

World Vision



It takes a world  
to end violence against children



# Will You Hear Us?

100 children in DRC tell their story

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*Child protection considerations: World Vision ensured safe and ethical participation of children when they shared their stories, adhering to World Vision's child protection protocols. Names have been changed to protect the identity of the children at risk, and all photos were taken and are used with informed consent.*

# Contents

<b>6</b>	Introduction
<b>5</b>	What happened in the Kasai Region?
<b>7</b>	Who we spoke to
<b>8</b>	What children told us
<b>9</b>	1. Forced to fight and struggling to reintegrate
<b>12</b>	2. Persistent displacement and hunger
<b>14</b>	3. Lost parents and education
<b>18</b>	Glimmers of hope - children's recommendations for change
<b>19</b>	World Vision's Recommendations

## 2012

Jean-Prince Mpandi inherits the role of Kamunia Nsapu after the death of an uncle. He has, and continues to, spend time abroad and travelling. The government refuses to recognise him, and he begins to instigate a low-level rebellion.



**Kamuina Nsapu (KN) is the name of the ruling head of the Bajila Kasanga family, which controls a paramount chieftancy in the Democratic Republic of Congo. KN is also the name of the village in Dibaya territory where the chief is based, and the name of the militia started by the former KN Jean-Prince Mpandi in the Kasai Region.**

## 2016

### 8-11 AUG

Jean-Prince Mpandi leaves his KN militia to attack Tshimbulu, a neighbouring village in Dibaya territory. MPs arrive and attempt to negotiate between KN and the government.

### 12 AUG

Confrontations in Fuamba, Kabundi, and KN. Jean-Prince Mpandi is killed in a skirmish around 4pm. His body is taken.

### AUG

The Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI) announces that national elections (originally scheduled for December 2016) will need to be delayed until 2018. Previous laws passed allow Joseph Kabila to remain as president until a successor is elected.

### NOV/DEC

Fighting reaches Tshikapa, the diamond-rich capital of Kasai province to the southwest. 154 villages were affected and 150,000 people fled their homes.

### 16 DEC

The first MONUSCO peacekeepers arrive in Kananga.

### DEC

Catholic church leads negotiations in Kinshasa regarding an election timeline after earlier AU negotiations falter; a new government is formed, although Joseph Kabila maintains his post as president. Several prominent politicians who had been involved in negotiations between the government and KN lose their posts. Joseph Kabila agrees to step down by the end of 2017, and not to attempt to run for a third term.



2017

**JAN/FEB**

Clashes between militia and military continue. According to UN records, at least 99 people die during this time. At least 56 children are arrested or subjected to enforced disappearances. Villagers flee in terror for the bush, government employees and symbols of the state also come under attack. The violence has now touched Kazumba territory (to the west of Kananga) and Mbuji Mai (a city to the east).

**1 FEB**

Etienne Tshisekedi, leader of the opposition Union for Democracy and Social Progress party, dies at the age of 84 in Belgium. Born in Kananga, the Kasais have long been considered a Tshisekedi stronghold.

**12 MAR**

UN Experts Zaida Catalán and Michael Sharp depart Kananga and disappear en route to Ngombe. Their bodies, and that of their interpreter, are found two weeks later. Zaida Catalán has been beheaded.

**17 MAR**

Peace accords are signed between the government and the royal Kamuina Nsapu family.

**APR**

First reports of Tchokwe, Pende and Tetela ethnic groups forming Bana Mura counter-militias, which target Luba and Lulua groups (who are ethnically associated with KN) in Kasai. The KN have splintered and are taking on increasingly ethnic tones. They are now spread over an area three times the size of Belgium.

**16 APR**

A new chief, with links to the government is named KN. The body of Jean-Prince Mpandi is reportedly exhumed and returned to his family.

**20 APR**

1.5 million children have now been touched by the crisis. At least 4,000 have been separated from their families, and about 2,000 have been recruited into militias.<sup>1</sup>

**5 MAY**

1.27 million people are now displaced.<sup>2</sup> Refugees begin flooding Angola, and are settled in Luanda Norte.

**OCT**

Relative peace has stabilised in Kasai Central, but ethnic violence continues in Tshikapa. Hundreds of newly displaced families arrive in Dibaya during World Vision's food distributions with World Food Programme.

**20 OCT**

The Interagency Standing Committee declares a Level 3 emergency for the humanitarian situation in Kasais, Tanganyika and South Kivu provinces.

**5 NOV**

CENI publishes a new electoral timetable, scheduling elections for 23 December 2018.

2018

**11 APR**

World Vision shares children's stories with decision makers ahead of the Humanitarian Conference on the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

**13 APR**

The UN and EU co-host a fundraising conference for humanitarian funding' use "The UN and EU co-host the Humanitarian Conference to raise funding for the DRC.

**1 MAY**

Two members of the KN family are beheaded in Dibaya, each from opposite sides of the conflict. The community flees to the bush in terror.

**AUG/SEPT**

To mark one-year since the international community began responding to the crisis, World Vision once again puts forward the voices of children, sharing their struggle with the effects of violence and their hopes for the future to compel international and national support.

