

No Choice

It takes a world to end
the use of child soldiers
A Research Report

List of Acronyms

AUC – Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (English translation: United Self-Defenders of Colombia)

CAR – Central African Republic

CSO – Civil Society Organisation

DRC – Democratic Republic of the Congo

FARC – Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (English translation: Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia)

FARDC (Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo)

FGD – Focus Group Discussion

FTS – Financial Tracking Service

GBV – Gender Based Violence

IDP – Internally Displaced Person

KRI – Kurdistan Region of Iraq

MONUSCO – Mission de l'Organisation des Nations unies pour la stabilisation en République démocratique du Congo (English translation: United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo)

NGO – Non Government Organization

SPLA – Sudan People's Liberation Army

SPLA-IO – Sudan People's Liberation Army – In Opposition

SSPDF – South Sudan People's Defense Force

SRSR-CAAC – Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict

UN – United Nations

UNFPA – United Nations Population Fund

UNICEF – United Nations International Children's Fund

UN OCHA – United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

WV – World Vision

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Cover photograph @Oscar Durand, Robert, 17, was abducted by the Sudanese People's Liberation Army In Opposition (SPLA-IO) when he was on his way home the market. His dream is to finish secondary school so he can support his family.

The names of all children quoted in this report have been changed to protect their identities.

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Summary

The recruitment and use of children as armed actors is identified as one of the six grave violations of children's rights according to international law. This practice is an affront to the safety, dignity and healthy development of children. It is a tragedy that deeply and negatively affects children, their families and communities; and it undermines broader peace, security and development for countries experiencing conflict or extreme levels of violence. Despite this, there are at least 18 conflicts around the world where children have participated in hostilities since 2016.¹

Tens of thousands of girls and boys are currently used as soldiers by armed forces and armed groups around the world. Child recruitment is typically thought of as coercive and forcible. However, in many cases, multiple factors push and pull children to be involved with armed actors; rarely is there one single driving factor. Often children are exercising some agency, real or perceived, in deciding to join, even if they are choosing amongst several bad options for the sake of survival.

This multi-country study is expected to contribute to the dialogue on protecting children from the impacts of armed conflict by elevating their voices, and providing evidence on factors impacting their resilience. The study is based on primary qualitative research in the Central African Republic (CAR) and Colombia, as well as desk research on the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), South Sudan and Iraq. The primary research relied on focus groups of affected community members, key informant interviews and testimonies from people who were associated with armed forces/groups as children.

The study finds that being engaged in an armed group is not always a matter of having approached or been recruited by some discrete group of combatants. Armed groups may simply be part of the fabric of everyday life, and not an entity separate from the communities in which children grow up. Children and communities may also find social value in armed groups, especially in a setting without much state presence or basic services.

The recruitment and use of children are features of countries experiencing conflict or high degrees of violence. The factors are varied and differ by context but are fundamentally driven by and link back to the presence of conflict and normalisation of violence that can result in society. These can include forced displacement; family separation or breakdown; occupation, destruction, closure or decreased functionality of schools; general safety or physical protection concerns; absence of

opportunities for work for older children or safe, structured spaces for leisure time; gender norms; poverty; and inequality. A major pull factor can be that armed forces/groups also confer on a child a sense of belonging and purpose in the home, school, community, or institutions that are often interrupted as a result of conflict, displacement or high rates of criminality.

While boys seem to join armed forces/groups more than girls in all contexts explored for this research, many girls are nonetheless involved, and in numbers that may be higher than previously assumed, depending on the location. Girls' needs, experiences and motivations are often different from boys', as are the risks. That girls are mostly seen as 'wives' or 'girlfriends' to fighters suggests a significant gendered difference in how they come to be involved in an armed group. To the extent that some children are 'choosing' to join, these individuals appear more likely to be boys. Some girls may join in search of freedoms they cannot enjoy at home or in the community.

Families play a major role in keeping children safe from recruitment but are also often involved in pushing children to join. Caregivers in CAR and Colombia did not always speak of recruited girls and boys as children, but more as young adults who are becoming independent and exercising their own agency. The reality is that childhood and conceptions of children are contextually defined; these understandings shape adults' and children's views of appropriate behaviours, including whether or not to join armed groups.

The literature on prevention strategies is weak, especially with regard to strategies used by families and communities, as opposed to external actors. In the study sites perhaps the most visible 'organic' prevention mechanisms in place are the small community-based organisations that provide various services for children and families. In some cases neighbours rely on an informal neighbourhood-watch system via mobile phone. The church emerges as one of the few functional structures in many of these communities and is often cited as a resource for discouraging children's decision to join.

This report makes recommendations for governments, UN agencies, donors, and NGO actors to prioritise the protection of children and promotion of children's rights in humanitarian response as the most critical path to preventing child recruitment. Child protection is the second-least-funded humanitarian sector globally, despite gross violations of children's rights, including recruitment, being reported in the majority of humanitarian contexts. It is essential

¹ Child Soldiers International, 'Annual Report 2017–18'. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/CSI_annual_report_2018.pdf.

to reduce the vulnerability factors that contribute to the risk of recruitment, and thus it is argued that prevention strategies need to include those that increase protective factors, such as access to education and introduction of alternative livelihood opportunities. The most successful community-level prevention efforts are those that revolve around building a safe, nurturing, supportive environment at home. It is suggested that duty-bearers should work across the humanitarian/development/peace nexus to address the

structural causes of conflict, prioritising child protection in a more holistic manner and longer term than traditional humanitarian interventions of 12 months or less. Prevention of recruitment will require placing the needs, risks and protection concerns of children at the centre; strengthening communities' efforts to support vulnerable boys and girls and their families; and understanding prevention of the grave violations of children's rights, such as recruitment, to be central to realising broader peace, security and development.



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Background

Globally, at least 21,000 cases of gross violations of children's rights including child recruitment were verified in 2017 (6,000 by government forces, 15,000 by non-state armed groups), a large increase since 2016 (15,500) (UN University 2018). The UN currently lists 61 parties to conflict in over 20 countries for these 'grave violations' against children.

More than 20 years ago a groundbreaking report, *The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*, drew global attention to the devastating effect of armed conflict on children. The report led to the creation of a Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (SRSG-CAAC), a UN Monitoring and Reporting process, and an Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child on children in armed conflict. More recently the UN's Agenda 2030 process called to end child recruitment as part of the global development agenda. This document includes targets to end the recruitment and use of children (Goal 8.7) and all forms of violence, exploitation and abuse of children (Goal 16.2); it also pledges 'to leave no one behind'. In 2016, parties to the World Humanitarian Summit called for ending grave violations against children as part of 'upholding the norms that safeguard humanity'.

While the legal and policy frameworks and many programmes to prevent and end recruitment are in place, international action has mostly centred on the demand side, that is,

changing the behaviour and attitudes of armed groups towards child recruitment. Less attention has been paid to shrinking the pool of children susceptible to recruitment. Doing so requires investigating what factors augment the vulnerability of boys and girls and what factors make some better able to resist. Even less attention has been paid to the many instances in which children might have had some agency in the decision to join armed groups; that is, cases where children have opted to join, as opposed to being forcibly taken or actively coerced.

This multi-country study was commissioned by World Vision to expand the current framing of the dialogue and to ensure children are protected from violence. The study is intended to help governments, donors and humanitarian actors better understand the drivers of child recruitment, and, building on what is already being done at the grassroots, what works to prevent it.

Central African Republic (CAR) and Colombia were chosen as primary research sites. This selection of case study countries was based on the availability of information in World Vision's areas of operation, country-level priorities, and security considerations at the time of data collection. Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), South Sudan and Iraq were chosen for the desk-based case studies based on the high levels of children's engagement in armed conflict.

'Joseph', 12, used to be part of the Kamunia Nsapu armed group in Kasai-Central, the Democratic Republic of Congo. He is now in a transit centre, receiving support with other children.



Methodology²

This research employed a participatory, consultative approach and sought to ensure that national counterparts could share expertise, views and ideas at all stages of the process. The perceptions of various stakeholders were sought, including boys and girls, parents, community leaders, local authorities and child protection actors. Three desk-based case studies were conducted using literature reviews and key informant interviews in DRC, South Sudan and Iraq. Primary research was conducted in CAR and Colombia to obtain in-depth, qualitative information about the underlying social and cultural factors that motivate and sustain children’s engagement with armed groups. In total, 33 interviews were conducted with frontline workers, UN agencies, civil society organisations (CSOs), traditional and religious leaders and parents/caregivers. Thirty-five focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with separate groups of girls, boys, male and female caregivers and community leaders. Each of these was approximately two hours in duration and engaged 5–12 individuals.

