refer to a child who is carrying or has carried arms.

(UNICEF Cape Town Principles and Best Practices 1997)

Child soldiering is often seen as “one of the most alarming trends in armed conflict” (Machel 1996: II.A.34). Although it is impossible to accurately calculate the number of child soldiers currently involved in conflicts around the world, Brett and McCallin’s estimate of over 300,000 is a commonly accepted reference point frequently quoted in the literature (1998: 30-31)¹⁵. A majority of recruits are between 14 and 18 (Machel 2001: 28); however

¹⁵ Figure based on the 36 conflicts documented by the authors and accurate in May 1998. The authors state this is a conservative estimate and if “all recruitment of under-18s is taken into account, including that undertaken in peacetime and in conformity with the applicable



there are reported incidences of child soldiers as young as seven and five (Lorey 2001:3; Humper et al 2004).

Although the number of conflicts that involve children has decreased from 27 in 2004 to 17 by the end of 2007, the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers stresses that this results mainly from conflicts ending, and not to a cessation in the practice of child recruitment (Human Rights Watch 2008). Conflicts that have commenced in this period show many of the same practices, including that of child recruitment (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers 2008a). In this way the number of child soldiers globally has remained essentially constant.

Involvement of child soldiers in conflict

Children become involved in conflict in a variety of ways. Many are conscripted or kidnapped or recruited from schools, off the street or from homes (Machel 2007). Some present themselves for service, often citing as motivation the attraction of the security of belonging to an armed group, or the need for food or other resources that the armed group can provide (Singer 2006: 62)¹⁶. Children are used by armed groups for a variety of reasons. It is often easier to abduct and subjugate children than adults (Machel 1996: 16). They learn quickly and their generally smaller stature makes them ideal spies and fighters (Machel 1996: 52). Facing children on the battlefield poses a moral dilemma to the opposition about whether to engage in fighting (Machel 1996: 51). As recognised in the Cape Town Principles, children perform many tasks beyond active combat duties. They act as porters; fulfil domestic roles such as cooking, cleaning and scavenging for food; and are used as lookouts, spies and messengers (UNICEF 1997). Girls face particular challenges and threats. Many girls are used for sexual services, either through arbitrary rape or as 'bush wives' to commanders or more senior combatants (McKay 2006). Consequentially, the problems facing girl soldiers are not limited to physical threat but include health risks such as sexually transmitted diseases including AIDS, pregnancy, forced abortion and physical mutilation (de Berry 2004)¹⁷. Child soldiers are often given drugs to make them either more passive to command or more reckless in battle, and many children become addicted (Singer 2006: 81-83). Many children suffer from post traumatic stress disorder or associated psychological illnesses (Morales 2005; Punamaki 1997; Honwana 2006). Children negotiate a complex range of issues and abuses, all of which affect them once they cease being active in conflict.

Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration: Children after conflict

Children pose particular challenges in the post conflict environment. While there is a "paucity of documented past experience to learn from" (Cohn 1999: 166) there is an ever increasing literature on how to engage with or 'deal' with former child soldiers (see, for example, Agborsangaya 2000; UNDDRRC 2006b, 2006c; Verhey 2001; Malan 2000). Much of this centres on DDR programs and emphasises psycho-social support, health care and reunification with families. The UN stresses the importance of prioritising children in the DDR process including

national legislation then the numbers worldwide would be more than doubled". The number is estimated to have remained relatively constant due to the commencement of new conflicts as others are resolved.

¹⁶ For a discussion on the complex implications of the word 'voluntary' see: Krijn Peters, "Re-examining voluntarism: Youth Combatants in Sierra Leone," in *Monograph No.100* (Institute for Security Studies, 2004).

¹⁷ For accounts of girls' experiences in Sierra Leone see: Humper et al., "Report of the Sierra Leone Truth & Reconciliation Commission: Volume Three B," 268-73.



where appropriate, provisions for the protection of children, including the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of child combatants, in peace negotiations and in peace agreements, and the involvement of children, where possible in these processes (United Nations Security Council 2000).

