



Learning Summary

Emergency Reintegration of 100 Child Soldiers in DRC

This learning summary highlights the main challenges, successes and lessons learned during an emergency project to rescue and reintegrate child soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). This work took place between February and July 2017. Supported by Peace Direct and implemented by Centre Résolution Conflits' (CRC), the project aimed to demobilise and reintegrate approximately 100 ex-child soldiers in the North Kivu region of the DRC. The opportunity for the project followed an opening in dialogue with the leader of a militia group who offered to release all the child soldiers under his command on condition that the children were adequately supported to return to their families and community. With funding from a US donor, the project aimed to reach out to children at risk of recruitment as well as demobilising those in the bush; offering alternatives including vocational training or help with entering the formal education system.

CRC, whom Peace Direct has worked with since 2005, has a long track record of supporting ex-combatants, including the rescue and rehabilitation of children who have been abducted and forced to fight or work for militias operating in the region. The territory of Lubero in North Kivu has for some time been troubled by violence and waves of brutal fighting, which has provided fertile ground for the proliferation of armed groups. Although child recruitment has been publicly condemned, CRC estimates that as many as 1,200 children across the region are currently working for armed groups.

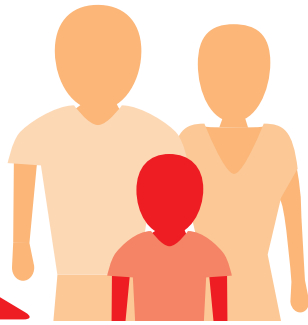
The following learning summary is based on an independent evaluation conducted at the end of the project in September 2017, which sought to assess the impact and challenges faced in working with such a vulnerable target group, to inform learning and strengthening of future projects. The evaluation sought to review and provide recommendations to improve CRC's systems and methods for monitoring and evaluating their work with child soldiers.

62

children were successfully de-mobilised and more than

150

children were reunited with families or rehoused with suitable caregivers



“ I want to buy a piece of land later and do farming. A working young woman commands more respect than an illiterate one...I'll gain more value in my community as I become financially independent. ”

Female project participant, 17 years old



Evaluation of Efficiency and Effectiveness

- **Local resourcefulness:** CRC demobilised and reintegrated 62 children, with little to no advanced notice and extremely limited resources. Despite the many challenges that arose from the short-term emergency nature of the project, CRC demonstrated flexibility, resourcefulness and resilience.
- **Community-based demobilisation:** CRC successfully took advantage of a very rare opportunity to rescue and reintegrate a large number of children in response to an unprecedented offer by a militia leader. Their work demonstrated the potential of community-based approaches particularly in the absence of any government initiative.
- **Reintegration through education:** CRC successfully placed 35 children (18 boys and 17 girls) into school, which was a significant achievement in a culture where learning a vocational skill and earning an income are often valued more highly than education. The middle of the academic year caused problems in children's admission into school, which is only permitted in September. This points to a limitation in the education system that cannot accommodate children outside of the start of the school year.
- **Raising awareness of child recruitment:** It became clear that militias actively target boys not going to school, making joining the local militia a more attractive alternative than being idle. This work shed light on paths to recruitment for militia groups, and the need for supporting training and education as a way of preventing further recruitment.
- **Prevention of re-enrolment:** The project's success in preventing re-recruitment was a significant one. The sustainability of this will rely on continued reintegration support through future projects. The evaluation also noted that 'children's socioeconomic reintegration should be integrated into a general approach aiming at building a stronger protective environment for children.'

Challenges

- **Short planning time:** The short window of opportunity for the project meant that there was little to no planning time. The urgency to release the children meant that systems were not in place to sufficiently collect, verify and maintain the data collected on those rescued and remaining in the bush.
- **Access:** Poor roads and the rainy season meant that access to the project sites was difficult. Pockets of insecurity also created significant logistical challenges in the release and rescue of children, travel between project sites, and in monitoring activities.
- **Limited resources:** Several key CRC staff left the organisation for higher paying jobs with the UN and INGOs, which disrupted project monitoring and implementation. In addition, funding constraints meant that those rescued and pursuing vocational training lacked tools to help them start their micro-enterprises.
- **Advocacy and partnerships:** The lack of collaboration with other INGOs meant that CRC's ability to advocate effectively, enhance their visibility, and link with and learn from other initiatives was limited.
- **Gender:** The lack of a strong gender lens led to insufficient support being provided to women and girls who were part of the project. For example, sexual and reproductive health education should have formed part of the support being provided to girls, and psychosocial counselling and support should have had a much clearer gender dimension given that girls and women face specific violations at the hands of militias.