Focus Group	Colombia	Central African Republic
Girls 11–14	5	2
Girls 15–17	1	4
Boys 11–14	1	2
Boys 15–17	2	4
Female adults	8	2
Male adults	1	2
Mixed adults	1	–
Total	19	16

Testimonies were also provided by 21 individuals (11 female, 10 male) formerly associated with armed groups as children.

Ethics and protection considerations

Given the risks that could arise from research on this sensitive issue, especially in insecure environments, World Vision, its implementing partners and the researchers took all reasonable steps to ensure that the research did not exacerbate existing risks or create new ones. Research team members were sensitised to ethical and safety concerns, including the possibility of harm that could arise as a result of recalling distressing experiences. Particular attention was paid to outreach and the selection of respondents and to ensuring confidentiality and privacy, including in the safeguarding



A World Vision social worker helps a former child soldier in South Sudan

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of data. Focus groups were not stratified by whether respondents had been engaged with armed groups. Persons with safety concerns were not pressured to participate. Informed consent was secured from all respondents, and in the case of children, also from their caregiver or, when necessary, from another trusted adult. For a more detailed explanation of ethical aspects of this research, see Annex 2.

Limitations

While the study attempted to find parallels and common currents amongst the country contexts considered, in fact there is major variation in the situations of children associated with armed groups, even within a single country, or from one child to the next. These differences limit the extent to which lessons and recommendations can be generalised.

The sites where primary data were collected are by their nature highly insecure for both study respondents and researchers, a fact which not only limited access to communities but which may also have unintentionally introduced bias in the selection of sites and respondents. In CAR, for example, researchers were only able to work in ‘pacified’ areas, meaning those places where the conflict is no longer ongoing. The profile and experiences of these communities may be substantially different from those where conflict is ongoing and other armed groups operate.

The study topic is one that can itself provoke violence or threats. This fact may have limited who could safely participate and what they could safely say. In a few instances the FGDs were monitored by representatives of armed groups, and in one case, a group of invited boys left the venue

² See also Annex 1

before the FGD could start, perhaps out of fear, or because they were told to, or for another reason unknown to the researchers.

Overview of country contexts

To varying degrees, the contexts considered here are all marked by active or recent civil conflict or high levels of ongoing criminal violence, population displacement, weak or no state presence, criminality and human rights abuses, limited access to vital goods and services, absence of or poor quality education and health systems, inadequate laws and/or failure to enforce laws, and high levels of corruption and violence. In most contexts the state is unwilling or unable to protect the safety and rights of its citizens, including children, and has been a party to the conflicts occurring. Perhaps not surprisingly, the data on these populations, and especially on the children associated with armed groups, is generally incomplete, inaccurate and out of date.

As mentioned, even within a single country a child's trajectory into an armed group, and the nature of the armed groups themselves, can be very different from one place to the next.

- The most recent conflict in South Sudan, beginning in December 2013, has had a severe impact on children, with an estimated 19,000 children associated with fighting forces and groups – the largest number across Africa (UNICEF 2018). The government military, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), now the South Sudan People's Defence Force (SSPDF), the rebel Sudan People's Liberation Army-in Opposition (SPLA-IO) and other armed groups in opposition have recruited children. The practice of child recruitment in South Sudan is geographically widespread and the country's conflict has been complex, made up of various forces and numerous militias supporting the opposition.
- Following an agreement signed by the Congolese government in 2012, the numbers of children involved in armed forces and groups (FARDC) have seen a significant reduction. However, in recent years there has been a proliferation of armed groups. As of December 2017, it was estimated that there were about 70 different armed groups in Eastern Congo alone (Stearns and Vogel 2015). Depending on the context in DRC, a child might become involved with rebel groups, pro-government militia, foreign armed groups, or small community self-defence militia groups.
- Conflict in Iraq, such as in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and Mosul, has led to extremely high levels of displacement, and living conditions are precarious and volatile. Living in these circumstances has been shown to heighten children's risk of joining armed groups. While exact figures are unknown, children are reported to join armed actors on all sides of the conflict, although currently this appears to be on a smaller scale than in previous years.

COMBOS

In Colombia, in addition to guerrilla groups of Puerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia or former FARC fighters that might have common characteristics to armed groups in DRC, Iraq, South Sudan or CAR, there are two other classes of armed groups that involve children: right-wing paramilitary groups, including most famously the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC,) as well as hundreds of low-level youth gangs known variously as combos, pandillas, bandas and other names. The latter are 'managed and controlled by larger, mafia-like organisations called razones [that] exert state-like powers such as resolving disputes, enforcing contracts, policing . . . managing markets, and taxing businesses. . . . Combos also monopolise local illegal markets . . . drug sales, prostitution and loan-sharking' (Innovations for Poverty Action 2017). The combos phenomenon is pervasive in some urban and peri-urban areas.

- In Colombia, depending on the block where one resides in Bogotá-Soacha, for example, an area may be controlled by either an ideologically driven paramilitary group or a combo. In the countryside, however, young people may be more likely to come into contact with guerrilla groups competing with the Colombian state for political power. In spite of a 2016 peace accord, children continue to join with FARC dissidents who either did not demobilise or who shifted into drug and arms trafficking, often linked to gangs in urban areas.
- The recruitment and use of children in CAR quadrupled, based on the most recently available data on verified incidents. (UN Secretary-General's Report on Children in Armed Conflict 2018) Currently, the State controls only 20 per cent of its territory, mostly within a hundred kilometre radius from the capital, Bangui. The majority of children officially reported to have left armed groups in recent years come from the South, but limited access hampers understanding of the total scope of child recruitment patterns.

Can children ‘choose’ to join?

A multi-country 2018 study from the UN University posits a ‘continuum of coercion’ of child engagement with armed groups, with abduction on one end and volunteerism on the other (UN University 2018).

Forced recruitment/abduction is a reality across the five settings and an issue that is well documented in the literature. The scope of this study focuses on the volunteerism end as an area that has to date received much less focus and attention. The present study is focused on those cases in which boys and girls had some, albeit often limited, agency in the decision to join an armed group – situations in which children have opted to join, as opposed to being forcibly taken or actively coerced. This is not to ignore the fact that many of those who join armed groups are choosing amongst several bad options, often for the sake of their own or their family’s survival.

‘Maybe the children are not forced [by anyone] to join the gang, but in the end, it is their only choice. They must make those decisions for economic sustainability. Later perhaps it becomes something more meaningful [to the child] because the gangs [make them feel that they belong]. I have seen many of my peers joining just because it is the last option in my neighbourhood.’

—Youth activist, Villavicencio, Colombia

Despite these realities the distinction is nevertheless important: in a setting where many children are said to have made a decision to join, and where local communities see adolescents, and boys especially, as capable actors, the issue of choice versus force or coercion is important to explore (Ensor 2013). Although it is often the case that children are victims of armed groups, child protection actors need to avoid seeing all boys and girls in this way; in some cases children do elect to join, even in consultation with their families. This fact needs to be acknowledged so that the realities of boys and girls in these circumstances can be better understood and effective interventions can be designed. This study engaged local community members in an effort to comprehend the realities of children and the factors that might drive a boy or a girl to decide to become or not become involved.



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Children play safely in a World Vision Child Friendly Space in Iraq.

Key findings

Concepts of a child

This study sought to understand community concepts of childhood in Colombia and CAR, and how these ideas might relate to the acceptability of people under the age of 18 joining armed groups. Various concepts and understandings of childhood emerged in the primary research sites. While some respondents were aware of the legal definition of childhood as anyone below the age of 18, respondents articulated a wide variety of concepts of who is a child, an adolescent and an adult.

In both countries there was great divergence in opinions about the age strata of childhood: whereas one respondent might say a child is someone aged 0–5 years, another might understand childhood to end at age 15 – or age 30. In both settings age does not appear to be the major factor in defining who is or is not a child. The transition from childhood to adulthood in the CAR sites appears to be demarcated by physical changes as well as social and cultural markers, such as the ability to support oneself financially or to understand one's roles and responsibilities. Respondents in CAR defined childhood as a series of increasing developmental skills and capacities that progress in stages as a child grows and interacts with the world; in this context childhood is understood to end when a girl reaches puberty or when a boy becomes physically stronger; upon marriage or upon conception or birth of a child of his or her own. These markers of physical and social development also emerged in Colombia, but respondents in the research sites referred more often to observed stages in a young person's behaviour, from being 'innocent', 'dependent', 'playful', and 'naughty', to eventually 'taking on more responsibility'.

In CAR and Colombia, as well as in DRC, respondents in the research sites did not always refer to those boys and girls who join armed forces/groups at the ages of 14 or 15 as children, but rather as young adults who are becoming independent and exercising their own agency.

