


INEE Round Table

“The Role of Education and Youth in Preventing Urban Violence and Countering Violent Extremism”

~ Case Studies from Research and Practice ~

Summary

	Organisation	RET International
	Location	Uvira, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)
	Title	Protection of Adolescents at Risk of Recruitment and Associated with Armed Groups in South Kivu through Prevention, Rehabilitation and Reintegration Processes
	Key Themes	Adolescents ex-combatants, vulnerable youth, education, reintegration, parents'/caregivers livelihoods, community prevention and stakeholders sensitization

Overview:

RET's project in Uvira, South Kivu - DRC, started in 2012 and is currently in its 4th phase of implementation. The project's success in the past years is the result of a holistic and innovative approach in bringing together all stakeholders involved in DDR to address the drivers of adolescent's recruitment in armed groups and identify sustainable solutions to the phenomenon of child and adolescent soldiers.

Overall goal and objectives:

The project's overall goal is to contribute to building and consolidating durable peace and stabilization in South Kivu by using and strengthening education as a tool of protection at different levels, in order to trigger processes of demobilization, reintegration and prevention. The project also seeks to engage young people as active agents of change in their communities. For 2015, the three following specific objectives have been set:

- 1) Objective 1 Prevention: To equip youth association members with the skills and values to become actors for positive social change within their communities (1260 direct beneficiaries)
 - a) 60 trained members of youth associations receive training to become Master Trainers, able to reach the more isolated and inaccessible communities of South Kivu.
 - b) 1200 youth participate in trainings delivering key messages of peace, tolerance, SGBV prevention, youth's positive community participation, carried out by the 60 Master Trainers. This activity promotes the capacity-building of civil society to ensure that RET's intervention is sustainable and can have a medium and long-term impact on general rights' awareness, social values, and on the active participation of youth, thus mitigating the risk of recruitment into armed groups, even in the most isolated communities.

2) Objective 2 Demobilisation and Rehabilitation: To apply a rights-based approach to demobilisation, and rehabilitation programmes in the Centre de Transition et Orientation (CTO) (150 direct beneficiaries)

a) 50 key socio-political and military stakeholders are sensitised on national and international legal frameworks for the rights of the child, and against child/adolescent involvement in armed groups. These stakeholders include both provincial and territorial authorities, where possible the armed group commanders or their proxies, community leaders, and civil societies. Armed groups' leaders are encouraged to sign commitment notes declaring that they would abstain from further recruitment of adolescents.

b) 100 Adolescents aged between 11 and 17 are demobilised and admitted in the CTO to follow a rehabilitation process. The programme in the CTO is in part standard to all, and in part individually tailored. Personal assessments and aptitude tests are carried out to determine the health, psychological and educational needs of each adolescent.

The programme helps adolescents to rediscover their interest in formal education (primary or secondary levels depending on individual educational levels) and/or relevant and appropriate livelihood/vocational training. The activities include:

- remedial / catch-up classes in formal education
- vocational training opportunities in key trades and businesses such as agriculture, carpentry, mechanics, bakery, hairdressing, soap-making and tailoring.
- sensitisation activities on various topics including civics education, personal health and hygiene, children's rights, etc.
- recreational activities such as theatre, soccer games and regular outings from the CTO.
- psychosocial / counselling activities (individual and group sessions)
- housekeeping activities.

During the course of his or her stay, each adolescent produces a 'life-plan' on how he/she will be resilient to further avoid recruitment and adopt self-reliance. When leaving the CTO each adolescent will receive a small exit kit, relevant to his or her life plan to facilitate a successful reintegration process.

3) Objective 3 Reintegration: To support reintegrated ex-adolescent soldiers, their guardians and vulnerable youth, with relevant educational and training opportunities, to increase community resilience to conflict (457 direct beneficiaries).

a) 100 adolescents ex-combatants are supported in their reintegration process after their stay in the CTO.

+ 100 vulnerable Adolescents between 11 and 17 years old (or the equivalent number of ex-combatants) benefit from support for their formal education or vocational training. This aims at supporting community stabilisation, reducing the risk of youth entering armed groups and avoiding 'favouritism' for ex-combatants by ensuring that becoming a combatant has no advantages.

RET work with the Provincial Ministers of Education to support youth (newly integrated ex-combatants and vulnerable youth) who have (re-)entered the formal school system with basic educational materials to reduce the risk of drop-out.

For the adolescents who require apprenticeships, RET helps identify appropriate

and relevant opportunities as well as seek new partnerships to facilitate the provision of quality technical assistance and to ensure certification upon completion of the training.

b) 200 parents / guardians are trained in starting up an Income-Generating Activity (IGA) (100 parents of the ex-combatants, 100 parents of the youth identified as vulnerable). The parents/guardians are trained on the basic skills to improve income-generation and marketable skills.

