

A black and white photograph showing the silhouette of a young child standing in the center. The background is filled with bright, billowing smoke or fire, creating a stark contrast with the dark silhouette of the child. The overall mood is somber and evocative.

CHILD SOLDIERS

Dr MICHAEL WESSELLS is a Senior Child Protection Specialist for Christian Children's Fund and Professor of Psychology at the Randolph Macon College in Virginia USA. He has served as President of the American Psychological Association Division of Peace Psychology and Psychologists for Social Responsibility. Author of three books and sixty published papers, his current research on children and armed conflict examines child soldiers, displaced children, psychosocial assistance in emergencies and post conflict reconstruction for peace. He spoke to OLGA YOLDI



You have mentioned that societies around the world are increasingly socialising young people for war. How many child soldiers do you think are fighting wars? In what countries?

No exact figures are available, in part because commanders are skilled at hiding the evidence but also because many formerly recruited children fear stigmatization and want to avoid being identified. My personal best estimate is over 200,000 children are in armed forces or groups at this moment, and they span all continents. Significant numbers of children are recruited in Sri Lanka, Iraq, Myanmar, Palestine, Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia, Chad, Sudan, and Colombia, among others.

What methods do rebel groups use to dehumanise and brutalise young boys?

The dehumanization and brutalization applies to girls as well as boys. The primary method is forcing complete

obedience by demanding on threat of death that children carry out actions that would be unthinkable in civilian life. Not uncommonly, groups that abduct children force them to kill members of their own village to destroy the social bonds and reduce their motivation to escape.

In many armed groups, children are forced to kill other children who try to escape, and the killing methods are calibrated psychologically to reduce moral qualms about killing. In Northern Uganda, for example, children are forced to collectively beat escapees with large wooden sticks. In this method, no one knows who dealt the death blow, thereby easing any moral angst that might have occurred over killing. Also, many commanders force children to drink the blood of presumed enemies to 'harden them off', when the goal is really to remove the sense of sanctity of life. Often children are beaten severely or killed for even minor infractions of the rules. In this situation, children learn very quickly to obey orders and to stop

thinking about right and wrong in civilian terms--they enter a different moral world and do what they have to do to survive. The dehumanization process is completed by strictly isolating children from their friends and family, and prohibiting talk of what life is like outside the armed group. They become sealed, at least temporarily, in a new world where they have to operate according to the armed group's rules.

When wars end these children will be socially isolated and stigmatised. What is being done to integrate them back into society?

In many African countries, former child soldiers are believed to be contaminated or haunted by the spirits of the dead. In rural areas, people often believe these spirits hold the power of life and death, which is quite terrifying. The first step toward gaining community acceptance in such contexts is to work with local healers, who perform rituals to cleanse or wash away the bad spirits which are

seen as threatening not only the former child soldiers but also their families and communities. In addition, young people need to find a place or meaningful role in society--if they hang out or spend time 'idling' and getting in trouble, this will impede their acceptance. Accordingly, most reintegration programs follow the Paris Principles, which set the standards for reintegration practices, and organize a mixture of education, livelihoods, family reintegration, and reconciliation supports. The good news is that when these supports are available, the vast majority of the formerly recruited children do in fact integrate into civilian life, though reintegration typically is measured over years.

You have mentioned that children are not always passive agents, that in some circumstances they find meaning in violence. This is very challenging. Do you think that education on peace and the value of human rights is as important for post conflict communities as it is providing aid?

The majority of humanitarian work is guided by concern over human rights, which I support wholeheartedly. Yet there are other reasons to support violence-affected youth, including those who have intentionally joined so-called liberation struggles to overthrow powers whom they regard as oppressors or who have joined armed groups to get revenge, money, or goods they could not obtain otherwise.

The main 'other reason' has to do with peacebuilding--what realistic chance for peace and sustainable development will we have if young people are socialized into violence and finding meaning in it? What we need is a combination of international and national commitments to building positive life options for children so they will be less likely to get involved in violence. This entails not only access to education and means of earning a living but also addressing the root causes of the conflict, which often

related to social exclusion and injustice. Education for peace and human rights do not work well when applied alone, but they are effective when coupled with this approach of systems transformation.

You have worked with the Children Christian Fund in programs to reestablish trust between young killers and their victims. What programs did you develop to achieve that?

The most important first step is to rebuild empathy. In Sierra Leone, for example, local people feared ex-combatants and thought they were trouble makers and bloodthirsty predators. A key step was to create social spaces in which young people told their stories of abduction and mistreatment by the armed groups. Local people came to understand that the children had in fact suffered and that they had not done bad things to have a good time but because they had been exploited by adults.

CCF/Sierra Leone also did a very useful program in organizing work teams of ex-soldiers and other youth who together built things such as schools and health posts that the villages valued. As the youth collaborated, they rehumanized each other. Equally important, local people came to see the former soldiers not as fighters but as civilians who give back to their communities. This giving back is a means of restorative justice whereby youth pay back the community for the harms done to them during the war. CCF has implemented many other supports for war-affected children--typically they involve traditional cleansing, education, livelihoods, and mentoring--such programs have been implemented in places such as Afghanistan, Liberia, Chad, Angola, Uganda, Sri Lanka, and Sierra Leone, among others.

The proliferation of small arms means that it is easier than ever to arm children. What percentage, do you believe, of arms production are small arms?



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In addition to production, we have to think about distribution and availability. In most war zones in Africa, people can purchase an AK-47 assault rifle for the price of a chicken, and small arms are readily available through war profiteers. The numbers of small weapons are in the hundreds of millions, and this broad production and distribution makes it possible even for children of relatively small stature to be effective fighters.

As child soldiers, children are considered cheaper, less demanding than adults and they are easily manipulated. Are they also less able to cope with trauma than adult soldiers are?

Children are remarkably resilient overall. The chances of recovering and reintegration are high for most children. Chances are lower for children who are recruited at a very young age and who live inside armed groups for many years. But with appropriate community and family supports, most children defy the odds and make a successful transition to civilian life. This cautions against simplistic portrayals of young people as a "lost generation" or "traumatized children" who cannot find their way back. ■