

A young child's face is partially visible, peering through a narrow crack in a weathered wooden wall. The child's eyes are looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The wood is rough and textured, with some bark missing. The background behind the child is dark and indistinct.

SOUTH SUDAN'S HUNGER CRISIS:

THE IMPACT ON CHILDREN IN ARMED CONFLICT

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INTRODUCTION

When we write 19,000 children, the number can appear as faceless bodies, souls without a past, victims of a tragedy, and casualties of violence. However, they are much more than that.

We know they are people like Mbara, John, Joseph, James, Rose, Grace, and Desiree. We use pseudonyms to protect their identity, but their experiences are retold and can act as representative of some of the 19,000 children¹ still involved in South Sudan's armed groups.

In the past four years, World Vision South Sudan staff have sat beside more than 700 children formerly associated with armed groups. As the children shared their experiences, concerns, frustrations, goals, and hopes for the future our staff offered an empathetic ear and listened. Their involvement with armed groups is aptly reflected by UNICEF, who highlighted that when children join armed groups, they "...are used in a variety of ways from support roles, such as cooking or portering, to active fighting, laying mines or spying and girls are frequently used for sexual purposes."²

They witnessed and were forced to participate in incidents that caused them nightmares years later.

We highlight the challenges they experienced as we raise a red flag and warn of growing conditions that spur the recruitment of children

into armed groups. We echo the words of a 2021 Resolution by the United Nations Secretary-General, which warns that the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted children.

"The socioeconomic impact of the pandemic exposed these children to grave violations, notably recruitment and use, abduction and sexual violence,"³ stated the Secretary-General's report to the United Nations General Assembly Security Council.

Our team is committed to help the children formerly associated with armed groups reintegrate. We assist the children get back into school or enroll them in vocational training programmes where they were provided equipment to start a small business.

We know we can assist more children formerly associated with armed groups by employing a multi-sectoral and multi-disciplinary response and reducing the conditions in communities that lead children to voluntarily join armed groups.

We pray that South Sudan will be free of conflict one day and that no child will know the horrors of armed violence. Every child deserves to live life to its fullest, and we are determined to make it so.



¹UNICEF. (2017, December). Childhood Under Attack: The Staggering impact of South Sudan's crisis on children. https://www.unicef.org/media/48556/file/UNICEF_Childhood_under_Attack_in_South_Sudan.pdf

²UNICEF. (2007, February). The Paris Principles: Principles and guidelines on children associated with armed forces or armed groups, p. 4. <https://www.unicef.org/mali/media/1561/file/ParisPrinciples.pdf>

³(2021, May 6). Children and armed conflict: Report of the Secretary-General. United Nations, General Assembly Security Council, Seventy-fifth session, A/75/873-S/2021/437. https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_2021_437_E.pdf



HOW CHILDREN JOIN SOUTH SUDAN'S ARMED CONFLICT

Children are routinely forced or coerced into joining armed groups in South Sudan. Ongoing conflict drives the recruitment of children into various armed groups.

World Vision's interviews with children previously involved with armed groups identified the following methods and scenarios of recruitment:

Abduction

Three of the children we spoke with were en route by foot from one location to another.

"When I was abducted, I was 15 years old," remembers Desiree. "While fetching water for my family, four men came out and grabbed me."

Eleven-year-old Joseph was walking to his aunt's place with his two younger brothers when he was taken.

"We were walking on the road when they abducted me, but they left my two younger brothers behind," Joseph recalls.

John was abducted as he walked home from working in his family's fields.

"I was in senior one class and full of hope for the future. All of my dreams were brushed off, and my life went dark, stained with blood and tears of innocent people. No child deserves this," John recalls.

Forceful conscription

Grace was 17 when her home was attacked. The armed group forced her to join them.

"It was almost past midnight when a group of about 15 armed men stormed our compound, banged on the doors and demanded that my stepfather open up or they will shoot everyone."

"In less than a few minutes, we were outside and on the ground. The men sprayed bullets in the air and told my stepfather and me to move,

as they threatened to kill anyone who tried to escape or resist," Grace shares.

Grace says they walked for almost four hours without knowing where they were taking her.

She adds, "Our lives were obviously in God's mercy. Being led by drunk and armed people was a horrifying experience. Fortunately, some people, including my stepfather, managed to escape."

