

# 8

## Children in the disarmament and demobilisation process

### SUMMARY

Although the principle that children should be given priority in disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) has been broadly accepted, there is still a long way to go. Experience has shown that a significant proportion of children in fighting forces do not take part in formal DDR processes (see also chapter 5) and that there is a need for a much better understanding of the factors that encourage children to leave fighting forces, and of those that deter them from participating in a formal demobilisation.

This chapter looks at the main obstacles to children demobilising, and then suggests ways of improving their access to demobilisation and how to reach those who avoid or miss out on it altogether.

All too often, the essential political will and resources needed for effective DDR are lacking, while children are sometimes held back when their military commanders attempt to control the process. Other restraining factors range from personal attachments through to the belief that the outside world holds nothing better for them.

The chapter shows that children need accurate information and confidence in the DDR process in order to demobilise. Trained child protection staff, effective monitoring and a family tracing system can help meet children's needs. Continued efforts to secure children's release are also likely to be necessary.

## 8A. Obstacles to the disarmament and demobilisation of children

A formal disarmament and demobilisation is a complex and fragile process that can easily be derailed if the parties to the peace agreement lose confidence in it. Both adult and child combatants have to make a leap of faith when they give up their weapons. The adults are also releasing a major asset – the children who fight for them and serve them. Adults and children therefore need reassurance that the DDR process will deliver what it promises.

Political will at national level, and political and financial backing from the international community, are both crucial in providing the momentum needed for an effective DDR. All too often, both are lacking and disarmament and demobilisation in the past have been under-resourced, poorly organised and subject to delays. This is unlikely to make the combatants any keener to release children, or the children themselves to feel any more confident about the process that lies ahead.

Here are some other reasons why children fail to leave fighting forces or avoid the formal demobilisation:

- Public censure of armed groups that use children can make it difficult politically for such groups to acknowledge or release the children in their ranks (see Chapter 6). In Mozambique, the use and abuse of child soldiers was particularly stigmatised:

### **Denial**

Political expedience can result in complicit denial of children's rights violations by all factions. In order to avoid acknowledging its own child soldiers just as the 1994 national election campaigns were getting underway, the Liberation Front of Mozambique (FRELIMO) was allegedly willing to refrain from denouncing the Mozambican National Resistance's (RENAMO) forced recruitment of children and from insisting on rehabilitative programs for demobilising youth.<sup>1</sup>

- Commanders may try to release some children but not others, keeping back those who are more useful. Forces often see the demobilisation of children as a public relations opportunity, and may try to control the release of children to their own military or political advantage. This can mean that children who are not child soldiers and not directly involved in the force are released, such as dependants of adult commanders (see section 8B3 below).
- If children have to hand in a gun to be eligible to demobilise, this will exclude those who perform other functions in armed groups and thus do not have access to weapons. If there is a financial incentive to hand in weapons, commanders may force children to hand in a weapon, collect the money and bring it back to them. Or they may simply forbid the children to demobilise. If there are not enough weapons to go round, some children will be left out.
- If armed groups do not have confidence in the wider political process and the disarmament and demobilisation attached to this, they are unlikely to let children demobilise. In Sierra Leone, commanders have reportedly allowed children to demobilise in order to ‘test’ the process and then report back; they have then claimed that children are better off under their ‘care’. Commanders may also deliberately misinform children about what is available for them. Children demobilising in Liberia were told that they would receive, among other things, a bicycle, blue jeans and a pair of Nike trainers.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, children in Sierra Leone were told that they would be drowned in the sea, or that they should expect mob justice, hard labour and rejection by their family.<sup>3</sup>
- If being in the group means access to food or the feeling of ‘being somebody’, children need to be convinced that there is something better for them in the outside world. If their family handed them over to the armed group, or failed to protect them, they may feel that they have nothing and nobody to go back to. If they have suffered violence or abuse at home, they might feel that life in the army is a better option.
- Some children are held back by emotional attachment to commanders or peers. The fear of being separated from commanders might make them falsely claim that they are dependants. Girls in forced or consensual sexual relationships with adult commanders or older boys may be reluctant or afraid

to leave – or commanders may not allow them to. Little is known about the experiences and needs of girls (see Chapter 7, section E1), but for those who have been sexually abused or have had a child as a result of rape or a sexual relationship, presenting themselves in public can exacerbate their feelings of shame or fear of social rejection. Attachment to commander ‘husbands’, even if they are abusive, can be a powerful deterrent to demobilising. Also, girls who were actually combatants (as opposed to ‘wives’) may feel strongly about being separated from boys in this process.

