

# *Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict*

## *Executive Summary*

Today, tens of thousands of children are thought to be involved with armed groups<sup>1</sup> in conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Mali, Nigeria, Yemen, Central African Republic, Libya, and elsewhere. How and why do children become associated with non-state armed groups (NSAGs) in these conflicts, and what helps or hurts their chances of exiting from their ranks? This volume analyses the evidence for children's movement into and out of armed groups, and considers how the international community can improve its efforts to prevent and respond to child recruitment. The volume specifically addresses the widely held assumption that there is something exceptional about the nature of contemporary conflicts and the armed groups fighting in them that requires unique policy and programmatic responses.

The research suggests that most children do not so much “opt” into conflict as “grow” into it. Conflict structures the information they see and the choices they make. It pulls and pushes them in many directions. Conflict erodes their relationships. It exacerbates their needs and exposes them to untold risks. Conflict shapes their identity and heightens their need to find meaning in their lives. Ultimately, the forces of conflict narrow the paths available to children, and tragically, for many, lead to exploitation, violence, and trauma.

These findings undermine the conventional wisdom that “violent extremism” or ideology is predominantly responsible for driving children into armed groups. In addition, the volume proposes that the international community maintains outdated and unrealistic notions of how children leave armed groups and their prospects for reintegration in unstable contexts. These misconceptions can result in poorly suited – and potentially counterproductive – policy and programmatic responses.

Recognizing these challenges, and drawing on the available empirical evidence, the volume proposes five principles for more effective international efforts to prevent and respond to child recruitment and use by armed groups: (1) avoid programmes focused primarily on ideological factors; (2) only incorporate ideological components where individually necessary and where they can be embedded into larger, holistic efforts to address the needs and risks of children; (3) ensure all interventions are empirically based; (4) rigorously assess interventions over the long term; and (5) engage children not just as beneficiaries, but as partners.

### **I. This Volume**

This volume is one of the marquee outputs of a two-year collaborative research project to fill key knowledge gaps about how and why children become associated with, are used by, and leave NSAGs in contemporary conflicts. The initiative is led by the United Nations University (UNU) in

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<sup>1</sup> Children also continue to be recruited and used by armed forces, but this publication is focused on the recruitment and use of children by non-state armed groups. For a list of state forces that have been identified for recruiting and using children, see Children and Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary General, 24 August 2017, A/72/361-S/2017/821.

close consultation with and with generous support from UNICEF, the United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), and the Governments of Luxembourg and Switzerland. The project combines wide-ranging desk reviews; three conflict case studies based on original fieldwork in Syria and Iraq, Mali, and Nigeria; and an analysis of the challenges to prevention and release and reintegration programming for children in contemporary conflicts. The ultimate goal of the project is to use the empirical findings to inform programmatic guidance for practitioners in the field working to protect children from NSAG association.

The heart of this project is the original case-study research, based on extensive interviews with key stakeholders, focus group discussions, and survey work, among other research methods. In each case study, a scrupulous effort was made to engage children and youth to understand their experiences. In Iraq, the researchers conducted a pilot survey of 45 children detained or convicted of association with Islamic State and interviewed 143 key informants, including former combatants who were under 18 at the time of their recruitment across Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. In Nigeria, the researchers ran a pilot survey of more than 200 internally displaced persons who had been impacted by Boko Haram violence and drew from 39 interviews with children formerly associated with Boko Haram conducted in a joint initiative by UNU and the Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation Programme. In Mali, the research team conducted 65 interviews and 12 focus groups with more than 190 respondents across key provinces affected by the conflict and drew from five UNU focus groups with children from those same areas.

## II. Diagnosing the Problem

The original research findings in this volume suggest that in many ways common understandings of child recruitment and use by and exit from armed groups in contemporary conflict fail to reflect the realities on the ground.

