

Civic Education – 12-14 years

Teachers resources



Child Soldiers

Teacher's Resource Sheet: Selected passages from Guy Goodwin-Gill and Ilene Cohn, *Child Soldiers: The Role of Children in Armed Conflicts* (Oxford, OUP, 1994)

The Changing Face of War

Increasingly, war and conflict are marked by the numbers of civilian deaths. In time of conflict, children risk recruitment or attraction to the military for many reasons:

- Schools that might otherwise occupy their time are destroyed or closes
- fields they might otherwise plant are off-limits because of fighting or mines
- relatives and neighbours are arbitrarily arrested, abused, or tortured.

Often a gun is a meal-ticket and a better alternative to sitting at home afraid and helpless. Today, even small boys and girls can handle common weapons like assault rifles.

More children can be more useful in battle with less training than ever before.

But children are not always forced to become soldiers. Sometimes, as in Liberia, they are among the first to join; or as in the Palestinian *intifada* in the Israeli occupied territories, they are the primary catalysts of violent strife. The motivation lies in the very roots of conflict, in the social, economic and political issues defining children's lives. Confronting these larger concerns may be the only realistic road to preventing youth participation in otherwise unavoidable hostilities.

Forced Recruitment

In El Salvador through 1991 and even now in Guatemala, the armed forces fill their ranks, taking young men out of buses and cars, away from market-places or churches. Formal conscription processes, if they exist, are by-passed.

Why do they forcibly recruit? Manpower shortages and class discrimination are among the reasons. Army salaries rarely lure even the poor, while the young from the wealthier families are considered free of subversive tendencies, and just don't travel the country buses targeted for recruitment sweeps.

While the government has also used force, the Mozambican resistance (RENAMO) consistently and systematically practised forced recruitment, even preferring children to adult combatants:



'Kids have more stamina, are better at surviving in the bush, do not complain, and follow directions'.

But they are also brutalized, 'programmed' to feel little fear or revulsion for the atrocities they committed. RENAMO would take a boy back to his village, forcing him to kill someone he knew; the community saw what he had done, and the door to ever returning to his village was closed tight.

Involuntary recruitment is not necessarily a matter of physical threats or intimidation. No one knows exactly why 12,000 homeless Sudanese boys trekked the wastes of Sudan, Ethiopia or Kenya; or how 'voluntary' is the enlistment of Tamil youth. Subtle and not so subtle pressures are at work, and all the harder to eradicate.

Influences

Children are influenced by their social milieu and by their stage of development. Parents, families, peer groups, schools, religious communities and other community-based institutions have their sway. And how a child understands or integrates his or her experiences also works its effect.

The militarisation of daily life, patrols and curfews and the celebration of soldiering and military death, create a climate, a mentality of violence.

Children who become soldiers have often witnessed physical violence, death squad killings, disappearances, torture, detention, sexual abuse, displacement, destruction of home or property. They seek revenge, or to continue the struggle, or to find another family, to take control of events.

Most of the 3,000 or so children in the Ugandan NRA had been orphaned during the Obote army's rampages through the countryside.

They were taken in by the army when their parents died. They looked to the army as surrogates, as parents.

But that was often secondary to the fact that they had personally lived through the murder of family, friends, and community, in an experience beyond remedy and certain to influence the rest of their lives.

Children and their Experiences

How children explain and evaluate their personal experiences influences their decision to join one or another armed group. Adults have different explanations. Leaders and devotees of armed opposition groups, like Liberia's NPFL, the Afghan Mujahedin, El Salvador's FMLN, and the Sri Lankan LTTE often claim they could not prevent zealous children from joining voluntarily in support of 'the cause'.

Some children do profess loyalty to religious, nationalist, or political ideology, but too many instances of evident indoctrination negate the idea of voluntariness, and case doubt on the extent to which youth of a certain age have the capacity to think rationally about concepts like ideology and nation.

