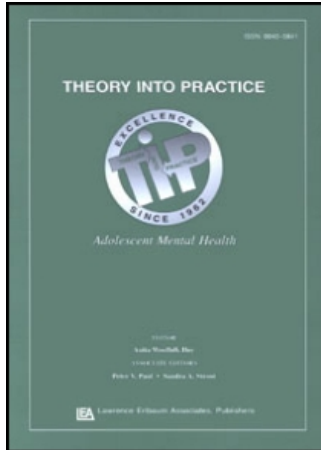


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### Child Soldiers, Peace Education, and Postconflict Reconstruction for Peace

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*Michael Wessells*

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# Child Soldiers, Peace Education, and Postconflict Reconstruction for Peace

*Worldwide, children are drawn into lives as soldiers and terrorism as the result of forced recruitment and also by extremist ideologies and their inability to obtain security, food, power, prestige, education, and positive life options through civilian means. Using an example from Sierra Leone, this article shows that peace education is an essential element in a holistic approach to the reintegration of former child soldiers and to the prevention of youth's engagement in violence and terrorism. In the post-conflict context, effective peace education has a stronger practical than didactic focus, and it stimulates empathy, cooperation, reconciliation, and community processes for handling conflict in a nonviolent manner. These processes play a key role also in the prevention of children's engagement in violence and terrorism.*

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**A** STRIKING, IF SELDOM NOTICED, feature of contemporary armed conflicts is that many of the soldiers are children, defined under international law as people under 18 years of age. Globally, an estimated 300,000 children serve not only as combatants but also as medics, laborers, cooks, domestics, bodyguards, spies, and sex slaves (Brett & McCallin, 1996; Machel, 2001; Singer, 2005; Wessells, 1997). In the post-2002 fighting in Liberia, children comprised nearly half the soldiers (Human Rights Watch, 2004). In Sierra Leone, where the war ended in 2001, nearly half the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) soldiers were children, of whom 25% were girls (McKay & Mazurana, 2004). In Colombia, children make up nearly half of some guerrilla units (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers [CSC], 2004). As recently as 2 years ago, the Burmese government forces exploited an estimated 50,000 children as soldiers. Children are exploited as soldiers because, in war zones, children are readily available, cheap, and useful to troop-hungry commanders, who cloak their abuse of children. Commanders frequently prefer child soldiers because they can be manipulated and

terrorized and are often willing to accept the most dangerous assignments because they lack a full sense of their own mortality. Worldwide, there are over 500 million lightweight weapons such as the AK-47 assault rifle that enables even 10-year-olds to be effective combatants (Renner, 1999).

This article has two complementary purposes, the first of which is to explain why children become involved in soldiering and the second to provide direction for reintegrating child soldiers back into society. An understanding of why youth join armed groups is necessary for the construction of well-informed means of preventing their engagement as soldiers. In the postconflict environment, a high priority is to reintegrate former child soldiers into civilian society, reducing their propensity to use violence as a means of meeting their needs and continuing cycles of violence. Using reconstruction for peace in Sierra Leone as an example, I attempt to show that peace education, defined broadly to include practical and collective components as well as didactic, individually oriented components, is central to the reintegration of former child soldiers and to the reconstruction of war-torn communities for peace.

### Why Children Become Soldiers

Forced recruitment is a common means through which children become soldiers. Using a method of press ganging, armed groups sweep through markets and other public places, forcing mostly poor and marginalized youth to join their ranks. Abduction, too, is a widely used recruitment method. In Northern Uganda, the so called Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) fights the Ugandan government forces by means of a small, highly mobile army, 75% of which consists of abducted children and youth (Human Rights Watch, 2003). To terrorize villages and break the bonds between the children and the community, the LRA often forces children to kill family members or other villagers at the time of their abduction, making it impossible for the children to go home. Known for its brutality, the LRA uses tactics of isolation, physical beatings, and intimidation to force children into complete obedience. Typically,

recruits are forced to participate in killing escapees, and over time they are forced to use guns to attack and loot villages, abducting other children. Although not all armed groups exhibit the raw brutality of the LRA, the use of forced recruitment is visible in conflicts in Sierra Leone, Democratic Republic of Congo, Colombia, and Burma, among many others (CSC, 2004).

