

CRADLED BY CONFLICT

PREVENTING AND RESPONDING TO CHILD RECRUITMENT

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMMING

AND USE IN CONTEMPORARY CONFLICTS

TECHNICAL NOTE



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CRADLED BY CONFLICT: IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMMING

Preventing And Responding To Child Recruitment And Use In Contemporary Conflicts

TECHNICAL NOTE

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Overview

This Technical Note aims to help guide programming intended to prevent and address the recruitment and use of children by armed groups in today's conflicts.

It is an output of the United Nations University's (UNU) [Children and Extreme Violence Project](#), which sought to fill key knowledge gaps about how and why children become associated with, are used by, and leave armed groups in contemporary conflicts, particularly those groups deemed "terrorist" or "violent extremist". The project was a collaboration of UNU, UNICEF, DPKO, and the Governments of Luxembourg and Switzerland. This note is based on the research findings in UNU's [Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict](#) (2018) and extensive consultations with practitioners and children to determine how existing programming and practice might be strengthened to respond to the particular challenges facing child protection practitioners in contemporary conflicts.¹

Child release and reintegration programmes are increasingly implemented in situations of ongoing, high-intensity armed conflict where the basic political and security preconditions for disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) have not been met. Peace agreements are sometimes absent, military operations may be ongoing, and programming may take place in insecure locations, often with limited or no access for international humanitarian actors and child protection actors. The risks associated with prevention, release and reintegration programming are significant. They can however be mitigated through ongoing, in-depth conflict analysis; strong, trust-based partnerships at the local level; and a commitment to accountable and responsive programming. The lack of access to key services and infrastructure in ongoing conflict contexts means that programming objectives need to be realistic, and lead to tangible results even while programming for mid- and longer-term system strengthening is ongoing.

While much of the existing child protection toolkit on prevention, release and reintegration remains relevant, six key findings identified by the UNU-led research collaboration suggest the utility of programming adjustments in these environments:

1. [Focus on children's rights and best interests in securitized operating environments](#) - page 4
2. [Rethink assumptions about neutrality](#) - page 9
3. [Be cautious about the role of ideology](#) - page 12
4. [Understand and positively build on children's prosocial motivations](#) - page 15
5. [Support children's long-term and non-linear exit processes from armed groups](#) - page 18
6. [Be cautious about the "violent extremist" lens](#) - page 21

The aim of this technical note is to supplement existing programming tools and literature for child protection practitioners and partners working on the prevention of child recruitment and use, and the release, and reintegration of children associated with armed forces or armed groups (CAAFAG) in contemporary conflict settings. It focuses only on the issues that present specific and urgent programming challenges. When simple answers to the challenges, risks and dilemmas of programming in contemporary conflict zones are not forthcoming, the note raises key questions for practitioners and their organizations for reflection and action. While the focus of the note is on contemporary conflicts, particularly those involving groups characterized as "terrorist" or "violent extremist", this note may also serve to inform several ongoing child protection and DDR guidance revision processes, and contribute to existing guidance for children's reintegration (e.g., the Integrated DDR Standards and the Paris Principles).²

¹ This technical note was informed by consultations with more than 70 practitioners from December 2017 – March 2018, and a two-day workshop involving child protection practitioners and researchers working in the Middle East and North Africa region. Additionally, focus group discussions (FGDs) with 32 Jordanian and war-affected Syrian refugee children living in Jordan also informed this technical note.

² See the UN Integrated DDR Standards ([Standard 5.20 Youth and DDR](#) and [Standard 5.30 Children and DDR](#)) and the [Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups](#).

1 Focus on children's rights and best interests in securitized operating environments

Conflicts are increasingly internationalized and intractable. They often involve extensive violence against civilian populations, facilitated by new technology and captured in real time by media. They end less often than they used to through political settlements. The presence of multiple non-state armed groups, many of which are factionalized, less hierarchical than traditional non-state armed groups, and are intertwined with organized crime makes for a high-risk operational environment. Humanitarian access is increasingly restricted not only by active combat, but also by a perception that humanitarian actors are no longer impartial. Some states have passed counterterrorism legislation criminalizing association with armed groups deemed "terrorist" or "violent extremist", increasing the prospect of more children being criminalized, detained, and prosecuted for having been associated with these groups. In highly securitized environments, levels of surveillance have risen, with child protection actors at times being compelled to hand over data or threatened with legal proceedings for working with at-risk children suspected of association with groups labelled as "terrorist" or "violent extremist". Combined, these factors have contributed to an extremely difficult operating environment for child protection practitioners.

PROGRAMMING AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This operational environment has two implications for policy and programming. First, child protection practitioners find themselves in situations where children's rights and best interests risk being trumped by national security considerations. This can, for example, lead to children being criminalized or detained and procedural guarantees for children should be provided in such circumstances. Second, the access of child protection practitioners is more restricted than in previous conflicts, their impartiality may not be respected or recognized, and their work is likely to be scrutinized by security services. Organizations that simultaneously seek to gain or sustain access from states to key populations or territory for service delivery and at the same time promote the rights of children with those same states may find they face tensions between these two goals. Operating in these securitized environments comes with heightened programming risks to child protection practitioners, the beneficiaries they serve, and the data they store, requiring new risk mitigation strategies.

PROGRAMMING SUGGESTIONS

Develop engagement strategies to reclaim and uphold the child's best interest, through dialogue with community actors, local authorities, state and non-state actors, and where possible, armed groups.

- To reprioritize children's rights and best interests, consider opportunities for dialogue with the full range of local stakeholders, including not only national and local authorities, teachers, civil society, business leaders, children and their families, but also, when possible and possibly beneficial, with armed groups (see [page 23](#) for specific considerations on engaging with armed groups) or with "insider mediators"³ at the local level who have access to armed groups.
- The notion of "dialogue" is important, as it allows for a constructive engagement that on the one hand acknowledges the concerns, priorities, and fears of state and local actors, while on the other hand evokes the shared responsibility for the protection of children.⁴
 - Given the complexity of contemporary conflicts, dialogue needs to occur at multiple levels, requiring more sophisticated strategic approaches by organizations, ideally in coordination

³ For more information, see [Insider Mediators, Exploring Their Key Role in Informal Peace Processes](#) (Berghof Foundation for Peace Support and Center for Security Studies, ETH Zurich, 2009).

⁴ The protection of children should be considered from a whole-of-system perspective, thus encouraging more active and constructive engagement beyond child protection actors, with responsibilities to protect extending to security actors and armed groups, as well as donors and Member States, see: e.g., the [Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers \(2017\)](#).

- with others. Which lines of communication would be the most helpful to have in place to help mitigate acute problems when they arise (e.g., unlawful detention of children)?
- When dialogue is possible, it is important to consider the potential benefits and risks associated with such engagement, and who should be involved. For example, will top-down dialogues contribute to facilitating exchanges with local authorities and/or help protect access? In most cases, dialogue on release, return and reintegration should occur at multiple levels, and often simultaneously.
 - Is it possible to draw on existing fora and reporting mechanisms, such as the UN Human Rights Council – as well as at state level, among UN country representatives and international donors⁵ – to facilitate effective dialogue about the best interests of children?
 - Can these dialogues be conducted in line with existing community outreach that is part of broader programming (e.g., Communication for Development, or other programme areas such as education, health, water and sanitation, governance, or rule of law) and/or separately as part of a clearly elaborated communications strategy specific to the prevention of child recruitment and child reintegration?⁶
- At the community level, it is important to acknowledge the fears and distrust felt by people who have borne the burden of violence. Perceptions can be as important as facts, and so engaging closely with families and other local actors is necessary to prepare for the return of children who have exited armed groups or who have been released from detention.
- Engage in dialogue with local actors to identify and understand the fears and concerns they may have relating to returning children. How might these fears be addressed when preparing for children’s return, and during their reintegration? Who are the key local actors who might have the greatest positive influence on resolving these concerns and how might they be most effectively engaged?
 - In order to respond to the potential threat of reprisal attacks on associated children returning home after conflict, consider how community protective capacities can be reinforced.
 - How might local communities be supported in their efforts to prevent children who have left armed groups from re-joining or joining another group?
 - Specifically, are there ways that can help children demonstrate to the community that they do not pose a threat, that do not include joining a self-defence force or the community’s preferred armed group? What are the potential risks and stigma associated with these metrics or signalling functions?
 - Local actors, including children themselves, parents and families, peers, teachers, civil society and others should be considered key actors from the earliest stage of programme design, as they will be best placed to identify which actions might be useful. This will also help ensure that local communities are engaged from the start, and that the programmes are considered relevant, and draw upon and support existing local capacities most effectively (see [page 18](#) for more information).

