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UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL COUNTER-TERRORISM COMMITTEE

BRIEFING ON CHILDREN & EXTREME VIOLENCE

The UN Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTED) invited United Nations University to brief its members on 21 June 2018 on the topic of Children and Terrorism at UN headquarters. It was based on a research project led by Dr Siobhan O'Neil and supported by Kato van Broeckhoven. The following is an adapted summary of that briefing.

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CHILDREN & EXTREME VIOLENCE

In many communities an entire generation of children come of age cradled by conflict, their development shaped by engagement with armed actors and scarred by experiences of violence and terrorism. This terrible truth will have real and serious economic, social, and political consequences for those children, their communities and countries – and indeed potentially for other countries around the world. Research examining the causes, dynamics and consequences of child association with armed groups in contemporary conflicts is still nascent, but its significance is clear.

In 2016, United Nations University set up a research project, together with the Governments of Luxembourg and Switzerland, UNICEF, and the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations to fill the knowledge gaps about how and why children become associated with, are used by, and leave non-state armed groups (NSAGs) in contemporary conflicts, particularly those groups characterized as terrorist or "violent extremist". The project – Children & Extreme Violence – produced three main outputs:

- Three "state of research" briefs that drew lessons from the latest research across the Social Sciences, Criminology and Brand Marketing.
- An edited volume entitled Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict, which includes three conflict case studies in Syria and Iraq, Mali, and Nigeria.
- A Technical Note that addresses the programmatic implications of the Cradled by Conflict research, which will be used to inform practice on the ground.

Led by Dr Siobhan O'Neil and Kato van Broeckhoven of United Nations University, the work involved researchers from multiple regions and academic institutions and drew on original case study research, extensive interviews with key stakeholders, focus group discussions, and survey work, among other research methods. In Iraq, a pilot survey was undertaken of 45 children detained or convicted of association with Islamic State and 143 key informants were interviewed, including former combatants who were under 18 at the time of their recruitment across Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. In Nigeria, research drew on a pilot survey involving 200+ internally displaced persons impacted by Boko Haram violence and 39 interviews with children formerly associated with Boko Haram. In Mali, 65 interviews took place in addition to 12 focus groups with more than 190 respondents organized across key provinces affected by the conflict. Five focus groups were organized with children from those same areas.

SIX MAIN FINDINGS

(1) ## Pro-social, not anti-social motivations

Contrary to conventional wisdom, children's motivations for the behaviours called 'association with terrorism' or 'violent extremism' are frequently pro-social, not anti-social. Many children who join or associate with armed groups – even those deemed terrorist or violent extremist – largely do so for positive, pro-social reasons. Children are frequently motivated by love of their in-group – such as their clan, their village, or simply their family – rather than hatred of others. Armed groups can provide children with a ready-made identity, community, and sense of significance, as well as some semblance of order amid the chaos of war and crisis, and the challenging transition from childhood to adulthood. Armed groups know this and exploit it. Many armed groups deliberately exploit children's greater tendency towards altruism and group bonding in their recruitment appeals, and in their handling and management of child recruits.

(2) ## Complex mix of factors driving entry

The research found that most children that associated with armed groups did so as a result of multiple intertwined factors. The researchers found that children associating with armed groups are influenced by promises of physical and food security, incentives generated by family and peer networks, market-based financial incentives, in response to direct physical coercion, and as part of a self-directed search for status and identity. This multifactorial nature of the causal pathways leading to association has significant implications for how we think about children's agency and, of course, in the legal context, their responsibility and culpability. What might tip a child into association with armed groups is almost always a cocktail of factors, but there is no single recipe that explains association in every context.

(3) ## Ideology is rarely a primary or singular motivation

In today's conflicts, association with armed groups is often framed largely in terms of ideology – whether religious, political, or sectarian. This research suggests that child association with armed groups is multi-causal, that is there is rarely ever a single motivation for an individual's involvement. The research suggests that for children, ideology is rarely the primary motivating force or the primary frame through which they understand their own actions. Even in cases where ideology plays a role in a child's trajectory towards an armed group, it is usually just one of several motivating or facilitating factors. Even when ideology is identified by external observers as a motivator for a child, ideology is often a reframing of what the child may perceive to be more central motivating factors, especially relating to family and identity.