19
children at risk of re-enrolment were supported through livelihoods training and education



“At the end of the apprenticeship three of us came together to open a small motorbike repair shop.”
Anonymous project participant

- **Poverty and absence of the state:** Pervasive poverty in the communities alongside the complete lack of involvement by public authorities made it difficult for CRC to run facilities such as day centres for vulnerable children. As they are responsible for managing all aspects of reintegration without local government support, there was a real risk of a culture of dependency setting in, not only by the community to CRC, but also from CRC to Peace Direct.
- **Local customs and superstitions:** A common belief among young people in the region is that joining the local militia provides access to money quickly, and ensures mystical protection against recurrent cycles of conflict thanks to the militia group's witchcraft. Local beliefs also affected reintegration, with perceptions on witchcraft impeding children's acceptance back into the community.
- **Making steps toward societal reintegration:** Given the limited time and resources available, the project has had a positive impact on the potential for successful reintegration of child soldiers. Participants revealed that they have developed skills in negotiation, non-violent dispute resolution and economic empowerment, all of which are crucial for the successful long term reintegration.
- **Improved ability to work together:** One particularly successful outcome was the cooperation between young vocational trainees under the supervision of a craftsman. Participants also gained more positive recognition from their communities and generated higher profits. This result has been seen across multiple projects when apprentices work together to develop businesses.

Impact

- **Increased acceptance towards ex-combatants:** Children who completed their vocational training were perceived significantly more positively as a result of their training. Communities were also able to better understand the importance of socio-economic reintegration of ex-combatants.
- **Education and training for girls:** Despite the lack of a gender lens, a particular success was the enhanced opportunities for girls to access education and vocational training, which led to increased feelings of acceptance within their communities. Participation in training led to increased self-esteem and acceptance even when it did not lead to significant income generation.
- **Reducing the rate of re-recruitment into militia groups:** According to parents in the two project locations, all children who benefited from the project activities have remained in their communities, with none returning to the bush.
- **Enhancing awareness on the issue of child soldiers:** Although small, the project played a catalytic role in bringing the issue of child recruitment to the fore in the target communities. Despite interest remaining low among international and national actors, enthusiasm has risen throughout the project showing determination to solve the child soldier crisis and increase its visibility.
- **Greater levels of hope:** After the psychosocial capacity-building of six counsellors, an increase in confidence and optimism was reported. Interviewees described increased levels of hope and motivation among ex-combatants once improved capacity was in place for psychosocial support. This lays the groundwork for the potential of more holistic approaches to reintegration in the future.
- **Unanticipated outcomes:** One major unanticipated outcome of the project was that soon after the project ended, the militia leader handed himself into the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO). A child soldier himself, CRC felt that increased engagement with him had given rise to discussions about opportunities outside of the militia which may have contributed to his decision to hand himself in.



Reflections from Peace Direct and CRC

CRC

The key learning from this project reminded us of the need to keep emergency activities in line with a more general approach to full reintegration; working with new children while still supporting those vulnerable to recruitment and re-enrolment. Interventions should be driven by the needs of the communities, and we call for donors to understand the complex and lengthy process of reintegration of ex-combatants and the need for long-term flexible funding. Going forward, the importance of mitigating against these ongoing challenges is clear. It is nevertheless important to see this project as a small contribution to changing perspectives on education, mental health and the reintegration of ex-combatants. It has also contributed to peace in the region, as part of broader involvement in the protection of children and the provision of safe alternatives to recruitment.

Peace Direct

CRC was able to successfully implement an emergency demobilisation and reintegration project with little to no planning and extremely limited resources. It will be vital to pair the resourcefulness of local organisations when faced with quickly changing circumstances, with a broader approach to reintegration, and the root causes of militia recruitment. A broader focus must not neglect the need to provide training for trainers, to develop a gender lens, and to highlight the importance of child protection activities in their own right. Understanding local perspectives, customs and ideas has been highly important for Peace Direct in the development and implementation of this project. It was clear that regional and local customs, superstitions and fears affected the successes, and sometimes added unforeseen obstacles to the project and the potential for longer-term impact and reintegration. More specifically, it became clear that the timing of the project between school years caused issues with the education element of the project. The evaluation showed that an even closer focus on local knowledge and practices will help Peace Direct to better support and understand the work and the context of our partners.



Recommendations

- Develop individualised reintegration support packages, taking into account livelihoods needs and other vulnerability criteria such as mental health.
- Support partner organisations to develop a more efficient system to organise, record, monitor and identify vulnerable children throughout the project cycle, and to easily share the information.
- Focus on designing activities that can sustainably respond to the needs of former-child soldiers on a long-term basis, including a rigorous planning of these activities and a consequent mobilisation of the necessary financial and staffing means.
- Support local peacebuilding organisations to join forces with other influential actors, governments and stakeholders in order to increase collaboration and engagement in advocacy activities aimed at child recruitment prevention.