### **Girls’ needs**

In Mozambique, there were reports that girls who wished to be reunited with their family were forced to stay with their partner or leave with him to go to his home. There were also reports that girls or women and their children were abandoned by their ‘husband’ and father [of their child] at the time of demobilisation. In other cases, the girls wished to stay with their partner and efforts were made to establish contact with the girl’s family.<sup>4</sup>

- The high public visibility of demobilisation may be a problem for some children. If they have taken part in atrocities against civilians, they may be worried about how they are perceived and may fear revenge attacks (see also Chapter 9, section E3).

### **Exposure**

Ex-combatant boys in Sierra Leone involved in a GOAL programme for street children did not go through the formal demobilisation procedure. According to programme staff and the boys themselves, “to many of [the boys], this is a blatant exposure of their involvement in the atrocities of the war. They want to be able to live and feel like any normal child and put their experiences as far behind them as possible.”<sup>5</sup>

## 8B. Approaches

### 1. Find out what encourages children to demobilise – and what might be preventing them

Chapter 6 has shown how important it is to learn from children who have already left the armed group about how they got out and what would help other children to demobilise. However, agencies need to be sure that talking to these children does not put them at risk. Members of the community allied to the armed group sometimes watch ex-combatant children and could target them for punishment. Children have also been used to send information back to their commanders.

Equally important is some understanding of how military commanders see the question. Children are probably the best sources of information here, as they have lived under the control of these commanders for months or even years. Community leaders, religious groups and members of the public may also be able to provide information. The same people will also be useful sources of information about local attitudes to disarmament and demobilisation, and about changes in the political and military situation that may hold up the process. Other national and international agencies, UN personnel and journalists will also have a view, and the co-ordination group should allow for continual updating and sharing of information.

### 2. Tell children in fighting forces about the DDR process and its benefits

How much confidence children have in the demobilisation process and what happens afterwards will depend upon what they think will happen to them and how they will benefit.

#### **Messages**

Demobilised children at an interim care centre in Sierra Leone were asked in a workshop about their worries before demobilising, the good things about

the centre, and what message they would give their friends that might make it easier for them to leave the bush. Some of their messages were that “living in the bush is not better than living in town” and “we are getting good treatment now, no violence”.<sup>6</sup>

Suggestions for communicating the children’s messages to others under arms included producing large signboards that would be positioned at demobilisation sites. These would have written information about what was available, and cartoon-type illustrations for children who could not read. It was also suggested that leaflets with the same designs could be produced and distributed.<sup>7</sup>

Communicating accurate information to children in fighting forces is difficult. Rumour travels fast in the charged political atmosphere surrounding a demobilisation, and if there are problems, children will certainly hear about them.

The people mentioned in section 1 above will certainly have suggestions on how to tell combatant children about the demobilisation. Other methods used in the past include broadcasting messages over the radio and distributing leaflets. Members of the community or local organisations can also be asked to help pass on information. If a UN peacekeeping mission is involved, its representatives will have prime responsibility for liaising with commanders. Part of their role should be to make sure that children are fully informed about the demobilisation process.

Agencies must be realistic about what they promise in public statements and they should be confident that they can deliver. If not, the process will falter and commanders will use this as an excuse to hold on to children (see also Chapter 6). On the other hand, children who have not been associated with the fighting forces may be attracted to the DDR process because of benefits it offers. A public information campaign, programmes for other children affected by the conflict as well as ex-combatants, and screening by trained staff of children presenting at demobilisation sites will all help to address this.

### **3. Make sure that agreed criteria for release of all children associated with fighting forces are implemented**

If there is a high public and political profile attached to children's demobilisation, this can complicate the process of releasing children. Commanders may try to control the release of children to their own advantage, putting forward some children while holding on to others who are more useful. Those put forward may, for example, be dependants of adult fighters or come from families associated with the armed group.

Non-combatant children are sometimes attracted to demobilisation sites or sent by their families in search of the benefits, or perceived benefits, offered by the DDR process. In high profile releases of children in Sierra Leone and South Sudan in 2001, for example, many of the children 'released' had never been child soldiers.

High profile releases are difficult to manage since there can be a great deal of pressure on all parties involved to produce large numbers of children. As a result, agreements may be finalised very quickly without the time or conditions required to carry out proper screening interviews of children. Even if criteria *are* agreed and interviews carried out, it can be difficult to ascertain the status of a child on the basis of a short, and often rushed, interview.