1 UNICEF, 1.5 million children affected by violence in Kasai region of Democratic Republic of Congo. 21 April 2017. [https://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/media\\_95825.html?p=printme](https://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/media_95825.html?p=printme)

2 United Nations. GENEVA / DRC HUMANITARIAN. 8 May 2017. <https://www.unmultimedia.org/tv/unifeed/asset/1882/1882301/>

# Introduction

The crisis in the Kasais region of the Democratic Republic of Congo is first and foremost a child protection crisis, one of the worst in the world. Children make up more than two million of the 3.8 million people in need of humanitarian assistance and protection across the region.<sup>3</sup>

Humanitarian emergencies can have catastrophic effects on children, exacerbating existing forms of violence and making them more vulnerable to exploitation, including being recruited into armed forces or armed groups, being sexually abused and being trafficked.<sup>4</sup> In August 2017, UNICEF counted almost 2,000 children<sup>5</sup> who had been members of the militias in Kasai, although the actual numbers are likely much higher. An estimated 60 percent<sup>6</sup> of the militia members in the region were under the age of 18, with the majority younger than 15, and some as young as 5 years old.

In the DRC as a whole in 2017, at least 3,270 grave violations against children<sup>7</sup> were documented, a 245 percent increase in just two years.<sup>8</sup> The long-term impact of children being exposed to violence for so long is difficult to overstate. It has far-reaching effects on children's social, emotional, cognitive and spiritual well-being and development.<sup>9</sup> It interferes with their ability to learn and to lead healthy lives into adulthood.<sup>10</sup>

As a Christian organisation, World Vision believes that every child deserves life in all its fullness. We believe children should be heard, and their views and voices included in decisions that affect them. We hear from children themselves how important this is to them. And this is why World Vision shared a number of children's stories<sup>11</sup> ahead of the Humanitarian Conference on the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in Geneva in April 2018<sup>12</sup>. Children told us that they were tired of violence and hunger; tired of fear and uncertainty. Rarely are they asked how conflict affects them and what would make their lives better:

However, despite World Vision's efforts to make decision makers listen to children, the appeal for the DRC remains critically underfunded, and these children's stories have been largely disregarded by the international community. As of June, less than 8 percent of children and families targeted for protection programming in the Kasais have received the support they need.<sup>13</sup>

We have passed the one-year mark since the international community began responding to the crisis in the Kasais, and once again World Vision is putting the voices of children forward, sharing their continuing struggles with the effects of violence, their concerns and their needs, but also their hopes for the future.

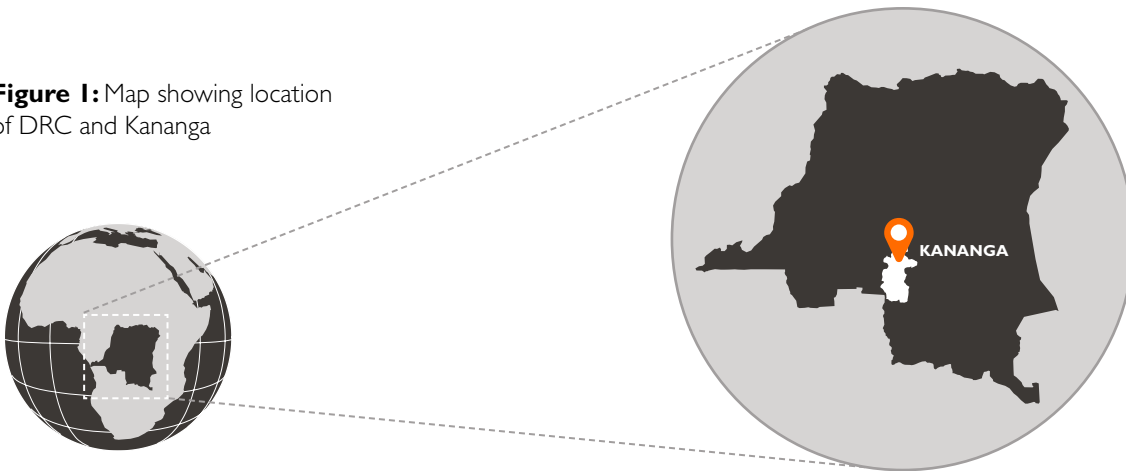
This report is based on interviews with more than 100 children and additional focus groups with 250 children and adults in the Kasais. The stories children shared with World Vision are alarming, but not, unfortunately, surprising. Twenty percent of the children we spoke to had been recruited into the militias, almost all of them coercively. Twenty-three percent of children lost either a parent or sibling due to the violence, or saw them die from starvation or disease while hiding in the bush. And whether it was with their militia cohort, or with their family and neighbours fleeing violence, all but one child we spoke to has a story of being displaced by the conflict at least once. Almost 40 percent of children we interviewed are out of school.