Recruitment in schools and other places

"It was exactly 9 in the morning in 2015 when a group of armed men stormed our mathematics class," recalls Rose. "Eleven children, five were girls including me, were told to stand up and walk without making any noise. They warned us that whoever would resist would be shot."

UNICEF reports indicate that from 2013⁴ - the start of the conflict - to 2017, at least 293 armed groups have attacked schools. A 2020 United Nations Security Council report highlights ongoing recruitment by armed groups from attacks on schools as a continued concern.⁵

In other cases, children voluntarily join armed groups because of a lack of educational opportunities. In a 2019 report, World Vision South Sudan noted that one of the most frequently cited push factors for voluntary recruitment is lack of access to education.⁶

Poverty and hunger

Apart from children abducted and forcefully recruited, some are pushed by poverty to join.

"When I was 16 years old, I was tempted with a promise that I would be paid good money if I became part of the group. I got the opposite, and it wasted my life," says Mbara, now a 22-year-old father of two.

Mbara was playing football with friends when armed men approached them, promising SSP 15,000 (\$335USD) if the boys joined.

"As soon as my friends and I heard of the money, which at that time was a tremendous amount for us, we did not ask further questions and registered," Mbara says.

Increasing levels of poverty and a lack of access to basic needs has been documented to growing reason why children voluntarily choose to join armed groups in South Sudan.⁷

Family coercion

When James was 12, he was sent to join an armed group.

"In January 2018, my uncle forcefully got me recruited to the army. I didn't have a choice but to follow him to the training centre," James remembers.

Poverty and a lack of concern about a child's education drove James' family to consider sending him to an armed group as a viable option.

"My family doesn't believe in education," James says. "In my mother's words, there is nothing good in school instead of wasting time. She always told me to join her on the farm."

Before being sent to the armed group, James was paying his own school fees, earning money by working in neighbour's gardens.

"I earned SSP 2000 after five days of work. I was okay with it until that fateful day when my uncle decided that I join the army," James remembers.

World Vision South Sudan's call:

No armed actor should recruit children. No boy or girl under the age of 18 should see joining an armed force or armed group as his or her only or best option.

It is imperative for donors, organisations, governments, communities, and other stakeholders to work together to change practices in armed forces and armed groups. It is critical to prioritise the rights and protection of children and reduce the factors making children vulnerable to recruitment by committing to action.



⁴UNICEF. (2017, December). Childhood under attack: The staggering impact of South Sudan's crisis on children. <https://www.unicef.org/reports/childhood-under-attack>

⁵United Nations Security Council. (2020, December 14). Children and armed conflict in South Sudan: Report of the Secretary General, S/2020/1205. <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N20/363/55/PDF/N2036355.pdf?OpenElement>

⁶Child Frontiers. (2019, February). No choice: It takes a world to end the use of child soldiers. Country Case Study: South Sudan. World Vision International. <https://www.wvi.org/it-takes-world/publication/no-choice-it-takes-world-end-use-child-soldiers-south-sudan>

⁷Mlambo, VH, Mpanza, S, & Mlambo, DN. (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. Public Affairs, 19(2). <https://doi.org/10.1002/pa.1896>



WHAT HAPPENS WHEN CHILDREN JOIN ARMED GROUPS

Children recruited into armed groups in South Sudan play several roles. According to a 2020 report by the United Nations Secretary-General⁹, 48 per cent of children are armed, trained and used in active combat in South Sudan. The other 52 per cent of children involved with armed groups play support roles that include cooks, porters, spies or bodyguards.

Girls and boys have distinctive roles based on their gender. In addition, women and girls, who have been reported to make up 30 per cent of armed groups, routinely face sexual assault and forced marriage.⁹

The children we spoke to had revealed incredible and disturbing experiences.

Involved in active combat

After being forcibly recruited, Grace says she and the other children spent three months learning to attack and rob people of their food and belongings.

“In no time, from a young girl who was once afraid of guns, I got trained to hold one and shoot people without thinking twice for self-defence,” Grace confides.

Grace says that the leaders practised magic rituals on the recruits, telling the children it would protect them from bullets.

“My first terrifying experience was watching over a dead body for three days waiting on the people coming to take it. As I sat with the deceased’s children who were even younger than me, I imagined myself in their position,” Grace reports.

Similarly, Mbara remembers after joining an armed group and being given “guns and uniforms, then the commands on what to do began.”

