Perspectives of families in The Democratic Republic of the Congo on adolescents' involvement in armed groups

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The recruitment and use of children by armed forces and groups has devastating consequences for young people and their families. To contribute to family strengthening where child recruitment occurs, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) undertook a two-year initiative funded by USAID from 2019-2021 to build on existing research and programming to develop and test an intervention to support families and promote reintegration following child recruitment by armed forces and armed groups. To guide the development of this family-based intervention, the IRC carried out qualitative formative research with caregivers and adolescents in conflict-affected communities in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to increase understanding of the drivers of recruitment, as well as the barriers and facilitators for reintegration.

This brief focuses on the family dynamics that may have played a role in the decision of boys and girls to join armed groups and how these dynamics continue to influence their reintegration.

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The Context: Armed Conflict and Child Recruitment in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

The Democratic Republic of the Congo was colonized by Belgium for almost a century until it gained independence in 1960. Since independence, regional refugee crises and internal political and ethnic tensions have fueled ongoing conflict and instability throughout eastern DRC. The First and Second Congo Wars, as well as recent intercommunal conflicts, have involved multiple armed groups and government armed forces fighting for political, military, and economic control. Despite the signing of series of regional peace agreements in 1999 and 2002, continued political instability and slow movement to address the humanitarian needs of communities in the eastern part of the country prevented sustained peace.[1] Communities in eastern DRC have suffered from preventable diseases, starvation, and violence caused by insecurity, displacement, and lack of access to basic needs and health infrastructure. An estimated 4 million Congolese citizens have died as a result of the conflict.[2] The UN High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that in 2020, an estimated 5.2 million people were internally displaced, 2.7 million of those being children, and a growing number have fled to neighboring countries.[3]

Children have been recruited and used by all parties to the conflict including the government-led armed forces. In 2012, the DRC government signed the Agreement to End Child Recruitment and Other Conflict-Related Violations against Children and a subsequent Action Plan for concrete steps toward the release and reintegration of children.[4] However, multiple armed groups and militias have continued to rely on girls and boys to play different roles in conflict, including as a large part of their military force, some as young as seven years of age.[5] While the government of the DRC has committed to stop recruiting children into its armed forces and is coordinating efforts to access children recruited by armed groups, many girls and boys are still being used by militias with little hope of escaping or being rescued, and the use of children in armed conflict in North and South Kivu and Ituri provinces has increased since 2018.[6-7]

Children are recruited by armed groups in various forms. Some children in the DRC are kidnapped and forced to join armed groups, whereas many are also pushed or pulled to join as a result of a number of socioeconomic factors. Given the level of economic poverty throughout the region, children in the DRC have been found to join armed groups in search of income, schooling, food, and a better quality of life, at times even crossing borders for economic opportunity. Others have been motivated by family members to join armed groups with which the family is already affiliated, and some were even born into the group.[8]

Notwithstanding the 2012 law targeting conflict-related violations against children and successive plans in 2015 and 2018 to put forth steps to reduce recruitment and support reintegration of children in the DRC, insufficient resources have been dedicated to the reintegration of children released or returning from armed groups. An Amnesty International report emphasized that the majority of children reunited with their communities are not receiving adequate educational or vocational opportunities, with some children reporting being harassed by the

[1] ACCORD (2012). Policy and practice brief: The peace process in the DRC: A transformation quagmire. Available at: https://www.accord.org.za/publication/peace-process-drc/
[2] Amnesty International (2006). Democratic Republic of the Congo: Children at War, Creating Hope for the Future. Available at: https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/AFR62/017/2006/en/
[3] UNHCR (2018). Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2020. Available at: https://www.unhcr.org/flagship-reports/globaltrends/
[4] OSRSG-CAAC (2012). Announcement made on the day of signing of the DRC Action plan to end recruitment of children in the armed foces. Available at: https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/2012/10/
[5] Amnesty International (2006). Democratic Republic of the Congo: Children at War, Creating Hope for the Future. Available at: https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/AFR62/017/2006/en/
[6] MONUSCO (2019). Report on the recruitment and use of children in armed groups in the Democratic Republic of the Congo 2014 – 2017. Available at: https://monusco.unmissions.org/en/report-recruitment-and-use-children-armed-groups-drc-2014-2017
[7] Mlambo, V. H., Mpanza, S., & Mlambo, D. N. (2019). Armed conflict and the increasing use of child soldiers in the Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, and South Sudan: implications for regional security. *Journal of Public Affairs*, *19*(2), e1896.
[8] Mlambo, V. H., Mpanza, S., & Mlambo, D. N. (2019). Armed conflict and the increasing use of child soldiers in the Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, and South Sudan: implications for regional security. *Journal of Public Affairs*, *19*(2), e1896.