Once children have been admitted to the DDR process, reuniting them with their families can be a long and complex process. In some cases agencies face the dilemma of whether reunification is in the best interests of the child, particularly if family members are combatants and there is the potential for the child to become actively involved in the military.

If these problems are to be minimised, clear criteria for the demobilisation of all children associated with fighting forces must be agreed before children are released. This will need to be followed up by strenuous efforts to persuade all parties to follow proper procedures.

### **4. Lobby for sufficient trained staff and adequate security at demobilisation sites**

Child protection personnel must be present when children demobilise. If there

is a UN peacekeeping mission or other military presence leading the overall disarmament and demobilisation process, these forces must include trained child protection staff. In Sierra Leone, for example, a Child Protection Adviser was deployed to ensure that the peacekeeping operation was sensitive to children's needs; this included training military observers in child protection and special procedures for the disarmament and demobilisation of child combatants<sup>8</sup> (see also Appendix 7).

Ideally, the demobilisation of children should take place separately from the disarmament and demobilisation of adults. It is essential to provide adequate security: tensions can quickly rise if the children are not told enough about what is happening to them, or if they are made to wait around with nothing to do.

This can be avoided by having enough staff present who have the skills to diffuse anger and aggression and have been trained in communicating with ex-combatant children. One problem in Sierra Leone was that non-English-speaking peacekeepers could not communicate with commanders and children coming out of the bush to demobilise.<sup>9</sup>

Child protection personnel and security staff should work together. Security staff should be given clear information (including written procedures if necessary) about the demobilisation process and they should know exactly who they are protecting. A list of prohibited behaviour might also be included: for example, beating children, verbally intimidating them, encouraging aggressive behaviour and giving false information.

## **5. Monitor what happens to children who do not go through the formal demobilisation process**

Children who find their own way out of armed groups miss out on the formal demobilisation process and the benefits this can bring. Finding out where these children are and what protection they need can be a formidable task, especially if the situation is still unstable and parts of the country are inaccessible. Local organisations and community networks can play an important part in identifying children who might have special needs, or who have missed out

on demobilisation. Agencies working with street and working children, for example, may be providing support to ex-combatant children:

***Ex-combatant children living on the street***

In Sierra Leone, as in many other countries, ex-combatant children are living on the street. Even if they do demobilise formally, the children may have their own reasons for not wanting to stay in a centre or go back home. The approach used by a street children's programme supported by GOAL, with its strong emphasis on working with the community and with children 'where they are', could well offer lessons to programmes for demobilised children.

Work is carried out with children at the community level, starting where the child is and gradually building up a relationship of trust. Much advocacy work is done within the communities themselves to ensure that the children will be supported by their particular community in the longer term. To this end, Child Protection Committees have been set up to encourage communities to take greater responsibility for their street children. Two phases of community sensitisation workshops have also been held in the six areas where GOAL shelters are located. These have covered topics such as, 'Who is a street child?', 'How to approach street children' and 'Community initiatives'.<sup>10</sup>

If former child soldiers are located in communities, agencies should discuss, both at local level and with the co-ordinating body responsible for child DDR, how to meet their needs and whether they can be registered as part of the demobilisation process if they wish. This might be possible in their home area or at a demobilisation site or interim care centre.

Interviewing children about how they left the fighting forces, why they did not go through the formal process and whether they think it is useful can help agencies to adapt existing arrangements so that they are more accessible.

**6. Provide for the dependants of adult commanders and identify separated children who are not demobilised**

If adult combatants have their own families with them, facilities will be needed

for the children. In Sierra Leone, the families of combatants were not included in the original design of the national DDR programme. As a result, many programmes failed to cater for dependant women and children.<sup>11</sup> One of the difficulties that arose was how to verify who were the actual parents of the children in the groups demobilising. Some children thought of their commander as their legal guardian or parent, particularly those who did not remember their biological parent or their original name. There were also problems in reaching girls being kept with their ‘husbands’ in the adult demobilisation camps.

Agencies should therefore make sure at the planning stage that children who have a right to be with their parents are catered for, and that a procedure for screening exists. There should also be provision for children who are separated from their families but who are not child soldiers.