“Every time we were ordered to attack people, some even died. I would spend the next days suffering from fear, guilt and anxiety. I felt remorse that their children had become orphans because of me,” Mbara says.

Mbara adds that children were closely watched and controlled at the camp run by the armed group.

When considering the responsibility children involved in armed conflict bear, ethicist Maia Winkel writes,

“We cannot ignore the context in which the child soldiers operate; we must take into account what exactly is at stake, how the children interpret and internalise violent experiences that surround them, how cognitively aware these children are of their actions, and the ensuing consequences, what their state of cognisance is (i.e. drugged, drunk, brainwashed) and how much physical and psychological trauma can be endured before and the individual’s more sensitive and personal dignity collapses.”¹⁰

Support roles in armed groups

Armed men took Rose from her school and then gave her a list of activities to complete.

They were given different tasks while in captivity. "I did the laundry for the commander, cooked, and, sometimes, I was forced to beat people who tried to escape. I have to do it or take the punishment myself."

Armed groups routinely used the threat of violence on the children and their families to keep them performing daily tasks like fetching water, Desiree says.

"They would beat you seriously. You had to follow their rules. They wanted me to do a lot of work, so I just had to bear it," Desiree remembers.

Joseph, who was forced to join an armed group after encountering armed men on the way to his aunt's house, was given tasks that supported armed operations and forced him to witness violence.

"I was made to carry guns during operations, fetched water and food, and tasked to wash the commander's clothes. They beat me every time I resisted. But my worst experience was seeing people killed in my presence," Joseph remembers.

Girls' involvement in armed conflict

Girls forced to join armed groups have been documented to play a role in both active combat and support roles: cooking, carrying loot, brewing alcohol, and transporting wounded combatants.¹¹ They also are used sexually and often violently.

Rose remembers a group of men coming after her in the night. She had been with the armed group for three months. "They raped three of us over and over again. I got pregnant," she laments.

Further studies have pointed out that girls are often forced to marry men in armed groups¹² and are routinely subjected to both sexual violence and gender-based violence.¹³



⁸United Nations Security Council. (2020, December 14). Children and armed conflict in South Sudan: Report of the Secretary General, S/2020/1205.

⁹Savage, R. & Ajak, M. (2019, January 7). In South Sudan, girls forced into war face gender double standards in peace. *The New Humanitarian*. <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2019/01/07/south-sudan-girls-child-soldiers-forced-war-face-gender-double-standards-peace>

¹⁰Winkel, M. (2014). Children without childhood: Robbed innocence and its implications for violence. *Voices in Bioethics* 1, page three. <https://journals.library.columbia.edu/index.php/bioethics/article/view/6468>

¹¹All Survivors Project. (n.d.). South Sudan. <https://allsurvivorsproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/South-Sudan-1.pdf>

¹²Ellsberg M, Murphy M, Blackwell A, Macrae M, Reddy D, Hollowell C, Hess T, & Contreras-Urbina M.

(2021). "If You Are Born a Girl in This Crisis, You Are Born a Problem": Patterns and Drivers of Violence Against Women and Girls in Conflict-Affected South Sudan. *Violence Against Women*, 1-26. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33750243/>

¹³Lacey, L. (2013). Women for cows: An analysis of abductions of women in South Sudan. *Women for cows: An analysis of abductions of women in South Sudan*, 27(4), 91-108. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43825103>



HOW CHILDREN ARE RELEASED FROM ARMED GROUPS

Across South Sudan, a coalition of organisations and governments engage armed groups to release children from their ranks.

Since 2015, 3,677 children¹⁴ have formally been released with support from a coalition of international and national organisations, along with the government.

The children we spoke with both escaped and were formally released from armed groups.

Escape

Grace and three others in her armed group managed to escape.

“That day was long-awaited for me, as four of us, out of 20 people sent on a mission, decided to take the risk. I got home after two days of running. The whole neighbourhood burst into tears because they thought I died,” Grace remembers.

Joseph, too escaped while the commanders of his group were asleep.

Desiree decided to escape when she was sent to fetch water for the armed group. She was on her own.

“It was not an easy journey for me. Where I was heading to, I didn’t know. I just kept moving. It took something like two days. I had no water, no food, and no energy to move anymore. I was only praying to God to give me the right path to follow,” Desiree narrates.