government or even arrested or detained upon their return.[9] Without national policies or initiatives to support them, many children released from armed groups are at risk of re-recruitment.[10]

Methods

To increase understanding of the drivers of recruitment and barriers and facilitators to reintegration, the IRC conducted in-depth interviews with 39 adolescents (22 girls, 17 boys) and 21 caregivers (13 women, 8 men) in six communities in North Kivu, DRC from September to October 2020. Participants were selected by the Child Protection team in DRC and through engagement with community child protection groups. Adolescent participants were either formerly involved in armed groups or were identified as being at risk of joining based on social and/or economic criteria. Caregivers who participated in interviews were all caregivers of children who were formerly involved in armed groups. Interviewers were trained on research ethics, consent, confidentiality, and child protection concepts, and all had prior experience working on research or psychosocial support with children. The research methodology and procedures were reviewed by the IRC Technical Team, DRC Child Protection team and approved by the IRC Institutional Review Board and the DRC National Health Ethics Committee, Comité National d'Ethique de la Santé (CNES) Direction Provinciale du Sud-Kivu.

Family Dynamics and Adolescent Recruitment into Armed Groups

The results of the formative research highlighted the strong influence that economic poverty had on the lives of families in conflict-affected communities in North Kivu. While economic drivers such as unemployment and lack of access to school were mentioned frequently by all adolescent participants as drivers of their recruitment, the interviews with both caregivers and adolescents demonstrated the extent to which these economic conditions negatively influenced family relationships and in turn drove children to join armed groups to seek social and economic support. The perspectives of both adolescents and their caregivers are presented below.

> **"When I learned that schools were closing due to COVID-19, I went straight into the forest. … I lived with my friends; we went [to where the armed groups live] together. … After whipping us, they gave us money to buy food for them."** *When asked if her parents knew she was going and would have allowed it she said no,* **"But they accept [me joining the armed group] because of the lack of money."** (15-year-old girl)

Adolescent perspectives on why they joined the armed groups

> **"The mothers [of children who join armed groups] are informed long before [children join armed groups], and since they know that they will be able to receive something, they allow their daughters to go there."** (18-year-old girl)

Economic stress and tension within the household drive children to engage

Both boys and girls described the desperate economic conditions of their households due to the recurring conflict, and the negative effect this had on their families. The majority mentioned poor economic conditions and lack of jobs and school as being the reasons that they decided to join the armed groups. Many also described how this affected their relationship with their caregivers, and the disappointment or stress that they felt because their families could not provide for them. Feeling that they had no other options to provide for their basic needs and frustrated with their household's economic situation, both boys and girls reported leaving to join the armed groups without telling their families. In a few cases, both girls and boys reported that while their parents did not want them to engage with armed groups, they condoned it because they thought it might bring in an income. This was reported more by girls, who are expected to bring economic gains back into their households more so than boys who are expected to use it to start their own families. The economic stress on families was further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic

[9] Amnesty International (2006). Democratic Republic of the Congo: Children at War, Creating Hope for the Future. Available at: https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/AFR62/017/2006/en/

[10] MONUSCO (2019). Report on the recruitment and use of children in armed groups in the Democratic Republic of the Congo 2014 – 2017. Available at: https://monusco.unmissions.org/en/report-recruitment-and-use-children-armed-groups-drc-2014-2017

and subsequent closure of markets, schools, and other institutions, and at least two adolescent girls linked their decision to join the armed group to the consequences of the pandemic.

Influence of friends and community members persuades adolescents with guarantee of resources

None of the adolescents interviewed in the DRC reported feeling motivated or interested in the causes of the armed groups, and many acknowledged having unfavorable opinions of the groups even before they engaged with them. Nevertheless, both boys and girls reported being motivated to engage with the armed groups by their peers or others in the community who persuaded them to join because they would receive an income. A few boys described instances in which members of armed groups came into the community to convince children to join with promises of payment.