Engagement with state and non-state authorities to prevent and mitigate unlawful and/or harmful detention of children

- Consider conducting joint assessments with state and non-state actors to accurately identify key concerns and challenges relating to the detention of children for terrorism-related acts.
- If the assessment shows a lack of knowledge about and capacity to practically adhere to national and international justice for children standards, then provide support to national authorities or refer suitable partners who may be able to provide such support.

⁵ For example, some Member States have formed country-specific or regional networks known as Group of Friends on Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC) which meet regularly to discuss how to support the CAAC agenda in their work. E.g., Group of Friends networks were established at the UN in New York and Geneva, in Amman for the Middle East Region, in DRC, the Philippines, and South Sudan, amongst others.

⁶ For a comprehensive evaluation of UNICEF’s Communication for Development (C4D) approach, see: [Communication For Development: An Evaluation Of UNICEF’s Capacity And Action. Synthesis Report](#) (2016).

- Consider facilitating training for local judges to refresh their familiarity with the best interests of the child principle and how and when it should be considered in making assessments that involve children who have allegedly been involved in the commission of crimes while engaged with armed groups.
 - If the assessment shows that the problem is that national security concerns are prevailing over international law, consider engaging in dialogue with state authorities regarding their obligations to uphold International Human Rights Law – including the Convention on the Rights of the Child,⁷ IHL, and established international juvenile justice standards.⁸
 - Encourage the review of national terrorism legislation by local and international experts (e.g., through a Human Rights legal centre) and provide advice to national authorities on the inclusion of provisions in line with existing IHL and justice for children standards.
- In contexts where it is feasible, consider advocating with authorities that cases involving children should be resolved without delay by a competent, independent and impartial authority in accordance with laws and juvenile justice standards. Consider reminding authorities that any justice proceedings must take into account the child's age and prioritize her/his eventual reintegration. Consider highlighting the potential long-term security implications of detaining children unjustly and in inhumane conditions.⁹ It is important to note that the detention of children (e.g. administrative detention for screening, or pre-trial detention pending judicial investigation and prosecution) may not necessarily violate international law and domestic laws, including emergency legislation. A legal analysis by field practitioners will be helpful to determine the different advocacy messages on the release and treatment of the children detained.
 - Consider providing legal counsel and legal expertise to and/or observe cases relating to children accused of armed group association whenever possible.
 - With state and non-state actors, consider having in place standard operating procedures on screening of children and hand-over protocol of children from military and security forces to civilian authorities based on the applicable international legal framework.
- To address concerns about justice and reconciliation at the national and local level, especially when parties to conflict agree on a peace framework and cessation of hostilities, consider engaging in discussions with state and non-state actors about longer-term options for transitional justice and locally-appropriate, alternate accountability models for children who have allegedly committed crimes while engaged with armed groups.

Protection of local implementing partners, at-risk children and data

- Jointly conduct a risk assessment with implementing partners on the specific operational risks for programme implementation, and jointly elaborate a risk-mitigation strategy. Provide training and support to local partners to better equip them to deal with threats and intimidation by security actors.
- To reduce the risk of targeting project staff and at-risk children by security actors and armed groups, develop community-based approaches, such as community violence reduction programmes, that are community-wide and do not identify children at-risk of recruitment or children who have been released from armed groups. This broader approach does not preclude individual case management to meet the specific mental health and psychosocial support needs of at-risk children.
- Consider the best way to support follow-up with children once they have completed the reintegration programme, including through community-based networks and peer groups. Consider the special needs of those children who are likely to relocate after they exit the programme. Are there referral systems that might be put in place or feasible mechanisms for follow-up? What financial and logistical capacity would such follow-up require?

⁷ The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is the foundational legal instrument; its key principles of non-discrimination (Article 2), the child's best interests (Article 3), survival and development (Article 6), and respect for the views of the child (Article 12), are further supported by protections against any cruel or harmful punishment (Article 37), and the respect of juvenile justice standards (Article 40). Any justice proceedings must take into account the child's age and prioritize their eventual reintegration, see: the [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) and the [UNICEF CRC Fact sheet](#).

⁸ See the chapter by Mark Drumbi and Gabor Rona, Navigating the Challenges in Child Protection and the Reintegration of Children Associated with Armed Groups in [Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict](#) (UNU, 2017), pp. 210-33.

⁹ For in-depth guidance, refer to the checklist of key elements for practitioners on page 81 of the UNODC [Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: The Role of the Justice System](#) (2017).

- Work with implementing partners to jointly assess current data management practices, capacities, and needs, and consider strategies for improved data protection based on context-specific risks in line with international standards (e.g., the ICRC Handbook on Data Protection in Humanitarian Action, linked below).¹⁰
 - This may mean not documenting details relating to at-risk children, bolstering anonymization practices systems, and/or investing in encryption.
 - Where relevant, also assess cross-border data management and data sharing practices, including gaps and weaknesses and how they may be addressed.
- Discuss the security-induced constraints to data collection with headquarters and donors, highlighting the risks faced by local implementing partners as they fulfil their donor reporting requirements, and jointly reflect on how monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and other donor reporting requirements may be adapted to operational constraints.

RISK CONSIDERATIONS

- Addressing issues related to security and detention comes with significant risks, which also need to be carefully considered within a strategic assessment of the organization's activities and priorities.
 - Will engaging state authorities on issues relating to child detention increase risks to other programme priorities (e.g., reduction of access to other vulnerable children and programme areas)? How can such risks be mitigated (e.g., by having another arm of the organization conduct this outreach)? How might these risks be balanced (e.g., by offering capacity support on jointly-agreed priorities)?
- When deciding to engage in dialogue and advocacy with government, security actors and non-state armed groups (considerations for engagement are explored in greater detail [on pages 22-23](#)), who is best placed within an organization? Are there situations where it makes sense to bear the risks of such engagement collectively with other organizations and donors or “offshore” such risks onto others, by relying on other partners to do this type of engagement?
- What are the specific challenges associated with the shift to hyper-localized and small-scale programming, including in terms of donor expectations and M&E? How can these challenges be addressed (e.g., by sensitizing donors to the operational risks and challenges of programming, and by agreeing on realistic and measurable outputs for monitoring programme achievements)?

PRACTICAL EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

Gaining access to children in detention

To address the concerns relating to the detention of children associated with armed forces or armed groups, one UNICEF programme in the Middle East and North African region has managed to gain access to more than 1,000 children in detention through persistent advocacy and dialogue with state authorities. Building relationships over time has increased trust between state authorities and UNICEF. Through this engagement, UNICEF has been able to conduct interviews, offer legal counsel and provide legal representation. Despite this significant progress, the issue of child detention remains incredibly challenging, including in addressing children's fears of returning home, as in some cases communities are not willing to accept children formerly associated with certain armed groups.

¹⁰ Learning from other areas of protection programming can be helpful here, see e.g., the [gender-based violence information management system \(GBVIMS\)](#) (UNFPA, UNICEF, UNHCR, IRC and IMC).

Protecting at-risk children through community-based approaches

To avoid both the risk of stigmatization and to protect the security and privacy of formerly associated children and programme staff, one programme takes a community-based approach by providing support to a larger pool of at-risk children through centre-based services and family visits. The programme offers activities to boys, girls, and their families around peaceful conflict resolution, intercultural dialogue, critical thinking and vocational training. Through case management, children are referred to specialized services when needed (e.g., shelter, medical, legal, mental health). Significantly, formerly associated children are not otherwise distinguished from other at-risk children. As such, the programme mitigates potential security concerns and helps protect formerly associated children, while also providing enhanced protection for staff and the organization who might otherwise come under pressure by authorities to share data about formerly-associated children. This programme's holistic and individually-tailored case management approach ensures that associated children – like other children – will receive the services that are needed regardless of whether they are identified as formerly associated with an armed group or not. By working within long-standing community programmes, the organization ensures that there is local buy-in for such programmes, and that it can identify at-risk children without stigmatization or security risks. This approach creates some specific M&E challenges and donor reporting issues but provides a pragmatic solution in a context where there are concerns about protecting information, children, local stakeholders and project staff.