‘When you start to work and have an income, you are considered an adult.’

—Male adult, Damara, CAR

‘An adult is someone who is responsible, independent, living without his parents’

—Teenage boy, Yaloke, CAR

The literature on South Sudan and KRI finds that, for some communities and families, joining an armed group is part of what is perceived to be a boy's transition from child to adult. For some of South Sudan's largest tribes, such as the Dinka and the Nuer, initiation can be an important feature of the culture, in which boys are considered to transition from childhood to adulthood, making them men and able warriors in the eyes of their communities before they are 18. For girls in South Sudan the conception of adulthood is also earlier than 18 years, but the rite of passage conceptualising adulthood is most often marriage. Though the statutory legal age for marriage is 18, customary law is more frequently practised, resulting in 40 per cent of girls married before the age of 18 (UNFPA 2018). Respondents in the research sites in Colombia and CAR did not speak of armed-group membership as a rite of passage. This is an area for further research.

Children who join armed forces and armed groups

In the global literature the categories of children with increased vulnerability to engagement in armed forces/groups include orphans, children who are out of school, child heads of household, street-involved children, children who have experienced domestic problems/conflict, displaced children, and children exposed to drugs (de Vise-Lewis and Schwarz 2017; UN University 2018). Vulnerability is linked to the lack or loss of parental and family care and guidance and the lack of protective legal environments for children, or where law and order has broken down to create a culture of impunity (Clemesac 2007; ILO 2003; de Vise-Lewis and Schwarz 2017). It is widely acknowledged in the literature and in the primary research sites in CAR and Colombia that boys – and to some extent, girls – from the poorest families and communities are amongst those more likely to be associated with armed forces/groups (Achvarina and Reich 2006). In the literature on Colombia, indigenous and Afro-Colombian children appear statistically to have a higher rate of joining armed forces/groups compared to their share in the national population.

Reviewing the literature on CAR, DRC, South Sudan and KRI/Mosul, children's engagement with armed forces/groups primarily occurs among adolescent boys aged from 14–16 years and up. At this age in CAR boys are considered to be young adults in the eyes of the community and of the boys themselves. In South Sudan boys younger than 14 years also join but are generally not combatants, instead taking on roles such as cooks, bodyguards for commanders or spies (Human Rights Watch 2018), a reality that also fits with the evidence



World Vision social worker Laura Poni provides psychosocial support and interacts with children playing safely in Yambio, South Sudan

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generated in CAR and DRC. Most boys associated with armed groups in KRI report becoming fighters, but some are also used as suicide bombers, for logistics purposes and for manufacturing explosive devices (UNICEF and Transition International 2017; interview with World Vision). The average age appears to be slightly older in Colombia, where boys were reported to join mostly at around 16–17 years. However, much younger children in Colombia and CAR do sometimes come into regular contact with armed groups.

Gender dimensions

Across the countries studied, boys and girls do not join in equal numbers, though more girls may join than previously thought. In South Sudan, of the 934 children officially released in 2018, almost 30 per cent were girls (Child Soldiers International 2018). In CAR, as well, girls are estimated to be 30 per cent of the total population of children in armed groups (UN University 2018).

There is a tendency to speak of boys having more of an active combatant role in armed forces/groups, while girls generally play other roles, though this is not always true. Older girls, who may already have children, can be affiliated with armed forces/groups as spies, while younger girls, 9–15 years of age, may be married to commanders and used to perform domestic duties (Interview with World Vision South Sudan staff). In Iraq, DRC and CAR girls tend to be affiliated to the groups by marriage, becoming ‘wives’ for the fighters, rather than as active combatants (United Nations Security Council 2018; UN University 2018; interviews with IRC and World Vision). They may use their sexuality – willingly or unwillingly, for survival or not – as a commodity that buys them protection, food, status, and so forth.

‘Most of the girls in the armed groups are simply there as girlfriends or wives of other boys and men who joined.’
‘Out of every 10 boys, there are 2 girls.’
‘The girls normally are older than the boys – above 17.’

—FGD, boys aged 15–17, Damara, CAR

One focus group of girls reported the existence of a female-led criminal gang near Bogotá-Soacha, Colombia, but for the most part, across categories of respondents, females were reported to play roles other than primary protagonists of violence: spies, ‘girlfriends’, mules, go-betweens and ‘wives’. This could reflect a sexist view – respondents not wanting to recognise girls’ leadership roles that challenge traditional gender norms. Hypothetically, armed forces/groups may give girls freedoms or leadership opportunities greater than those afforded by their families and communities. This is a question for further research.

In some parts of DRC virgin girls are recruited specifically to prepare fetishes used as part of the armed groups’ purification rituals, practices that are believed by combatants to provide protection during battle (MONUSCO 2015; interview with World Vision). Some girls in Colombia and DRC have been targeted for recruitment because they are perceived to be less likely suspects for the commission of crimes (Watchlist 2004). Girls may face different risks and vulnerabilities than boys, but these can be equally grave. Gender-based violence against girls associated with armed forces/groups has been widely documented, including by the United Nations Security Council (2018), and was mentioned several times in the primary research.

‘I had no childhood, I was taken so small. I was recruited by the FARC when I was 12 years old. I was an adult from a very young age, it was very hard, this time, especially for me, as I was raped. I have not overcome it yet; it is still difficult to be with my partner.’

—Ex-combatant female, age 30, Villavicencio, Colombia, November 2018

‘I was 16 years old when the Seleka came armed groups took us in their vehicle and I who was the only girl [they] took me alone to Bambari. The leader gave me to his son in marriage; he was older than me. I had a child with him a girl. At first, he abused me because I did not want to, and [they] told me that if I was going to be defiant my husband would kill me, and I was afraid. So I was submissive and he took me with him everywhere. I saw how [the armed group] stole goods from people; he even taught me how to shoot a weapon. They were enlisting girls by force and forcing them to marry [the fighters]. Some girls escaped and ended up in other armed groups called Balaka.’

—21-year-old woman who spent five years with the Seleka armed group, Damara, CAR

How girls and boys come to join armed groups

Much of the literature on Sub-Saharan Africa suggests that forced recruitment or coercion of children into armed forces/groups is the norm (see, for example, United Nations Security Council 2015; 2018). However, recent studies, as well as interviews with World Vision staff, suggest that more boys and girls sign up of their own volition than has been commonly assumed (Mlambo 2019; MONUSCO 2015; Child Soldiers International 2017; de Vise-Lewis and Schwarz 2017; UN University 2018). In DRC, Child Soldiers International reports that up to one-third of ex-combatant girls interviewed in their 2017 study had ‘volunteered’. Similarly, War Child’s 2017 study in eastern DRC found that the overwhelming majority of children in study sites had joined voluntarily and that forced recruitment was the exception

rather than the norm.

In Colombia and CAR, after a discussion about definitions of the word voluntary, many groups and interviewees reported that most child engagement with armed groups was voluntary.

‘I decided myself.’

—FGD, boys aged 15–17, Damara, CAR

After deliberation, however, some focus groups concluded that children had no other choice. As discussed above, in most instances the notion that a child has ‘volunteered’ to join is challenged by the fact that children and families face extremely violent realities and incredible hardships, limiting their options considerably.

‘What kind of choice do you have if all your family were killed?’

—FGD, girls aged 15–17, Damara, CAR

‘I have to challenge the use of that term ‘voluntary’. As long as there are no options, there’s no such thing as voluntary recruitment.’

—Colombian government intelligence official, Bogotá

In Colombia, key informants referred to gangs as a normal part of the local landscape (‘naturalised’). Recruitment becomes a less useful term in these contexts, where young people are more often said to be ‘staying with’, ‘being with’ or ‘hanging out with’ (quedarse con) the combos, and where the combos may not necessarily be conducting any concerted outreach per se (Roshani 2016). In Eastern Congo, when armed groups are stationed or reside in local communities, children’s circulation between the groups and ‘regular life’ can be constant (de Vise-Lewis and Schwarz 2017). In some rural communities in South Sudan and KRI, it is not only normal but socially acceptable and expected for boys to participate in armed conflict. These are very different situations to CAR, for example, where children are said to be joining armed groups in reaction to a sudden invasion from outside in a phenomenon that is seen by community members to be temporary. In parts of DRC and urban Colombia armed group involvement can be considered a part of the normal fabric of life. This notion, however, can change over time, and children’s engagement and the circumstances that motivate it are dynamic.

In urban Colombia the combo may be the most important structure in informal, peri-urban communities that are not even recognised by the government, and in which the

gang is the primary provider of essential commodities such as cooking gas, water, and some staple foods. In the two localities visited near Medellín, adults and children alike seemed to consider the local gang as a positive force, even as they decried the violence and drugs associated with its presence.