"When I was asking my friends about the situation in the bush, to know what happens there, they said [in the bush] they are able to have money." (15-year-old boy)

Indistinct lines between forced and voluntary recruitment

The difficult economic conditions of communities in eastern DRC blurs the lines between forced and voluntary recruitment of children. A few girls reported being kidnapped or forced to join but also mentioned later in the interview that they chose to join because they were not happy at home. Similarly, one boy mentioned he was thinking of joining the armed group to earn money but then was forced to go with the armed groups. Many adolescent boys and girls first came into contact with the armed groups when selling firewood—one of the few sources of income for adolescents in the region—and reported either being persuaded to go away with them or being forcibly taken. This phenomenon emphasizes the important point that even when they go "voluntarily", most children do not have the power or agency to refuse to engage with armed groups for their physical or economic survival. Incidents of forced recruitment were reported most often by girls.

Caregiver perspectives on why their children joined armed groups

"What motivated him, it was because of poverty. He could see there is nothing at home, so he decides to join." (Male caregiver of boy)

Caregivers identify economic need as the main push factor that led their child to join armed groups

Similar to adolescents, most caregivers described the economic influence behind their child's engagement with armed groups. Both male and female caregivers emphasized their household poverty and the poor economic conditions of the community. Several men and women described the stress of not being able to provide for their children at home and stated that they could not provide the clothes or food necessary to keep their children from becoming engaged. Nevertheless, all caregivers interviewed expressed being strongly against their child engaging with the armed groups even for economic reasons, and a few mentioned that their child engaged with the group despite them advising them against it because the child believed they could have a better life. For many families, these conditions had not changed when the child returned, and both male and female caregivers expressed fearing that their child would return to the groups due to the lack of opportunities at home.

"The life conditions now, we are doing our best to provide for her needs so that she cannot return in the armed groups because she is threatening us that she is going to return there again." (Female caregiver of girl)

Negative family relationships may have influenced girls and also boys to seek support from groups

Several male and female caregivers described how they had struggled with their child's behavior before they ran away to join the armed group, and that this may have driven their children to join armed groups. One mother described a negative home situation in which she acknowledged they were no longer supporting their child

"Our mother was dead. … [My sister] had been beaten and abused by family members [she was separated]. This was how she fled to the armed group. … As a child, since she had not been able to bear the insults and lashes each time, she had fled. … When she was gone, we looked for her. She was found in an armed group." (Older sister of girl)

financially because she had an unplanned pregnancy, which strained their relationship. Another male caregiver reported having a difficult relationship with his son and specifically advising him not to join the armed groups, but he still ran away and joined the group. In a few instances, family members described that some children experienced abusive or neglectful situations in foster care, and this led to the child to join armed groups; to escape the situation. While negative family dynamics were also reported by caregivers of boys, reports of children fleeing their home situation to join armed groups was reported most often by caregivers of girls. These dynamics and their effect upon caregivers revealed not only the importance of a supportive, positive home environment for adolescents to prevent their engagement, but also the support that caregivers need to be able to foster such an environment in the face of economic stress and other conflict-related factors.

Experiences of children while with the armed groups

I was coming home and talk to my sisters, give them some money. … And when grandparents come, I go so that they do not tell me to stay." (15-year-old boy)

Girls' and Boys' experiences in the armed groups

Adolescent boys and girls described joining the armed groups between the ages of 10-14 years and remaining with them from a few weeks to up to two years. None of the adolescents interviewed in the DRC reported being directly involved in combat; most described running errands, cooking food, cleaning, and selling firewood and other goods while living in the armed group camps. While all adolescents described violent and abusive situations in which they were beaten or denied resources, adolescent girls reported the most severe circumstances. Multiple girls described their role in the group as being the "wife" of one or multiple soldiers and being forced to have sex with them and being denied clothes or food as punishment. Both boys and girls described the violence between armed group members as one of the factors that motivated them to flee and return home.