For many children, the distress of violence and armed conflict has been exacerbated by being on the move, away from their homes. Their education has been interrupted, and families are struggling to feed themselves as they return to fallow fields and find their livestock seized or killed. Any recovery is jeopardized by a security situation that isn't restored, and a pervasive fear that the militias will return and families will need to flee for their lives once again.

Children are scared, lonely, and isolated, hungry, and out of school. Their needs are immense and the response to date pales in comparison. Here are their stories.

- 3 UNICEF, Kasai: A Children's Crisis – Coping with the impact of conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, May 2018, [https://www.unicef.org/publications/index\\_102863.html](https://www.unicef.org/publications/index_102863.html)
- 4 Child Protection Working Group, Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, p. 13.
- 5 UN Human Rights Council, Rapport de l'Equipe d'experts internationaux sur la situation au Kasai, 6 June 2018, <https://reliefweb.int/report/democratic-republic-congo/rapport-de-l-equipe-d-experts-internationaux-sur-la-situation-au-kasai>
- 6 [https://news.cgtm.com/news/3d3d674e3349444e77457a6333566d54/share\\_p.html](https://news.cgtm.com/news/3d3d674e3349444e77457a6333566d54/share_p.html)
- 7 The UN-designated grave violations against children in armed conflict are: recruitment and use; killing and maiming; rape and sexual violence; abduction; attacks on schools and hospitals; and denial of humanitarian assistance to children.
- 8 OCHA, Humanitarian Response Plan 2017-2019 for the Democratic Republic of Congo, updated for 2018, December 2017, pg 9
- 9 World Vision, Child Protection Systems in Fragile States, Policy Report 2013.
- 10 World Vision, No One to Turn To: Life for children in eastern DRC, January 2014.
- 11 World Vision, Hear Our Voices: Investing in conflict-affected children in the DRC, April 2018 <https://www.wvi.org/congo-drc/publication/hear-our-voices-investing-conflict-affected-children-drc>
- 12 <https://www.unocha.org/humanitarian-conference>
- 13 UN OCHA, Urgence humanitaire de niveau 3 en R.D. Congo Rapport de situation n° 3 : Bilan final de la réponse L3 d'octobre 2017 à avril 2018, 22 June 2018, [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/sitrep\\_13\\_rdcongo\\_no3\\_vfinale.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/sitrep_13_rdcongo_no3_vfinale.pdf)

**Figure 1:** Map showing location of DRC and Kananga



## Who we spoke to

World Vision in front of Child Friendly Space spoke individually to 100 children and conducted an additional survey of 250 children, parents, and community leaders to identify the types of violence threatening children in the Kasais. Many of the children we reached out to were frequent attendees at Child Friendly Spaces in the region. Others, including parents and community leaders were members of the communities where World Vision is delivering assistance. What has been striking during this process is just how pervasive the effects of violence and conflict have been on every child's life. Almost every child we spoke to, boy or girl, whether in primary or secondary school, now knows the experience of fleeing for their lives. Most have seen first-hand the death of others, and many have personally lost parents, siblings or friends in the woods and on the battlefields.

When asked about the types of violence they worried about, their top concerns were heavy labour, recruitment into armed groups, and sexual violence. Some communities said that they perceive rape as the biggest risk to children. Children who have left militias live in fear of reprisal by the police and armed forces. Most children and adults worried about the threat of renewed or continuing violence. Parents, children, and community leaders cited unemployment, hunger, displacement, and conflict as factors increasing this risk.

In this report, our goal is to let the voices and experiences of children speak for themselves. Every child has a powerful story to tell, and all have had their childhoods and lives brutally disrupted by this crisis. These children are not just statistics. The international community and the Government of the DRC must listen to their voices and fulfil their obligations to respond.

Interview sites in Kasai Central:

“

“One morning when I woke up, my parents sent me to go and buy oil. I happened upon a group of militia members and they took me. They made us drink things and a powder that they had prepared – I didn't know what was in it. They gave us all amulets (fetiche). And then they told us to go and fight the military.”

Daive, 15

“

“They came into the house and kidnapped me at 1am. They took me into the woods, and I had three baptisms. I ate the red ants. I spent two months in the woods. Life was hard. I'm traumatised, I have terrible memories of the killings.”









Ngalula, 12

“

“When they told us to go fight I hid in houses; I was scared of getting killed. One day there was a big attack and I fled, but unfortunately, I found my father dead, and my mum had been shot in the legs. I'd been with the militia for two months.”

Olivier, 17

### Interview sites:

-  Tshinyama
-  Tshikula
-  Nganza
-  Kamilombe
-  Tshilumba
-  Mutefu
-  Tubuluku
-  Tshiamua







## I. Forced to fight and struggling to reintegrate

A few children joined the militias by choice, but most we spoke to said they joined out of fear - either due to direct threats to their lives and those of their families if they didn't join, or from indirect pressure. The militias morphed over time; in some communities recruitment was mostly conducted by community leaders who found children and especially girls better at following their complex rules and rituals. In other cases, children were recruited by force by other children, or chose to seek out the militia in the hopes of finding protection and food to eat. In one village on the outskirts of Kananga, 53 percent of children that we spoke to said they had been in the militias.