As its name suggests, DDR is a three-staged process: disarmament followed by demobilisation and reintegration. Disarmament generally refers solely to combatants handing in their weapons. Knight and Özerdem (2004) highlight the dangers of relying on handing in a weapon to qualify for DDR programs as many children either have their weapons taken by commanders or have fulfilled roles that did not require a gun. Demobilisation of former child soldiers is often done by cantonment—most often in separate camps to adult combatants (McConnan and Uppard 2001: 90)—and involves interviews, health and psychological assessment and the granting of demobilisation papers¹⁸. The IDDRS recommends this process should occur as quickly as possible, optimally within 48 hours, before children are moved to Interim Care Centres or Transit Centres, before, if practical, being sent home (UNDDRRS 2006c). Demobilisation not only involves ensuring the physical and mental well being of the child, but normally includes a ‘package’, which in the past was frequently a cash benefit but increasingly is a promise of education and skills training programs (Visman 2005: 7). These programs can trigger resentment by those who did not qualify for the DDR program and it has been suggested that these ‘packages’ should be replaced with community oriented programs (UNDDRRS 2006c: 21). Former child soldiers can face resentment, fear, shunning, and rejection by families and communities. Girls face particular problems both in qualifying for DDR programs or in being accepted back into communities after suffering sexual abuse (Chrobok and Akutu 2008; McKay 2006). The DDR process is complicated and imperfect; often made more difficult by ongoing violence, tensions or by being conditional on peace agreements and negotiations (UNDDRRS 2008; Edloe 2007). DDR programs frequently suffer from shortages of ongoing funding, lack of commitment to goals and an inability to cater for all who need the services (McConnan and Uppard 2001). While it is acknowledged that many NGOs, governments and the UN are working on finding better ways of conducting DDR programs there are still many problems facing children in these situations. Children find ways of overcoming problems such as these, as will be demonstrated below.

Background to the three ‘focus’ conflicts

While the phenomenon of child soldiering is global this paper focuses on conflicts in Colombia, Sierra Leone and northern Uganda as they represent a variety of situations and outcomes. Uganda provides interesting examples of children attempting to resume ‘normal’ life in a highly charged and not peaceful environment. Being a comparatively high profile conflict there is sufficient information to provide a fuller account of the children’s situations. The UN estimates that approximately 25,000 children have been abducted since the conflict commenced in 1986 (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers 2008d: 345) while other

¹⁸For general analyses of the demobilisation phase see: United Nations Disarmament, "OG 5.30 Children and DDR."; and Kari Hill and Harvey Langholtz, "Rehabilitation Programs for African Child Soldiers," *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice* 15, no. 3 (2003); For analyses relating to psycho-social assessment see: Elizabeth Jareg, "Crossing Bridges and Negotiating Rivers - Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Children Associated with Armed Forces," (Norway: Save the Children, 2005); and Morales, "The Psycho-social care of Demobilized Child Soldiers in Colombia: Conceptual and Methodological Aspects."



estimates place the number as high as 60,000 (Annan, Blattman and Horton 2006). The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) uses particularly violent tactics including mutilations, rape, forced conscription, and the destruction of property. Fear of abduction grew so great in 2003 and 2004 that up to 20,000 children, known as 'night-commuters', sought refuge from abduction by travelling to safe towns to sleep (Chrobok 2008). There are almost no stories of children voluntarily joining the LRA and unlike other African conflicts very few express any interest in resuming fighting once they leave the group. A peace agreement was signed in August 2006 however the LRA is still reluctant to release children and the ICC issued a warrant for its leader Joesph Kony in 2005 (ICC 2005)¹⁹.

It is of use to draw upon examples and experiences from Sierra Leone due to the presence of the Special Court and the fact that sufficient time has passed since the ending of the conflict that there is research on the ongoing effects of participation on former child soldiers. Sierra Leone's civil war was also characterised by extreme brutality including rape and physical mutilation (particularly the severing of limbs, lips and ears). Estimates of child soldier involvement vary dramatically: reports during the war estimated that up to 80% of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) was between the ages of seven and fourteen (Singer 2006: 81), while surveys conducted just after the war estimate that approximately 12% of all fighters were under 18 (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers 2008c). Since the end of the conflict approximately 7,000 child soldiers have been demobilised, although many children missed out due to ineligibility for DDR programs, lack of programs in their region, or lack of knowledge about the DDR process (Honwana 2006; Knight and Özerdam 2004; Gbla 2003). Many children became involved in conflicts in neighbouring countries, particularly Liberia. In 2002 The Special Court for Sierra Leone was mandated to try those "bearing the greatest responsibility" for crimes against humanity, war crimes and other serious violations of international law²⁰.

Colombia provides an interesting contrast to the predominantly African-focused literature, and poses unique challenges as DDR and other peace processes are attempted without peace agreements. It is estimated that between 11,000 and 14,000 child soldiers are involved with the various armed groups in Colombia (Thomas 2008: 13). The government's Colombian Institute for Family Welfare (*Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar*, ICBF) has worked with over 3,000 children and youth through DDR programs (Thomas 2008: 15). Children cite the security of being in an armed group as a major incentive to remain mobilised and the government's disinclination to offer ongoing funding or other promised assistance add even more difficulty (WarChild 2007: 22)²¹. All three conflicts demonstrate unequivocally the horrendous damage that occurs to social fabrics, families and children during conflict and the particular dangers of child soldiering.

¹⁹ For further discussion of the Ugandan conflict and the use of child soldiers see particularly: Annan, Blattman and Horton 2006; Coalitional to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers 2008a, 2008d)

²⁰ For further discussion of the Sierra Leone conflict and the use of child soldiers see particularly: Adebajo, 2002; Shepler, 2004; Sommers, 1997; Gbla, 2003; Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008c; Honwana, 1997. For information on the Special Court for Sierra Leone see: Special Court for Sierra Leone, 2007; Amnesty International, 2003; Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008c.