Why boys and girls join armed groups

Leaving aside extreme coercion and forcible recruitment, multiple factors push and pull children towards engagement in armed forces/groups. Many are overlapping and interrelated; rarely is there one single driving factor. The global literature yields a long and diverse list of motivations for joining, including but not limited to the need for protection from various types of threats, including physical safety and protection from armed actors; real or perceived threat of the state; proximity to armed forces/groups; joining one group in order to avoid being recruited into another; fear, particularly if physically separated from family in displacement; loneliness; boredom; ideas of power and authority conferred through participation in an armed group; admiration of the armed forces/groups' accomplishments; the lure of easy money or not having to work a normal job; weak or non-existent state structures; lack of schooling; poor quality schools; rejection from the national military; ideology/agreement with the cause of the armed group; desire to avenge the death of a loved one; abuse or intrafamily violence; the influence of a relative or a boyfriend/girlfriend already in the armed group; and more structural causes such as poverty and inequality. (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2017; UN University 2018)

In addition, armed forces/groups can provide children several less tangible benefits, such as a ready-made identity, community, and sense of significance, as well as some semblance of order amid chaos. Armed groups deliberately exploit children's greater tendency towards altruism and group bonding. . . . a way for young people to express

themselves and attain a level of status beyond what society would usually allow someone of their age. Lastly, even if children do not willingly join an armed group, once inside, group processes may lead to identification and bonding with the group and its members, complicating exit. (UN University 2018)

To varying degrees, all of the above push and pull factors were observed in the settings where this research took place. Those factors that emerged most prominently in CAR and Colombia are sited in the below table and are described in more detail across the five settings. The table shows that many of the same factors emerge in the two primary sites. However, it also highlights how one driver can be significantly more prominent in one setting depending on the different contexts and dynamics at play. This is an important to consider when framing our understanding and responses and calls for programmes to be adapted to local realities, avoiding standard blueprints.

Presence of conflict, normalisation of violence

In all the study countries, simply growing up in a conflict setting or a situation of generalised insecurity is seen as a factor that facilitates children's engagement in armed forces/groups. Armed group activity is so prevalent in these settings, and firearms so readily available, as to be normalised. The ever-present, 'everydayness' of guns, violence and conflict may desensitise children and families to the generalised violence around them and reduce their fear of children becoming involved.

'There is insecurity, violence [all around them]. Children here will tell you, calmly, that they have killed someone, and that is very shocking.'

—Youth activist, Villavicencio, Colombia, November 2018

	Central African Republic	Colombia
Drivers	Vengeance	Family breakdown
	Defending a cause/territory/community	Lack of opportunity
	Presence of conflict/normalisation of violence	Poverty/inequality
	Lack of opportunity	Displacement
	Poverty/inequality	Presence of conflict/normalisation of violence
	Family breakdown	Substance abuse



Kosa George, a World Vision social worker supervisor, motivates and encourages former child soldiers in South Sudan.

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‘This is all these kids know. They have never had it any other way.’

—World Vision Colombia staff member near Bogotá-Soacha

In some settings, such as South Sudan and Colombia, armed groups are more than just a normal feature of the community; they also hold status as important social structures in a context with otherwise weak state institutions and infrastructure.

‘The girls [in a focus group, Medellín] told the story of seeing a guy getting hacked with a machete out in the street, in the middle of the day, and their first instinct was to wonder what bad thing the guy had done to be getting this treatment. So to me, it seems that they have totally normalised the violence in their environment and they’re even taking the side of the combo.’

—World Vision Colombia staff member and FGD facilitator

Displacement

To varying degrees across study sites displacement is driven by the threat posed by gangs and armed groups to children. Importantly, displacement can also be a driver of child participation in armed groups, as migrants often end up in new settings where they may experience high levels of poverty, violence and social isolation. This was found to be particularly relevant in Colombia and KRI/Mosul. Levels of recruitment in such circumstances are high, and alternatives are few.

‘They just leave. That’s one way of protecting the children. We had a bunch of kids the other day that were in the gangs and they were called upon to sell drugs but the families said no, and [the families] had to make the decision just to leave the community. It’s another form of displacement [apart from the displacement from other parts of the country that most people in this place have already experienced]. But a lot of people do it. We had to do it ourselves

[years ago]. I myself was living somewhere with my family and I felt [my kids were in] danger and we had to get out.'

—Female CBO leader near Bogotá-Soacha, whose son was killed in gang violence

Lack of opportunity

A lack of options for education, jobs and leisure activities were obvious in all countries explored in this study. Schools across research sites were uniformly decried as substandard, and this fact in itself was seen by some respondents as a primary driver of children engaging with armed groups. In South Sudan, DRC, Iraq and CAR, many schools have been destroyed in the conflict or used by combatants as living quarters; even where schools do remain, they are often understaffed and under resourced, and the quality of education is poor.

In two of the three research sites in Colombia the communities were relatively newly populated, being informal settlements made up primarily of internally displaced persons (IDPs) – and more recently, many Venezuelans – where the government does not even recognise the existence of the community, much less provide basic services and infrastructure or otherwise ensure people's rights. This situation is similar to communities in and around Mosul and KRI, where great numbers of IDPs and refugees live in makeshift camps without access to basic services. Education is also extremely weak or nonexistent in these settings.

'You wouldn't believe how bad the schools are here.'

'We don't have education here. The kids out here, the schools, they don't have resources. So it's all about inequality and bad quality of education.'

—Volunteers in a feeding center for children near Bogotá-Soacha, Colombia

In South Sudan a lack of access to education was reported to hamper the successful reintegration of demobilised children and ultimately to lead to cycles of reengagement (Skåras 2017). Taking a longer term view, provision of child protection services, such as comprehensive case management and prioritisation of community-based social reintegration initiatives with parents, families and community members, has also been identified as a critical component to the success of reintegration programmes.

In all of the study sites, even those young people who have managed to complete secondary school emerge to find very

limited options for employment. In such contexts, 'when armed groups are the only employer and exert physical control over the populace, joining an armed group may be the only realistic survival strategy' (UN University 2018).

'The people have nothing but the gangs out here. In the gangs, the kids have everything they want. It's all about opportunity. A kid comes to me and asks me for a job and I have nothing for him. But the gangs can give him everything he wants.'

—Male community leader who lost his son to gang violence, interviewed near Bogotá-Soacha, Colombia

'[They join] in order to have a job and help their family.'

'[The one that does not join,] he has a job.'

—FGD with girls 15–17, Damara, CAR

There may be gendered differences in the extent to which lack of employment is a motivating factor for joining and even in the kinds of groups boys and girls become associated with. If girls are not expected to work outside the home, but rather to take up domestic duties and childcare, this could lend more or less to girl recruitment, depending on the gendered norms and perceived roles for adolescent girls in a given context. In some cases girls might experience more forced recruitment for social/gendered reasons, as in South Sudan where the majority of girl recruitment was linked to early/forced marriage, while boys may be more 'mixed' between push and pull. This is an area for further research.

In the study sites in CAR and Colombia few if any structured opportunities exist for learning skills, for being engaged as a member of the community or for even simply staying busy. Many respondents called for vocational training or other types of economic strengthening programmes.

A primary suggestion among child respondents, especially, was the creation of safe play spaces and programmes with sports, music and dance.

'Here there are no courts to play football, and we like to play. In order to play, you have to go to other places, very dangerous places because the combos hang out there.'

—16-year-old boy near Medellín, who started using drugs at age 13, and was used by the local criminal gang to commit crimes including an attempted murder

Practitioners in CAR and Colombia stressed the need to keep children busy, to help them occupy their after-school time and other free time with alternatives that keep them out of contact with bad actors in the community.

‘We organise sport clubs and have established a talent show to have a space where children can meet and forget the recent war’

—Male adult, Yaloke, CAR

‘Music, dance, art, sports, etc., are the things that keep them busy. And you must do it from the youngest age.’

—Volunteer working with vulnerable children near Bogotá-Soacha, Colombia

These free-time activities, based around board games, sports, hobbies, homework help, and so forth, are also seen as a fairly safe strategy in a context where armed groups become suspicious of civil society activities and structures, with sometimes deadly repercussions. In Colombia civil society actors are among the populations most at risk of assassination by armed groups, which greatly restricts their ability to engage communities in a robust way (Defensoría del Pueblo Colombia 2018).

Vengeance

In CAR overwhelmingly, and in KRI, DRC and South Sudan, respondents reported that children are motivated to join armed groups by a desire for vengeance for killings and other atrocities committed by opposing armed groups.

‘The main reason for boys is to take revenge for something that happened to their parents or family members in their presence; because they killed their brothers/sisters.’