LINKS TO SELECTED EXISTING GUIDANCE

- » [Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action](#) (CPWG, 2012) – These standards include a summary and links to relevant resources on justice for children in humanitarian contexts (see Section 14).¹¹
- » [Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: The Role of the Justice System](#) (UNODC, 2017) – The specific guidance on children accused of terrorism-related offences in this handbook is especially relevant (see Chapter 3).
- » [Neuchâtel Memorandum on Good Practices for Juvenile Justice in a Counterterrorism Context](#) (GCTF, 2017)
- » [Lifecycle Initiative Toolkit](#) (GCTF, 2016)
- » [Children and Transitional Justice: Truth-Telling, Accountability and Reconciliation](#) (UNICEF, 2010) – This volume shares learning on transitional justice from other post-conflict contexts.
- » [Handbook on Data Protection in Humanitarian Action](#) (ICRC, 2017) – This handbook includes a discussion on the basic principles of data protection (see Chapter 2).
- » [Professional Standards for Protection Work](#) (ICRC, 2018) – This volume includes a chapter on managing data and information (see Chapter 6).
- » [Field Manual – Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism \(MRM\) on Grave Violations against Children in Situations of Armed Conflict](#) (UNICEF, 2014) – This manual provides guidance to field staff on the implementation of the MRM (see Section G on information management).
- » [Inter-Agency Guidelines for Case Management & Child Protection](#) (CPWG, 2014) – (see Section 3 for case management steps and Appendix 6 on conducting risk assessments).
- » [Child Protection Case Management Training Manual for caseworkers, supervisors and managers](#) (CPWG, 2014) – (see Module F for a discussion on self-care for practitioners).
- » Integrated DDR Standards [5.20 on Youth and DDR](#) and [5.30 on Children and DDR](#) – These standards provide detailed guidance on reintegration support for youth and children.

¹¹ At the time of publishing this Technical Note, the Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action were under review by the [Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action](#).

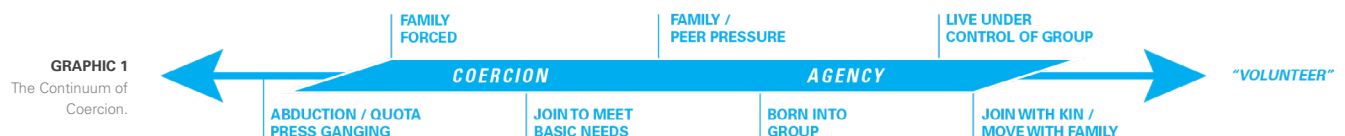
OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

The trend towards increasing securitization is also occurring beyond active conflict zones as states throughout the world are amending criminal laws and administrative procedures to bolster existing counter-terrorism measures. These security measures are in some cases denying their citizens who have been associated with such groups from returning to their home countries. This affects children who may have been associated themselves, or who are simply associated with former combatants (e.g., their parents). These measures may be in contravention of IHL and basic child rights norms and require consistent and targeted advocacy at international and regional levels.¹²

2

Rethink assumptions about neutrality

Those on the outside looking in to conflict theatres often assume that it is possible for children, their families, and even whole communities to remain neutral during the conflict. The UNU research finds persuasive evidence to the contrary, at least for children.



Child recruitment in armed conflict occurs along a continuum of coercion and in some situations, it is a matter of one available option to “voluntarily” join an armed force or armed group. For many children, the stressors and the coercive pressures they face are so significant that there is almost no chance that they could remain neutral in the conflict. For example, when a territorial armed group holds physical and economic power over large swaths of the population, there is often no other option for children than joining. When the state assumes that all adolescent boys and young men in a given territory are affiliated with rebel groups, as has occurred in recent conflicts in the Middle East, there is, for all practical purposes, no benefit to neutrality. In other contexts, where whole communities rise up to defend themselves or align with an external armed group, it is very unlikely that a child could defy their parents and community leaders by choosing not to engage. When remaining unaffiliated with an armed group raises suspicions about whether an individual has truly disengaged from an armed opposition group, the benefits of joining a self-defence group may far outweigh those of remaining neutral, because joining the self-defence group may serve as a signal to the community that the individual no longer poses a threat.

PROGRAMMING AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This rethinking of assumptions about neutrality has two policy and programming implications. First, there is a need to better align the expectations of donors, programme managers and local stakeholders, including children, with the realities of what is possible given the difficulty children face in remaining neutral.¹³ Second, there is a need to demonstrate quick positive benefits from programmes working to address the drivers of recruitment – including physical safety and food security – in order to build credibility that non-violent alternatives are available to children. Important lessons can be drawn from results of programming where children were released from armed groups, but programming support was not yet in place, leaving children with few other options but to return to armed groups, or to engage in other high-risk activities to support their immediate survival.¹⁴

¹² See clarifications provided by the ICRC in their 2015 article on [The applicability of IHL to terrorism and counterterrorism](#) (1 October 2015), and the blog post by David Tuck and Thomas de Saint Maurice in [International Humanitarian Law: A legal framework for exceptional circumstances](#) (30 November 2017).

¹³ The NSRP and UNICEF research on [Perceptions and Experiences of Children Associated with Armed Groups in Northeast Nigeria](#) (2017) provides evidence on the importance of understanding local-level perceptions.

¹⁴ Children's DDR programmes in the DRC and Burundi represent just two examples of how poorly implemented reintegration programmes can put children at greater risk, see: e.g., Claudia Seymour (2011) [Selective Outrage: the Dangers of Children's DDR in Eastern DRC](#), Disarmament Forum, No. 3, pp. 57-66 and (2015) [Unprotected: Young People in Post-conflict Burundi](#), In Small Arms Survey 2015: Weapons and the World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 243-267.

PROGRAMMING SUGGESTIONS

Community-based prevention and preparing for reintegration

- To avoid stigmatization and to reduce risks of reprisals, any prevention efforts should be community-based, although implementing partners should work closely with local actors to ensure that the children who are considered to be most at-risk of recruitment (as determined through consultations with local actors and as advised by local implementing partners) have access to programming.
- When there is little likelihood of keeping children unaffiliated with armed groups and/or facilitating their exit from armed groups may be more dangerous for children than remaining affiliated, consider ways of laying the groundwork for reintegration. This may include working closely with parents and other key stakeholders at the local level to understand best ways to enhance prevention capacities, and ways to support children's reintegration once they return home.¹⁵

Short-term results oriented

- For both prevention and reintegration, implementing programmes and interventions that address the acute needs and priorities of children (e.g., supporting food security and income-generation or providing access to schooling or training) may help undermine the appeal of armed group association. Such projects should directly address the multiple factors driving recruitment (e.g., not only basic needs but also capitalize on children's needs to express themselves, gain status, and be part of something bigger than themselves).

Gender-sensitive assessment of security risks

- Special consideration should be given to addressing the specific security needs of girls, particularly in contexts where some individuals and/or their families may consider armed group affiliation a "safer" alternative to early marriage and/or sexual violence and/or when there is a gender-specific stigma or threat of violence due to former armed group affiliation.

RISK CONSIDERATIONS

- Confer with local actors and implementing partners to agree on the minimum provisions needed to support a safe exit from armed groups.
 - For example, can the safety and safe passage of children as they exit the armed group be guaranteed?
 - Is there a physical place for children to go once released? Is that place safe, secure, and well facilitated?
 - Will the stressors children will be exposed to upon exiting the armed group be reduced, similar, or greater than those they faced before they became affiliated or while they were in the armed group?
 - Is reinsertion support immediately available for children and their families?
 - Are reintegration programmes ready for immediate implementation and designed to demonstrate quick-impact results for children, their families, and the communities more broadly?
- In cases where particular circumstances might make it more dangerous for children to leave armed groups and/or remain unaffiliated, what should the organization do in the face of the recruitment and use of children by armed groups?¹⁶

¹⁵ Principle 6 (p. 31) of the [Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action](#), (CPWG, 2012), focuses on strengthening children's resilience, and urges programmes to involve parents, caregivers, peers and other people who contribute to a child's support environment. For training resources for parents and caregivers, see: [Child Protection Sessions for Parents and Caregivers](#) (Save the Children, 2013).

¹⁶ For useful guidance on applying a Do No Harm analysis, see The Sphere Project's Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response, [Protection Principle 1: Avoid exposing people to further harm as a result of your actions](#).