## 7. Maintain efforts to secure children’s release while demobilisation is under way

As mentioned above, continued efforts may be necessary to secure the release of children. In Angola, children spent several months in demobilisation quarters under the control of National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) commanders.<sup>12</sup> In Sierra Leone, demobilisation after the 1999 Lomé accord has been protracted and many children remain in the fighting forces. Community networks can play a critical role:

### ***Lobbying for children’s release***

Outreach work by Save the Children UK and community-based Child Protection Committees in Kailahun district included advocacy with Revolutionary United Front (RUF) commanders to release children from their ranks. Discussions were held with rebel commanders (including women) and the RUF liaison officer at the DDR camp. Issues discussed included:

- The position of children in the Lomé Peace Accord.
- The importance of the home for the development of the child.
- The importance of children going through the DDR process to benefit from family reunification and community or civil reintegration.

- Acknowledging the ‘care’ provided to these children during their time in RUF ranks (many members of the RUF considered some of the children in their ‘care’ to have been ‘rescued’).

The Child Protection Committees, which include women and children, work to address wider child protection issues in the community and to make a reality of children’s rights. Committee members have also participated in the identification of separated children, have facilitated family reunifications, and have assisted with advocacy initiatives regarding access to, and the release of, children associated with the fighting forces.<sup>13</sup>

## 8. Start family tracing

Family tracing must be a priority for all children who leave armed groups, and planning should start within the framework of the broader DDR planning process.<sup>14</sup> Key elements include:

- Establishing a framework for co-ordination.
- Setting up systems to support tracing and reunification.
- Agreeing on approaches (forms and procedures).
- The division of roles and responsibilities.
- Agreement on a strategy to provide training, supervision and support.

In some countries, a structure for family tracing may already exist, in which case agencies will have to assess its capacity to expand rapidly. A decision will also have to be made about whether the information system is set up separately from any general information system for tracing, because of the greater sensitivity needed when dealing with ex-combatant children.

The approach taken to family tracing will depend upon a needs assessment which must address:

- How many children are in contact with their families.
- The extent to which the population has been displaced.
- Whether the tracing is required in a small locality, throughout a large district or across international borders.

- The limits on the accessibility of areas still affected by conflict or other problems.
- The age of the children and the length of separation.
- Existing capacity for family tracing: whether a system exists, whether its quality is satisfactory and whether it can be expanded quickly enough.
- Which of the agencies present have expertise in this kind of work and whether they work through their own staff or through local organisations (or a combination).

When deciding upon an approach to family tracing, co-ordination and co-operation are paramount: all the agencies involved should use the same approach, with standardised forms and mutually compatible information systems. This will prevent any duplication of activities. There should normally be a lead organisation co-ordinating the joint efforts.<sup>15</sup>

One way to increase capacity can be to work with trained volunteers through community networks.

### ***A volunteer network***

In Angola, a network of volunteer social workers known as ‘catequistas’ were organised through the church to help ex-combatant children reintegrate into their communities. The catechistas also had a key role in family tracing.

They were given lists of child soldiers expected to reintegrate into their area, and because they often knew who the children were, were able to inform many families before they returned home. They also organised community meetings for families to review lists of under-age combatants and register any others known to have been recruited but missing.<sup>16</sup>

Children waiting for news of their families are likely to need temporary accommodation (see Chapter 9). Staff should be aware that children who see others going home will probably be anxious about their own families and what will happen to them if they cannot be found.

## 9. Monitor the disarmament and demobilisation process and take action if failures are affecting children

Just as important as political commitment to the success of disarmament and demobilisation are good organisation and adequate resources. Disarmament and demobilisation is a very complicated process, and child protection agencies should keep abreast of developments and make sure they are represented on key decision-making bodies (see Chapter 7).

They must also be prepared to take action if the demobilisation process is failing children. In the case of Sierra Leone, child protection agencies and others publicly urged the international community to increase its support for the peace process. They recommended greater financial, political and technical support, a review of the DDR process, and implementation of improvements ‘for a programme that is better co-ordinated, more inclusive and clearly linked to wider reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts’ and ‘comprehensive reintegration and resettlement plans to assist both ex-combatants and returning civilian populations.’<sup>17</sup>

Wider political failures have an impact on disarmament and demobilisation. In Sierra Leone, the lack of funding and the slow and inadequate mobilisation of peacekeepers led to administrative failures that directly affected children (see Chapter 1). Not only did large numbers of children remain in armed groups, but some who did demobilise could not get home:

### **Delays**

Children in a demobilisation centre in Sierra Leone were still there after three weeks, despite a policy that demobilisation procedures should be completed within 72 hours. One girl was visibly distressed because she knew where her grandmother was but couldn’t go home to her because her demobilisation form “was missing”. The process had not been completed for all the children there because photos for their ID cards had not been taken, and no one had taken the initiative to sort out the delay.<sup>18</sup>