Also, many children decide to join armed groups without explicit coercion, although their decisions cannot be regarded as voluntary because they are nearly always bounded by desperation and survival needs (Wessells, 2002). Family considerations frequently loom large in children's decisions to join and exhibit a mixture of push and pull factors (Brett & Specht, 2004). Push factors are visible in youth's decisions to join an armed group as a means of escaping an abusive family situation. Not uncommonly, girls decide to join armed groups to escape forced marriages that they do not want (Keairns, 2002). Extreme push factors arise when children's families have been killed or when they have been separated from parents or customary caretakers who might have provided care and protection. Orphans and separated children frequently decide to join armed groups, as a means of obtaining food, security, and health care. Family level pull factors are visible in children's decisions to join armed groups to be with older siblings, an uncle, or a father. In Afghanistan, where large numbers of youth fought in the ranks of the Northern Alliance against the Taliban, many youth joined armed groups in part to be with family members. Also, youth often join armed groups in hopes of earning money that they can send home to support their families.

Desire for revenge also leads youth to join armed groups. As a Philippines youth said, "I joined the movement to avenge my father's death in the hands of the military. When I was seven years old, I saw the military take away my defenseless father from our house" (UNICEF, 2003, p. 28). Psychologically, the desire for revenge justifies killing as a form of retribution. Revenge motives frequently go hand in hand with cognitive images of the people who had committed the wrongdoing as evil, savage, even demonic, figures. By dehumanizing the adversary, such enemy

images carve the world into good and evil, exclude the adversary from the moral universe, and absolve one of responsibility for killing and atrocities (White, 1984). Even atrocities and acts of terrorism may seem justified to people who harbor extreme enemy images.

Power, glamour, and excitement also figure in children's decisions to join armed groups (UNICEF, 2003). For youth who have grown up in abject poverty and who have been attacked and have felt powerless, the gun and the military uniform confer a measure of power and prestige that they could not have obtained through other means. The excitement of wielding a gun and participating in military activities offers a stark contrast with the boredom and lack of opportunities youth experience in quiet, rural villages. As a Pakistani boy who had joined the Taliban said, "I enjoyed the task of patrolling Kabul in a latest model jeep, with a Kalashnikov slung over my shoulder. It was a great adventure and made me feel big" (Laeq & Jawadullah, 2002, p. 7). The excitement offered by military life is a strong incentive for youth who are at a stage in their lives at which risk taking is normal and encouraged by peers.

Children also join armed groups out of disaffection with a political, social, and economic system that has failed them. Lack of educational opportunities, which children see as necessary for building a positive future, is one of the main sources of alienation. In Sierra Leone, youth cited lack of access to education as the primary reason why they had joined the RUF, which promised and offered training that government had failed to provide (Richards, 1996). The paucity of jobs in most war zones, many of which feature unemployment rates as high as 80%, also corrodes youths' sense of hope. Lacking education, jobs, and a sense of hope, and living deeper and deeper in poverty, many youth in war zones spend long hours idling on the streets, where they become easy prey for recruiters who make inflated promises about a better life through joining the armed group.

Ideology and political socialization exert strong influence over youths' decisions to join armed groups. In many countries, opposition groups recruit successfully by playing on youth's sense of victimization, social injustice, and disaf-

fection, as well as their sense of idealism and commitment to their religion. As part of the struggle, oppressed people construct ideologies—societally shared belief systems—that justify the use of violence as an instrument for achieving liberation and political goals that are unattainable through peaceful means. In such societies, poverty and deprivation may be less potent motives than the beliefs and ideas of oppression and liberation that form part of the socialization process for even middle class children. In many societies at war, adults and youth alike use propaganda as a means of motivating youth to join the struggle. During the Taliban era in Afghanistan, for example, adults used religious schools, *madrassahs*, to teach youth to hate and fear outsiders such as the United States. Following 9/11, when U.S. forces attacked the Taliban, youth who had been indoctrinated in the *madrassahs* in Pakistan swelled the ranks of the Taliban (Rashid, 2000).

For young people who adhere to powerful ideologies, terrorism is a natural extension of their participation in armed conflict. In Sierra Leone, Small Boys Units participated in mutilations wherein the RUF cut off villagers' arms and hands as a means of terrorizing and controlling villages. Many people, young or old, become terrorists because they believe that terrorist activity is their highest commitment to their religion or cause of liberation, and is necessary to overcome evil, win eternal salvation, and defeat the dehumanized Other (Bandura, 2004). In Sri Lanka, for example, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) selects girls who show strong motivation and the ability to blend in to be suicide bombers. Girls who martyr themselves receive a Heroes Welcome, which is celebrated by the community and confers great prestige on the girls' family (Keairns, 2002). In Palestine, Hamas proclaims youth suicide bombers are martyrs and celebrates their actions in ways that win the family enormous respect (Singer, 2005). Although it has often been suggested that terrorists, whether youth or adults, are mentally ill or deranged, little or no evidence supports this view (McCauley, 2002).

