

Children in Armed Conflict Situations: Focus on Child Soldiers in the Philippines

ELIZABETH PROTACIO-DE CASTRO*

In the last 30 years of internal armed conflict in the Philippines, children have become both victim and perpetrator of violence. Children, boys and girls not even eighteen years of age, bear arms for the New People's Army (NPA), the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Abu Sayyaf. Children old enough to carry and use M-16 and AK-47 rifles are volunteered, coerced and even manipulated into armed groups. Young and impressionable, child soldiers can become the fiercest fighters through indoctrination. According to the author, there are several reasons why children end up fighting alongside adults. These children may have been victims of physical or sexual abuse or witnesses to the death of a loved one in the hands of government forces. Some factors are more complex. There may be experiences of neglect and abuse, weak family ties and negative experiences in school, or a combination of all the above. Poverty, social injustice, and limited or no access to basic services are contributing factors to the creation of the child soldier.

Being exposed to armed conflict situations, children are exposed not only to grave and serious physical danger but also to psychological trauma resulting from capture, torture and rape, and detention. Harrowing experiences also result in child soldiers living with shame and guilt and reacting with apathy and numbness for the rest of their lives.

They are faced with extremely polarized moral dilemmas such as self-preservation and killing another human being for the glory of God, freedom and the oppressed people. Should they be taken out of armed conflict situations, child soldiers find difficulty in re-joining their communities or having normal lives. Often they return to their comrades in the battlefields.

"Children are at the same time the victims and perpetrator of violence."

— Boia Efraime, Jr.¹

For more than three decades now, the Philippines has been besieged by two internal armed conflicts, one between the government armed forces and the revolutionary army of the Communist Party of the Philippines, the New People's Army (NPA). The other is between the

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government forces and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and its breakaway group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The Aquino and Estrada governments, in the past, launched a "total war" or an "all-out war" policy especially in Mindanao while the Ramos government attempted various "peace initiatives." The new government of Macapagal-Arroyo has again embarked on "peace talks" with these various armed groups.

According to a study done by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in 1998, both the NPA and the MILF have used children for combat.² In a similar study commissioned by UNICEF in 1999, there was evidence to show that children were used or involved in armed conflict situations. There was no reported use by government or government-supported forces of children as soldiers but media has reported the use of children in paramilitary units. According to UNICEF, 3 percent of the approximately 9,000 strong NPA fighters are children. The MILF is 6,000 to 10,000 strong and these figures include children aged 13 years old and up. There are no estimates on how many children are in the MILF but the media has documented children wearing oversized fatigues.³ There is also evidence that children are involved with the Abu Sayaff Group, a 1,000-strong force known for their protracted hostage-taking. The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) captured a 15-year old boy during a military raid.⁴ More and more children and youth bear arms in these internal armed conflicts and violent strife than ever before.

Armed conflicts inevitably result in sufferings and hardships among the affected population especially among women and children. Many children in these situations were arrested, detained, tortured and raped. Some were victims/survivors of indiscriminate bombings, strafing and massacres, while others were witnesses to the violence done to their families, neighbors and friends. These experiences have created a culture of violence described by Gustafson⁵ as the "triangle of chaos" that seriously impedes the healthy development of the child.

Loss, separation and exploitation are the three interrelated experiences resulting from these violent contexts. Loss comes with the death of loved ones, destruction of property and personal belongings or the absence of a safe environment for them to live normal lives. Separation is spawned by the involuntary disappearance of loved ones; when families are forcibly separated from their homes, land or from each other; or when community

activities and social interactions can no longer take place. Exploitation comes in the form of neglect when children are not given proper care and attention, as well as when they are being used, abused and manipulated for various purposes in violation of their rights and contrary to their best interest. The interactions of all these factors bring about generalized feelings of fear and anxiety amidst an atmosphere of uncertainty and the continuing threat of the war. All these have an impact on the overall development of the child.

Who is the Child? Who is the Child Soldier?

According to the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC), a child means every human being below the age of 18 years, unless under the law applicable to their case, the "age of maturity" is attained earlier. The "age of maturity" is a social, religious and cultural or legal device by which societies acknowledge the transition to adulthood and there is no necessary correlation between any of the age levels.

For the purpose of participating in religious rituals, for example, a child may become an adult at the age of 13. For legal purposes, however, such as contracting obligations, including marriage, giving evidence under oath, being criminally liable or voting in elections, other age requirements may prevail.

A child soldier is defined as any person under 18 who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to fighters, combatants, messengers, porters, cooks, as well as girls recruited for sexual purposes and forced marriage.⁹

The idea of the child as a person under 18 years of age is widely accepted in international circles, even if a different terminology such as "youth" or "young people" may be a better phrase to describe those in the crucial 15-18 age bracket whose physical, emotional and intellectual maturity is rapidly developing even as they continue to face certain legal constraints. Clearly, those under 18, no matter their individual capacities, are generally presumed not to appreciate fully the nature and consequences of their actions. If age 18 reflects a general rule, with certain limited exceptions, the question then is when and in what

circumstances those under 18 can be lawfully conscripted for military service or permitted to participate in armed hostilities.