By reducing the socio-economic vulnerabilities of adults in the community, RET undermines the risks of poverty-driven recruitment into armed groups and guarantees the sustainability of its action by ensuring that parents can pay for their children's school fees after the programme's support stops.

c) 107 ex-combatants and 50 vulnerable adolescents (from the second and third phase of the 2013-14 programme) are targeted with further support in meaningful learning and income-generation opportunities. This reflects RET's commitment to making this intervention sustainable, offering follow-up support to those recently reintegrated.

Additionally, at least 3'000 beneficiaries, including family members, teachers, local authorities and wider community in the areas of reintegration, benefit from the sensitisation campaigns and training, leading to longer term and more widespread impact on conflict reduction.

The programme has been designed to ensure sustainability, to avoid dependency, and to increase community resistance and resilience. In addition to prevention and demobilisation, addressing poverty and a lack of livelihoods opportunities allows to cut one of the root causes of child/adolescent soldiering, and indeed one of the driving forces behind conflict in general.

Description of Context: (problematize, include figures/data where possible)

The Eastern part of DRC, and in particular the province of South Kivu, has for close to two decades been a scene of multiple conflicts, which have caused widespread displacement, loss of life, destruction of property and infrastructure. The war in Eastern DRC has also been infamous for the use of Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) against women as weapons or war and vengeance, and for the recruitment of children/youth into armed groups. The region has been described as one of the worst conflict zones in Africa but despite this, South Kivu province in particular is the least served by NGOs and international agencies working in DDR programmes.

The situation is very complex and is driven by many factors. These include, among others, armed groups which control valuable mineral resources; local militia groups which have been set up to defend their communities from attacks and raids due to lack of state control and protection; and armed groups, such as the Mai Mai, established to defend their regions from external forces, such as Forces Démocratiques pour la Liberation du Rwanda (FDLR) and Forces Nationales pour la Liberation Du Burundi (FNL). The government's effort to integrate the armed forces/ groups into the national defence force have not been successful; as such

most of the groups are active in most parts of the Eastern DRC and continue to recruit adolescents into their groups.

In his 2015 Report on children in times of armed conflict, the Secretary General pointed to 241 new cases of recruitment (including 18 girls) in Eastern DRC. In addition, at least 1'030 children were reported as demobilized, most of whom had been recruited in 2013 and 2012, before the age of 15.¹

To add to the complexity of the situation, even though the government of the DRC has set the minimum voluntary recruitment age at 18, the National Congolese Army (FARDC) recently admitted to using children and adolescents in their ranks. An agreement has been made to sign a one year Action Plan between the Congolese Government and the United Nations for the release of all children and to stop further recruitment.

The context in Eastern DRC can be described as a vicious circle of violence: unacceptably high rates of death and displacement and widespread instability impact daily life and socio-economic structures, which in turn increases poverty and vulnerability. All of this increases the risk of and incidence of forcible and voluntary recruitment of children and adolescents, made vulnerable by the broad impact of conflict while facing a futile future.

Thus, the general social and economic environment is a leading cause of child / adolescent soldiering. Armed groups take advantage of the conditions of poverty, lack of education and livelihoods opportunities and lack of community/youth sensitisation. Young people's participation in armed groups can be either forced or voluntary, but the term "voluntary" has to be understood within the socio-economic context, whereby participation in an armed group offers some stability and security to both the adolescents and their families.

Explanation of the Intervention: (rationale, conceptual basis, process)

a) Methodology and Approach

IDENTIFYING THE UNDERLYING FACTORS OF RECRUITMENT

In view of the complex context described above, RET has identified the main and intertwined drivers of children and adolescents recruitment into armed groups. Among others, focus groups with adolescents at the CTO have underlined a set of reasons and factors that contribute to their enlisting in armed groups, namely:

- Poverty and socio-economic vulnerability,
- Lack of quality education and understanding of children's rights,
- Lack of opportunities for the future,
- Youth's inability to establish a "life project",
- Lack of community and youth sensitisation/understanding of the issues related to children/adolescents recruitment,
- Psychological fragility related to the violent environment,
- Lack of familial stability and support,

¹ Nations Unies, *Le sort des enfants en temps de conflit armé*. Rapport du Secrétaire général des Nations Unies, 5 juin 2015, A/69/926-S/2015/409.