- **The distorting effect of the “violent extremist” lens:** The narrative often superimposed on today’s conflicts (at least from outside the conflict theatres) is one of “violent extremism”, ideology, or “radicalization”. Simplifying conflicts – and children’s involvement in them – along a single dimension inevitably distorts their driving factors, which are multifaceted, complex, and often intertwined. In Mali, for example, the narratives of violent extremism and radicalization fail to resonate with local populations, for whom intercommunal conflicts over resources and cattle – exacerbated by climate change and state corruption, weakness, and retreat – are far more pressing. These dynamics are lost when the Mali crisis is reduced to a simplistic, dichotomous characterization of the actors involved. Such an approach leads to equating widely disparate groups who differ along key characteristics that may be more important than a violent extremist demarcation (e.g., territorial control, state sponsorship, extra-state goals).
- **The role of ideology:** The outsized emphasis often placed on the role of ideology in driving communities and individuals to engage with armed groups reflects the distorting effect of a singular outside focus. Evidence from the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, Mali, and Nigeria detailed in this volume suggests that ideology is rarely the primary force motivating child association with armed groups. Even in cases where ideology plays a role in a child’s trajectory towards an armed group, it is usually one of a number of motivating or facilitating factors. In Nigeria, for example, Boko Haram has conflated its religious ideology with a

rejection of the Nigerian state, the latter of which may be the greater driver of association with Boko Haram for Nigerians who have experienced state oppression and violence.

- **A multiplicity of causes:** As has been the case historically, child association with armed groups in conflicts today is multifaceted. Children become involved with armed groups for interrelated reasons that range from extreme coercion to the mundane. Some of the specific factors that influence involvement today overlap significantly with factors that influenced child involvement in earlier conflict contexts, including physical and food security, family and peer networks, financial incentives, coercion, status, and identity. Moreover, the stressors of conflict appear to put children at risk for a range of adverse outcomes beyond NSAG association. For example, the same factors that put children living through the Syrian civil war at risk of association with armed groups may also put them at risk for trafficking and exploitative labour, among other hazards. While certain structural and social factors are especially influential in particular contexts, each child's trajectory is determined by a personalized cocktail of interconnected risks, needs, and resilience factors. Unfortunately, the state of knowledge surrounding the protective factors and processes that could help safeguard children from armed group recruitment and community mobilization is still nascent.
- **The fallacy of neutrality:** In many of today's wars, as in earlier ones, it can be virtually impossible for children to remain unaffiliated with a party to conflict. When armed groups are the only employer and exert physical control over the populace, joining an armed group may be the only realistic survival strategy. In parts of Syria, where unemployment is rampant, there are few options for children to support themselves and their families other than to turn to the armed groups who control the area. When the state assumes that all adolescent boys and young men in a given territory are affiliated with rebel groups, as was the case in Aleppo, neutrality has no benefit. When remaining unaffiliated raises suspicions about whether an individual has truly disengaged from a rebel group, the benefits of side-switching to a self-defence group far outweigh those of remaining neutral, as is the case for children in Nigeria exiting Boko Haram who feel compelled to join the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF). Likewise, it is highly unlikely that children can avoid association with an aligned armed group or local self-defence vigilantes when their families and entire communities are engaged. This is the case in Mali, where community mobilization is often the dominant, although underappreciated, pathway of children into armed groups.
- **Differences inside and outside conflict theatres:** It is important to recognize the differences between factors that influence child association with armed groups inside conflict theatres and those that drive participation from areas adjacent to or far away from the fighting. Evidence from the Syria and Iraq conflicts suggests that while social media can play a role in recruitment inside conflict zones, its influence is often greater in distant areas. Media coverage and social media are the dominant channels through which children and youth further afield are exposed to a conflict. Social media can be a gateway to connect with armed groups, a virtual replication or reinforcement of direct personal connections to armed actors. Another key difference relates to ideology. For many Syrian children and youth once associated with armed groups, ideology did not appear to be a key motivational factor for their involvement. Some evidence suggests, however, that ideology played a larger role for those who were drawn to the fight from outside the conflict theatre.

- **The prosocial appeal of armed groups:** It can be difficult to appreciate the allure of armed groups, especially those that are deemed terrorist, violent extremist, or jihadist. But for many children and youth, particularly inside conflict zones, armed groups provide a ready-made identity, community, and sense of significance, as well as some semblance of order amid chaos. Armed groups deliberately exploit children's greater tendency towards altruism and group bonding. Furthermore, armed groups can confer individual perks to children and youth, from food and financial incentives to less tangible benefits. In Mali and Nigeria's strictly hierarchical societies, for example, armed groups can provide a way for young people to express themselves and attain a level of status beyond what society would usually allow someone of their age. Lastly, even if children do not willingly join an armed group, once inside, group processes may lead to identification and bonding with the group and its members, complicating exit.