—Female adults, Damara, CAR

‘The Seléka killed [my father] and took the money that was on him but also the gold [that he had mined]. They also took his bike, his vehicle, and they totally destroyed

our property. It was at this point that I made the decision to enlist in the Balaka.’

—Male, 17, who joined the Balaka at age 13, Yaloke, CAR

The decision to join to avenge a death or attack can lead anyone to join, irrespective of other contributing factors such as poverty, quality of schools, and so forth.

‘It does not matter if you are rich or poor, if you go to school or not; it is just to protect your own community.’

—Boys, 15–17 years of age, Yaloke, CAR

Although the literature on Colombia suggests that vengeance is a motive for children to become engaged in armed groups, this finding did not emerge in the primary research conducted for this study, perhaps because the study sample was mostly drawn from areas affected by criminal gangs rather than guerrillas or paramilitary groups.

Defending, cause, territory or community

In Iraq in particular, but also in CAR, DRC and South Sudan, the literature shows that children join armed groups in order to defend their homeland. For boys in KRI who have reached the age of 15 or 16, families, communities and children themselves consider it normal and a source of pride that young men defend their land (interview with World Vision staff). Families and community leaders are said to encourage this. As with revenge, the desire to defend one’s community can drive children to opt into armed groups irrespective of other contributing factors.

‘They [the children] want to defend their community. When the Seleka came here, we went to the forest and then, together with our husbands, they formed an armed group to defend our community.’

—Female adult, Yaloke, CAR

Family breakdown

In Colombia in particular, respondents cited weak families, intra-familial tension, domestic violence and abuse as primary causes of children becoming involved in armed groups.

‘They join because they are unprotected and have no parental guidance. Children who do not join armed groups are the ones who have guidance. You know good from bad, because you have someone teaching you at home. Parents have expectations for you.’

—Youth activist, Villavicencso, Nov 2018

‘It all started for one reason. In the family you feel like nobody cares about you. My mother did not pay attention to me, she did not let me go out, she beat me, and she made me look bad in front of the [community]. [Leaving home led to drug addiction, sexual exploitation and being briefly kidnapped and tortured.] I became a victim of sexual abuse, and many of my rights were violated.’

—Formerly gang-affiliated girl, age 16, Medellín, Nov 2018

In CAR, lack of family support does emerge as a push factor; however, this is in relation to children being orphaned during the conflict rather than as a result of domestic violence or neglect.

‘Because they killed their parents and no one was left to take care of them.’

—Boys, 15–17 years of age, Yaloke, CAR

In DRC and Iraq, becoming orphaned and living with extended family also appears to augment children’s vulnerability to becoming engaged with armed groups.

In both CAR and Colombia, FGD respondents of all ages were asked to describe a hypothetical child who opted not to join an armed group. The most common response related to the state of a child’s family (‘The situation at home is good’; ‘She had her family to guide her’; and so on). A large volume of research shows the protective role that families play for children at all times, and especially in the midst of crises such as war and political violence.

Substance abuse

In Colombia in particular, family breakdown was often linked to alcohol or drug abuse, often on the part of the father, stepfather or mother’s boyfriend. Children’s desire to try

recreational drugs or their need to feed a drug addiction were commonly cited as key motivators for boys and girls to become involved in armed groups. Drugs were not mentioned as a pull factor for children in the other study sites, though it has been reported in many settings globally that once involved in armed forces/groups, children get exposed to drugs and become addicted.

Poverty and inequality

Economic drivers of child engagement with armed groups were reported in all contexts, and especially in DRC, South Sudan, KRI and Colombia.

‘Poverty is a huge contributor. Hunger is a strong force, and when mom and dad can’t feed them, kids will do whatever it takes.’

—Colombian government intelligence official, Bogotá

‘This whole problem [of armed groups] is all about inequality. Some [rich people in the North of Bogotá] have all the luck, and others no.’

—Volunteers in a feeding centre for children near Bogotá-Soacha, Colombia

‘There are not really any common traits among the children who engage, except that most of these children are from a poor family.’

—Male community leader and pastor, Damara, CAR

Beyond basic needs for food and shelter, some boys and girls in DRC and Colombia reported that a desire for fashion and material items drives some children to become involved with armed groups. Growing up in contexts of deprivation does not preclude these children from sharing the same desires as other young people around the world.

‘I needed money to buy cool clothes, hats, to get known in the neighborhood.’

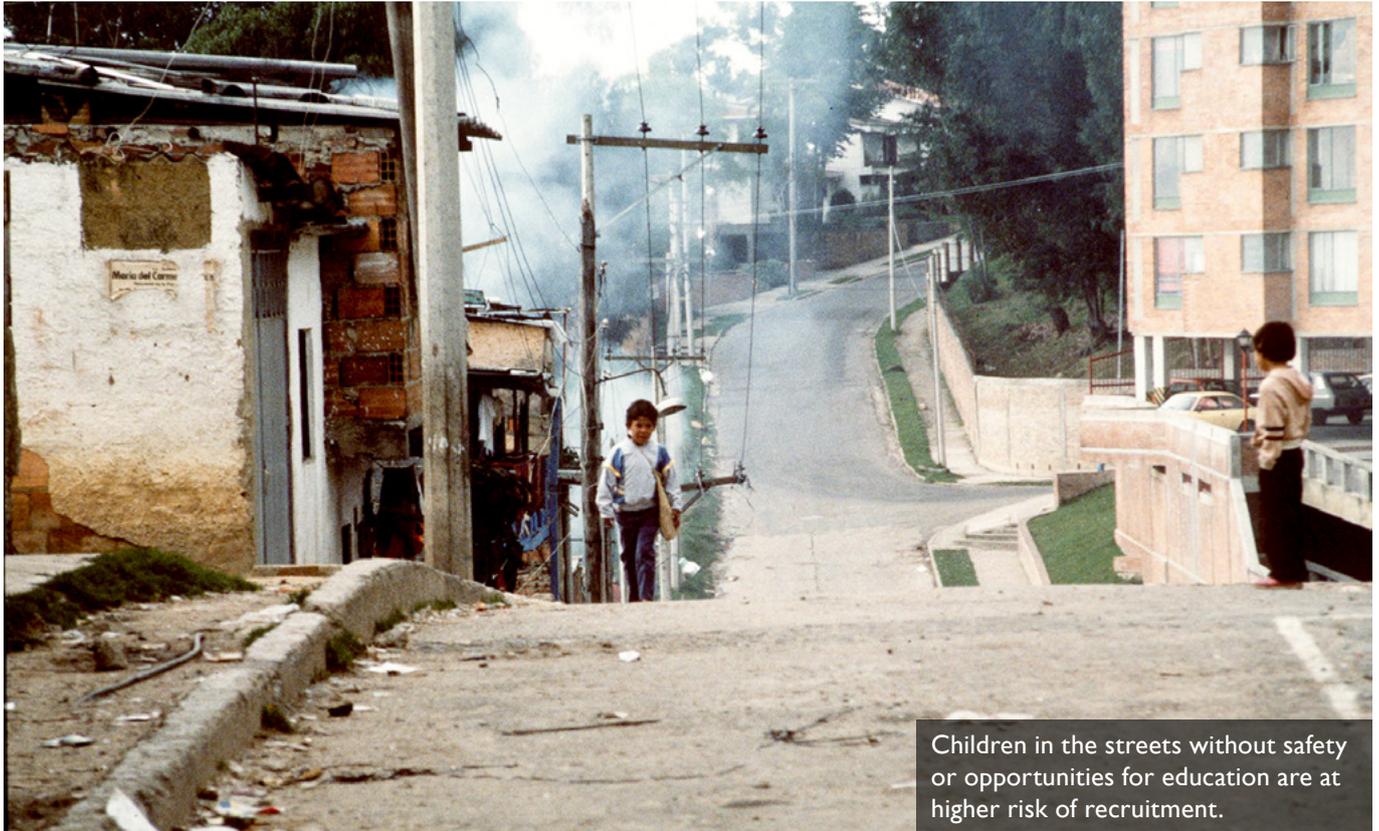
—16-year-old boy near Medellín, Colombia

In South Sudan extreme poverty and presence of conflict are interlinked and intersect with the push/pull factors for child recruitment. Economic collapse resulting from the conflict placed pressure in some cases on adolescent boys

'Grace,' a former child soldier, learns sewing skills for a new livelihood in a World Vision supported vocational training school.



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Children in the streets without safety or opportunities for education are at higher risk of recruitment.

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to contribute to their family income, particularly where the concept of childhood does not extend to 18 years. Some parents are also financially motivated to push their girls to be recruited for marriage in order to receive a dowry payment as a way manage economic hardship.