- Feeling of insecurity,
- Peers influence to join the “powerful” armed groups,
- Search for social identity, need to belong to a group
- Need for revenge following exactions and lootings committed by hostile armed groups - the “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” mentality,
- Forced recruitment by armed groups.

This project aims at tackling these multiple and underlying root causes of recruitment through consciousness raising of youth and communities and support of mechanisms which combat poverty, violence, intolerance and gender imbalances. Each of the activities carried out within the project implementation seeks to address one or more of these identified factors.

TACKLING THE MULTIPLE DRIVERS OF RECRUITMENT THROUGH A HOLISTIC APPROACH

In RET’s view, not only is it imperative to provide youth with credible alternatives to joining the militia, but also to offer a holistic community approach to DDR. Establishing a paradigm shift in how DDR projects are carried out means adopting a conflict transformation agenda, seeking for a lasting impact by engaging all stakeholders, including the youth themselves, in demobilising, disarming and reintegrating, as well as in supporting communities to prevent further recruitment.

- **PREVENTION:** By training youth associations, RET raises awareness of the rights of the children and adolescents as well as of social transformative values such as tolerance, respect and peace. In addition to building local capacities, this increases local ownership, and thus the potential for sustainability.
- **SENSITIZATION:** At a more political level, RET also builds bridges to create communication networks between the relevant stakeholders involved in DDR and to raise awareness amongst state institutions and FARDC officers and soldiers. Additionally, through local partners, RET ensures that information on the national and international legal frameworks is transferred to the commanders of armed groups, in order to facilitate the demobilisation of young recruits within their ranks and prevent further recruitment.
- **REHABILITATION:** The CTO provides an appropriate transition programme offering the demobilised youth health and psychosocial support as well as relevant learning opportunities. Besides, responding to educational needs through catch up classes and professional trainings, discussions and reflections on conflict resolution, emotions and stress management, self-management tools, and medical and social support take place on a regular basis. A special emphasis is placed on making the demobilised youth understand their rights as adolescents and as human rights holder. Equally important is the establishment of a life plan to facilitate an effective reintegration process.
- **REINTEGRATION:** The programme also targets a equal number of identified vulnerable adolescents who have not been affiliated with armed groups but whose life situation exposes them to be easily attracted by militias, in order to better mitigate further recruitment into armed groups. By encouraging reintegrated youth as well as vulnerable youth to reintegrate formal education or into life-skills and livelihoods trainings/apprenticeships, RET sends a positive

message to the entire community: youth – both ex-combatants and vulnerable adolescents – have a value and should be regarded as actors of social change for a better community and ultimately a more peaceful and stable province/country.

- **COMMUNITY RESILIENCE:** Extending support and opportunities to the communities is essential to ensure the project sustainability: both vulnerable and reintegrated youth's family members benefit from training in income-generating activities, so as to address poverty and the lack of livelihood strategies, identified as one of the major reasons children and youth are recruited, and indeed one of the underlying causes of the armed conflict in general. It also aims at providing parents with the needed resources to pay for their children's school fees after the project closure.
- **FOLLOW-UP:** In 2015, it has been decided to create an additional objective providing adolescents reintegrated in 2013-2014 with further support in educational and professional opportunities, in order to reinforce their likelihoods to become self-reliant and to ensure the sustainability of the investment made.

A SPECIAL FOCUS ON GENDER

In view of the deep gender disparity in many daily aspects in DRC – from access to education, health services to cultural norms – RET continues to set the agenda by engaging communities and key stakeholders in discourses on the importance of promoting gender equality. A special focus is placed on the rights of girls and women, and the need to involve them in all decision-making processes of the community, particularly but not exclusively in the area of DDR.

In the first and second phases of the programme in Uvira, RET learned that access to girls beneficiaries is more difficult, since girls are often associated with smaller and local defence armed groups in backwater areas rather than with well-known politico-military movements. Despite these challenges, RET successfully obtained the release of 41 girls since project inception. All of them went through the CTO and have been reintegrated in their families and communities. In the forefront of the strategy is the fight against the stigma associated with girls in the armed groups and the establishment of a girl-friendly space at the CTO through, for instance, the hiring of female psychologists in order to girls' specific counselling needs.

During the community and youth associations sensitisations, not only efforts are made to ensure gender parity amongst participants, but RET also emphasises the importance of accepting girls back to the community and offering support for them to access education or livelihood programmes, thus encouraging female participation and empowerment.

b) Implementation Process

In implementing the project, RET works with local provincial and district government, territory administrators, FARDC as well as other armed groups commanders, local police, local hospitals, educational institutions, youth associations, village leaders and members of the community at large as key stakeholders in the eradication of adolescent soldier recruitment. As such, RET

adopts a participatory approach, in which all concerned public and private actors are involved in all stages of implementation, including in the search for durable solutions. It is also worth mentioning that, having signed several agreements with different international organisations, RET works in all operational settings to support the international and national coordination in the area of DDR.