Once in the militias, children spent weeks on the move or in camps in the bush. Some killed, and most saw others kill or be killed. All cited the killing and deaths of their companions as a struggle.

Studies of former child soldiers in Uganda and the DRC have found that up to 97 percent of children exhibit some form of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). According to these findings, the more children have been exposed to violence like killing, beating, or sexual violence, the less likely they are to be able to forgive the people who forced them to fight, creating long term insecurity.<sup>14</sup>

Child soldiers who have killed or injured people during conflict are also more likely to experience trouble connecting with others and developing the kinds of emotional bonds which can help them surmount their experiences. The younger children are when they join an armed group, the more likely they are to struggle to process the conflict.<sup>15</sup> Among the children we spoke to, the average age of children who had been in the militias was 15, meaning they would have been 13 or 14 when they joined. Children have told us of others as young as 5 in their tshiotas (militia camps).

“

*“Sometimes we killed soldiers. I killed five soldiers and one time the fighting was really hard and I ran away. I didn't want to kill people, but they made me. The worst thing was seeing the dead bodies of people I knew.”*

**Davide, 15**

“

*“I joined the militia. It was my papa who brought me to the initiation to be baptised. We spent two days marching with Papa. I went into battle and killed people. I killed 13 soldiers at the airport with a machete. When the soldiers shot, I'd keep going to get close and kill them; the bullets couldn't touch me. If the war starts again, I couldn't rejoin the militia because I've broken the rules. They told us not to acknowledge any soldiers, but I said hello to a soldier who's a member of my family, my uncle.”*

**Modeste, 10**

“

*“I was part of the militia but fled when my parents and my sister were killed. When I am alone, I think of my family and cry. What makes me most afraid now is the army and corpses. I have seen too many of both.”*

**Nadine, 15**

<sup>14</sup> Bayer, C. P., Klasen, F., Adam, H. (2007). “Association of trauma and PTSD symptoms with openness to reconciliation and feelings of revenge among former Ugandan and Congolese child soldiers”. JAMA, 298 (5), 555-559. doi:10.1001/jama.298.5.555.

<sup>15</sup> Betancourt, T.S., Brennan, R.T., Rubin-Smith, J., Fitzmaurice, G.M., Gilman, S.E. (2010) “Sierra Leone's former child soldiers: a longitudinal study of risk, protective factors, and mental health.” *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*. 49(6):606-615. doi:10.1016/j.jaac.2010.03.008.

### Moving past the conflict

Community acceptance post conflict is also very important, but 75 percent of the former child soldiers we spoke to told of a continued fear of official persecution as well as a general sense of unease. Community leaders and those working with children also told us that the fear is real – that the army and the police are trying to find all of the people who were part of militias in order to lock them up.

Of the children we spoke to who were in the militias, 40 percent, ranging in age from 10 to 17, are not in school. Instead they work in the fields, helping their parents to support the family, and play football with their friends. Their worries about persecution and guilt over their actions during the conflict seem to subsume them. When asked about their lives now, they're all preoccupied with the after-effects of the conflict.

The lack of education and the sense of unease in the communities is an early warning sign for the future of these children. Reintegration

programmes to date have been weak, or widely lacking, and less than 10% of children targeted for protection programming have received any help. Education has been only slightly better funded.<sup>16</sup> Research has shown that enabling former child soldiers to continue their education can help them adapt to their changing lives and be better able to process their experiences.<sup>17</sup>

While the effects of participating in the conflict itself are severe, post-conflict care has a significant potential to determine the impact the crisis will have on children's lives. Schooling is really important to give children a sense that they can find a different future outside of the militias; without it, their risk of re-recruitment is higher. Community acceptance and school enrolment can decrease the chances that a former child soldier will go on to have a violent future, whereas an internalisation of problems, being recruited at a young age, social stigma and economic struggle can all increase the psychological effects of conflict on former child soldiers.<sup>18</sup>



*"I was afraid to come here. I thought I would be followed and persecuted."*

Jean, 16



*"Sometimes in the neighbourhood we're followed by soldiers and agents of the ANR [the National Intelligence Agency]"*

Mélanie, 17



*"I'm scared. My big brother got arrested and he was only recently let go. I can never rest easy."*

Ngalula, 12



*"I'm not doing anything now, and I don't go to school. I'm always uneasy - I killed people, and sometimes I think about what I did."*

Pascal, 15

**Figure 2:** Child recruitment in militias

Of the **100 children** we spoke to...



**20** had been associated with the militias, in villages stretching from Dibaya territory to Kazumba.

Out of these **20 children**...