Influences on a child’s decision to join or not

In the literature a large percentage of children are reported to join because friends or family members have already joined. Respondents said that the decision to do so is often made together, and that the family exerts a heavy influence (UNICEF and Transition International 2017; UN University 2018). Many children interviewed in Iraq in 2017 reported that they first heard about armed actors from family members; over half reported having at least one family member in the national army or another armed group (UNICEF and Transition International 2017). In the primary research in both CAR and Colombia, parents and friends were said to exert the most influence on a child’s decision to join or not join an armed group.

‘Fathers can encourage their sons not to join with the promise of sending them to school. They tell their children that they

can die if they join. The most influential [in discouraging children from joining] are the parents.’

—Girl, 15–17, Damara, CAR

Having supportive parents was key to avoiding engagement, but parents can also push children to join.

‘Parents encourage children to join to have better goods (motorbikes, phones, etc.)’

‘Parents tell their children to join, because by doing that, they will be able to support their family.’

‘Fathers tell their children to go, to defend their country.’

—Male adults, FGD, Damara, CAR

‘Some mothers bear many children just so that they can have extra ones to send to the combo.’

—World Vision Volunteer and community leader, near Bogotá-Soacha, Colombia

In Colombia many references were made to *malos amigos* (bad friends) who lead children 'down the wrong path' to drug use and gang life. Girlfriends and boyfriends are seen as major influencers, with girlfriends most often mentioned as those who discourage gang involvement and boyfriends as those who encourage it.

In CAR, local authorities, village chiefs, ministers and state officers were reported by FGD respondents to be a positive force against children becoming involved in armed groups. However, as in KRI, these same figures were also said to at times encourage children to join. In South Sudan parents could be influential to prevent recruitment or to push their children to join, depending on the parents' perceptions of childhood, girls' rights related to marriage, financial pressures and fear. Peers were also very influential in the 'choice' to join or not, particularly for boys.

'Here they tell children that they have to engage because of what happened in the community, and to behave like "men", [and these figures also] may benefit from when children join certain groups.'

—FGD with adult men in Damara, CAR

In the case of Colombia, local authorities, ministers and state officers were little mentioned, perhaps due to weak existing structures or to the fact that local authorities are so often implicated in child rights violations and/or are themselves associated with armed groups. Some child respondents in Colombia, but more often adults, mentioned the need for greater police presence in the community. However, many also mentioned the contributing role of police, who were understood to be a threat to child well-being.

In both Colombia and CAR the church was mentioned in FGDs and interviews as one of the only functional structures outside the armed groups, and one of the only offering any structured activities and advice discouraging children and youth from joining, if only sporadically and with limited resources.

Prevention strategies

This study found few strategies focused specifically on the prevention of children's involvement in armed groups. This may be one of the reasons why reintegration fails so often, leading to cycles of re-recruitment – the drivers are not being addressed. Many of the drivers (political insecurity/violence, poverty/inequality, and so forth) need to be tackled at the macro level, while most prevention work takes place at the micro level.

In all settings there are some child protection initiatives working to prevent recruitment and re-recruitment of children into armed groups, albeit with limited reach. These mostly focus on creating safe places for children to play and interact outside of school and on providing psychosocial support, access to education, intergenerational dialogue and parenting skills, and livelihood opportunities. Typical initiatives provided by government and nongovernment actors in the five settings include

- establishment or strengthening of community-based child protection committees responsible for promoting the safety and rights of children, and monitoring and reporting child protection concerns
- provision of child protection services, including availability of social workers to provide psychosocial support and links to other child-friendly support services
- establishment of safe spaces for children to play sports; participate in dance, arts and crafts; and receive psychosocial support
- provision of vocational training, small business support and/or income-generating activities
- provision of school supplies, school construction and teacher training
- provision of opportunities for children to increase their social, decision-making and coping skills through clubs, sports, recreational spaces, peer mediation and basic conflict-resolution skills
- sensitisation with parents and adolescents on child recruitment.

World Vision's priority interventions in the five countries focus on a number of these, such as child protection prevention and response interventions. This includes comprehensive child protection case management, provision of psychosocial support, promoting children's rights, building capacity in positive parenting, promoting attitude and behaviour change to reduce harmful norms around concepts of childhood, child development and gender, improving access to education, income-generation activities, capacity building through vocational training and apprenticeship placement, as well as support services for youth.

- Prevention initiatives at any level were not found in the literature from CAR. In the primary research respondents mentioned that awareness raising on risks children face in armed groups is done by local authorities, UNICEF, World Vision and CARITAS. CARITAS has also had vocational-training programmes. State-level interventions in relation to this issue appear to be virtually nonexistent.
- Colombia established an interagency prevention policy in 2010, an ambitious rights-based package of interventions at all levels. However, a 2014 government review of progress found officials failing to recognise or prioritise

the recruitment issue or resisting the changes called for in the policy (Defensoría del Pueblo de Colombia 2018). A conflict 'early warning' system is now in place which delineates the roles and responsibilities of various government entities, but the prevention priority remains under resourced and implementation is spotty.

Little documentation exists about what communities, families and children are doing themselves to prevent children's engagement with armed forces/groups. With the intention of building upon what already exists, the study sought to understand what preventive strategies are in place at the community level (including those of traditional leaders, faith actors and communities, and community-based organisations), and at the family level, why they work, and how effective they are considered to be.

At the level of the community, perhaps the most visible 'organic' response is the rise of small community-based organisations that provide a variety of services for children and families depending on the need, including, for example, a hot meal, informal counselling, or a safe place to do homework out of the reach of armed groups. Some of these community-based organisations have the capacity to conduct training and sensitisation on topics such as gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive health and life skills. Their approaches are rooted in local needs and some staff have decades of experience working with children. A few have attracted external funding, including from World Vision. Some of these groups are made up of just two or three concerned citizens.

'We organised information meetings with young people in our community about the consequences of engaging in armed groups. Neighbourhood leaders organised meetings for public awareness [around] youth [issues]. Neighbourhood leaders approach families to raise awareness of children's issues, encourage them to enrol

their children in school and monitor their progress. For the public, we have banned [children from seeing] war films and follow-ups are done by the neighbourhood leaders. The mechanisms put in place in our community work well, but it's not easy working with children in this post-crisis [environment].'

—Community leader, Yaloke, CAR

Around Bogotá-Soacha and Medellín, World Vision has funded several comedores, community-based organisations that serve primarily as free or low-cost restaurants but that also provide a de facto second home for local children who are otherwise on the streets for much of the day.

Another organic community response under way in Colombia is an informal 'neighbourhood watch' system.

'We have this thing called "I take care of your kid you take care of mine." [Laughs.] It's like an alarm system we use. Whenever we see a kid going wrong or in trouble, we just call each other to let each other know. [This strategy] just develops [naturally] among some groups of people like us – neighbors. But I think people do this in other places too.'

—Female CBO leader near Bogotá-Soacha

'These ladies here, they call each other whenever there's an issue with someone's kid.'

—Male leader near Medellín, Colombia

In at least one instance in Colombia girls mentioned that their membership in a community youth group served as a protective factor for them and that the group could prevent the recruitment of others in the community.

In CAR several respondents said that religious groups during mass, prayer and group activities actively discourage children from joining, and in Damara a peacebuilding initiative is organised by an Islamic Committee.

‘At the moment, what we are trying to do is to build a cohesion between the two communities of Damara through joint sensitisation that we do with the members of the Comité des Sages in Damara. ‘

—Representative of the Islamic Committee, Damara, CAR

‘The Catholic Church has an evangelical programme to keep children out of armed groups. The church is very active in preventing recruitment.’

—FGD with boys 15–17, Damara, CAR

Many respondents in both Colombia and CAR also described those who managed to avoid engagement with armed groups as ‘good Christians,’ families who were pious or who have a ‘fear of God’.

‘What drove me to leave the band was that my mother was doing religious activities. She was a virtuous woman, and I would feel the light every time we were given the word of God. That touched me, so I decided to leave the group to return to the community.’

—17-year-old boy who joined the Balaka at age 13, Yaloke, CAR

However, religion can also be used as a recruitment tool, as seen in CAR and Iraq.

At the level of the family, respondents in CAR and Colombia spoke mostly of parental support and advice as the primary prevention strategy. Parents who are present, providing guidance and a nurturing and supportive environment, were described as the biggest deterrent to involvement in armed groups.

‘[They advise] their children and tell them about the disadvantages of joining.’

—Boys, 15–17, and adult women, Damara, CAR

Guidance of this kind was often linked to religion:

‘Parents teach their children that because of their religion they have to stay out of armed groups.’

‘Praying.’