²¹ For further information on the Colombian conflict and the use of child soldiers see particularly: Thomas, 2008; WarChild, 2007; Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008b; Coalición contra la vinculación de niños, niñas y jóvenes al conflicto armado en Colombia (COALICO) and Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2007.



Children in Peace Building Processes

These lived experiences [of child soldiers] rupture the binary stereotype of innocent victim or dangerous delinquent and challenge us to recognize these children and youth as active subjects in their own lives who develop survival strategies for themselves, their families, and their communities

(Sanford 2006: 77)

It is important to recognise and respect the painful and traumatic events experienced by children in conflict however, this recognition can also mask the ability to recognise the ways in which children have acted in their environment to survive and cope with these experiences. The engagement of children in peace building and reintegration efforts, particularly in Uganda and Colombia where conflict is ongoing, demonstrate their desire for change and their ability to exercise their agency to change their situation. The literature on children's involvement in peace building activities has been criticised strongly by several authors who argue that its overly policy-focused nature suffers from a lack of detailed ethnographic studies and analyses of particular conflict environments, instead substituting generalities based on acceptance of the universality of the dominant discourse (Boyden and de Berry 2004; Kostelny 2006: 21-23; Honwana 1997; Boothy, Strang and Wessells 2006). The lack of culturally specific studies and the adoption of dominant understandings of child and childhood have practical ramifications as many aid agencies and international organisations "[presuppose] that research is superfluous" and assume that children everywhere "have the same basic needs and that these can be met with a standard set of responses" (Boyden 1994: 256). Creating policy appreciably devoid of cultural understanding has significant ramifications for the applicability and success of programs.

The agency discourse highlights the contingency of dominant definitions of 'child' and 'childhood' and the inadequacy of the Western universalistic conception in many situations. Conflicts exacerbate these inadequacies. In many societies adulthood is reached upon completion of particular tasks or ritual and is understood in terms of social roles and responsibilities (Shepler 2004). Conflicts disrupt these rituals and processes, resulting in people that are as old as 30 to 40 being as 'children' because they have not participated in the socially accepted practices to become a recognised adult (Honwana 1997). This obviously challenges Western understandings of childhood, and definitions within international documents and practice. For this reason I have chosen frequently to use the phrase 'children and youth' in this section. By this I refer, with hesitation, to the UN definitions of each term. In this way I acknowledge that what is appropriate for a boy of 17 may not be for a boy of 6, but that they share some common feature of 'young-ness'.

'Victims' or 'Terrors'

Children and youth in conflict and post conflict environments are generally described according to the binary of 'victim' or 'terror'. Adults label former combatants as 'out-of-place' and dangerous because they have broken the socially accepted norms of behaviour. Particularly in African countries where the demographic is increasingly youthful, adults tend to identify these children as 'bandits' and 'vermin' (Peters and Richards 1998). With a youthful population, broken social relationships and the loss of adult members from many communities, the presence of often large groups of former child soldiers is constructed as something to be feared (McEvoy-Levy 2006: 136-137).



The other common construction (often espoused by aid agencies and media outlets) is that of the passive victim. Children are seen as the unwilling and uncomprehending tool of vicious regimes, living through events so far beyond their experience they are unable to deal with the situation at hand (Pupavac 2001). There is a long tradition of interventions and literature built on the dominant discourse, perceiving children as both particularly vulnerable and particularly unable to change their situation. Children are de-contextualised from their environment and engaged with through programs that are based on preconceived measures of needs. Designating children as ‘victims’ removes them from their contexts; “by definition, it takes away agency from children and obscures the instrumentality bestowed on and found in children” (Brocklehurst 2006: 47). Accounts of child soldiers lament their ‘lost’ childhood. The media plays “a zero sum game where the political or military sphere gains extra bodies at the expense of children’s childhood” (Brocklehurst 2006: 140). The creation of this objectified victim allows children to be used as an emotive construct; a powerful tool for the mobilisation of aid and political gain that frequently achieves no real benefit for the children involved (Boyden 1994: 45-47; see also Pupavac 2001; Brocklehurst 2006).

This “often fictitious bifurcation” (McEvoy-Levy 2006: 289) of terror and victim limits the ability to involve children productively in peace building processes. Neither of these roles enable children’s participation; rather they actively suppress understandings of children’s agency and legitimise concerned adults to speak on their behalf. This is problematic in two ways. Firstly adults cannot know the manner in which children interpret their environment, what they prioritise, or the modes in which they wish to be involved. Secondly it disallows recognition that their involvement in peace building and reintegration may play a positive role in the lives of children coping with trauma and conflict. Overcoming structural obstacles children demonstrate their agency, both tactical and sometimes strategic, in a range of peace building and reintegration processes.