- Are there risks for the organization if it decides not to actively pursue efforts to facilitate the release of children because they may be safer inside an armed group given the circumstances of the conflict?
 - How does an organization make that assessment? What alternatives to armed group association does a child have and do they present greater or less risk (e.g., trafficking)?
- With local actors and implementing partners, carefully evaluate which capacities exist at the community level to prevent recruitment, facilitate release and reintegration, and consider how they might be reinforced in the short term.
- Examples of these provisions might include the establishment or strengthening of community-based referral networks or establishment of telephone hotlines – which may or may not involve local security authorities – in instances when children, their families and/or implementing partners are threatened.
 - Depending on the context, minimum provisions might include establishing formal or informal lines of communication with armed group actors to secure assurances that children can leave safely.
 - Local media actors may be especially helpful in sharing information about the safe release of children.

PRACTICAL EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

Small-scale projects with tangible results addressing economic drivers of recruitment

In one community in the Middle East and North African region, where public narratives had described child association as driven primarily by ideology, child protection actors conducted an in-depth investigation into the actual factors driving recruitment. They found that the economic concerns of children and their families were the most significant influence on their decision to associate with the armed group. As a result, a small-scale project was set up in partnership with local private sector actors to provide training and job opportunities for the community's children and youth. The goal of the programme was to prevent the recruitment of those children by providing them with economic opportunities. This responsive, small scale, and community-based approach was also designed to generate reintegration opportunities for local children and youth after their exit from various armed groups. Although children's reasons for joining armed groups are complex and multi-causal, the provision of economic options offered at least a partial response to some of the coercive stressors faced by children and their families. Although longer-term outcomes of the project have not yet been evaluated, the programming priority on listening to concerns articulated by local-level actors and to adapting programmes accordingly have contributed not only to supporting the immediate concerns of children and their families, but also to building trust in the programme.

Equipping staff and partners with the skills to engage in difficult conversations in contexts of fear and distrust

As described by practitioners across a diversity of geographical contexts, one of the greatest challenges in contemporary conflicts are local-level sentiments of distrust and fear, even among parents and families of associated and formerly associated children. The fear of stigma or reprisals can impede the exit of children from armed groups or lead them to joining a self-defence group to prove their disassociation. Local sentiments of distrust and fear are highly complex, and may emerge from any number of interrelated factors, including past victimization, threats of reprisals, social stigma, and politically expedient narratives about "terrorists" and "criminals". To begin contributing to a shift in these deeply-rooted perspectives, some child rights organizations are training or retraining their staff

and implementing partners on the continuing relevance of child rights and IHL, reinforcing their skills and knowledge so that they may be able to more effectively engage in difficult conversations with local actors. These skills can help staff and partners more effectively accompany local actors as they examine their fears without rescinding their obligations to protect children's rights, while also facilitating the return of children and the prevention of re-recruitment.

LINKS TO SELECTED EXISTING GUIDANCE

On engaging with armed groups to release children, see Geneva Call's methodology which seeks to establish dialogue and trust and includes perspectives from some armed group leaders on their obligations to protect children:

- » [Armed non-state actors speak about child protection in armed conflict](#) (Geneva Call, Meeting report 22–24 November 2016).

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

It is important to recognize the difference between factors that influence child association with armed groups inside conflict zones versus areas adjacent to, or far away from the fighting. Children outside conflict zones are unlikely to experience the same stressors or levels of coercion. To attract children from outside the conflict theatre, armed groups need to appeal and attract supporters, for example through social media.¹⁷ In some cases, armed groups tailor their messages in such a way that appeal to children and youth. There are examples of armed groups targeting messaging specifically at girls; for example, according to focus group discussions with Syrian and Jordanian children in Jordan, idealized notions of romance and marriage held by girls are preyed upon by recruiters, who offer girls a way to escape family and cultural restrictions.¹⁸ As has been established by research across multiple conflict contexts, membership in armed groups can provide children with the means to circumnavigate traditional norms and social expectations. Conflict exacerbates generational tensions and challenges traditional hierarchies and social norms. Awareness of and sensitivity to such social changes that occur during the conflict need to be considered during the design of return and reintegration programmes.

There appears to be some recognition that when recruiting girls specifically, social media engagement allows armed groups to circumvent strict social and familial controls and promising them a way to escape these same controls.¹⁹

3

Be cautious about the role of ideology

Contrary to conventional wisdom, ideology does not appear to be the primary motivating force for child association with armed groups, including those that are deemed “terrorist” or “violent extremist.” Child association with armed groups is not a mono-causal phenomenon. Children become associated with armed groups due to a number of complex, and often interconnected, structural, social, and individual factors. When ideology does play a role in a particular child's trajectory towards an armed group, it is usually one of a number of factors that influence involvement (e.g., physical and food insecurity, family and peer networks, identity and status, or a desire for revenge, and coercion). Moreover, ideology should not be understood in a simplistic manner. It can serve as a proxy for other factors, such as community or identity. However, it is possible that for some children, ideology may become more important over time, particularly through indoctrination processes or as a post-facto justification for violence committed or for association with an armed group. The potential dangers of overemphasizing the role of ideology are also addressed in greater detail on [page 21](#).

¹⁷ For an analysis of the complex ways some armed groups attract children by tapping into these prosocial needs, see: Amanda E. Rogers, [Children and Extreme Violence: Viewing Non-State Armed Groups Through a Brand Marketing Lens: A Case Study Of Islamic State](#) (UNU, 2017).

¹⁸ FGDs conducted as part of the consultative process for the elaboration of this Technical Note (Jordan, February 2018).

¹⁹ FGDs in Jordan (February 2018).

PROGRAMMING AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The narrative among some states and media that ideology explains much individual involvement in contemporary conflict has two programming and policy implications. First, this narrative can cloud perceptions of conflict and lead to simplistic and flawed assessments of their drivers, raising the likelihood that programming based on such assessments will be ineffective at best, or at worst, counterproductive. Second, the dominance of this narrative leads states, donors, the public and local communities to have certain expectations about the types of interventions necessary to curb recruitment and facilitate reintegration, which may be disconnected from the realities on the ground. It may also raise donor expectations about what outcomes programmatic interventions are intended to achieve and what metrics are expected in reporting.

PROGRAMMING SUGGESTIONS

Context analysis

- As part of broader conflict and context analyses processes, try to understand the specific role of ideology, including what “ideology” means in the local context (e.g., what it signifies, how beliefs are held).
- Understand how armed groups may be linking prior grievances to ideologically-based narratives.

Individualized responses

- When conducting intake assessments of child beneficiaries, try to understand the multiple (likely interconnected) reasons why a child becomes involved in an armed group, her/his experience within the group, and how and why she/he exited the group.
 - Consider how these factors might be intertwined with ideology (e.g., identity, grievance, aspirations), and how these may relate to the child’s actions and pathways of meaning attribution.
 - Consider how, even if ideology did not play a significant role in motivating a child’s association, it may have taken on importance during indoctrination and/or as a post-facto justification for engagement in violence.
 - For those children for whom ideology is an important motivator or justification, carefully consider what ideology means to the individual and what role it may play in their transition from armed group to civilian life (e.g., has ideology become the language in which a child has become used to framing her/his actions? Does ideology represent the social norms and incentive structure of the armed group?).
- Reinforce life-skills approaches to support psychosocial well-being and children’s sense of belonging and purpose, which may provide alternate avenues for children to find meaning and community, and thus reduce the appeal of armed groups.

Programmatic approaches

- In general, avoid large-scale, simplistic ideology-oriented prevention programmes.
 - Only incorporate targeted activities and/or interventions related to ideology when:
 - there is a nuanced, evidence-based understanding of what ideology means in the local context and for individuals involved in the conflict;
 - there are clear indications that an ideological component might have a preventive or reintegration effect; and
 - any ideological components to programming can be embedded into larger, holistic programming. For example, if engagement with religious leaders about religious ideology is deemed necessary, can it be done as part of a larger engagement effort with other community and civil society leaders and contextualized as part of a discussion on social norms?