—FGD with female adults, Damara, CAR

In South Sudan, World Vision uses a community-based child protection prevention approach which works with existing civil society groups to learn, to change harmful attitudes and behaviours and to promote children’s safety and rights, as well as to coach these community groups to advocate for child protection, and monitor, report and refer protection risks and concerns for children. This approach engages and works with faith actors and their congregations, local women’s organisations, networks of youth leaders, protection committees composed of concerned or interested citizens, and local leaders such as camp managers, traditional elders and other community leaders or authorities. While this approach works with communities to holistically prevent the most common protection concerns for children in South Sudan – violence and abuse, and for girls early/forced marriage – it could represent an approach to be tailored more specifically to the prevention of recruitment.

Conclusions

The challenges faced by children at risk of or already engaged in armed forces/groups, and therefore the programmes in place to address these challenges, have in many cases been built on faulty assumptions:

- that the child is always a passive object, preyed upon by the armed group
- that boys and girls who join up are understood by themselves and their communities to be 'children'
- that engagement in armed forces/groups is a simple matter of either 'joining' or being recruited, rather than a continuum within which positions shift over time according to circumstance
- that the armed group is somehow separate from the community and not deeply connected to it
- that the armed group has no positive social value
- that girls do not participate in significant numbers.

Across the countries in this study children are joining armed forces/groups for multiple overlapping reasons: proximity to the armed group, type of armed group, nature of the conflict, displacement, ethnic identity, economic status, sex and age of the child, gendered norms, individual circumstances, search for belonging and peer pressure, among many others. Depending on the dynamics at play at a particular time, one driver might be more prevalent in one context than another: desire for vengeance or need for protection in CAR; weak families and domestic violence in Colombia; ideology or defending the homeland in KRI; poverty and hunger in DRC; presence of conflict and normalisation of violence in South Sudan. Despite the differences most cases of children opting to engage with armed forces/groups boil down to a lack of meaningful alternatives. In the absence of other means of support, services and protection, engaging with an armed group becomes the most effective way to meet basic survival needs.

Children living in contexts of armed violence such as those studied for this report often have few avenues to secure their own survival and that of their families and communities. Frequently they are forced to choose the best of a small set of bad paths. Although the question of choice in this context is undoubtedly constrained, it is nonetheless important to recognise and acknowledge children's efforts to take control of their lives, even in the most difficult of circumstances. In many cases they are seen by communities – and see

themselves – as having agency, being capable of making important contributions to the household, for better or for worse, even capable of taking responsibilities and having a family of their own. Programmes may be poorly served by the application of a strict definition of a child as someone below the age of 18; locally, boys and girls may be understood as adults from an earlier age. Interventions need to recognise this reality by reaching out to and including adolescents and youth (13–25 years) who may not in all instances consider themselves to be children.

One of the main findings of this research is that being engaged in an armed group is not always a matter of the child having joined or been recruited by some discrete group of combatants. In many communities armed groups are simply part of the fabric of everyday life and not something separate – geographically or conceptually – from the lives of children as they grow up.

Relatedly, prevention programmes need to acknowledge the perceived positive social value and safety that an armed group may play in a setting where the state has little presence or ability to provide basic services or stability, and in the worst circumstance, is an active party to the conflict. Communities and children do not necessarily have a negative opinion of the armed groups in their midst, who are after all made up of their friends, neighbours and family members, and who may be providing protection and a number of basic services such as the food and water that the community lives on.

In addition to being one among few or no options for survival in a landscape of deprivation and adversity, armed forces/groups can also confer on a child a sense of belonging and purpose, a feeling of membership that may be lacking in the home, school and community, or may be threatened or undermined by state institutions or other armed groups/forces.

While boys seem to join armed forces/groups more than girls in all contexts explored for this research, many girls are nonetheless involved, and in numbers that may be higher than previously assumed, depending on the location. Girls' needs, experiences and push factors are often very different from boys', as are the risks associated with their involvement. This is an important topic for further research.

In terms of solutions, children and adolescents interviewed highlighted the need for alternatives to armed group interaction: providing children with safe places to play and engage in leisure activities, such as providing youth centres, libraries, sports and other activities. On a broader level,

solutions need to prioritise a greater commitment to children's rights and protection in fragility and conflict and tackle the context-specific aspects of vulnerability that place children or their families in a position of susceptibility to push and pull factors towards recruitment.

Child Protection remains the second-least-funded sector in global humanitarian response, the least funded being GBV (gender-based violence) Prevention and Response, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Financial Tracking Services (FTS). While child protection and GBV programming do not necessarily 'cost' as much to implement as other sectors, the chronic underfunding of Child Protection in emergencies fundamentally affects the ability of actors to invest in strengthening child protection prevention systems and approaches to promote and protect children's rights against all grave violations, including recruitment. Where child recruitment intersects with GBV and gendered norms, as may be the case for girls' recruitment, the underfunding of this sub-sector in humanitarian response represents a potentially compounded challenge.

Vulnerability to recruitment can be further reduced by creating safe spaces and future pathways for children that increase protective factors. This can include increasing access to education and the provision of livelihood opportunities and basic needs, which are argued to be essential to curbing children's engagement in armed forces/groups (Skåras 2017; Ensor 2013; Graham 2015; UN University 2018). Community members of all ages in CAR and Colombia mostly pointed to the need for schools to be built and teachers to be trained, as well as for economic strengthening interventions such as skills training.

Community-level prevention efforts should revolve around building a nurturing, supportive environment at home. Respondents asserted that a strong, trusting and supportive family – one that is prepared and able to engage meaningfully with its children, provide advice, guidance and emotional support – is what makes the difference between those who join and those who do not. This emphasis on familial closeness and support may be less useful for prevention in a context like CAR, where children said that they are motivated in large part by the desire for revenge and the need for protection, and where even the strongest families might still have children who choose or are encouraged by family members to defend their community.

The study demonstrates that a lack of purpose and identity among adolescents within their communities or society is



Elisa, 13, was 9 years old when she was abducted by the South Sudanese National Liberation Army along with two of her siblings when walking back home from the family farm in Yambio, South Sudan

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central to their involvement in armed conflict. However, in most of the sites where this study was undertaken, there is a conspicuous lack of structured activities or opportunities for meaningful engagement with adolescents. Those programmes that do exist appear to be completely inadequate to the existing demand. Examples from South Sudan underscore the need for programmes that are sustained and take a holistic view to children's reintegration, with an emphasis on social integration for both released children, and amongst adolescents, parents, extended families and community members.

The role of community and religious leaders has been found to be crucial in many settings (CAR, Iraq, and DRC, especially), though their influence can be both positive and negative. In Colombia and CAR, in particular, churches seem to hold promise as structures from which to build.

Recommendations

Strategies are needed that specifically prevent children's engagement with armed forces/groups and that address the structural inequality and inequity that foster it. Context matters, however; and no single blueprint will apply everywhere. Drivers of child engagement with armed forces/groups must be thoroughly understood at the local level before devising interventions.

To these ends, the following steps are recommended, based on the findings of this study:

Governments:

- **Prohibit recruitment of children.** All governments and their armed forces must prohibit the recruitment of anyone under the age of 18 in law, policy and practice. The government obligation to end recruitment of under 18s extends to any recruitment in their territory, including by non-state armed groups. This includes appropriate national legislation and its enforcement.
 - **Adequately resource child protection and associated services.** Governments must effectively and sufficiently resource child protection, education, social protection and child health services in national budgets and strengthen the capacity of ministries with child protection mandates. The protection of children from grave violations must be prioritised in national policy. Policies and funding must reach the local level.
 - **Prioritise the participation and empowerment of children and youth in humanitarian programming, peacebuilding and community life.** Children have a right to participate in decisions affecting them and are important actors in their own protection. Governments should implement the key recommendations of the UN Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security.³ For example, children (of sufficient maturity) and youth should be involved meaningfully in peace processes and humanitarian, resilience and recovery programmes.
 - **Ensure security and access.** Governments must prioritise the security and protection of child protection actors in their territory and facilitate humanitarian access.
- **Recognise child protection as life saving.** The United Nations, donors and the international community must recognise and define prevention of grave violations against children, specifically child recruitment, as a life-saving intervention in emergencies and the responsibility of all humanitarian actors.
 - **Increase funding to end violence against children in conflict and ensure that prevention and response are both prioritised in this funding.** The child protection sector and cross-sectoral work on violence against children must be prioritised in humanitarian response planning and advocacy. Donors should support innovative long-term interventions around prevention of grave violations against children and other child protection issues, including by
 - increasing the use of multi-year partnership agreements to realise greater impact of community-based prevention strategies
 - providing multi-sectoral approaches that bring together child protection, gender-based violence, education, food security, livelihoods and cash-based programming to promote prevention and reduce vulnerability
 - using longer-term programming to ensure continuity of care for demobilised children from a Do No Harm perspective.
 - **Support the role of child protection systems in preventing grave violations.** All actors must recognise the role that both formal and informal child protection systems play in the prevention of children's recruitment into armed forces and armed groups as well as other grave violations against children. These systems must be strengthened, including in humanitarian and emergency contexts.
 - **Invest in operational research on root causes and what works.** Donors should invest in operational research to generate better understanding of root causes, more evidence of 'what works' to prevent child recruitment and recidivism, how to contextualise interventions and increasing understanding of the unique vulnerabilities and push factors for girls' recruitment.