The partnership with these agencies represents a great value for the project, due to their expertise and knowledge of the region cartography, coupled with their facilitated access to militia groups and remote communities. RET constantly builds the capacity of these partners in the areas of project management, finance, and monitoring and evaluation to the extent that should RET pull out, they will be able to continue the project; thereby local capacity should be ensured over time and reach beyond the short-term benefits of the project.

One of the programme's innovative implementation strategies is the identification of Focal Points in each of the communities. These are selected among trained youth associations' members and allow smooth and regular communication with key community members in isolated areas. They are in charge of ensuring the follow-up of reintegrated adolescents, disseminating key messages on the issues related to children and adolescents recruitment, providing support to trained family members on income generating activities, and informing RET about any changes in the context/situation happening in remote areas not easily accessible by road.

Results & Findings: (outcomes, direct/indirect results, intended vs unintended, challenges)

GENERAL OUTCOMES

So far RET has been able to **successfully demobilise, rehabilitate and reintegrate of 525 (including 41 female) adolescents** through the CTO. In addition, it has **assisted 249 vulnerable adolescents (including 113 girls)** in the territories of Uvira and Fizi, providing them with access to formal education and professional learning opportunities.

It has trained and supported **30 local youth associations** to raise awareness and to cope with the risks and threats associated to the armed conflict. In addition, between 2012 and 2014, RET has sensitized more than **12,567 community members**, and has signed instruments of engagements with key stakeholders in the DDR processes, including 16 armed groups.

Some specific results

- According to post-training evaluation sheets filled by participants after the Youth associations' trainings in 2014, **all the participants developed a better understanding on child/adolescent protection and on how to build relationship and trust with adolescents to ensure effective communication** and thus gathering accurate information.
- With regards to the CTO, the results obtained so far are very encouraging. In 2014, close to **90% of the demobilized adolescents improved their average grade in formal education**. More importantly, most have gained and demonstrate great motivation to further study.

- The success of the rehabilitation process in the CTO is undeniably illustrated by an observed **significant change in former soldier adolescents' behaviour and attitudes**. This positive change is partly due to RET's partnership with a theatre group, whose expertise in using drama, games, music and culture to help adolescent ex-soldiers rehabilitate and reconnect with their adolescent life. Through recreational activities, adolescents acquire important social skills and regained their self-esteem as individuals and important community actors. These recreational sessions are also a communication channel for important life skills messages on adolescent health, reproductive health, hygiene, human rights and peaceful cohabitation.
- For reintegrated adolescents, the CTO has become a safe space: many adolescents keep in touch with RET staff, or occasionally come back to the CTO to greet the staff or to seek for assistance in case of troubles.
- In 2014, RET has organized monitoring and evaluation missions to communities, targeting close to 300 previously reintegrated and assisted adolescents. The ones who had chosen formal education were found attending and well integrated in their respective schools. Encouraging feedbacks have also been received from the adolescents who had chosen vocational training, some of whom were already developing small microenterprises.

Some RET's intervention lasting impact

- A group assisted and reintegrated adolescents have formed their own youth associations in their communities (one association created in Lupango and another in Minembwe), with the aim of promoting development and fighting against interethnic conflicts. They are able to transfer the key messages acquired during their time at the CTO to local youth, through the establishment of intercommunity games for instance, thus preventing further recruitment and promoting positive social change.
- Since 2013, 12 ex-combatant adolescents have completed secondary education and received their diploma, two of whom have become teachers in their respective schools. In addition, two adolescents are now studying at university.
- Some of the reintegrated adolescents are able to pay for their school fees and pursue their study thanks to the income generated by their professional activity, thus becoming self-sufficient.
- Change of mentality and solid understanding of the issues related to child recruitment are observed. For instance, recently, reintegrated adolescents have themselves actively pushed back Mai Mai armed groups trying to recruit in their community. Moreover, leader of the same community has asked for assistance and support to better prevent new recruitments in his locality.
- One adolescent reintegrated in 2013 has joined a drama group and is involved in the sensitization and support of more recently demobilized

youth at the CTO.

- Some of the programme's activities and trainings have brought together participants from different ethnic groups, who have experienced peaceful cohabitation and collaboration, thus resulting in a positive questioning of the hostile perspective toward the other.