**2 boys** joined when their father and older brother brought them to the *tshiotas*.



**1 girl** joined by choice after seeing the violence that was being inflicted on others.



**17 children** joined through force and fear for their lives.

16 OCHA. "Bilan final de la réponse L3 d'octobre 2017 à avril 2018" 22 June 2018. [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/sitrep\\_L3\\_rdcongo\\_no3\\_vfinale.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/sitrep_L3_rdcongo_no3_vfinale.pdf)  
 17 Betancourt, T.S., Brennan, R.T., Rubin-Smith, J., Fitzmaurice, G.M., Gilman, S.E. (2010) "Sierra Leone's former child soldiers: a longitudinal study of risk, protective factors, and mental health." *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 49(6):606-615. doi:10.1016/j.jaac.2010.03.008.  
 18 Betancourt, T.S., Newnham, E., McBain, R., & Brennan, R. (2013). "Post-traumatic stress symptoms among former child soldiers in Sierra Leone: Follow-up study." *British Journal Of Psychiatry*, 203(3), 196-202.



## Raphael's story

“

*“We were in Tshikapa, at the house, when we saw the soldiers come and take Papa. Our neighbours told us they killed him. The next day, the soldiers came for my mum, but she was sick and she cried and begged the soldiers and they let her go.*

*When we got here, my friends brought me to the tshiota to be washed. They said it was for my own protection. I took part in a ceremony where I went around*

*the initiation space so many times, and they hit me with mortar in the chest so I could repel bullets. They cut me with a machete on my lower belly so I would be protected against any attack.*

*I fled with my mum and my sister. Before we crossed the river, they refused to let my big sister go because they thought she might be a militia member, and we had to leave her behind in the*

*village. A few days later we heard that she'd joined the militia and a couple of days later we found her at the market. She had gone crazy and she was dead.*

*It took us five days to walk from Tshikapa. We drank any water we could find and ate cassava and pineapples if we could find them.”*

**Raphael, 11**



## 2. Persistent displacement and hunger

Whether children were in the militia or not, most spent weeks if not months in the bush, either fleeing the violence with their families, or with their militia tshiota. All speak of hunger during this time, commonly citing cassava leaves as their only source of nutrition.

Malnutrition is pervasive in the DRC, and even before the conflict almost 20 percent of families in Kasai Central were struggling to get enough to eat. After the conflict last autumn, the number had risen to 76 percent.<sup>19</sup> Long-term hunger has been compounded by repeated displacements during which farmers left fields fallow while they hid in the woods. Prior to the conflict, some families had goats or chickens, which represented savings and helped them to keep their children well fed. However, armed parties on both sides seized livestock, meaning that families who returned from the bush have had to begin from scratch, with empty fields and missing animals.



*“For two years, we were hiding in the woods. I haven’t been able to study because of the war. We were always running and hiding in the woods with my parents and lots of other people. We were there for three months altogether; life was difficult. There was no food, or oil, or salt or soap. We couldn’t find food; mostly we ate fruit. The armed groups killed a lot of people, they even followed us into the woods.”*

Marie, 12



*“Our life changed. Sometimes we ate raw cassava, or we’d sleep hungry. It wasn’t good.”*

Ntumba, 18

After two growing seasons with no harvests, and a relatively poor one at the end of 2017, food stocks and coping mechanisms are severely depleted. In January, World Vision conducted an assessment with World Food Programme which found that over 52 percent of children suffer from stunting, and 15 percent have acute malnutrition. A 750 percent increase in food insecurity from pre-crisis levels<sup>20</sup> has translated into mass malnutrition, and put 400,000 children at risk of death.<sup>21</sup> Food insecurity in the DRC has never before been so close to famine.<sup>22</sup>

When World Vision spoke to families in March 2018 in Dibaya territory, 84 percent told us that a lack of access to food was one of the biggest problems facing children in their community. Only 6 percent of families were able to fully meet all of their basic non-food needs and cover things like school fees and medical care for their children.



*“We fled into the forest; we spent two months there. We ate cassava leaves and palm nuts. Life was really bad. We struggled to eat and we were sick.”*

Kanana, 10



*“We spent two months in the forest. We weren’t eating well. We finished everything we brought with us, and then there was nothing. All the food was far away. We were just suffering.”*

Christine, 15

Food shortages caused by displacement and interrupted planting have been further compounded as families play host to extended relatives who’ve fled ethnic violence in Tshikapa and other regions. 37 percent of families have more people living with them now than they did before the crisis. In Dibaya territory, the average household size is now nine, compared to a country-wide average of six.



*“Papa had left [where we were hiding] on a bike to try and find us something to eat. While he was on the road the was taken and killed. We fled Dibaya and it took us six months to come here, passing through all the different villages. Sometimes we ate and sometimes we didn’t.”*

Mulamba, 10



*“I’m here with my two little brothers, the others don’t have the strength to come here. They have malnutrition. I have to leave them at home because they always need to be carried and it tires me out. When I see our children who are dying of malnutrition, it makes me sad.”*

Agnes, 13

<sup>19</sup> European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), Food Security Cluster presentation, September 2017.  
<sup>20</sup> <https://unocha.exposure.co/eight-facts-about-the-humanitarian-crisis-in-the-democratic-republic-of-the-congo>.  
<sup>21</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/06.12.18%20-%20USAID-DCHA%20DRC%20Complex%20Emergency%20Fact%20Sheet%20%234.pdf>.  
<sup>22</sup> Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP), December 2017.



