

Critical issue module 7

Children associated with armed forces or armed groups

Topic 4 Planning and implementation

Handout 6



Demobilisation of children associated with armed forces or armed groups in Mozambique

1 During the armed conflict

During the armed conflict there were few specific efforts to demobilise children. Criticism of disorganised forms of forced recruitment was directed more against the form of recruitment and the fact that students were recruited in the middle of the school year, rather than against the fact that minors might have been included. At times measures were undertaken by the government to prevent the recruitment of children. New recruits were screened at the military training centres and children detected sent home.

Special attention and treatment for children in armed forces came into the foreground in 1988 when a group of about 40 children captured from Renamo bases by the government armed forces were handed over to the National Directorate for Social Action (NDSA) within the Ministry of Health and to the Ministry of Education. This group was used to call attention to the recruitment and use of children by Renamo: the so-called '*instrumentalised children*'. A working group, including representatives of various government ministries (Health, Education, Internal Affairs, Justice, Agriculture, Culture), the Department for the Prevention and Combat of Natural Calamities, the Mozambican Women, Youth and Children Organisations, was formed to study how these children should be rehabilitated as well as to draw up policies and strategies on children and youth in difficult circumstances. Following the creation of the National Commission on Children in Difficult Circumstances, similar commissions were formed at province and district level.

While initial support for the creation of specific centres for the instrumentalised children was quite strong, some negative effects of concentrating the first group in a centre (Lhanguene, Maputo) soon became clear: excessive attention from the media and foreign visitors, and lack of confidentiality about the children. As a result, priority was given to family tracing and reunification for this group of children. The positive aspects of daily routine, caring relationships with adults, individual attention, recreational and expressive activities, and integration in a normal school were later incorporated into other programmes.

Not all the Renamo children captured by the government armed forces received special treatment and were handed over to the civil authorities. Many stayed at the barracks, doing auxiliary jobs for the military, who were not always prepared to hand them over to civilian authorities.





Renamo did not recognise the existence of children in their armed forces until long after the peace agreement, so no children were formally demobilised during the armed conflict. But throughout the war numbers of children managed to flee from military bases during attacks or otherwise.

2 At the end of the armed conflict

Under the general demobilisation programme after the General peace agreement, 92,881 soldiers were demobilised. Out of these 76.3% were former government and 23.7% former Renamo combatants. According to UN regulations only soldiers of 16 or above were demobilised. Over half (56%) were younger than 31. Only 350 were under the age of 18 at the time of demobilisation, including government soldiers. Over 90% had served five or more years in the armed forces.

Almost 28% were younger than 18 when recruited:

- 4,678 under 13 year olds
- 6,829 14 to 15 year olds
- 13,982 16 to 17 year olds
- 25,498 total.

Before entering the armed forces, 44% were attending school, 25% working in agriculture, fishery or small animals production and 10% had no occupation. About a third had no education, another third a certain level of primary education (anything between Grade 1 to 5), the rest had a certain level of secondary education (Grade 6 to 9) or above.

This means that amongst those soldiers who were formally demobilised there was a group of over 25,000 who were probably integrated into the armed forces as children with little or no education, many having interrupted their schooling. Most had stayed for more than five years in the armed forces. They became adults there. The group includes a significant number of government soldiers as the number exceeds the total number of ex-Renamo soldiers.

There was concern about the low number of children at the Renamo assembly areas. Negotiations to get access to children associated with armed forces or armed groups and unaccompanied children at Renamo bases started in 1993, through the UN Office for Humanitarian Assistance (UNOHAC). Following appeals by Renamo for help in dealing with these children, an assessment of children and youth in Renamo zones was carried out on behalf of UNICEF. Only in June 1994 did Renamo agree to grant full access to the bases for the registration of children for family tracing and to authorise the children's transfer to civilian areas.

A list of 19 bases where these children were held was presented. As a result the evacuation and family reunification of these children was implemented by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and Save the Children USA (SCF-USA) as part of the demobilisation of vulnerable groups (disabled and women soldiers). Out of over 2,000 children (about 40% girls) documented in an initial survey, 850 boys were reunited with their families in an operation that lasted three months. Over half were from the southern provinces. In various places these boys created disturbances demanding the same treatment and benefits as the demobilised soldiers, claiming that they had been soldiers and refused to be reunited with their





families. Not knowing whether they would benefit from a specific programme, some children decided to run away.

As part of the peace agreement all the militias had to be disarmed and dismantled as they were seen as government paramilitary groups. The ones that had a salary had the right to a compensation of three months' salary. In various places there were revolts by militias demanding demobilisation benefits, but they were not eligible. In the same way, some Naparama groups demanded formal demobilisation and benefits.

3 Family tracing and reunification

In 1988 the National Family Tracing and Reunification Programme (FTRP) was formally launched by NDSA, starting from the Lhanguene Project for instrumentalised children. In the early eighties the NDSA had developed activities for children in difficult circumstances, which included family tracing and reunification and the integration of children in substitute families, thus limiting institutionalisation to the absolute minimum.

The programme was coordinated by NDSA and implemented by various NGOs. The ICRC and SCF-USA played a major role in this programme, in addition to Save the Children Sweden, Save the Children UK, and the Christian Council of Mozambique who each had responsibility for certain geographic areas. Mozambique Red Cross took an active part with its tracing network in the registration and reunification activities. The programme was not specifically geared towards children associated with armed forces or armed groups, but any unaccompanied children, including internally displaced, and refugee children. UNHCR participated in the reunification of refugee children in neighbouring countries, in close cooperation with the above-mentioned organisations.

The activities consisted basically of the identification and registration of the child, tracing the child's family, verification of data collected about the child and family members, transport and handing over the child, and (few) follow-up visits.

One of the weaknesses of the FTRP was the preparation of both child and family and the follow-up. These aspects have been difficult and costly due to the great distances involved and poor communications. The same programme dealt with the tracing and family reunification of children found at military bases.

There is no accurate data on the number of unaccompanied children reunited with their families. Up to the end of 1994 about 10,000 out of 16,000 documented children had been reunited with their families by the various organisations involved. Exact information regarding the numbers of children who spontaneously, or by other means reunited themselves with their families is also lacking.