Education and Skills Training

Young people believed that education is essential to their survival, protection and full recovery from their experience of armed conflict. They saw it as answering their need for self-respect, economic opportunity and having productive roles and voices in society

(Lowicki and Emry 2005: 9)

Structural Barriers: Preventing practical gains

The inefficiencies and poor results in achieving successful education and livelihood for former child soldiers is a clear sign of the inadequacies and disjuncture between the rhetoric and the practical gains. Education and skills training are recognised as such vital aspects of the reintegration process that all DDR programs contain elements of them (American Institutes for Research 2007; Basic Education and Policy Support (BEPS) Activity 2002; Thomas 2008; Verhey 2001). The Paris Principles recognise the importance of “education, vocational and skills training and livelihoods” within reintegration programs (UNICEF 2007: 40). However, in practice children must overcome an enormous variety of structural barriers to access these elements. Children risk continuing instability to attend school. Schools are either the target of attacks or are frequently in disrepair having been targeted during the conflict (Bensalah et al 2001; Landry 2006). Furthermore, there is a lack of qualified teachers, the facilities are inadequate, and schools are overcrowded (Verhey 2005; Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children 2005b: 6; Thomas 2008: 25-26). Children frequently cannot afford school fees, or they must care for their families instead



of attending classes (BEPS Activity 2002; Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children 2005a). Former child soldiers face shunning, victimisation, difficulty concentrating on studies, and fear from other students and teachers (American Institutes for Research 2007; Bensalah et al 2001). They often feel ashamed of their lack of education and are conscious of their need for 'catch-up' education that isn't forthcoming (Machel 2001: 32).

Involvement in skills training programs presents similar stories. Programs are frequently under-funded and often where programs have been run local markets cannot deal with a glut of workers with the same skill (Lowicki and Emry 2005: 12). Promised funds for micro-credit schemes, such as those offered in Colombia, have been delayed, frustrating those who signed up for the training program on that promise (Thomas 2008: 26). Lack of complementary skills such as basic economic education and business skills contributed to the failure of small enterprises in both Colombia and Sierra Leone (Lowicki and Emry 2005: 13-14). The Youth Reintegration Training and Education for Peace Program (YRTEP) in Sierra Leone initiated a nationwide non-formal education program for approximately 40,000 former child soldiers and non-combatants (BEPS Activity 2002: 3). Although there has been a positive response from those involved, they also report that efforts by agencies associated with YRTEP to provide them with skills in the absence of employment opportunities contribute to their sense of powerlessness (Women's Commission 2005a). These obstacles breed frustration and discontent amongst those involved and can lead to increased instability and distrust of government and NGOs.

The statistics reflect the consequences of these factors. In Sierra Leone only 12% of 12-14 year olds and only 6% of 15-17 year olds are in school (Women's Commission 2008: 2). In Colombia 70% of young people have only a grade 5 education or less (Thomas 2008: 25). In 1996 Uganda became the first African country to institute Universal Primary Education, and as of 2000 the literacy rate was 84% and 69% for boys and girls respectively (Fiske 2000: 70). However, estimates put the primary school enrolment rate in Ugandan Internally Displaced Persons camps at less than 30%, compared to approximately 90% in the general population of southern Uganda (Lowicki and Emry 2005: 10).

Lack of education or skills training is perceived to be closely linked to poverty, unemployment and lack of basic necessities. This low education level contributes to the estimated 70% of youth that are underemployed or unemployed in Sierra Leone (Women's Commission 2008: 3). The Survey for War Affected Youth (SWAY) in northern Uganda reported that more than half of the children and youth surveyed worked fewer than 8 days a month, and that 21% of males and 14% of females were unemployed (Bidwell et al 2008: 9). These statistics demonstrate that there are significant problems facing children seeking education and training. The question then becomes if children are struggling to overcome structural factors to get education and skills training, how does acknowledging their agency help in these circumstances?

Education: "the top solution"

Young people overwhelmingly cited lack of quality education as one of their top concerns, and behind peace and absence of violence in their lives, they called education the top solution to the problems they face...

(Lowicki and Emry 2005: 2)



Understanding children as agents moves the discussion beyond the obvious answer of increased funding and commitment to programs, schools and training centres to the more pertinent process of engaging with ways that children themselves create and sustain learning opportunities. Many programs seem to echo Rousseau's conception of child as an innocent that needs to be protected and educated for an unspecified future, rather than active in the present. However, children and youth, undeniably active in the present, see education as a critical component of peace building and reintegration efforts. In Uganda, despite classes often having more than 100 students to one teacher, the children were so keen to learn, as one young person explained, they bring the teacher food "so they will come back to us each day" (quoted in Lowicki and Emry 2005: 19) a perfect example of tactical agency. Children in Sierra Leone organise 'rosters' of attendance in which they share uniforms or other supplies and attend alternating days of school (Fauth and Daniels 2001). Both these examples may appear insignificant in the greater scheme of things, but exemplify the lengths children will go to in order to ensure their continued education, even though they are far from Giddens' "loci of power" (1984: 15).