## Andre's story

“

*“My papa worked in the mines, and when they were on their way home one day, Papa and my big brother were attacked by the militia who were attacking anyone who came from Kasai.*

*I fled with my little sister. It took us two weeks to leave Tshikapa and come here, and on the road we found two kinds of soldiers – there were mean ones who made us suffer with their tricks, and others who were nice. Life was really difficult with the soldiers thinking everyone was in the militias. We lived off of cassava.*

*My mum tried to follow us, and then she heard that we were in this village. But when we arrived the war started again. We fled for the home of our neighbour who told us to hide on the floor. Our mum didn't know where we were and she started to cry, thinking that we were dead.*

*When she found us, she told us to go hide in the bush, but unfortunately the soldiers were there searching for the militia and we had to flee back to another village. When we got there, there was conflict there too, and our mum said we couldn't flee any more.*

*One of my friends told me I should join the militia, but when I told my mum, she said she'd murder me and I'd die right away. I didn't try to join the militia again.*

*It calmed down again, but we can't go to school any more. The worst thing has been Papa dying. If he was alive, we wouldn't be suffering.”*

**Andre, 13**



### 3. Lost parents and education

No child we spoke to escaped the conflict unscathed. Many lost parents, friends, or siblings in the conflict as they fled multiple times. Altogether almost a quarter (23 percent) of the children we spoke to lost either their mother, father, or a sibling in the conflict.

Many children had their lives turned upside down in the conflict. Some are now living in host communities, or with extended family. There are also many who are without any familial care. Over one in ten children we spoke to lost a parent during the conflict.

The loss of one or both parents further reduces the resiliency of children recovering from exposure to armed conflict. A difficult home life, missing parents, or a lack of community support makes it more likely for children to experience some form of PTSD.<sup>23</sup>

The loss of parents has meant that many children have also dropped out of school. When we spoke to them,

61 percent of children who lost a mother or father during the conflict were not in school.<sup>24</sup>



*“When the soldiers began fighting the militia, I fled with my two little sisters who died from gunshot wounds on the road. I haven’t seen my mother or father since the war.”*

**Styno, 8**



*“At around 10AM the soldiers came to the market. The militia heard about the soldiers’ arrival, and they began shooting. Everyone fled. We got lots of mosquito bites and only had raw cassava to eat. Our sister died in the bush from a stray bullet.”*

**Sebastien, 13**



*“I don’t have a father anymore; he was killed in my presence.”*

**Fabrice, 14**

Of the children we spoke to overall, less than two-thirds (64 percent) were currently in school. During the conflict, over 400 schools were attacked and destroyed and despite back to school campaigns since the end of the conflict, many children in the Kasais remain out of school.

Displacement and interrupted economic activities have made it difficult for parents to afford to send their children to school, even if one is still there. Some children aren’t attending because their parents need help at home as they recover from the financial effects of the crisis, others because there’s no money to pay school fees, and some out of fear and insecurity.

23 Betancourt, T. S., & Khan, K. T. (2008). “The mental health of children affected by armed conflict: Protective processes and pathways to resilience.” *International Review of Psychiatry* (Abingdon, England), 20(3), 317–328. <http://doi.org/10.1080/09540260802090363>.

24 13 children lost a parent, 8 of them are out of school. Overall, 36 children are not in school.



*"When the war started, my parents fled in one direction, and we don't know where they are. I fled with my two sisters and our grandfather. Now we're staying with our father's second wife. The killings were the worst, we saw lots of dead bodies on the ground."*

**Bibi, 12**



*"I'm not in school anymore. I was in 4th grade, but my father disappeared during the atrocities."*

**Jeanette, 12**



*"I don't go to school anymore. I would meet the militia members on my way to school. That's why my parents thought it was better that I stop going to school."*

**Christine, 15**



*"The trouble started when I was at school with my two brothers. We jumped out of the window and fled with a woman we didn't know that we found along the way. We spent a week walking in the forest."*

**Madeleine, 11**



*"Our heads are all disturbed from the sound of bullets."*

**Mulamba, 10**

Studies have shown that returning to education after a conflict is an important part of the recovery process for children, and can help give them a sense of security and hope for the future. For children who have been displaced, education becomes even more important as a way for them to connect and establish social bonds in their new community.<sup>25</sup>

During community focus groups in April 2018, being out of education was widely discussed by the children and families in Dibaya as a form of violence against children.

Many children World Vision spoke to dream of becoming nurses or teachers in the future. In a country where the Church is often seen as a pillar of stability and goodness, children also said they wanted to become priests or nuns. However, without an education, these children will struggle to achieve their goals.

In one village on the outskirts of Kananga, the militia and military confrontation happened at midday, while children were in school. The teachers panicked and told the children to run, sending them fleeing in the midst of the crossfire. Three children in the village have gone mute from the terrible event and now struggle to interact with their peers. All suffer from the after-effects.

For all the children in the Kasais, recovering from the conflict will be a long-term process and require support. One of the most heartbreaking responses during the interviews was from a 16-year-old former child soldier who told us that she doesn't have a favourite game anymore and has no hopes for the future.