Eventually, Desiree arrived in a small community that helped her.

Fear of being re-recruited

Those who escaped faced new concerns when they arrived at their communities.

Grace says she lived in hiding for a year, afraid of being killed if captured again.

Joseph says his father refused to let him sleep in the house, worried the armed group “would come and take me back.”

Grace and Joseph registered for a programme to support children involved in armed conflict after their families heard announcements. “When I heard the news of registration on the radio, my uncle rushed to register me. This gave me the courage to come out of hiding,” Grace says.

Formal release

Both Mbara and John was among 300 children first to be formally released in Yambio,¹⁵ facilitated by the National Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (NDDR) in a ceremony in 2018.

“I was filled with joy when I learned that the commander registered my name among the children for release. I did not sleep for fear that it was only a dream that I am finally coming home,” Mbara remembers. These children also joined a rehabilitation programme organised by NDDR, UNICEF and World Vision.

¹⁴UNICEF. (n.d.). Stolen childhoods: Children in armed groups in South Sudan. <https://www.unicef.org/southsudan/stolen-childhoods>

¹⁵McVeigh, K. (2018, February 8). ‘Crucial step’ hailed as more than 300 child soldiers released in South Sudan. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/feb/08/crucial-step-300-child-soldiers-released-in-south-sudan>



HOW ARE CHILDREN ASSISTED AFTER BEING RELEASED FROM ARMED GROUPS?

When children are released directly from armed groups in Western Equatoria, World Vision offers interim housing and supportive programming. Children receive necessities such as clothing, food, and health services.

Psychosocial support is provided to the children by the social workers who facilitate referrals to the hospital for sick patients, conduct home visits, and initiate family tracing and reunification.

In time, supported children are reintegrated into their communities via a multi-faceted approach.

Assisting children to return to school

Joseph was abducted when he was 11 years old. After being released, he restarted his education thanks to a World Vision, UNICEF and NDDR programme. He is now in Primary 6.

"I was excited going back to school. It is a chance for me to rebuild my future. I want to become a doctor someday," Joseph says.

World Vision paid for Joseph's school fees and study materials. They also connected him to other supervised children who were gardening to pay for their educational needs.

Desiree too was able to return to school after she left the armed group with World Vision's support.

"Children are not supposed to be soldiers. They should be in school," Desiree says.

Helping children gain skills and purchase equipment to earn income

Other children get training in a skilled trade and the equipment to start their own business.

Rose learned tailoring skills. She received a sewing machine, Kitenge (African style) fabric roll, and the materials she needed to sew dresses. She sells her creations for \$10 USD.

"The strategy worked for me," Rose says.

From her income, Rose returned to school with the dream of becoming a midwife to help other women in South Sudan.

"I work on weekends to pay for my school fees and buy school requirements," Rose explains.

Mbara was 18 when he left the armed group.

Mbara learned carpentry skills. When he finished a carpentry course at a vocational training school, World Vision provided him with start-up tools.

"Now, I make a bed at SSP15,000 (USD 33) and a door at SSP7,000 (USD 20). I earn well every month from my small carpentry business," he says.

Now 22 and a father of two, Mbara points to his children as his inspiration. "I am working hard to provide for my children so they can study and have a better life."

Other children released from armed groups, like John and Grace, joined tailoring courses and got the equipment they needed to launch their businesses.

Providing counselling

When children return to communities after their time with armed groups, they may require assistance to recover from the emotional impact of what they have witnessed.

Mbara says he was haunted by what he had done in the armed forces.

Rose adds she had nightmares for months after returning from the armed group.

“I could see people crying and begging for their lives as some dead people attacking me. I would wake up in the middle of the night screaming. While people told me it was just my imagination, it felt real to me,” Grace states.

Additionally, children may face stigma from the community when they return due to their involvement with armed groups, even if their

recruitment was involuntary.¹⁶ For girls, in particular, the stigmatization can be severe upon their return to the community.¹⁷

Children receive counselling and psychosocial support from World Vision social workers to help them recover from the emotional impact of their experiences with armed groups and build their confidence.

“At first, I was hesitant to share anything with the social worker,” says John. “After a week, everything came out, and it felt like a fresh beginning for me.”

Rose too was hesitant to engage with the counselling process. However, she says the support was helpful once she did, and the nightmares ended.

“My social worker never left me from day one. She regularly visits me and guides me,” Rose says.