Skills Training: Building the Future

It [skills training] is at the crossroads of economic recovery, education and rehabilitation and reintegration, and can be a key component of development, a method for upgrading the labor force and a factor in the holistic development of youth...

(Bidwell et al 2008: 4)

Children also find ways of creating and maintaining livelihoods. In northern Uganda former child soldiers formed agricultural cooperatives where they took turns to tend goats and till land (Lowicki and Emry 2005: 16). In Makeni, Sierra Leone former child soldiers began a bicycle cooperative providing transport around town and offering repairs (Lowicki and Emry 2005: 13). Adjusting and responding tactically to their environment, children and youths find ways to develop their skills and attempt to make a living. In some instances children have banded together to assist in providing much needed and much wanted education and skills training. In Uganda the Watwero²² Rights Focus Initiative was started by unemployed young people in 1998 in an attempt to find means of making a living (Women's Commission 2005a: Young people's participation). It now offers skills workshops including an engineering and carpentry workshop, income-generating projects and conducts awareness-raising activities in schools (Women's Commission 2002: 5). In cases like this children's agency becomes more strategic than tactical as they project plans and goals into the future. While there are immense obstacles, children and youth engage with their peers and organise to receive funding for specific projects that often have long lasting positive effects such as these.

Education and Skills Training: Keys to Peace and Stability

I took up arms because of selfishness, greed and discrimination by [President] Kabbah. For us, lasting peace is to keep promises... There are no improvements now, because the promises are not forthcoming... if [they are] not, and they call us, we will come back [and fight], we are ready

- former RUF adolescent soldier, Makeni, Sierra Leone

²² Watwero translates as 'we are able'



(quoted in Lowicki and Emry 2005: 12)

Children observe that despite the additional work they take as a result of conflict, often as heads of households, teen mothers or as orphans, in addition to attempting to gain an education or a trade, they are not consistently assisted and supported by the adults around them (Lowicki and Emry 2005: 12). This, they argue, leads to profound health, security and psychosocial problems (Verhey 2001: 18). In Sierra Leone children and youth have argued that without support for their economic wellbeing their “health would further deteriorate and that war would likely reemerge [*sic*]” (Lowicki and Emry 2005: 12). Demobilised soldiers in Sierra Leone threatened to return to conflict if international promises to provide education and skills training were not forthcoming (Wessells 2006: 185). These instances serve to emphasise children’s agency and the need for programs to recognise it. Addressing problems facing education and livelihood is key to establishing secure peace as it is frequently the lack of these resources that prompt children to enter conflict. Providing the skills children and youth need to contribute to the economic development of their communities and countries over time creates long term peace and stability. A UNESCO global study on education in conflict stressed the importance of realising this:

The international community and national governments, as well as leaders of militias, must realize that the future is imperilled wherever there is a generation of children who cannot read or write and only know the respect that is earned from the barrel of a gun (Bensalah et al 2001: 19).

From the point of view of the international community and the respective governments, programs to provide education and skills training need to take into account the complex world that children and youth find themselves occupying. They need to allow flexible attendance hours, provide ‘catch-up’ education and targeted education that can be used practically (Bidwell et al 2008; Women’s Commission 2005a). Through these innovations, the methods by which children and youth, as active agents, make the best of their situations can be maximised.

Political Involvement

To ignore these victims [children involved in conflict] in peace processes is terrible; to ignore them as the future of any sustained peace is self-defeating

(Helsing 2006: 213)

Children actively interpret the motives and behaviours of their peers, their commanders, the government and the international community. In many of the countries affected by armed conflict young people make up a considerable percentage of the population, and yet, this majority is marginalised and given no noteworthy role in political reconstruction (McEvoy-Levy 2006). This simply perpetuates and embeds previously existing problems. In Sierra Leone, many children and youth believed that the conflict had been about social inequality, the poor management of natural resources and the marginalisation and manipulation of youth (Lowicki and Emry 2005). They said they became involved to achieve economic and social protection they had not had before the conflict. In this way they saw “material well-being and access to social and political participation as essential to both their own recovery and as a means to a permanent end to armed conflict and social degradation” (Lowicki and Emry 2005: 7). This demonstration of social awareness is played out through



children's choices to participate in the conflict, and in their desire to be involved in decision making in the peace building processes. However, there are considerable obstacles to overcome if this desire is to be realised, as children and youth remained sidelined in political discussion.

The (dis)enfranchisement of former child soldiers

...young people found few spaces where they could address their concerns or engage with adults to work out constructive solutions. Many felt desperately 'disconnected' and longed to find a secure place and identity in their communities.