- Young Palestinians throw stones to 'prove' they are not collaborators;
- Liberian boy soldiers believe fantastic promises of future rewards;
- Young Tamils want to learn to ride a motorcycle;
- Many want the adventure, or an alternative to their present;



- The Afghan Mujahedin concentrated on 'arming their children spiritually and emotionally for the battles that lie ahead'.
- In Iran, young men flocked to the recruitment centres, fired by the picture of Iraqis as unbelievers without divine protection.

How communities 'value' the reasons for conflict is often central to children's own perceptions. Where community violence is prevalent, rational decision-making processes or non-violent options for conflict resolution may be overridden. Children see a violent response to structural or political problems as the 'only' choice.

Ironically, some young people feel more secure *inside* an armed opposition movement than outside, with other orphans, street children, refugees and displaced civilians. But war is a false environment, replacing freedom of thought and opinion with ideology, around a final purpose which is to create chaos and ruin, despite the superficial emphasis on comradeship, order and discipline. War is a moral lie.

Children can also pick up 'mixed messages'.

- Parents who are proud of their activist children, yet terrified for their safety;
- Parents who support the armed opposition, while actively discouraging their own children from joining.
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Conditions of Participation

The Henry Dunant Institute Study suggests that the only military-strategic rationale for using children as soldiers, rather than adults is that they are expendable and exploitable.

- **Iranian children** were in waves over mine fields.
- **Mozambique's RENAMO** and **Cambodia's Khmer Rouge** used terror and physical abuse to turn out fierce killers.
- **Uganda**: 'In the beginning, they mostly helped around the camps. With time the kids pressed; they wanted to get guns and fight for the cause. Most of the time they were refused. But then, later, some went into battle'.
- **Sri Lanka**: Far from home and a cyanide capsule to take if wounded or captured.
- **Zimbabwe**: Children can move about freely and are not instantly suspected of spying or supplying. They are an important link to the civilian population; if children co-operate, their communities can hardly do otherwise.

For their own protection, children should not wear uniforms, carry arms, move with troops, live in bases which are legitimate military targets. But when children's realities are defined by war's causes and by-products, such as displacement, separation, loss of parents, lack of food and shelter, should we not anticipate the choice that some of them will make?

The Consequences of Participation

Children face detention, for example, for subversion under national penal law. In international armed conflicts, they may become child prisoners of war.

Several hundred Iranian children spent several years in POW camps in Iraq, their return home apparently of no interest to their government.



In the late 1980's hundreds of young Ethiopians, forcibly recruited by the government, were captured by the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front. Like the Iranian boys, some spent years in the camps; and like the Iranian government, the Ethiopian government showed no interest in their fate. Unlike the Iranians, however, they did not benefit from POW status under the Third Geneva Convention, since the war was not characterised as an international armed conflict.

Psychosocial Consequences

'Every child', says the Convention on the Rights of the Child, is entitled to receive such 'protection and care as is necessary for his or her well-being' and States are obliged to 'ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child'. In addition, States must protect children from all forms of mental violence or abuse, and strive to ensure that victims of armed conflict have access to rehabilitative care.

- After a month in a camp in Thailand, one 15-year-old former Khmer Rouge cadre began hearing two voices arguing with each other inside his head. The first, a Khmer Rouge leader, was angry because the boy deserted; the second, a Buddhist priest, said that even when he died he would be punished for what he had done.

As child soldiers lay down their guns, they rediscover killing as moral transgression.

- A 10-year-old abducted by RENAMO, forced to kill civilians and soldiers, suffered flashbacks in which events from the past came flooding back at unexpected moments to haunt him.
- Kabanda was nine when he watched UNLA soldiers kill his parents: 'The man who kill my mother, they make me angry. Me, I decide to go in the army. Me, I decide to beat them. If I find them, I kill'.
- 13-year-old Stephen: 'I know these people they killed. This one, when I would come home from school and I be hungry, he would give me food. Now I remember. Those men who killed my friend, they should be killed.'
- Liberia, 15-year-old Ram Dee: 'I am a rebel. I fought off the trouble. I took in the bubble. I said double trouble. I'm a man who's not stable'.