Some Unintended Negative Effect

- Among the reintegration, four (out of 41) demobilized girls as well as some boys have got married at an early age after their reintegration.
- Since project inception, five adolescents (out of a total of 525) have been reintegrated into armed groups. This represents only 0.95% of the total of adolescents rehabilitated and peacefully reintegrated into their communities of origin. It is indeed a very low and encouraging percentage.
- Some adolescents are reported to have dropped out from school or sold their professional reintegration kit after a year, when financial support has stopped. Thus the need to extend the support and follow up measures after adolescents' reintegration.

CHALLENGES

- The major challenge consists of both poverty and the lack of favourable circumstances in the often-remote communities of return. The adolescents still lack viable opportunities to make good progress out of their lives, and thus remain exposed to re-recruitment.
- Some adolescents are moving from a village to another, dropping out from their initial reintegration path or leaving school due to the incapacity of parents to pay for the tuition fees or to provide adequate supervision. Most of these issues are observed in isolated places of return. Although RET has appointed Focal Points to effectively track reintegrated adolescents' relocation and to reinforce support to the parents in the most remote communities, we still lack strong local partners where the reintegrated beneficiaries can refer to for on-going coaching and orientation purposes (also at the psychological level).
- At the educational level, many parents still lack understanding of the importance of education, especially for girls. Facilitating access to schools, reinforcing the teachers' capacity to stimulate their students' learning/methodologies, and developing practical systems to support the adolescents in school as well as completing their homework, are constantly identified as being an acute need for most adolescents in the region.
- Despite having reached out to several armed groups since the inception of the program whose commanders have signed agreements with RET, a considerable numbers of armed groups in the Territories of FIZI and UVIRA still continue to recruit adolescents in their ranks, and new armed groups still flourish in the areas of intervention.

- Difficulties to purchase material and equipment needed for the IGA after reintegration, due to the large distance between remote communities and sources of supply, as well as looting committed by armed groups on the way.
- Administrative obstacles to successful reintegration through income-generating activities, imposed by local authorities in the communities upon return.
- RET's level of visibility in the communities has significantly increased. As a result, members of communities are requesting further assistance and services and have expectations that go beyond RET's financial resources in DRC, in areas such as GBV for instance.

Conclusions: (suitability of the approach, adaptability to other contexts, lessons learned, outcomes, direct/indirect results, intended vs unintended)

RET owes the success of its DDR intervention in South Kivu to its unique ability to unite all DDR stakeholders for a common cause, a strong and constant field presence through effective sensitization mechanisms and the use of local Focal Points, the utilization of a rights-based approach, appropriate and adapted reintegration of adolescents, individual based psychosocial support and professional guidance. Yet, the key to achieving an effective prevention, rehabilitation and reintegration is making sure that each activity addresses the identified drivers of child/adolescent recruitment.

The encompassing DDR approach goes beyond the support of demobilized adolescents to reach key stakeholders in communities – including vulnerable youth who have not been yet affected by recruitment. The programme aims at providing livelihood opportunities to parents and guardians in order to secure the reintegrated adolescents' access to formal education as well as prevent poverty-driven recruitment.

Facilitating the adolescents' socio-economic reintegration, working with a strong network of local actors, ensuring continued monitoring of reintegrated adolescents and building strong peer support networks should ensure sustainable reintegration and contribute to avoiding reintegrated adolescents being 'recycled' as soldiers by the same or other armed forces/groups.

Yet, as highlighted above, despite some interesting direct and indirect results, some important challenges remain, including:

- poverty and lack of financial resources in the communities to ensure sustainable reintegration
- continuation of recruitment despite sensitizations of armed groups
- lack of understanding of the importance of education, especially for girls amongst parents and caregivers.

In view of the identified challenges and gaps, there is a need to continue reinforcing the sustainability of the project, in particular of the IGA activities

involving parents and caregivers, and to continue to put many efforts in the sensitisation of armed groups, youth and communities in order to prevent further recruitment.

In terms of adaptability to other contexts, RET's model of intervention in the DRC, due to its overall success, can be a source of inspiration for other rehabilitation and reintegration programmes targeting vulnerable groups, such as SGBV victims or victims of human trafficking for instance. In fact, since 2015, RET has replicated this holistic intervention approach in North Kivu, starting by the areas surrounding Goma province.

Links: (documents, references, websites etc.)

RET's website : www.theRET.org

Key questions and considerations for further engagement: (points for further discussion among members in the Roundtable discussions)

- i. How to ensure the long-term support of interventions that are originally funded by humanitarian funds?
- ii. How to mitigate the long lasting effect of poverty on parent's disengagement with respect to their children's education in contexts of violence?