### III. Charting a Way Forward

Child recruitment and use by armed groups in today's conflicts bear some important similarities with previous conflicts. Likewise, many child protection efforts remain stymied by the same enduring challenges as yesteryear. Current conflict contexts, however, do present new dynamics – in nature, scope, degree, and combination – that present further challenges to efforts to prevent and respond to the recruitment and use of children.

- **Avoid viewing today's conflicts as exceptional.** The research featured in this volume cautions against viewing today's conflicts and the groups fighting them – particularly those labelled as terrorist, violent extremist, or jihadist – as exceptional and thus exempt from comparison with other contexts and/or necessitating unique responses. In particular, demarcating armed groups like Islamic State, Boko Haram, and Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb as exceptional, solely based on the ideology they promote, oversimplifies their relationships with ideology and obscures the totality of the dynamics that render them challenging to address programmatically (e.g., territorial control, integration with organized crime). Numerous findings reinforce the conclusion that there are enough similarities with previous conflicts to warrant applying lessons from past conflicts and programming experiences. At the same time, contemporary conflicts do pose some new and/or compounded challenges that require careful analysis and thoughtful responses. For example, the media have always covered foreign wars, but technological innovations and social media have given young people today unprecedented access to conflicts, the perpetrators of violence, and their victims. Other notable shifts include the proliferation and the fragmentation of armed groups, the supra-state objectives pursued by some armed groups, and the increasing internationalization of today's conflicts. State responses to contemporary conflicts have also contributed to the securitization of the humanitarian space, growth in counterterrorism legislation, and the increasingly punitive treatment of children alleged to have been associated with armed groups. More holistic, nuanced analyses of today's conflicts and their dynamics and actors are required.
- **Re-examine disengagement and desistance.** Common conceptions of how children disengage from armed groups are both outdated and influenced by the current political climate towards groups deemed terrorist, violent extremist, and jihadist. The expectation that

exit from an armed group is a discrete event appears to be a holdover from when (and how) entire armed groups were demobilized as part of a peace process. In reality, exiting an armed group is likely a process or, more accurately, a series of interrelated processes whereby an individual desists from violence and disengages both physically and psychologically. The processes are likely influenced by how and why children became associated with the group, and their experiences in its ranks. In many cases, neither desistance nor disengagement is a smooth or linear process, but is full of fits and starts. In active conflict settings, as the Syria and Iraq case study highlights, the continued stressors many children and youth experience upon leaving an armed group, as well as barriers to reintegration, can push them back into its ranks, or entice them to switch to another. This outdated conception of exit as a single, distinct event is also likely reinforced – particularly for terrorist groups – by laws that specifically criminalize *membership* in proscribed groups and assumptions that individuals are unlikely to be casually associated with such fanatical organizations. Yet child association with armed groups today is rarely dichotomous (e.g., “member” or “non-member”), but rather is fluid, even with many of the most violent terrorist groups. This is particularly true in community mobilization contexts where children may be living alongside armed groups and where the nature of engagement may be irregular and informal. In such settings, it is highly unlikely that children could disengage from the armed group with which they are associated until their community stands down or withdraws its support from the group. To help children permanently exit armed conflict, programmatic responses need to be grounded in the realities of association and reflect the processes of exit.

- **Recalibrate expectations for programmatic interventions.** One of the tenets of the Paris Principles is that children associated with armed groups should be released “at all times, even in the midst of conflict and for the duration of the conflict”.<sup>2</sup> Once released, the assumption is that most children will be reunited with their families and reintegrated into their communities. In each of the three conflicts examined in detail in this volume, large swaths of territory remain completely unstable – the economy does not function, and there are no services or rule of law. In parts of Syria, for example, the unemployment rate is staggering, there are no functioning schools or basic social services, and violence is prevalent. This raises the question: reintegrate children into what? Does the international community need to alter its expectations for release and reintegration programmes, which, like prevention programmes, are relatively limited in scope, duration, and funding, given the conflict contexts in which they increasingly operate? Even if programmes successfully address children’s needs and risk factors, and work to enhance their resilience to future challenges, will children who have gone through them realistically be able to withstand the structural conditions and pressures that characterize active conflicts?