Families, communities, and entire societies suffer the repercussions of children's participation in armed groups or forces, including collective punishments, house demolitions and forced displacement.

Families and communities may also reject former child soldiers, either because they have committed serious abuses or because they fear violent retribution for their acts. Many NGOs anticipate high levels of popular resentment towards former combatants in Liberia, given the level of atrocities.

Convention on the Rights of the Child

Adopted by resolution no. 44/25 of the General Assembly of the United Nations on 20 November 1989



Article 38

1. States Parties undertake to respect and to ensure respect for rules of international humanitarian law applicable to them in armed conflicts which are relevant to the child.
2. States Parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure that persons who have not attained the age of fifteen years do not take a direct part in hostilities.
3. States Parties shall refrain from recruiting any person who has not attained the age of fifteen years into their armed forces. In recruiting among those persons who have attained the age of fifteen years but who have not attained the age of eighteen years, States Parties shall endeavour to give priority to those who are oldest.
4. In accordance with their obligations under international humanitarian law to protect the civilian population in armed conflicts, States Parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure protection and care of children who are affected by an armed conflict.

Out of sight, out of mind

In early 1992, the civil war in Sudan produced a tragic, new group of refugees who - for a time, at least - focused international attention on the victims of conflict in the Horn of Africa. Some 12,500 young Sudanese boys, many of them kidnapped from their families and forced to join a rag-tag children's army, sought refuge in Kenya after wandering for five terrifying years across Sudan and Ethiopia.

Today, four years after their arrival in Kenya, the plight of these boys and the hundreds of thousands of other refugees and internally displaced people in Horn of Africa is all but forgotten. But they are still there, just some of the millions of people forced from their homes by conflict, internal political strife and the effects of drought.

The largest number of IDPs is in Sudan, created by that country's civil war, which reignited in 1982. The U.S. Committee for Refugees puts the number of displaced persons in Sudan at between 3.5 and 4 million people, most of them living desperately on the edge of disaster.

Depending upon which estimates are used, IDPs in the countries of the Horn could number up to another 1 million persons, mainly in Somalia.

In Sudan, a country at war with itself even before its independence in 1956, many saw disaster looming long ago. In 1988, the late James Grant, Executive Director of UNICEF, began shuttle negotiations first with the government in Khartoum and then with the rebel leaders in the south, which finally brought agreements for a cross-border relief operation. Kenya became the focus of the cross-border effort for the south, while another assistance program was started out of Khartoum, to assist war-affected populations with food and other urgently needed medical supplies.

Relief aid to the people of Sudan is now overseen by Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS), a joint UNICEF/World Food Program (WFP) initiative. But despite its five-year existence, relief activities in Sudan are a stop-gap initiative, barely staving off the effects of war and collapse of the local economy.

WFP currently targets some 61,000 metric tons of food aid to more than 2 million people - Sudanese who, according to OLS, will find it difficult or impossible to

survive during the upcoming "hungry months" from April to August.

Philip O'Brien, who recently stepped-down as Coordinator of OLS' southern sector, warns that Sudan's civil war, and particularly internecine fighting among



rival rebel armies, has destroyed local grain stores and forced people from their traditional grazing and fishing grounds.

As the latest stage of Sudan's conflict enters its 14th year, there has also been an alarming trend of abductions of relief workers and hostage-taking, OLS reports. Over 1995, nearly 40 aid workers were taken hostage in three separate incidents, and OLS was forced to conduct more than 40 emergency evacuations of relief workers from locations in southern Sudan.

More than 35 international and Sudanese non-governmental organizations now work under the OLS umbrella, fielding some 200 aid workers inside southern Sudan, with more based out of the capital, Khartoum.

Security for U.N. and NGO workers is a prime concern for OLS staff, the same problem faced by UNHCR and other agencies in nearby Somalia, where UNHCR has run a cross-border operation from Kenya since 1992, while also maintaining a permanent presence in Hargeisa, northwest Somalia.