- In contexts where armed groups may be using forced religious education and conversion as a strategy of control and indoctrination, highlight this as a child rights violation. Also consider the impacts such exposure might have on children’s long-term psychosocial health and reintegration prospects and adapt programmes accordingly.
- Be cautious about how any post-involvement programming incorporates ideology. For many children it may not be a necessary or relevant part of their experience and it may be counterproductive to include it.
 - Provide training to social workers and psychosocial care providers so they can, where relevant, effectively engage with children on issues relating to ideology and beliefs.
 - Work closely with local actors and children to identify the most credible and trusted interlocutors who might be able to address/lead ideological-related activities in prevention and reintegration programming and ensure that these individuals have the skillsets needed to be effective interlocutors with children.
- Recognize that in some cases local “deradicalization” programmes may not have a direct impact on beneficiaries but may serve another indirect function such as signalling that formerly associated children do not pose a threat to the community.
 - Is there a way to achieve a similar signal without needlessly exposing children to unhelpful interventions?
 - Could these programmes be re-branded as “rehabilitation” and have the same effect on the community?

Engage in dialogue with donors and host states

- Engage in dialogue with states at national and global levels to deconstruct the application of the simple treatment of “ideology” in order to demonstrate its complexity, particularly interrelated factors. Consider local and international media actors as key partners in such efforts.

RISK CONSIDERATIONS

- Consider how interventions might reinforce a narrative that you would like to avoid. For example, does engaging with religious leaders on issues relating to religious ideology reinforce the narrative that particular conflicts or armed group association is a religious problem?²⁰
- How are programmes that have ideological activities/components labelled and described? Does this branding have the potential to further alienate the populations they are intended to engage?
- If you include religious actors in programming to address concerns about ideology, are these actors trusted and recognized as legitimate by children, families, and other local actors? What are the risks of engagement with these actors? Might working with your organization cause them to lose legitimacy in the eyes of the community?

PRACTICAL EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

Going beyond “ideology” and “violent extremism”: Understanding vulnerability and resilience to recruitment within the wider conflict context

In order to design and implement evidence-based programmes, International Alert with a network of Syrian CSO and research partners conducted extensive research on youth vulnerability and resilience to violence, and specifically recruitment to armed groups in Syria.²¹ Even though much of the donor interest in programming with youth in Syria has had a “preventing violent extremism” (PVE) lens, the

²⁰ In some cases, international laws and child protection norms and standards may diverge from religious teachings; in these cases, it is important to engage in discussions with local actors and children to resolve any apparent contradictions in contextually-acceptable ways.

²¹ See International Alert’s report on [Why young Syrians choose to fight. Vulnerability and resilience to recruitment by violent extremist groups in Syria](#) (2016)

research showed that the main driving force behind recruitment was not ideology, “radicalization,” or religion, but rather the context of war and its consequences. Reasons for recruitment included a desire to protect (e.g., family, land, honour), a loss of hope and disillusionment, a desire for revenge, looking for power, status and authority, a lack of alternative livelihood opportunities, and displacement. Based on the research results, International Alert and its partners designed programming and policy recommendations to address vulnerability and resilience to violence of all kinds. For example, one programme focuses on broad-based peace education and psychosocial support. It reaches over 7,000 Syrian children and youth from 8-18 years through providing safe spaces, supportive and connecting networks, alternatives to violence, access to positive role models, and building bridges across divides through dialogue.²²

LINKS TO SELECTED EXISTING GUIDANCE

- » [Reimagining Life Skills and Citizenship Education in the Middle East and North Africa: A Four-Dimensional and Systems Approach to 21st Century Skills](#) (UNICEF MENA Regional Office, 2017)
- » [Facilitator’s Handbook: Life Skills Workshop for Youth](#) (Save the Children, Youth Resilience Programme: Psychosocial Support in and out of School, 2015)
- » [Compilation of Tools for Measuring Social Cohesion, Resilience, and Peacebuilding](#) (UNICEF, 2014) – These tools can be useful for understanding the component parts of what might otherwise be labelled as “ideology.”
- » [Partnering with Religious Communities for Children](#) (UNICEF, 2012) – This document considers how to best engage with religious leaders as a part of community-based child protection approaches.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

It can be difficult to evaluate the role of ideology in part because ideology is complex. It does not necessarily represent ideas, but rather can be a proxy for or intertwined with identity, community, and grievances. In some cases, it is not beliefs themselves that matter, but how they are held, practiced and with whom they are shared. Deconstructing the concept of “ideology” will contribute to a better understanding of the real drivers of association with armed groups and will be useful in countering simplistic narratives about children’s involvement in contemporary conflicts. Likewise, better understanding of what constitutes ideology and its role (or roles) in conflict will also enable more effective monitoring and evaluation of programme impact, for example through the assignment of specific and appropriate project indicators.

4

Understand and positively build on children’s prosocial motivations

It can be difficult to appreciate the allure of armed groups, especially those that are deemed “terrorist” or “violent extremist”. While programmes often address the “negative” factors leading to association, they do not often consider that many children and youth have positive and prosocial motivations for joining armed groups, such as love of community.²³ Particularly inside conflict zones, armed groups provide a ready-made identity, community, and sense of significance, as well as some semblance of order amid chaos for young people. Armed groups deliberately exploit children’s greater tendency towards altruism and group bonding. Some use specific brand

²² See International Alert’s background paper on [Teaching Peace, Building Resilience, Assessing the Impact of Peace Education for Young Syrians](#) (2016).

²³ In some cases, participation in an armed group can open up possibilities for young people to express themselves and attain a level of status beyond what society would usually allow someone of their age. Girls who participated in consultations for the elaboration of this Technical Note emphasized the importance of strict family expectations on girls’ behaviour as a significant factor encouraging girls to seek “freedom” from their families by joining an armed group (FGDs, Jordan, February 2018).

marketing strategies in their messaging to adolescents, to appeal to their need for belonging, their desire to be part of something greater than themselves, and their determination to make a difference. Lastly, even if children do not willingly join an armed group, once inside, group processes may lead to identification and bonding with the group and its members in ways that may fulfil their social needs, thus making their exit and reintegration more difficult.

PROGRAMMING AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

A lack of understanding of the prosocial motivations for children's engagement with armed groups has two programming implications. First, an excessive focus on the negative reasons that children may join armed groups has led to programmatic responses that fail to provide viable alternatives to the attractive promises offered by these armed groups. Second, a failure to understand the appeal of armed groups has led to reactive counter-narrative campaigns that fail to tap into the prosocial tendencies and interests of children.²⁴

PROGRAMMING SUGGESTIONS

Meeting children's prosocial needs

- Programmes should reinforce children's sense of self-worth and need for belonging to something larger than themselves.
 - Programmes should be designed jointly with children to ensure their needs and prosocial motivations are properly recognized and addressed.
 - Care is needed to ensure that disproportionate attention is not paid to the "risks" or "dangers" posed by children and youth joining armed groups, which could contribute to negative narratives that further stigmatize them. Promoting trust and agency among young people can more effectively contribute to strengthening resilience and preventing recruitment.²⁵
 - Ensure programmes have the power to appeal to young people's legitimate quest for significance and purpose. Involve children in research, situation analyses, and programme design, implementation, and M&E.
 - When relevant, coordinate with existing adolescent, peacebuilding, and life skills programmes, as many already address these themes.²⁶
 - Ensure that children are provided adequate skill-strengthening and referral support for dealing with difficult and sensitive subject matters.
- As some armed groups have successfully tapped into children's need to express their agency and control, programmes should encourage child-led and peer-to-peer approaches whenever possible, and at all stages of programme design and implementation.
- Consider what types of services/programmes should be prioritized in the event that you cannot provide programming that matches an armed group's power of attraction or fully responds to the adolescent needs for authenticity, community, and rebellion.

RISK CONSIDERATIONS

- Consider the risks associated with child-led programming and ensure that sufficient support and referral mechanisms are in place to support children as they navigate difficult and sensitive issues.
- Consider whether messaging campaigns may be counterproductive, reinforce an armed group's narrative,

²⁴ Branding strategies by some armed groups have been particularly effective in attracting children with promises of solidarity, justice, and inclusion. Programmes should avoid myth-busting counternarrative campaigns which are unlikely to be successful and may simply backfire by increasing children's resistance to messaging. For an analysis of the complex ways some armed groups attract children by tapping into these prosocial needs, see: Amanda E. Rogers, *Children and Extreme Violence: Viewing Non-State Armed Groups Through a Brand Marketing Lens: A Case Study Of Islamic State* (UNU, 2017).

²⁵ For details see page 19 of the UNDP and International Alert toolkit: *Improving the impact of preventing violent extremism programming. A toolkit for design, monitoring and evaluation* (2018).