(Lowicki and Emry 2005: 16)

Political disenfranchisement of former child soldiers is not only potentially damaging on an individual level but can contribute to the destabilisation of an already fragile peace. Former child soldiers in Sierra Leone expressed feelings of frustration that their participation and involvement in the conflict counted for nothing once they had ceased being combatants; bereft of practical alternatives, and feeling that they had no voice, they turned to involvement in gangs to reclaim feelings of self-worth and participation (Women's Commission 2008); tactical agency with negative outcomes. Once a child has made this decision they are no longer viewed as a victim worthy of assistance, but rather are seen as a dangerous delinquent, because they have moved outside the conception of the innocent child "which society continues to maintain despite all realities to the contrary" (Sanford 2006: 57).

There are varied approaches to understanding children and political involvement. Security analyses generally focus solely on 'youth' as opposed to 'youth and children' and rarely even recommend youth participation as a useful policy (although most encourage the participation of women) (Borer, Darby and McEvoy-Levy 2006: 58). Child rights activists are vocal about the visibility of children in peace building processes, but predominantly advocate a 'return to childhood' and do not consider the agency of children as significant (Wyness 2004). The international community has recognised that child and youth participation helps build participatory democracy and successful reintegration. The IDDRS, for example, recognises that empowering and involving young people is crucial:

To overcome the problems that result when traditional leadership hierarchies go unchallenged and social structures remain unreformed, DDR planners should empower and involve youth to break the cycles of poverty, social exclusion and violence in which many are trapped. Failure to involve youth in a meaningful way in decision-making structures in the post-conflict period makes it more likely that regional and national development and peace efforts will fail. Seeing youth as positive assets for society and acting on that new perception is vital to preventing them from becoming alienated and turning to activities that destabilize society (UNIDDRRC 2006b: 24).

Its suggestions for involvement however are vague, and although well meaning, do not provide well thought out solutions to what is identified as a significant problem. While the principle of consultation with children is well established and espoused by UNICEF, other UN agencies, and NGOs, examples of children and youth being actively involved in the peace and rebuilding process are isolated. Predominantly, it appears that NGOs see their role



as advocates for the children and sideline the role children can play as advocates for themselves (Helsing 2006: 213).

Political exclusion is particularly damaging when children have been actively involved in the conflict. Children who have developed deep identities based around protection, ethnic allegiance, or anti-authoritarian sentiment find few avenues in the peace building process to realise and expand these identities; feeling empowered as a combatant makes the disempowerment suffered in peace building and reintegration processes even sharper (Borer, Darby and McEvoy-Levy 2006: 57-60). This is problematic both in terms of immediate instability and long term distrust in the socio-political system.

Enfranchising former child soldiers through peace building efforts is no easy task. The dominant discourse speaks so authoritatively and completely on the responsibility of adults to protect children and speak for their best interests. Within this framework it is counterintuitive for children to be involved in drafting laws and public policy or holding public office. “The conviction endures only as long as adults speak for children and children remain silent. Or silenced” (Nordstrom 2006: 111). Before children can become actively involved they need to break these firmly established assumptions and constantly challenge the ‘unchallengeable’ position of adults through constant demonstration of their agency.

Children’s opinions are important: “Active conflict transformers”

We have to teach one another how to live together in peace. We want the children in our communities to grow up with positive feelings about the future and a commitment to the community so that they can be leaders in the community, not obstacles to the community peace process

Alvin, youth leader in the Costa de Oro peace community, Colombia (quoted in Sanford 2006: 75)

When genuine involvement does occur it contributes to the individual well being of the children involved, builds community relationships and promotes long term stability. Cairns (1996) draws strong links between active political participation and psychological resiliency and coping ability. More than this, involvement promotes engagement both with the community and with peers. In Sierra Leone and Colombia there are a number of active civil society organisations for children and youth (Carter and Shipler 2005; Lowicki and Emry 2005). These include membership in larger scale groups such as the West African Youth Network (WAYN), and also country-specific organisations such as the Sierra Leonean Children’s Forum Network (CFN), Young Leaders Sierra Leone (YL-SL) and Fundación Escuelas de Paz (Foundation for Schools of Peace, FEP) in Colombia which all campaign for the inclusion of children and youth in peace building and political involvement (West African Youth Network 2008; Children’s Forum Network 2008; United Network of Young Peacebuilders 2008; Fundación Escuelas de Paz 2008). Many of these use their position to give “voice and body to young people’s concerns and capacities as principal actors in their individual and community recovery” (Lowicki and Emry 2005: 17). Clubs and organisations form points of significant contact for involvement with adults and with their peers. In the Soacha region of Colombia FEP has worked to create spaces where children and youth can talk between themselves and with concerned adults about issues facing them; an initiative that has been supported and encouraged by both the young people and the adults involved



(Fundación Escuelas de Paz 2008: 71-72). These organisations also provide safe places from which children can at times demonstrate strategic agency through advocacy and planning.