As these examples and many others illustrate, youth are not passive pawns in armed conflict but are actors who find meaning and identity in what

they see as the struggle for justice. If finding meaning in life is a powerful incentive for everyone, it is a particularly strong motive for teenagers, who are at a stage in their lives when they are trying out different identities and deciding on their role and place in society (Erikson, 1968). Particularly in situations of social injustice, humiliation, powerlessness, and hopelessness toward the future, extremist ideologies exert a strong grip on young people because they awaken youthful idealism regarding a better life and they answer youths' overarching questions of identity and direction in life.

### The Reintegration of Former Child Soldiers

Following armed conflict, a high priority is to reintegrate former child soldiers into civilian life, enabling them to find meaning and positive roles as civilians rather than fighters. Reintegration is a long complex process that is as much about helping children find an appropriate social place as it is about individual rehabilitation, although that, too, is important. Typically, reintegration programs include four key elements. First is family tracing and reintegration efforts that identify the location of children's families, reunite children with their families, and support the families in handling challenges that arise. Second is psychosocial support that helps children come to terms with their war experiences and helps to reconcile the returning children with their communities. Third is livelihood support that includes training in vocational and life skills that enable youth to obtain and hold jobs and also small loans that help them to earn an income. Fourth is education or literacy, which children frequently see as essential for building a positive future.

In many field settings, peace education is woven into reintegration programs, although it is frequently not identified explicitly. Reflecting a distinction found in the literature on peace education, reintegration programs involve teaching *for* peace rather than teaching *about* peace (Brocke-Utne, 1985; Hamburg & Hamburg, 2004; Salomon, 2002). Although former child soldiers may re-

ceive an orientation to the peace process when they have been demobilized from armed groups, the emphasis in most reintegration programs is highly practical rather than didactic. Particularly in situations of ongoing ethnic tension or recent intrastate war, the emphasis is frequently on empathy, reconciliation, building the skills and values of nonviolence, and the construction of narratives of living together in harmony. These offer powerful means of breaking through the enemy imaging, extremist ideologies, and social divisions that lead many children to fight.

These practical aspects of peace education are best illustrated by an example from Sierra Leone, where the conflict ended officially in January 2002. At that time, people in rural villages frequently said they felt unconnected to the peace process, saying "What peace? We were hungry before the war, during the war, and still now we are hungry." Building peace was a daunting task because much of the country lay in ruins, people struggled to meet basic needs, and large numbers of soldiers, including children, carried weapons. A 17-year-old who had fought in the RUF told me, "This gun gives me power, and I know how to get what I need. Why should I go back to the village when I have no money and no job, no education?" To address these issues, a national program of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration was constructed, and UNICEF and international nongovernmental organizations organized the reintegration of former child soldiers. In the Northern Province, which had been the home of the RUF toward the end of the war, girl and boy soldiers were returning home to the villages they had attacked and local villagers typically feared them or sought revenge. Former child soldiers were frequently stigmatized as rebels, and girls who had been raped and who had become mothers were harassed or regarded as if they were damaged goods (Kostelny, 2004).

To aid the reintegration of child soldiers and also young adult soldiers, Christian Children's Fund (CCF) used a holistic, community empowerment approach that included the customary element sketched earlier (Wessells & Jonah, in press). However, education for peace was interwoven into the project by virtue of the way in which it

was implemented. In particular, the project made extensive use of the principle that cooperation on shared goals is an effective means of reducing tension and improving intergroup relations (Johnson & Johnson, 1989; Sherif et al., 1961). It also built on the value of empathy and traditional reconciliation processes in reducing conflict and on community service as a means of helping former child soldiers achieve a positive social role.