Once uncomfortable with what happened to her, Rose found the courage to stand up. “I am not ashamed of what happened to me anymore. I have a future to fight for,” she declares.

¹⁶Betancourt, T.S., Borisova, I., Williams, T.P., Meyers-Ohki, S.E., Rubin-Smith, J.E., Annan, J. & Kohrt, B.A. (2013). Research Review: Psychosocial adjustment and mental health in former child soldiers – a systematic review of the literature and recommendations for future research. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 54: 17-36. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-7610.2012.02620.x>

¹⁷Amusan, L., & Ufuoma, E. P. (2020). Psychological Effect of Civil Strife on Women and Girls in South Sudan. *Psychology and Education*, 57(6), 382-387. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Lere-Amusan/publication/344157308_Psychological_Effect_of_Civil_Strife_on_Women_and_Girls_in_South_Sudan/links/5f5671fe299bf13a31aae990/Psychological-Effect-of-Civil-Strife-on-Women-and-Girls-in-South-Sudan.pdf



NEXT STEPS: 6 WAYS TO PROVIDE HOLISTIC SUPPORT TO ADDRESS ROOT CAUSES

Denis Bambura

Project Manager for Focusing on Children with Unmet Child Protection Needs in South Sudan

World Vision's Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups programme aims to work with 2,000 vulnerable children, including some formerly associated with armed groups, along with an additional 18,000 people through information and awareness raising sessions on children's rights over a three-year period. As we look at delivering this programme, we know that holistic approaches are required to adequately address the challenge of children formerly involved in armed groups.

Since I started working on this project, it has become increasingly clear that programmes addressing children formerly involved in armed groups must also include families, community leaders, law enforcement agencies, faith leaders, and children born to women who were released from armed groups. The following considerations must be included as we continue to help children reintegrate into communities after being involved with armed groups.

1. Holistic economic support for families

Some children join armed groups voluntarily because their parents and caregivers cannot financially support them. Others who return from armed groups are hesitant to go back to their families because of the economic hardship that exists there.

A holistic approach to empower families economically will help address the reasons that children voluntarily join armed groups. An example of an effective approach is establishing village savings and loans groups, where parents and caregivers can access money and invest in income generating projects.

We know that when families are financially stable, children are far less likely to choose to join an armed group.

2. Engaging community leaders to prevent recruitment

There have been instances where community leaders encouraged children to join armed groups. The thinking was this: if a significant number of people from a community join a specific armed group, they can feel safe and have influence in political affairs. Of course, this means that community leaders are participating, in one way or another, in recruiting children into armed conflict.

We need to make sure that community leaders better understand children's rights, and challenge thinking on the role and responsibilities of leadership. We need to engage community leaders through awareness sessions so that they can take the lead on preventing the recruitment of children into armed groups.

3. Support for children born to women involved in armed groups

Some girls and young women have children from their time in armed groups. They come home without support for these children. Programmes that support children formerly associated with armed groups should also be extended to their children so that their needs can be provided for.

4. Addressing community stigma as children reintegrate into communities

Children who leave armed groups and return to their community can face stigma and discrimination. Children can be blamed if community members are aware of acts of violence the armed group committed.

To address that stigma, it's important to work with faith leaders. In our context, religious

leaders have great influence and can play a significant role in sharing messages to combat stigma and discrimination. By engaging faith leaders, people can be reminded of equality and our shared humanity.

5. Providing consistent social work support

Often, social workers who are tasked with providing psychosocial support with children formerly associated with armed groups have huge caseloads. Currently, the two social workers we work with are tasked with nearly 100 clients each. The standard a social worker should have is between 30 to 40 cases so they can provide focused, consistent psychosocial support. Having enough qualified and experienced social workers in place will ensure children formerly involved with armed forces have better access to the psychosocial support they need.

6. Supporting law enforcement agencies to learn about child rights

In the future, it will be important to dedicate training about child rights that is targeted at police, the prison services, and the South Sudan People's Defence Force. In some instances, children are treated as adults by the law enforcement agencies. We need ensure that there is greater awareness about the special protections that are guaranteed to children, as enshrined by the various international human rights declarations that South Sudan has signed.

Denis Bambura Arkanjelo has a Master's in Human Rights and Cultural Diversity from the University of Essex. He joined World Vision South Sudan in 2021 to lead the Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups programme.



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