²⁶ The International Rescue Committee's *Safe Healing and Learning Spaces Toolkit* offers holistic training materials for use by managers and facilitators working with children and their families in conflict- and crisis-affected contexts, with a focus on social-emotional learning, reading and math, and parenting support.

damage your organization's reputation, or alienate the very people you are trying to reach. For example, myth-busting approaches to "counternarratives" may prove unsuccessful or even counterproductive if they point out deficits but the needs of children remain unmet or they only reinforce information bias.

PRACTICAL EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

Engaging youth in programme design to support wellbeing and sense of belonging

Mercy Corps' "Youth Advancement for a Peaceful and Productive Tomorrow" (Peace-Pro) project provides psychosocial support to youth and adults through skill-building workshops and self-expression activities in and out of the classroom, access to mentoring and potential role models, community service and development activities, and strengthening overall community resilience. The project is designed and elaborated based on a careful analysis of local needs and trends, and includes a psychological framework that gets adapted to the local context and focuses on a wide range of factors preventing violence, including increasing a sense of belonging.²⁷ To ensure youth engagement, the programme asks participants what their desired skills are, and assesses the capacities of local actors to provide training to the participants in youth-friendly spaces. An English course, for example, was offered to adolescents in a location notable for its heightened vulnerability scores and propensity for youth to support violent groups. Post-intervention results demonstrated participants' perceived victimhood had reduced by half.

LINKS TO SELECTED EXISTING GUIDANCE

- » [Listening and Learning Toolkit](#) (Search for Common Ground, 2015) – This toolkit highlights the importance of listening to young people and offers a practical guide to youth-led project development.
- » [Young People's Participation in Peacebuilding: A Practice Note](#) (Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development Working Group on Youth and Peacebuilding with support from PeaceNexus Foundation, 2016) – This comprehensive note clearly articulates the rationale for supporting youth in promoting resilience and peacebuilding and shares a wide range of ways for youth to be engaged in policy and programming.
- » [Child Led Indicators for Psychosocial Support](#) (Karki, Kohrt, and Jordans, 2009)²⁸ – Table 1 outlines the seven steps and goals of the psychosocial Child Led Indicator process.
- » [Children and Extreme Violence: Viewing Non-State Armed Groups Through a Brand Marketing Lens: A Case Study of Islamic State](#) (UNU, 2017) – This UNU "State of Research" Brief addresses the role of armed group branding and the risk of promoting counternarratives.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

The positive elements of belonging and peer group identity that some children may have sought or enjoyed once engaged in an armed group can be supported during armed group exit and reintegration. Rather than break down the bonds and networks developed in armed groups, which had been a focus of traditional DDR interventions, there is the possibility that they could occasionally be repurposed to facilitate reintegration. In one conflict context, social networks among young people were found to be useful for trying to extricate friends still associated with an armed group. In another, young people who had demobilized had started a business that now hires other ex-combatants.

²⁷ See Mercy Corps' [Profound Stress and Attunement \(PSA\) psychological Framework](#).

²⁸ Rohit Karki, Brandon A. Kohrt, and Mark J.D. Jordans (2009). Child Led Indicators: pilot testing a child participation tool for psychosocial support programmes for former child soldiers in Nepal. *Intervention*, Vol. 7 No. 2, pp. 92 – 109.

5

Support children's long-term and non-linear exit processes from armed groups

Exiting an armed group is unlikely to be a single event, but rather involves interrelated processes of individual desistance from violence and related activities, physical disengagement and psychological disengagement from an armed group. These processes are likely influenced by how and why a child became associated with the group and her/his experiences in its ranks. In many cases, neither desistance nor disengagement are smooth or linear processes, but are full of fits and starts. The continued stressors many children and youth experience upon leaving an armed group, as well as barriers to reintegration, can push them back into its ranks, or entice them to switch to another armed group. Child association with armed groups today is rarely dichotomous (e.g., “member” or “non-member”), but rather is fluid, even with many of the most violent groups. This is particularly true where children come to be associated with armed groups through community mobilization; in these cases, children may be living alongside armed groups and engagement may not be regular or formal. In such settings, it is highly unlikely that children could disengage from the armed group with which they are associated until their community stands down or withdraws its support.

PROGRAMMING AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The disconnect between expectations and realities around how children (and adults) exit armed groups have three programmatic and policy implications. First, there is a lack of political tolerance for drawn-out reintegration processes (or for recidivism), especially with armed groups deemed “terrorist” or “violent extremist.” Second, when exiting an armed group is a process (or a series of interrelated processes), programmes need to be adapted to the complex and shifting realities over the long term, yet there is rarely the funding for such extended responses. Third, in community mobilization contexts, child recruitment is less visible, potentially more enduring, and less likely to be targeted by programming. Especially in cases of community mobilization into self-defence forces, there may not be as much interest or funding to address child association with these armed elements, despite the evident needs and the long-term security implications of children's continued involvement.

PROGRAMMING SUGGESTIONS

Programming should be multi-pronged, community-based and tailored to individual beneficiary needs. These characteristics will help ensure effectiveness throughout the long-term, non-linear process of exit from armed groups.

Community-based analysis and outreach

- From the earliest stage of programme design, programming priorities and needs should be agreed with children, their families and other local actors.
- Through gap and capacity analyses, identify existing local capacities to protect children and consider what might be done to bolster these existing structures. Identify gaps and persistent systemic weaknesses and risks and consider how they can be mitigated in the short term.
- Engage with parents, local leaders and media to develop shared understandings of the difficult and long-term nature of exit and reintegration. Such engagement should help to increase tolerance and contribute to supporting sustained, locally-driven efforts to support reintegration and prevention.²⁹
- Consider the potential role of peer networks in the release and reintegration of children from armed groups, although a careful risk assessment of the impact on and threats to peers should be conducted.

29

Consider the example of Community Violence Reduction (CVR) programmes, which have been mandated by the UN Security Council to address violence at the local level in places where UN peacekeeping missions are deployed. CVR programmes seek to reduce the economic incentives of joining an armed group or provide enticement to leave the group, through a flexible, inclusive and bottom-up approach that focuses on at-risk individuals and households in hot-spot areas, specifically targeting youth at risk of recruitment into armed groups, see also: [Top UN peacekeeping officials hail success of community violence reduction programmes](#) (UN News Centre, 2016), and page 18 for an example of CVR.

Individualized, holistic support

- Supporting children through the process of exit and reintegration will require individualized case management within an overall community-based approach which may include mentoring and peer-to-peer support activities.
- Through the provision of one-on-one psychosocial support, adopt a holistic understanding of a child's pathway into an armed group, experience in its ranks, and why and how she/he left the group, as well as the risks and stressors she/he will face upon release/leaving the programme. Pay special attention to the different experiences of girls and boys.
- Provide specialized training and capacity support to social workers and psychologists on dealing with the particular needs of children following their exit and through the process of reintegration.
- Consider the particular challenges posed by issues of status and identity in reintegration processes.

Explanation to donors and host states

- At country and headquarters level, engage with states and donors funding reintegration programmes to explain the complex and long-term process of exit, to adjust their expectations in line with challenges of reintegration, and to gain their buy-in for innovative, long-term programmes funded over several years.
- With donors, explain the challenges of reaching large numbers of children in contemporary conflicts, where disengagement/disassociation processes are fluid and non-linear, where reintegration programmes may be less visible, and where persistent needs for capacity building (e.g., psychosocial and mental health training) are central for achieving expected outcomes.

RISK CONSIDERATIONS

- How are relationships with communities, states, and donors likely to be strained if returning children re-join an armed group or switch to another group?
- How does the organization handle the potential reputational problems that come with documented cases of recidivism?
- In the past, specific targeting of children exiting armed groups has been critiqued for “rewarding” them for their engagement, for increasing stigmatization against them, and for ignoring the wider population of at-risk children. How can the organization manage these competing challenges to ensure effective targeting – that provides children with the necessary support while generating community support and buy-in?

PRACTICAL EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD***Engaging with communities and families to reduce their support of children's engagement in armed groups***

Supporting the return of children to their home communities after conflict can present significant challenges, especially in contexts where there is strong local support for armed groups, and where in many cases social pressures contributed to children's engagement with the armed group in the first place. One NGO in Lebanon that works closely with the Ministry of Justice on the provision of social and professional rehabilitation programmes for formerly associated children has found that its most significant programming challenges occur after children have been released from detention. Many of these children return home to communities which support and encourage children's association with armed groups. In response, the NGO has increased its programming focus to engage more actively with communities and families to address the attitudes and behaviours that are putting children at risk of engagement in armed groups. With local actors, they are jointly developing responses to prevent the re-engagement of children following their release from detention.