In the first phase of the project, each of 15 communities held open meetings to discuss the end of the war, what it meant for villagers, concerns about children's well-being, and how to move forward. These discussions, which helped people to take a positive future orientation, frequently identified villagers' needs for schools or health posts that had been damaged or destroyed during the war. CCF's Sierra Leonean staff helped to facilitate discussions in which the communities prioritized these needs and selected a project such as building a school that would benefit children. Issues of child soldiers and reconciliation were delicately woven into these discussions. Because most villagers had viewed child soldiers as attackers who had not suffered, the CCF staff led dialogues on how children had become soldiers. These dialogues emphasized that suffering had led children to enter armed groups and showed also how children had suffered as soldiers. With empathy having opened the door for reconciliation, the CCF staff stimulated reflection on how to live together as one people. Villagers responded enthusiastically because they were very tired of war and knew that people from the same villages had fought against each other. Awakening older forms of nonviolent conflict resolution, villagers spontaneously offered proverbs, songs, or dances that evoked themes of unity, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

In the next stage, the village youth built the project—typically a school or health post—that the community had prioritized. As youth worked, they earned a small stipend, which was crucial because many former youth soldiers said that without an income they would have returned to the bush to fight again. The building was a cooperative endeavor by former child soldiers and village youth, who said they learned in the process to see each other as hu-

man and approachable. This activity transformed villagers' attitudes toward the former child soldiers, whom they now saw as people who had much to contribute to the community. Also, the physical construction had a powerful effect, as many villagers said that they experienced increased hope because they now saw tangible signs of progress and venues for supporting their children.

As the building continued, additional dialogues probed the possibilities for reconciliation. One chief told of a local method for rehabilitating former child soldiers who had shared their story with their parents. First, the parents approached the chief and asked him to speak with their child. If the chief agreed, he met with the child, who prostrated himself before the chief and held his ankle as gestures of submission, and then told his story. If the chief believed he was truthful and remorseful, he assigned the child to an adult for moral tutelage and guidance in community service. Like the cooperative work project, this community service approach was a matter of peace education through praxis. For the girls who had been violated and were seen as spiritually polluted, local healers performed cleaning rituals believed to remove the spiritual impurities and restore harmony with the ancestors (Kostelny, 2004). These rituals were important because in many sub-Saharan countries, local people view spiritual contamination as the major barrier to a child soldier's reconciliation with the community (Wessells & Monteiro, 2004).

In the third stage, former boy and girl soldiers received training in skills such as carpentry, tailoring, and tie-dyeing that market research had indicated were sources of jobs locally. They learned and worked under the direction of a master artisan who also served as a mentor and moral guide. The youth had frequent discussions about how to handle conflict without recourse to violence, about their role in the community, and about their hope for the future. Because conflicts occurred in the community over issues such as land and women, participants in the village meetings decided to create conflict resolution committees that worked locally to mediate disputes, referred particularly difficult cases to appropriate legal or traditional bodies, and supported local norms of nonviolent conflict resolution.

This project, which has subsequently been expanded into other provinces, enjoyed considerable success, visible in reductions of fighting and increased integration of former child soldiers into their villages. Despite dire predictions that villages would never accept back the youth who had attacked them, over 90% of former child soldiers have gone home and say they now have a civilian identity and hope of a positive life as civilians. Communities, too, say they see the former child soldiers not as troublemakers but as youth who have a spirit of community service.

Although this is only one example, it shows that peace education in a postconflict setting is a collective, practical project that aids the reintegration of former child soldiers by stimulating empathy, cooperation, reconciliation, and community processes for handling conflict in a nonviolent manner. This example is significant in part because it shows that it is possible to break the seemingly iron grip of ideologies of hatred, which the RUF had used to indoctrinate youth fighters. Also, it offers valuable clues about how to prevent youth's engagement in violence and terrorism. The project succeeded in part because it created for former fighters a set of positive life options and skills and values of nonviolence that they had not had before the war. Much youth violence is preventable by creating positive life options and socializing them for peace rather than war. A significant task for peace educators worldwide is to use their practical tools to counter the extremist ideologies and limited life options that draw youth into lives of violence and terrorism.

Although this work was conducted in a war zone, the findings have implications for peace education in school settings in more stable contexts. The tactic of reducing intergroup tensions through collaboration on shared goals applies as much to schools where rival groups or gangs exist as to war-torn communities. Even in schools that are relatively free of fighting and intergroup rivalries, the findings of this study provide a useful launching point for activist and consciousness-raising work by students on addressing global issues of war and peace. One very practical suggestion is for peace educators to work with their students on school and local area campaigns that raise awareness about the

problem of child soldiering and steps to address the problem. Through connection with the global Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, students can become effective advocates for healthier policies that protect children's rights and well-being. The need for this kind of work is indicated most clearly by the fact that the United States is one of only two members of the UN that has not ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which outlaws child soldiering. That the other country that has not ratified the Convention is Somalia speaks volumes about the challenges that lie ahead.

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