The involvement of children in political processes generally occurs in a haphazard manner. Many of the organisations are organic, growing from a particular group's determination to achieve a specific goal and expanding as need and desire requires. Children frequently cite these organisations as important, empowering, and enabling their participation. Conversely, participation in programs run by international NGOs is mainly seen as consultative rather than participatory (Lowicki and Emry 2005: 27). Although the rhetoric of the international community sees young people's participation and action as important, many practitioners on the ground in Sierra Leone and Uganda viewed it as "time-consuming rather than as effective and essential" (Lowicki and Emry 2005: 27). This leads to secondary inclusion of children and youth in their programs and reluctance to release full control, of both management and finance to the young people involved (Annan et al 2007: 14). This reduces their ability to gain new, practical skills and deepens their "reliance on adults and outside support, undermining prospects for strong adult/youth partnerships and youth-led, sustainable projects and community recovery" (Lowicki and Emry 2005: 28). Political involvement through participation in child or youth organisations requires adults to recognise these children's opinions, abilities and voices. This is a crucial step that must be taken if children's agency is to have an effect on reintegration and political rebuilding.

In some instances there have been moves towards this kind of engagement. In the post conflict reconstruction the Sierra Leonean government appointed a Minister of Youth and Sport who toured the country meeting with young people (Lowicki and Emry 2006: 36). This led to the National Youth Policy being implemented in June 2003, designed "to mainstream youth activities and contributions and to highlight youth concern as critical input in the development process" (Government of Sierra Leone 2003). The children and youth led groups played a key role in discussions, and continue to hold key representative positions in ongoing dialogue with the government²³. Similarly the TRC in Sierra Leone engaged with youth and children's groups to create a Children's Report, a version of the TRC's Report that was accessible to young people in Sierra Leone, with the intention of fostering understanding of the conflict and the healing and peace process with youth (Truth and Reconciliation Commission 2004).

In Colombia children have been involved in the creation of 'peace communities' in the middle of the war zone in which approximately 12,000 peasants negotiated a return to their land on which they live out their politics of non-violence and advocate for a peaceful resolution to the conflict (Sanford 2006: 52-53). Sanford argues that in this, they "represent a new kind of political power grounded in community integrity and moral courage" (2006: 53). Children in the Colombian peace communities organise to actively resist recruitment, they speak out against the armed groups and campaign for peace. These actions are not without risk. In 2002 the representative of children and youth in the peace communities, Edwin Ortega was assassinated (United Nations 2002). The children and youth responded by restructuring so that there is no single leader and instead everyone is viewed as leaders (Sanford 2006: 76). The young people involved did not passively accept conflict but reacted to the situation and created a solution that strengthens their cause and their organisation.

²³ It is interesting to note that the Rwandan government has reserved two seats for 'youth' to be appointed by the National Youth Council who sit in parliament and have an equal voice to the 'adult' parliamentarians. For detailed look at the challenges facing youth in Rwanda, and solutions such as this one, see Sommers 2006).



Similarly the Movimiento de los Niños por La Paz (Children's Movement for Peace, MNP), led by youth and children, involved 2.7 million young people across Colombia in a symbolic vote called the 'Children's Mandate for Peace and Rights' in which the 'candidates' were children's rights drawn from the CRC (including the 'right to peace' and the 'right to love and family') (Carter and Shipler 2005). For the first time many Colombian adults realised the extent of the conflict's impact on the younger generation (Cameron 2001: 31). This demonstration of solidarity and political engagement, in combination with other work by the MNP, has led to various towns and regions involving children more frequently in decision making (Carter and Shipler 2005). By these actions children and youth demonstrate the positive effects of political involvement and, it is argued, "construct new modes of agency and citizen participation, which are necessary for peaceful resolution to the internal armed conflict as well as for post war reconstruction" (Sanford 2006: 78).

A different perspective: the 'wisdom' of young people

[Those] who have had active roles in violence...are not 'lost generation(s)', broken, brutalized, irredeemably disaffected from society, or lacking in political skill or insight. The coping strategies, survival techniques, and knowledge that [they] develop ... equip them for active roles in building their societies' futures and ought to be harnessed in official peace-building processes

(McEvoy-Levy 2006: 297)

According to Helsing "young people have less of an interest vested in the status quo than adults and thus have the greatest incentive to push for change" (2006: 197). Galtung (2006: 261) makes a similar argument for the "wisdom" of young people who are not restricted by the established discourse and expertise. Beyond the platitude of 'children being the future', they are ultimately the recipients of the processes underway, and in this way have a major stake in the negotiations. Peace building and reintegration is done through established processes by adults who are embedded in an established development and reconstruction discourse. Children's flexibility and adaptability allows them a more 'idealist' view of the situation. However, this may not mean pacifist or socialist, rather that they see change as feasible; they may be "more revolutionary, wanting to change everything here and now, because reality falls so short of their ideals" (Galtung 2006: 262). Young people's views and understandings of the world have not "hardened", they are still willing to ask 'why' and challenge underlying assumptions. So many assumptions have been broken already by the conflict it is easy to see how children and youths can accept change as possible.