"We don't lack a capacity to do programs," said O'Brien, who now heads UNICEF's emergency unit from New York. "[Problems are] more related to funding and security."

And just as UNHCR finds donor interest in Somalia difficult to maintain - despite having successfully repatriated more than 42,000 refugees from Kenya in 1995 - a major roadblock for OLS lies with donor contributions. If funds are not available when security conditions on the ground permit access, then little can be achieved and people go hungry.

"We need money to keep the operation going," O'Brien said. "Needs are not met to let the operation run successfully."

Assisting the internally displaced and other people affected by the general collapse of services due to Sudan's war is not cheap. OLS will require some \$107.6 million in 1996 for food aid and a variety of other activities, including health programs, guinea worm eradication campaigns, and livestock and veterinary programs targeting a total of 4.2 million beneficiaries in both the north and south of the country.

In Somalia, UNHCR works to enhance the capacity of communities to cope with the strain brought on by the arrival of returnees and the presence of thousands of internally displaced persons.

Recent organized repatriation operations have come from Kenya, but spontaneous movements have also reduced refugee numbers considerably in neighboring countries. Such spontaneous movements also serve to help relay information about the safety of clan areas back to refugees. Repatriation operations in 1996 are also expected to include refugee movements from Ethiopia, Yemen and Djibouti.



UNHCR has been assisting people to return to northwest Somalia, although insecurity in the area in 1995 prevented any organized movement. Regardless of the periodic lack of humanitarian space, Kyaw Zin Hla, head of UNHCR's North West Somalia office in Hargeisa, believes the organization can do more to work with the clan system to assist people to return home.

"Political boundaries do not mean that much," said Hla, noting the nomadic lifestyle of many people in the region. "Clan boundaries are more flexible, more important. This has more positive effects on repatriation."

David Lambo, UNHCR's Regional Liaison Representative in Addis Ababa, says this nomadic lifestyle means there will always be people on the move in the Horn of Africa.

"There is a solution, I believe, to the refugee situation," Lambo said. "But the countries will always have to deal with an exceptionally mobile population that does not respect borders. It's something that has always gone on. Nomads will always look for pasture and water availability, but political crises in countries like Somalia have exacerbated this."

Like OLS, UNHCR must work continually to attract donor interest in its operations to assist Somali refugees and returnees. In 1996, UNHCR's North West Somalia operations and the Kenya-based Cross-Border Operation will require a combined total of some \$13 million. This is a relatively small sum, but donor interest has so far been minimal. Operations in 1995 had to be funded out of monies borrowed from UNHCR's general voluntary repatriation fund.

UNHCR North West Somalia and the Cross-Border Operation design and implement rehabilitation activities, Quick Impact Projects (QIPs), in local communities. These small-scale assistance programs are designed to help returnees, new arrivals and local residents alike, and to restore community services neglected during long years of war and internal strife. The establishment of QIPs benefits the entire population, and thus reduces or eliminates animosity toward the returnees.

In 1995, for example, despite poor donor support, UNHCR implemented 35 QIPs in the Kismayo, Sakoweyn, Afmadu and Galcayo regions. Costing between a few hundred to a few thousand dollars each, these projects improved the lives of hundreds of thousands of Somalis and gave refugees in countries like Kenya added impetus to repatriate.

Funds went to projects such as a brick works in Wamo, canoe construction in Kismayo, a bakery run by women in Galcayo, and financial support to the Sakoweyn women's group. UNHCR-aided projects assisted residents and returnees alike, making communities more viable and repatriation more plausible. But the lack of donor support in 1995 meant that some 90 projects were not implemented.



While UNHCR did scrape together funds for a 1995 seed distribution program in Jamame and Jilib, it was unable to fund \$35,000 worth of farm tools to help farmers plant and those seeds and harvest the produce. Likewise in Badhade and Kismayo, UNHCR provided seeds to locals and returnees - but lacked the \$28,000 necessary to fund the distribution of farm tools necessary to ensure a successful harvest.

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