Community Violence Reduction: Building social cohesion and preventing recruitment of youth

To prepare for the cantonment process in Mali, MINUSMA's DDR component engages communities near cantonment sites through community violence reduction (CVR) projects. In the region of Gao, for example, MINUSMA launched a reforestation programme together with a national NGO around five cantonment sites. The project creates short-term employment for both ex-combatants and community members and aims to build social cohesion and support for the cantonment process. By providing an income, the project reduces the vulnerability of youth to recruitment by armed movements and increases their sense of belonging and connection to the local community. The programme was designed and developed in collaboration with the communities, and participant selection criteria took into account special needs groups – primarily women, children associated with armed forces or armed groups, and the elderly. In addition, other Malians are indirectly benefitting from the project through improved community access to public goods, including lumber and firewood, thus increasing wider support for the cantonment process.

Strengthening the resilience and reintegration of girls and women

In Northeast Nigeria, the widespread stigma related to women and girls for their association with Boko Haram is reinforced at the community level upon their return from captivity. The distrust experienced by women and girls, is exacerbated by their return home with children who have been born of rape committed by Boko Haram combatants. Communities often consider that these girls and women are bringing “bad blood” into their community, leading to further social and economic exclusion of women.³⁰ A project of International Alert in Northeast Nigeria aims to reduce the stigma and address the long-term challenges faced by these girls and women through a multiple-layered programme in IDP camps. Their psychosocial needs are addressed through sensitization workshops run by local women who discuss ways to cope with the trauma and violence that was committed against them. The programme also works on supporting the reparation of the family unit through workshops with husbands, fathers, brothers, and others. Lastly, the programme works on creating community awareness of sexual and gender-based violence, and reinforcing skills such as conflict resolution and mediation to manage community relations related to the rehabilitation and reintegration of women and girls in the longer term.

LINKS TO SELECTED EXISTING GUIDANCE

- » [What Are We Learning About Protecting Children in the Community? An inter-agency review of the evidence on community-based child protection mechanisms in humanitarian and development settings](#) (Save the Children, 2009) – This document confirms the importance of community-based approaches, and the value of supporting local actors who are best-placed to help identify the needs of children and their families, strengthen local capacities, and mitigate risks (see Chapter 4.3 and Chapters 6).
- » [Communicating with Children: Principles and Practices to Nurture, Inspire, Excite, Educate and Heal](#) (UNICEF, 2011) – This guide emphasizes that the role of children as key stakeholders is central to programming in contemporary conflicts (see Section 4).
- » [Inter-Agency Guidelines for Case Management & Child Protection](#) (CPWG, 2014) – These guidelines remain relevant in contexts of active conflict and weak state capacity.
- » [Case Management Toolkit: A User's Guide for Strengthening Case Management Services in Child Welfare](#) (USAID, 2014)

³⁰ See International Alert's report on [‘Bad blood’ - Perceptions of children born of conflict-related sexual violence and women and girls associated with Boko Haram in northeast Nigeria](#) (2016).

- » [Children and Extreme Violence: Insights from Criminology on Child Trajectories into and out of Non-State Armed Groups](#) (UNU, 2017) – This “State of Research” brief produced by UNU offers insights from gang desistance programmes that is especially useful (see Section 3).
- » Integrated DDR Standards [5.20 on Youth and DDR](#) and [5.30 on Children and DDR](#) – These standards provide detailed guidance on reintegration support for youth and children.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Efforts at assessing or monitoring exit from armed groups need to take into account that exiting an armed group is a process, and likely a fitful one. A short period of assessment might lead to inaccurate results, indicating for example that a child has either successfully reintegrated, or has re-joined a (different) group. To correct for this, longer-term assessments are required that are more in line with the amount of time it takes most people to finally and fully exit an armed group.

Given that reintegration is a long-term process, reintegration efforts should take into account that children often face significant challenges to their reintegration long after they have left a programme. Some of those challenges can be very gender, age, and geographically specific. For example, there are thousands of girls and women who were married under Islamic State (IS) and issued IS marriage contracts. Many of their children received IS birth certificates. These documents, however, are not recognized as valid by the Iraqi and Kurdish Regional governments. Iraq’s system for birth registration generally requires that both parents issue a request on their child’s behalf, which is not possible for many of these women. The lack of birth documentation impedes children’s access to healthcare and education and, if nationality cannot be established, renders them vulnerable to statelessness. Responses to these cases will need to be flexible, especially in cases where marriage was forced, and provide the opportunity for girls to decide which response serves them best, with the right to change their minds at a later date.

6

Be cautious about the “violent extremist” lens

Simplifying conflicts – and children’s involvement in them – along a single dimension such as “violent extremism”, ideology, or “radicalization” can distort understandings of the drivers of conflict and armed groups’ behaviours. These are multifaceted, complex, and often intertwined. The emphasis on “violent extremism” narratives sometimes fails to resonate with local populations, for whom other dynamics may be more relevant in explaining conflict (e.g., local conflicts over resources; state corruption, weakness, and retreat; exclusion or discrimination against ethnic or religious groups). In some cases, the “violent extremism” narrative can also create unrealistic public and donor expectations. The Cradled by Conflict research findings caution against routinely labelling conflicts and the groups fighting them as “terrorist” or “violent extremist” and reinforcing the assumption that these groups are exceptional, thus requiring exceptional solutions.³¹ Such dichotomous characterization of armed actors tends to equate widely disparate groups that differ along key characteristics that may be more important than those highlighted by a “violent extremist” label.

PROGRAMMING AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The pervasiveness of the “violent extremist” lens for understanding current conflicts has three programmatic and policy implications. First, it leads to assumptions that today’s conflicts – and the groups actively engaged as parties to conflict – are fundamentally different from previous conflict situations and therefore the established international law and existing programmatic tools do not apply to children associated with such groups. The use of the terms “terrorist” or “violent extremist” as a qualifier to a “child” is in some contexts contributing to the erosion of international legal protections and child protection standards. Second, donor expectations with regard

³¹ Practitioners consulted during the drafting of this note described the framing of funding along a “preventing violent extremism” or “preventing terrorism” lens as having a distorting effect on programming. Through repetition, this narrative has taken on a life of its own, leaving many practitioners with the sense that they need to programme accordingly, if only to receive funding.

to programme design, focus, and outcomes have shifted away from underlying conflict drivers and grievances to other factors, such as ideology. Finally, as compared to other types of armed groups, those deemed “terrorist” and “violent extremist” may be seen as unworthy or unable to be engaged in dialogue.³² This has created obstacles to engagement aimed at securing the release of children and had a chilling effect on protection work more broadly.

PROGRAMMING SUGGESTIONS

Conflict analysis and local engagement

- To address overly simplistic narratives about the “violent extremist” origins of conflict, in-depth situational and conflict analyses should examine the full spectrum of structural, social, and individual factors that influence child recruitment and use. These may include issues around inequality, insecurity, economic decline, state retreat, identity-based cleavages, marginalization, human rights violations and other grievances.³³
 - Such analyses should also consider factors and systems of resilience, as well as vulnerability to recruitment in order to understand the individual, social and structural factors which prevent individuals and communities from joining in the first place.
 - Such analyses should be as localised as possible, as experience demonstrates that vulnerability and resilience factors to engagement in armed groups can vary significantly within and across conflicts.

Engagement with a wide range of local stakeholders such as community leaders, business people, religious leaders, teachers, parents and children is necessary for a correct diagnosis of the factors driving child recruitment. This commitment to local engagement is a fundamental principle that should be applied throughout the programme cycle.

Coordinated approaches among UN and other child protection actors

- UN and child protection actors may consider a coordinated approach at the national and local level to deal with issues relating to “violent extremism”, including a joint approach to language and messaging during advocacy with relevant Government bodies or Member States and while designing programmes for communities, ensuring that all are formulated in line with established child rights standards.³⁴
- Such coordinated approaches could include joint identification of challenges, bottlenecks, risks that may affect advocacy and programmes in this area and strategies around mitigating measures, as well as linking approaches to existing programmes.