If the dominant discourse is to be believed, children are passive recipients of socialisation. In this case children would see what adults do and mimic them, creating ongoing conflict and violence. Instead there are numerous examples of children choosing to critically evaluate their lived experiences and make choices towards promoting peace and engaging with their community²⁴. Children are mostly tactical agents in political participation. However through these examples it is clear that including them in a meaningful way would contribute to the formation of successful policy and the promotion of inclusive rights. "Young people live at the sharp end of some of the most difficult institutions to reform in post-accord situations—the police, the military, and the legal system" (McEvoy-Levy 2006: 299). Consultation with children and youth and subsequent action informed by that

²⁴ I acknowledge this is not always the case, and that some children turn to violent behaviours learned through conflict. This too, however, demonstrates the ability of children (like adults) to make, for better or worse, decisions about the way they navigate their lives.



consultation can have positive flow on effects in society. This engagement expands the subjective experiences that contribute to policy formation and reconstruction. Children's voices, as important and distinct from adults, have critical things to say in these situations.

Children's political participation has a threefold benefit: it engages with children in a productive and positive fashion, assisting in getting them off the street and away from situations of potential violence; it allows them a chance to have their opinions heard and included in a meaningful way; and it provides insights into the processes of peace-building and society that adults may not have. Children actively respond to their environment, creating opportunities and possibilities around them. Even in the face of ongoing conflict the youth leaders in the Colombian peace communities strive for political recognition and engagement. Their insights into political processes are unique and potentially more responsive than their adult counterparts and they bring enthusiasm and optimism to their endeavours. However, for this vision to be a viable option adults at all levels of society need to make children and youth visible in "political discourse not just as problem makers or recipients of aid but officially central to a repairing of society" (McEvoy-Levy 2006: 291). Children will only believe in this discourse if it brings "tangible benefits"; political participation as not just words but active involvement in the processes of peace and community building.

Conclusion

I asked the group of children who lived on the streets in front of my boarding room if I could pass—go about—with them one day...They ranged in age from eight to twelve...Curious what they would say, I asked them what it meant to be human. One boy touched the middle of his chest and said this is what made us human. No, said a second, it resides here...touching his throat. The third boy cleared this up: "It's both together: it's when we combine feeling, caring, with voice"...Then the children leaned back against the steps. "We always take rests—you can't walk too far unless you've eaten properly

(Nordstrom 2006: 115)

The ability of children to make the best of, or to better, their lived experience in the most difficult circumstances testifies to their resilience and their desire for change. This paper has explored the dominant discourse and highlighted the inapplicability of its universalised understanding of childhood. It has instead argued for engagement with a discourse that recognises children as possessing agency to affect their environments. The importance of such recognition has been demonstrated through the analyses of former child soldiers in peace building and reintegration processes. These children are neither passive recipients of aid agencies' plans, nor are they inert when promises made are not forthcoming. Instead, as this paper has demonstrated, they actively find ways of achieving what they desire whether it be education, skills training or raising their voice in the political sphere. These former child soldiers challenge the dominant discourse's understanding of children as passive, incomplete adults who are dependent, irrational beings. It is obvious that as agents, these children actively, rationally and independently seek change in their lives.

Recognising this is only part of the story. Beyond the principal criticism of the dominant discourse itself, to engage meaningful with children in the areas discussed and beyond requires a re-conceptualisation of established systems of power and understanding. Critiquing such a well established discourse can only achieve so much, and it is the practical ramifications of that critique that present hurdles. The social and cultural contingency that



lies at the heart of the agency discourse allows a similar conceptual space to be opened to discuss re-appraising these established systems and understandings. Understanding child and childhood as socio-historically located and variable also allows recognition that the social and political institutions that support it are socio-historically located and variable. From this recognition comes the imperative for the UN, NGOs and national governments to engage with children in productive, positive ways which challenge the existing power relations and demonstrate commitment to the meaningful involvement of children in the socio-political world.

This focus on former child soldiers is not meant to exclude the participation of other children affected by conflict. This brief analysis of the potential roles of former child soldiers highlights the complexities involved in the processes of peace building and reintegration. These complexities grow when dealing with the multitude of experiences of children in conflict. It speaks to the need to create responsive and diverse programs and processes, and to change the way children are seen in terms of their participation and involvement in their environment. This analysis of child soldiers, in this sense, demonstrates the need for further research in this area, dedicated attention to the active role of children in peace building efforts, and the importance of genuinely culturally based understandings replacing universalised notions of child (non)participation.

Children, particularly those who have lived through conflict, have a wealth of knowledge and experience that can contribute to the establishment of lasting peace and stability in these countries. Instead of assuming what is best for children, adults in all levels of society and government need to listen to children's voices with genuine commitment and interest. More than this, children need to be seen as human beings who deserve recognition, desire betterment and are capable of contributing to peace building initiatives in their own right.



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