SIX MAIN FINDINGS

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Context is critical

There are big contextual differences inside and outside conflict theatres. Each child's trajectory is unique; but across a large enough sample, trends begin to emerge as to how these different factors combine in different contexts. In particular, different factors influence a child's association with armed groups inside conflict theatres, versus areas adjacent to or far away from the fighting. This research found that this was particularly true regarding the outsized role social media can play outside conflict zones as compared to its relatively limited influence inside conflict theatres. Again, this has significant programming and policy implications; different preventive approaches and response strategies will be needed for different contexts.

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Neutrality is rarely an option

Much of the policy architecture that the UN Security Council and Member States have erected to deal with association with terrorist groups assumes that association is a choice, and a choice to be roundly condemned. 'Choice', however, means something very different for children than it does for adults. This is precisely why legal systems worldwide afford minors different rights and obligations than they do adults. It is also why international law recognizes the specific Rights of the Child and the need to place the best interests of the child as a primary consideration in all decision-making affecting children.

Contrary to common assumptions, neutrality is rarely an option for children inside conflict zones. This research turned up numerous examples where the choice that the law assumes – the choice for children to reject association with terrorism – was not a real one, either because it was not practical or, frequently, because it simply was not the child that made the choice. It is frequently the child's community, elders and family that decide whether the group will associate with a particular armed group. There is no scope for the child to stand up against such a choice – the choice is made by adults for them.

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Beware of the Violent Extremist Lens

Today's conflicts are often described and analyzed in terms of "violent extremism", ideology, or "radicalization". These narratives, which are often imposed from outside the conflict zone, can simplify conflicts and children's involvement in them along a single dimension. The risk is that such analysis can over-simplify, and in doing so, shape and structure how external actors engage with a conflict. These over-simplifications can lead to misunderstandings of the lived experience of actors – including children – in these conflicts, and imposes a conceptual and analytical structure that, by driving policy response and resource allocations, can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Far from protecting children, such narratives could work against their best interests, and place them at greater risk.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Working with practitioners in the Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC), Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR), and child protection communities, both in the field and at United Nations headquarters, a Technical Note has been developed for those working to prevent child association with armed groups or to facilitate the exit of children from armed groups.

The Technical Note focuses on six key implications from the research:

- The importance of focusing on children's rights and the best interests of the child and, in operation terms, what that looks like in acutely insecure operating environments;
- The need to rethink programming assumptions about neutrality and about children's agency in associating with terrorist groups. This has hugely important implications for how accountability, justice and rehabilitation of child offenders, is approached;
- Exercising caution around interventions focused on overly-simplistic explanations of drivers and motivations. Because each child's path into and out of association with these groups is unique, such interventions tend to produce "one-size-fits none" ideological interventions;
- Understanding and positively building on children's pro-social motivations, considering programming that takes the social capital that children have developed in and around these groups, but turns it towards non-violent, productive and legal endeavours;
- A child's exit from one of these groups is a process of physical and psychological separation and behavioural change. Yet, almost all programming is modelled on the assumption that children make instantaneous and complete breaks from the armed groups with which they were associated. This view is counter-productive as it makes it more difficult for programming to address the complex dynamics of exiting an armed group. As such, it can undermine the efficacy of interventions to facilitate sustained and permanent transitions back to civilian life;
- Finally, being very cautious about applying the "violent extremist" lens to armed conflicts and especially to children caught up in them.

While further research is needed on how best the international community can help manage individuals' - be that of children or adults - exists from armed groups, this research has filled a significant gap in policy research regarding children's initial entry and association with armed groups, providing practical programmatic recommendations for prevention and reintegration efforts.