"What scared me was that I realized that the life I led in the group was the same as at home. That is what made me decide to go home so I could die next to my parents. … I [stayed 3 years] because I knew that even with [my family] life was difficult." (18-year-old girl)

Family dynamics while the child is with the armed group

The majority of adolescent girls and boys reported living with the group and that they were not allowed to visit their families. Several revealed that their parents did not know where they were, and that this was a source of stress for them. Only three adolescents (two girls) reported living at home and working with the armed group during the day. A few older adolescent boys were able to visit their families while with the groups, and they reported trying to support their families if they had money or other goods to share. Most girls and boys interviewed described feeling alone and not having anyone within the group to support them or look to for help. This feeling of isolation and the poor living conditions drove many boys and girls to decide to return home. Several older adolescents mentioned that they stayed longer with the groups than they wanted to because they did not think their families would want them back at home, with one girl describing how she stayed for three years rather than return to the difficult situation with her family. Others stated that it was in knowing that their parents did not want them to be with the groups that motivated them to return home, and one girl explained that it was her family's attempt to make contact that gave her the courage to flee. These findings further highlight the important factor that dynamics with caregivers and families play in their child's decision to disengage from the armed group.

Caregivers had limited knowledge of their child's experiences, and struggled to speak with them about it

Caregivers did not know where their child was, or had little details of this period of time in their child's life

Most of the caregivers interviewed knew little of the details of this period of time in their child's life, though female caregivers more often reported having spoken to both boys and girls about it. Several caregivers reported not knowing where their child was when they were engaged in the group, even assuming that they had died until the child returned home. However, most had some idea of their child's role in the group and the extremely poor conditions in which they lived, and both men and women reported that their child was quickly disillusioned after joining. A few female caregivers of girls knew about the details of the abuse and violent conditions their daughters had experienced, including having been beaten or raped. Those caregivers who were in contact with their child while they were engaged with the group described taking the opportunity to advise them to leave when they visited home. This further emphasized the potential influence families have on their child's decisions around engagement.

"I discussed [his experience] with him to know what he was doing there. … We discussed how he can leave the armed groups and come back home. … I gave him pieces of advice. I told him I am going to get him back at school. … When I talked about this, he showed joy and it gave him courage." (Female caregiver of boy)

Even though most caregivers did not know their child was going to engage with the armed groups the first time, several reported suspecting that their child might have still been engaged, or that they would leave to re-join the groups in the near future.

"This situation had caused my family to suffer a lot because I personally no longer had the courage to go to work to feed my family. … Because I think of this child that was already in the armed group: what life does she lead there, how does she eat, how does she spend her life there. All this made me think a lot and not work as usual." (Male caregiver of girl)

Caregivers experienced stigma, decreased wellbeing while children were away from home with armed groups

"Our relationship was bad when the child joined armed groups because he was saying I was the cause of her joining armed groups." (Female caregiver of girl)

Both male and female caregivers reported experiencing stigma from the community and other family members when their children engaged with the armed groups. They described how people in the community blamed the caregivers for the child's decision to join, even in cases where the caregiver did not know they were planning to go or did not know where they were. However, one woman did report receiving support from the community, with people coming to console her "the way they do if one is bereaved." At least three caregivers (all male) reported being imprisoned or being punished through official government channels once their child was discovered to be engaging with armed groups. Female caregivers of girls and boys also described receiving additional blame from their husbands and reported the common perception that the child's misbehavior was the mother's fault, and in particular the behavior of girl children. Both women and men reported perceiving an increase in tension within the home when their child left to join the group, with several women reporting fighting between partners as a result.

This increase in stigma and tension, coupled with the distress and fear felt over their child's involvement in the group, placed an intense burden on caregivers and negatively affected their mental health, as reported by both men and women.

Returning home: Continued economic stress, changes in family dynamics upon adolescents' reintegration into the community

Adolescents face lack of economic opportunities, family and community tension upon return

Many adolescents had become involved with the armed groups with economic reasons as a pull factor, and upon their return had no way to support themselves. Most adolescents of all ages reported being dependent on their families' financial support, and both boys and girls interviewed described how this led to increased tension with their caregivers because their families could not provide what they wanted or needed. Several expressed feeling frustrated that they could not return to school because their families couldn't afford the fees, or because the schools were still closed due to COVID-19. This economic need, unchanged from before they left to engage with the armed groups, was one of the main challenges described by adolescent girls and boys after returning. This need was particularly acute for those older adolescents who were no longer receiving financial support from their families, especially for the adolescent girls taking care of themselves or their own children.