*"I was forced to join without permission from my parents. I treated others badly; the killings were terrible. Now sometimes I play in the community, and I work in the fields. I'm scared; I can't rest easy."*

**Héroïne, 16**



*"I was with Papa, Mama, and my three brothers. When we heard the sounds of the guns, people started running here and there, and we fled to come here. The worst thing was seeing the dead bodies on the road."*

**Rose, 6**



*"The worst thing about the conflict was the killings, we would see people get killed and then the bones on the ground. And we'd see people dead on the ground. We'd see people who'd been killed, but with their heads missing, lying on the ground. When we came back to the village from the bush, we found the houses burnt and dead bodies."*

**Therese, 12**

25 Betancourt, T.S., Khan, K.T. "The mental health of children affected by armed conflict: Protective processes and pathways to resilience."



## World Vision Child Friendly Spaces in the Kasai Region



*"The CFS distracts me. When I'm here I can forget about my worries."*

**Alexi, 17**



*"Thanks to the CFS I forget about the past and I make new friends."*

**Sebastien, 13**

Some children claim to have found peace since the conflict, especially through returning to school, and programmes like World Vision's Child Friendly Spaces (CFS) where they can laugh and play. World Vision has previously conducted research looking at refugee children who attend our CFS in Ethiopia and in Uganda. Children there demonstrated significantly higher levels of mental, social and emotional well-being than other refugee children.<sup>26</sup> CFS can reduce levels of stress and long-term damage to a child's mental health, and the research shows the importance of providing psychosocial support for children exposed to armed conflict.

In the Kasais, many children say that part of the reason they come to the CFS is because they don't want to be home alone. There is a lot of fear that something might happen again and they will need to flee very quickly and be separated from their parents.

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.wvi.org/child-protection/publication/evaluation-child-friendly-spaces-ethiopia-field-study-summary-report>.





## Marie's story

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*“The militia came to my house. They came and tried to make me join the insurrection. And when we refused, they forced their way into the house. There were children younger than me and adults in the group that came and tried to make me join.*

*My cousin died. My aunt's son... He got killed, just like that. It was the militia who killed him, when they came to our house.*

*I was with my big brother and my aunt. We spent a month hiding in the forest after we fled. When we were hiding in the forest, we had to drink the dirty water. The forest wasn't a nice experience, we were getting sick while we*

*were there. We had to eat things that weren't cooked properly, we didn't have any cooking oil. We were surviving off of cassava leaves. We picked them off the ground and had to eat them without cooking. For me, the forest wasn't very nice. I was getting bitten by all the insects.*

*I still see one of the children and one of the adults from the militia. They just sit at home; they aren't working or anything.*

*I study at home, and come to the Child Friendly Space to play football. I feel like things are getting better when I'm at school, but now that I'm not at school I'm worried.*

*I've heard that the militias might be restarting. During the war, a lot of people were killed. It's one of the things I don't like about the militias - they killed a lot of people. We saw the films that they took, how they were decapitating people. We're scared.*

*The only thing that can create peace now is the elections. It was horrible how we all killed each other.”*

**Marie, 15**

# Glimmers of hope - children's recommendations for change

The daily stresses of displacement, poor housing, altered family dynamics and hunger post conflict can all have powerful detrimental effects on the mental state of children.

The conflict has changed children's living situations for the worse, and the combined effect creates a lot of stress for children to process as they attempt to regain their normal lives. For the children in the Kasais, unless they receive the psychosocial support they need, the conflict could have long-term effects on their mental health, social relationships, ability to control their emotions, and memory.<sup>27</sup>



*"I'm scared. I'm scared because we hear that the militias are starting again. The conflict brought bad things, we had to take refuge in the forest."*

**Christine, 15**

All children in the Kasais have been deeply affected by this conflict, and all require support. It is incredible that despite the distress and disruption of the past several years children are trying to overcome their experiences and enjoy their childhoods. They laugh and enjoy playing football or jump rope with their friends. The future of the Kasais will depend on how well these children are able to rebuild their lives and move forward from their horrific experiences.

Many of the children told World Vision that in the future they want to become footballers, teachers or doctors, while some are concerned with influencing the political system for the better as governors, Members of Parliament, or judges.

**Children's recommendations** for their future are not complicated and can certainly be achieved with the right level of investment and effort by the international community and the Government of the DRC.

They are:

- End the conflict and protect them from violence
- End the hunger and uncertainty
- Invest in children's education
- Welcome children back
- Listen to children's opinions and consult them about their future and the future of their country

<sup>27</sup> Miller, K. E., & Rasmussen, A. (2010). "War exposure, daily stressors, and mental health in conflict and post-conflict settings: bridging the divide between trauma-focused and psychosocial frameworks." *Social science & medicine*, 70(1), 7-16.

# World Vision's Recommendations

## Listen to children and invest in their mental health and psychosocial care

The children of the Kasais desperately need more support to recover from the effects of the conflict. Their views are clear. They want to be listened to. They need to be listened to, by their Government and the international community, and have their opinions taken into account.