³ UN Security Council, 'The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security', <https://www.youth4peace.info/ProgressStudy>.

- **Ensure that prevention of child recruitment, influencing the behaviour of armed forces and armed groups as well as reducing children's vulnerability to recruitment, is prominent on the global agenda.** The UN Security Council, UN agencies, regional organisations and other influential actors must use their influence to press all parties to conflict to stop recruiting those under 18. Additionally, reducing children's vulnerability to recruitment must be on the global agenda – not only in relation to processes on children and armed conflict, but also priorities such as the Sustainable Development Goals, ending modern slavery and children on the move.
- **Champion and support the voice of children and youth in humanitarian and emergency contexts.** The global youth peace and security agenda, stemming from the 2015 UN Security Council Resolution 2250, recognises the contributions of young people to peacebuilding efforts. The international community and donors can support children and youth in humanitarian settings by speaking out on their concerns and giving them platforms to speak for themselves. They need to be listened to – and heard in all global forums where peacebuilding, child recruitment and the worst forms of child labour are discussed.

NGOs and civil society:

- **Mainstream a systems approach to child protection across programming, ensuring a focus on child recruitment is included.** Initiatives to protect children and strengthen child protection systems can be stand-alone but must also be mainstreamed across programming sectors to tackle vulnerability and risk. It is essential to prioritise child protection mainstreaming across the programming cycle and continue to build this capacity among humanitarian actors in all sectors as well as engaged civil society actors, especially faith actors, local partners and community organisations. Mainstreaming should not only consider prevention and risk mitigation of general child protection concerns but also include a more specific focus on the grave violations, including child recruitment.
- **Strengthen coordination for prevention of and response to child recruitment.** Preventing and responding to child recruitment requires leadership by child protection actors,

but in coordination with actors that provide child-focused services, such as in health, education, livelihoods or gender-based violence prevention and response. Where child recruitment is prevalent, coordination mechanisms for addressing child recruitment should be established or strengthened, ensuring terms of reference include the engagement of multi-sector actors.

- **Work with community actors to scale up initiatives.** NGOs working in conflict contexts must continue to scale up initiatives that strengthen community-based child protection systems, tackle harmful gender norms, and promote positive parenting and social cohesion. This should be done collaboratively with faith actors, youth leaders/groups, local women's organisations and community-based organisations.
- **Ensure the participation of children and youth in programming.** Actors working on the ground should systematically engage with children and youth, listening and involving them in age-appropriate and gender-appropriate ways, and address barriers that may prevent this. The opinions of girls and boys are vital to ensure programming meets their needs.
- **Invest in building the evidence base.** NGOs and civil society actors on the ground should collaboratively invest in building a stronger evidence base for effective strategies to prevent recruitment and support reintegration, moving from use of general programming assumptions to context-driven approaches responsive to local realities.

Parties to conflict (governments and non-state armed actors):

- **Cease all grave violations of children's rights and ensure safe, dignified release of child soldiers.** Parties to armed conflict must start or resume peace talks. All parties must immediately cease all violations of international human rights and humanitarian law, including the recruitment and use of children, and immediately release to the relevant UN and humanitarian organisations all children under the age of 18 who are involved directly or indirectly with hostilities, and cease further recruitment.

Annex I: Methodology

This research employed a participatory, consultative approach and sought to ensure that national counterparts could share expertise, views and ideas at all stages of the process. The perceptions of various stakeholders were sought, including children, parents, community leaders, local authorities and child protection actors.

Three desk-based case studies were conducted using literature reviews and key informant interviews in the DRC, South Sudan and KRI. The case studies resulted in brief reports for each of the three countries.

Primary research was conducted in CAR and Colombia to obtain in-depth, qualitative information about the underlying social and cultural factors that motivate and sustain child engagement with armed forces/groups. Participatory research tools were developed and Child Frontiers trained local researchers in each country and accompanied the research teams to two out of three research sites per country.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted as part of both the desk studies and the primary research. Child Frontiers worked with World Vision national offices to identify local authorities, frontline workers, UN agencies, CSOs, traditional and religious leaders, and parents/caregivers.

Two researchers were involved in all interviews and FGDs, one facilitating and the other taking notes. Gaining permission to do so was part of the informed consent procedure and was sought from respondents before the interview commenced.

Focus group discussions of approximately two hours in duration engaged children, caregivers, volunteers, and local leaders in order to explore issues related to child recruitment and to collect information on local perceptions. A series of participatory exercises tailored according to the ages and capacities of the different groups was undertaken in the course of these FGDs. The groups were the following:

- Girls aged 11–14
- Boys aged 11–14
- Girls aged 15–18
- Boys aged 15–18
- Female caregivers
- Male caregivers

FGDs provided respondents with the opportunity to share experiences and opinions in a safe, transparent and participatory way. Informed consent was secured from all respondents and, in the case of children, their caregiver or a trusted adult known to the child.

Testimonials were sought from those who had been associated with armed forces/groups as children, as well as from those who had not, in order to better understand their perceptions and experiences of joining armed forces/groups. The testimonials gathered life stories from children which helped to illustrate key issues that emerged from the primary and secondary data.

Sampling

The research team sought to identify people with detailed information to share through the FGDs. Thirty-five FGDs of 5–12 individuals each were held with girls, boys, male and female caregivers and community leaders. Testimonies were provided by 21 people formerly associated with armed forces/groups as children. Finally, 33 key informant interviews were conducted. For practical reasons and due to security considerations, World Vision's implementing partners were themselves tasked with the logistics of sampling for FGDs, testimonies and interviews, in consultation with the World Vision research teams. Community members were invited to participate on the basis of age, sex and their roles in the community.

This mix of purposive and convenience sampling methodologies was not uniform across locations. Some at-risk groups were likely under-represented, such as the poorest community members, child heads of household, and persons with disabilities and their caregivers. In Colombia, male children and youth were particularly difficult to include, due to their own safety fears, though some did ultimately agree to participate.

Annex 2: Ethics and protection considerations

Researching in insecure environments, especially those in which children are subject to grave violations of their rights, can introduce risks to all involved, including the children. World Vision, its implementing partners and the researchers took all reasonable steps to ensure that the research did not create new risks.

Focus groups were not stratified by whether respondents had been engaged with armed forces/groups. Instead, World Vision's local implementing partners, who are trusted community members, were asked to invite as many ex-combatant (or ex-gang-affiliated) persons (and their caregivers) as they safely could, based on their knowing such people in the community and their understanding of the risks that might be associated with participation in the research. In their outreach these partners could explain the study aims and allay any doubts.

Persons with safety concerns were not pressured to participate. Before any interview or focus group commenced, informed consent was secured from all respondents and, in the case of children, their caregiver or a trusted adult known to the child. Respondents were informed that they were under no obligation to participate, that there would be no compensation or material benefit, and that they could stop their involvement at any time.

To ensure that all conversations were confidential, to the extent possible, discussions were conducted only in quiet settings, minimising interruptions as much as possible, and only the researchers and respondents were present.

Only the research team had access to the completed consent forms, field notes, transcripts and other research materials. The names of the respondents, key informants and local staff have not been disclosed in this report.

Criteria for selection of respondents in testimonials were discussed and agreed with the research teams during the research training, taking into consideration the sensitive nature of the issues. Once identified, a time and a safe place were agreed to meet with respondents and allow them to share their stories. Some of the testimony interviews were conducted outside the community in order to protect the privacy of the interviewee.

Research team members were sensitised to the possibility of harm that can arise from research methods that cause respondents to recall distressing experiences or feelings; they were given a referral protocol to follow in the event of any participant's need for psychosocial support.

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World Vision is a Christian relief, development and advocacy organisation dedicated to working with children, families and communities to overcome poverty and injustice. Inspired by our Christian values, we are dedicated to working with the world's most vulnerable people. We serve all people regardless of religion, race, ethnicity or gender.

We believe a world without violence against children is possible, and World Vision's global campaign It takes a world to end violence against children is igniting movements of people committed to making this happen. No one person, group or organisation can solve this problem alone, it will take the world to end violence against children.

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