#### IV. Guiding Principles

Given the finding that child association in armed groups today is driven by multiple, often interconnected factors, the volume raises concerns about the utility of crafting narrow, ideologically focused programmatic responses. The emerging fields of preventing and countering violent extremism (PVE and CVE), may have some potentially positive impacts, including fostering a shift

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<sup>2</sup> The Paris Principles are international guidelines that consolidate global knowledge on, and complement international mechanisms to protect and respond to, children recruited and used by armed groups and forces. UNICEF, The Paris Principles: Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups, February 2007, p. 5, para 1.5. Available from [www.unicef.org/emerg/files/ParisPrinciples310107English.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/emerg/files/ParisPrinciples310107English.pdf).

from a reactive to a proactive stance and efforts to address political exclusion. Yet they also present cause for concern. This is especially true with regard to a subset of PVE and CVE programmes that are based on narrow and simplistic ideological readings of conflict, fail to appreciate the appeal of armed groups, and operate from outdated assumptions about how and why people associate with and disengage from violent groups. Such programmes are unlikely to effectively address the factors that actually drive conflicts and participation in them. Moreover, if they are narrowly targeted and branded as “PVE” and “CVE”, they may prove counterproductive if they cause resentment among, stigmatize, and further alienate the very communities they are meant to engage. In light of these concerns, the volume concludes with five general principles to guide decisions on when and how to adjust standard prevention and release and reintegration efforts for children in the face of shifting dynamics of contemporary conflicts.

- a) **Avoid one-size-fits-none programmes focusing primarily on ideological factors.** Given that ideology does not appear to play as significant a motivational role for many children joining armed groups in many contemporary conflicts, one-size-fits-all ideological interventions are more likely to be one-size-fits-none. Thus, it makes sense to incorporate targeted activities and/or interventions related to ideology only when there are clear indications that they might have a preventive effect. Likewise, such interventions and activities should be messaged and branded to avoid further alienating the very populations they are meant to engage.
- b) **Ideological components, when deemed necessary, should be embedded in the larger holistic approach to addressing a child’s needs and risks.** There is some evidence to suggest that ideology can become more important during indoctrination or as a post hoc justification for joining or engaging in violence. When individual children are influenced or motivated by ideology, or other factors specific to a conflict or an armed group, a well-designed, fully implemented prevention or release or reintegration programme should be able to address these factors as part of its larger holistic approach. Ideology can be difficult to distinguish from other important factors (e.g., community). Any programmatic components addressing ideology should work to mitigate possible risks associated with them and be empirically based and drawn from nuanced understandings of what constitutes ideology and how it is held by beneficiaries.
- c) **Interventions should be empirically based.** Specialized activities aimed at preventing child recruitment and use and/or responding to associated children in contexts labelled as terrorist, violent extremist, or jihadist should be employed only after thorough, empirically driven conflict and risk analyses, and following an assessment that the proposed intervention has a high likelihood of success based on past experience. This may mean focusing on other empirically supported concepts such as group processes, efforts to shift social norms around violence, and interventions that make political violence costlier.
- d) **Interventions should be rigorously assessed over the long term.** When any changes or innovations are made to programming, they need to be rigorously assessed over the long-term to determine if they had positive prevention and/or reintegration effects and/or resulted in unintended consequences. Continuous assessment should feed into programme monitoring, and programmes should be flexible enough to change course if it appears that their approaches are not having the intended effects.

- e) **Engage children not just as beneficiaries, but as partners.** Ultimately, the key to ending child recruitment is the same today as it was decades ago – creating peaceful, prosperous, and inclusive societies, where children do not need to rely on armed groups for their basic needs or self-worth. That end goal will not be achieved easily or quickly, but prevention and release and reintegration programming for children can play a role in the larger efforts to resolve conflict and sustain peace. Most importantly, children are not just beneficiaries of such efforts, but should be partners in designing and implementing their own road to recovery, reintegration, and reconciliation. The journey to peace is long and difficult; we may have to carry children at the outset, but they will carry us at the finish.

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