Communication and outreach

- Use the evidence base on children’s actual pathways to recruitment – generated by research, conflict analyses, and M&E – to inform messaging and to promote greater nuance in public, donor, and partner understanding of the drivers of current conflicts and individual involvement in them.
- Engage with government actors to discuss the potentially damaging implications of the use of terms such as “violent extremist” and “terrorist” in characterizing and engaging with local armed groups.
- Work to educate the public – perhaps via regional and local media outreach – about the complex pathways to recruitment to reduce simplistic assessments of conflict drivers and harmful use of “violent extremist” and “terrorist” qualifiers for children.
- Consider the terminology your organization employs. Using terms like “terrorist” or “violent extremism” may reinforce the exceptionalization narrative.
- Consider using the terms children associated with armed forces or armed groups (CAAFAG) or a broad shorthand (e.g., associated children) – which work regardless of an armed group’s designation or characterization. This helps avoid reinforcing false dichotomies between groups and minimizes stigmatization of children who have been associated with armed groups. Such language may be useful in balancing their multidimensional

³² In some situations, this reticence to engage with armed groups is deeply rooted at the local level, especially when these groups are those designated by Member States or listed by the UN as terrorists.

³³ It is also important to examine the impact of protracted conflict on other social norms and practices, coping capacities and resilience mechanisms, including on social relationships and the incidence of interpersonal violence, including domestic violence.

³⁴ See the UNDP and International Alert toolkit: [Improving the impact of preventing violent extremism programming A toolkit for design, monitoring and evaluation](#) (2018).

status as victims, witnesses, and sometimes, perpetrators of conflict-related violence. In conversation and planning, it may be necessary to make nuanced distinctions between these groups of children (e.g., those who exhibited some agency in their recruitment compared to those who were heavily coerced), but in general avoid using labels like “violent extremist” and “radicalized”.

- Consider how your organization’s language aligns with that of other offices of your organization, other NGOs and IOs, and that of state actors. Is greater coordination necessary to ensure a unified message?

Engaging with armed groups

- It is important to conduct an in-depth analysis of each of the wide range of armed groups that may be active in the conflict zone. When engagement with an armed group is feasible it may contribute to the prevention of children’s engagement and facilitate children’s release.
- Each armed group in each conflict context should be carefully analysed to determine potential entry points and opportunities for engagement. For example, analysis could consider:
 - the stated and actual objectives of the group, including its economic, political, religious, and ideological motivations;
 - the armed group structure, fractionalization, leadership, system of command, organization;
 - the recruitment tactics of the armed groups and whether it focuses on particular ethnic, religious, geographic or socio-economic groups for recruitment;
 - local and international relationships and alliances;
 - sources of financing, access to resources, and distribution;
 - understanding local perceptions of legitimacy, among other factors;
 - understanding how local actors feel about the impact of the conflict on children;
 - whether there have been previous engagement efforts and the outcomes of them;
 - the group’s view of children and their role in the organization and society at large; and
 - the capacity of the group to adhere to its own policies and other commitments (e.g., ceasefires).
- In some cases, only remote or indirect engagement may be possible, and even that may be limited. At an organizational level – and ideally in a coordinated manner with other humanitarian actors – careful consideration needs to be given on which individuals are best placed to engage with the armed group in question.
- Any engagement with armed groups should be part of a well-thought-out strategy that considers not only short-term priorities (e.g., releasing children), but also a longer-term strategic vision (e.g., transforming how the group views and uses children or respects human rights).
- When the armed group has been listed in the UN Secretary-General’s annual report on children and armed conflict, work in a coordinated manner with other child protection actors and the Office of the Special Representative on Children and Armed Conflict, in line with the established MRM Guidelines.³⁵ When Action Plans have been elaborated, work in partnership with state authorities and armed groups to support realization of their commitments.³⁶

RISK CONSIDERATIONS

- Thorough situational and risk analyses should be conducted before considering engagement with an armed group. This assessment should consider any previous attempts to engage the armed group and their results, as well as any ongoing efforts at engagement by different actors, how they may be leveraged, and how to avoid confusion, mixed signals, and inconsistent standards. In some cases, other actors may be better

³⁵ See [Guidelines: Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on Grave Violations against Children in Situations of Armed Conflict](#) (UNICEF, 2014).

³⁶ On Action Plans between the UN and armed forces and armed groups, see the [Action Plans to Address Grave Violations Against Children](#) (Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict).

positioned to engage these armed actors. Be sure to consider the potential risks if multiple humanitarian actors are engaging with an armed group along different tracks.

- Multi-levelled risk analysis should consider the differential risks to children and other local actors, programme staff and implementing partners, the overall programme, and the organization.
- Consider the risks that may be incurred by engaging in the discussion around “terrorism” and “violent extremism”; and whether using certain language or engaging in certain discussions may lend support for overly narrow interpretations of conflicts and involvement in them.

PRACTICAL EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

Emphasizing child rights in discussions on “preventing violent extremism” (PVE)

There is widespread concern among child protection actors about how to engage in dialogue with security and other national and international actors about preventing and countering “violent extremism” or “counter terrorism”; without being seen as lending tacit approval to the use of “violent extremist” and “terrorist” as qualifiers for children, and thereby reinforcing narratives which exceptionalize them. Yet, there are drawbacks to remaining outside such conversations as they have real consequences for child rights and child protection (e.g., reducing opportunities to engage with authorities on protection concerns relating to the detention of children). In Lebanon, UNICEF regularly engaged in the UN PVE platform not as a PVE actor but as a child-rights organization in order to manage possible overlaps of the growing national PVE agenda (UN’s and Government’s) with pre-existing rights-based agendas (e.g., children and armed conflict, justice for children) on delicate child-rights issues such as the treatment of children associated with armed groups or the support to youth development. Such engagement provided opportunities to clarify controversial aspects and generate inter-agency consensus on issues as well as modalities for response. In parallel, a “Joint UN Approach to address the association of children with armed groups” was developed to translate into practice inter-agency accountabilities to address this phenomenon as a child rights and child protection issue rather than as a security issue.

Engaging with governments to retain child rights focus in planning processes

Likewise in Syria, some child protection actors found that engagement with the government on the sensitive issue of counterterrorism was necessary to advance a less stigmatizing narrative about child involvement with armed groups. The Government’s previous position had been that all members of armed groups fighting against the Government forces are “terrorist” and should be treated as such – including children. During coordination meetings on the development of the national work plan, UNICEF and partners advocated with the government that children associated with armed groups should be considered as victims and not criminals, in line with established child rights and justice for children standards. Through a continuing process of dialogue, language in the Syrian government work plan and the related training manual were eventually changed from a “terrorist” narrative to a “victims” narrative, and more general terminologies were used, such as “armed groups” instead of “terrorist groups”. This example shows the potential to shift narratives that are damaging to children by recalling and emphasizing universal child rights commitments in dialogue with state actors.

LINKS TO SELECTED EXISTING GUIDANCE

- » [Guide to Conflict Analysis](#) (UNICEF, 2016) – This guide provides clear guidance on stakeholder analysis, assessing conflict dynamics, understanding root and proximate causes and triggers, and local capacities for peace (see Section 4).

- » [Humanitarian Negotiations with Armed Groups: A Manual for Practitioners](#) (OCHA, 2006) – This guidance note is useful in developing a strategy to engaging with armed groups on child protection and humanitarian issue (see Section 4).
- » [International Review of the Red Cross: Engaging Armed Groups](#) (ICRC, 2011) – This issue provides an in-depth analysis and policy debates relating to the engagement with armed groups from an IHL perspective.
- » Integrated DDR Standards [5.20 on Youth and DDR](#) and [5.30 on Children and DDR](#) – These standards provide detailed guidance on reintegration support for youth and children.
- » [Humanitarian Access in Situations of Armed Conflict: Practitioners' Manual and Handbook on the International Normative Framework](#) (the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), and Conflict Dynamics International (CDI), 2014) – This manual provides guidance on developing and implementing approaches to improve humanitarian access in situations of armed conflict.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Rigorous intake assessments about how and why children become involved with, are used by, and subsequently exit armed groups can create an important evidence base that can not only be used for programmatic purposes but can also potentially be helpful in sensitizing the public, donors, and local populations about the drivers of conflict and individual involvement in them. Appreciation of gender- and age-specific differences are especially important during these assessments to understand the divergent trajectories travelled by girls and boys into armed groups at varying stages of development, the particular experiences they may have had during their time with the armed group, and the gender- and age-specific challenges faced on their return home and through their processes of reintegration. Programmes need not only ensure the specific needs and experiences of boys and girls are reflected in programming but should also adopt a broader gender-sensitive lens when designing, implementing and assessing programmes.