"[Upon return home] There are some [people] who started to pour out abuse on me, while others were happy I returned home. … I wish I lived alone." (17-year-

"When I got home, I sat together with parents, we talked and they told me: 'As you have agreed with us to leave the bush, we want you to stay.' I stayed home and was going with them farming. They bought clothes for me. Later on, a neighbor asked me to look after his sheep and that is the activity I have until today." (15-year-old boy)

These economic conditions continued to affect adolescents' relationships with their families. While most adolescents described positive relationships with their parents and siblings, several described increased tension because their family members would remind them of their experience or treat them differently. Some boys and girls described experiencing stigma from both family and community members, though this stigma was gendered in nature, with girls reporting more experiences, and more often from other girls in their families and boys in the community. A few adolescent girls also described their male caregivers being angry with them upon their return, including yelling at them and using violence against them. Those boys and girls who described successfully reintegrating reported positive relationships with their family members and described feeling welcomed, having their family members ask them about their experience, and being treated with care and affection after they returned.

"When she arrives home, she no longer wants to be considered a child. … And if a family member including myself talks to her in terms of advice, she reacts very negatively saying that we have nothing to say to her. That if she wants, she can go back there. (Male caregiver of girl)

Caregivers adjust to changes in parenting

Challenges with behavior and gender attitudes in the home

Most caregivers interviewed described a positive change in their relationship with their child after the child returned home; however, this varied by gender of the caregiver and the child. Similar to reports by adolescent girls, a few female caregivers mentioned that their husband was not welcoming, and at times even violent toward their girl children when they returned home. This could be related to gender norms and the way that men engage with their girl children, as well as unequal gender dynamics in the household and girls' challenges with losing autonomy upon their return. Several men and women also reported tension in the household particularly between siblings and the child who had returned home, with siblings not trusting them or treating them badly because of stigmatization. Caregivers also perceived this stigma from siblings to be gendered and more often toward girls.

"Sometimes we sit down together, and I take the opportunity to give her advice on how to live. … I do it when we are doing a job because sometimes, she agrees to go with me to the field. … When I'm with her, I ask her questions about life. I ask her what she would like to do so that we know what can help her in the days to come." (Female caregiver of girl)

Caregivers confirmed their children's perceptions that their inability to provide for them financially was causing continued stress and tension within the household. Both men and women reported that they could not give their children what they wanted and needed, and that this put them at risk of re-engaging with armed groups.

Overall, most caregivers reflected that their child was doing much better after returning from the group, and that their children were more respectful and happier. Successful reintegration was described most often by caregivers of boy children compared to girl children, though some also reported having difficulties with their boy child's behavior.

"First, for me, it's building capacity, getting a lot of training so I can know how to advise this child and de-traumatize her. If I attend a lot of training seminars on how to live with the children or how to give them advice, it will already be a lot to help this child." (Male caregiver of girl)

Supporting caregivers to support their families: Caregiver needs for the future

Caregivers described several effective strategies that they had used to speak with their children and support their reintegration. Strategies included talking about opportunities for the future and using small moments as an entry point to a deeper conversation, such as sharing a treat or talking to them while working. Caregivers reported that giving their child advice or examples to practice, as well as giving them a responsibility, helped to redirect their child's energy into positive change. Nevertheless, both women and men expressed needing assistance in order to adequately support their child. They specifically requested support with building knowledge and skills on raising children and how to talk to them about the conflict. They also requested financial support or access to livelihoods and vocational training, as well as adult literacy courses.

The findings of the formative research indicate that many children join armed groups intentionally, when they lack the economic or social structures to adequately support them. The critical economic situation that confronts household is a driver of household stress and child involvement in armed groups. The protracted conflict, combined with the economic impact of the Coronavirus pandemic, has eroded the economy and depleted households' livelihoods. In these conditions, armed groups become one of the few opportunities for boys and girls to provide for their basic needs. Moreover, caregivers burdened by crippling economic stress and their own mental health issues struggle with parenting and fostering a warm and supportive environment for their children to seek protection.