The knowledge, problem solving ability and commitment of children and young people to building a better future should not be underestimated. They have not started the crises, and yet they are disproportionately affected. Allowing them space to use their voices will lead to a stronger, more stable DRC.

Donors and the Government of the DRC have a responsibility to prevent and protect children from further violence and to invest in the future of children in the Kasais. This should include investment in psychosocial care to help children overcome deeply distressing events and integrating psychosocial care across humanitarian interventions. Mental health and psychosocial support programmes can strengthen social support networks that enhance trust and tolerance among children and youth, help to develop reconciliation, and enable children to become active agents of positive change in their communities, as well as restore hope.

Child-focused programmes should include capacity building for the facilitators who work in these spaces to recognise signs that a child is in distress. Care must be provided in line with recognised child protection standards and the IASC Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings. All humanitarian actors must systematically include child protection in humanitarian assessments and to continuously monitor improvements in children's protection and well-being, making full use of the minimum standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action.

## Protect children from grave violations of their rights

Globally, violence against children costs up to US\$7 trillion each year.<sup>28</sup> Violence against children in Kasai is not inevitable. It can be prevented and doing so would have a substantial impact on children's long-term health, developmental and education outcomes. Moreover, investment in preventing violence against children in Kasai could bring significant social and economic returns that would contribute to the long-term stability and development of the region. Put simply, it is more cost effective to prevent violence than to need to respond to it.

A comprehensive strategy, backed by sufficient resources, is necessary to prevent violence against children

in Kasai, and across the DRC. The strategy must seek to address the factors that increase children's vulnerability to grave violations, creating a protective environment around children, ensuring:

- universal birth registration
- strong national and local mechanisms for protecting children
- access to good quality education for all; and
- social protection measures for families.

## Prevent stigma and invest in reintegration and accountability

Any child in the Kasais caught up in conflict must be first and foremost treated as a victim and a survivor of deeply distressing events, not as a perpetrator or accomplice.

Any blame or stigma attached to children formerly associated with armed actors should be tackled through investment in reconciliation and reintegration efforts within families and communities, not juvenile detention or legal persecution. Instead, the international community need to work with the Government of the DRC to hold accountable perpetrators of grave violations against children in the Kasais.

Support for demobilisation and reintegration of children formerly associated with armed groups should

28 ODI and ChildFund Alliance (2014), The Costs and Economic Impact of Violence against Children, <http://childfundalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/ODI-Policy-Brief-The-cost-and-economic-impact-of-violence-against-children.pdf>

include investment in the provision of specialised support services, such as psychosocial care, to the affected children and their families, as well as support for children to continue their education and access skills training, which can help them to contribute productively to their community.

Article 39 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child calls on all states to promote social reintegration of children affected by armed conflict in an environment which fosters the health, self-respect and dignity of the child. The DRC is a signatory to the convention and has a duty to uphold its commitments.

### **Investments in longer-term peace and development of the Kasai region**

Before the conflict began, the Kasai provinces were already some of the least developed areas in the DRC. Poor levels of infrastructure have been further degraded as health centres and schools were attacked during the conflict. Creating a better future for children across the Kasais will require long-term investment in addressing grievances, peace building, as well as in strengthening child protection systems, repairing the damage caused by conflict and improving existing infrastructure,

especially schools and hospitals. Preventing future malnutrition and hunger will mean longer term investment in water and sanitation, livelihoods and agricultural practices. Healing community grievances should be a core priority. This will take time and necessitate funding and planning that goes beyond three, six, or 12-month programmatic cycles. In line with the Grand Bargain commitments donors should pledge multi-year collaborative and flexible funds to address the situation in the Kasais and improve children's well-being. Funding should go beyond saving lives, to changing lives.

## **About World Vision in the DRC**

World Vision has been delivering relief, rehabilitation and development programmes in DRC since 1984. Currently, World Vision operates in 14 out of 26 provinces, with programming in protection, health, nutrition, water and sanitation, food aid, food security, peacebuilding and emergency relief, reaching almost 2.5 million people in 2015.

World Vision declared a Category III National Emergency in the Kasais in June 2017, and scaled the response up to a Category III Global Emergency (the organisation's highest priority level) in November 2017. As well as

responding in the Kasais, World Vision Angola has also been working with refugees from the region in Luanda Norte since July 2017.

World Vision was one of the first humanitarian organisations to begin aid distributions in Kasai Central in August 2017 and to date has reached 246,676 people with 5,226 metric tonnes of food, as well as 198,429 people with \$10.3 million in cash transfers. World Vision has also been working with children specifically affected by the crisis, distributing school supplies as part of a back to school campaign, running peace and

reconciliation workshops in Kamonia and Luiza communities, and opening Child Friendly Spaces for children to have a safe space to play. Altogether, World Vision has reached 38,164 children through child protection and education programmes.

World Vision's Kasais Emergency Response aims to reach an additional 500,000 people by the end of 2018, focusing on child protection and education, nutrition and food assistance, water, sanitation and hygiene, and multi-sectoral cash-based transfers.

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.

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