Although young people have been trained for battle in the past, the heavy weight of the old model weapons often limited their actual involvement. Today, as weapons become more lighter (eventhough more advanced), even small boys and girls handle common weapons like M16 and AK 47 rifles. More children with less training are useful in battle than ever before, exposing them to more danger and making them more dangerous to their enemies as well.

Why do children participate in armed conflict?

There is a very thin line that separates voluntary from coerced participation and it is not possible to know exactly at what age a young person is capable of "volunteering" in the way we accept such an act from an adult. No one makes a decision in a vacuum; and clearly a child can be susceptible to certain types of pressure from certain people and circumstances beyond their control.

Although forced recruitment of children is practiced in many countries (Burma, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Angola, Sri Lanka and Sudan), a majority of these children are not so much coerced as exposed to subtle manipulation. Hence, the practice is even more difficult to determine and eliminate compared to outright recruitment.

Examining different contexts and taking into account the specific experiences of children will help us draw a clearer picture of the child soldier in a given conflict. Forced recruitment of children happens because of shortage of adult soldiers, institutionalized discrimination against children and a perceived need to control the population and assert ideological dominance. Young and impressionable children can also be turned into the fiercest fighters through brutal indoctrination.

In the Philippines, interviews and anecdotal evidence confirm that many young people voluntarily join armed groups. In attempting to explain why children join armed groups. We can try to examine the following:

A. *Trigger factors.* These are immediate precipitating events, situations or compelling reasons that propel a child's participation such as urgent or emergency individual needs or family problems, and suggestions and pressure from peers and adults. Children's subjective understanding of reality is influenced by their social milieu that exerts strong pressure on the children.

Rubi del Mundo, NDF regional spokesperson, admitted in an interview that there are children with the NPA. These are the children who have been "physically and sexually abused by adults, who were orphaned as the military turned their wrath on civilians to retaliate for their defeats in battle, or those whose families can barely have a meal a day."⁷ Del Mundo's statement illustrated perfect examples of trigger factors that cause children to join an armed group. Bong-Bong, a case documented by PST UP-CIDS and UNICEF, said that he joined the NPA because he saw the military take his father away to be killed. He wanted vengeance.⁸

B. *Circumstantial factors.* These are the complex array of situations or influences existing, occurring in and resulting from the child's significant interactions and relations providing context and history to their involvement and development. It could be a combination of any of the following: experience of neglect and abuse, poor parenting styles and weak family ties, negative experiences in school, etc.

In the documented case of Sonia, she could not name one particular reason for joining the NPA. She claimed that there were several factors. These were threat of sexual abuse by an uncle, being forced to marry an old man, and the physical, verbal and emotional abuse from her older brothers and sisters. All of these are circumstantial factors. What triggered her to finally decide to run away and join the NPA was when her mother refused to believe her when she told her that her uncle attempted to rape her.⁹

C. *Contributory factors.* These are factors that aggravate the current situation of children and young people in their given localities. These are the socio-politico-cultural and economic realities in Philippine society today such as poverty, social injustice, limited or no access to basic services, militarization of daily life, and structural violence.

In Bong-Bong and Sonia's cases, both lived in areas where the basic services were absent. Sonia had to walk far to get to school with no food and money because of their extreme poverty. Bong-Bong was 11 years old when he finally finished the 1st grade during his recovery after he was captured by the military. Both were victims of crimes – sexual assault in the case of Sonia, and the murder of Bong-Bong's father. Both were so isolated and out of reach from law enforcers and other agencies where they could have reported the cases or asked for any kind of assistance. The only choice was to join the NPA.

The armed conflict was also part of their daily lives. Sonia said, "the military and the NPA were fighting around our area even before I was born." Bong-Bong's family has actively participated in the NPA's struggle for three generations.

These circumstances and social realities made it easy for the children to decide to join the NPA. But it must be noted that *developmental processes* affect a child's perception of social reality and his/her decision to join. Feelings of helplessness, vulnerability and the desire for revenge may lead the child to join in order to be empowered and feel a certain level of competence and self worth. The meanings they attach to the role of "combatant," "hero," and "leader" can give them a sense of mission and provide identity affiliation with the larger community.

The distinctive reason why children as young as 12 years old join the struggle of the MILF also needs to be noted. Kunesa Sekak, Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) Regional Director for Mindanao said that when Muslim children reach puberty, they are expected to practice Islamic teaching, including participation in a *jihad*. She added that, "Parents usually volunteer their children to the Muslim struggle when they reach puberty, to undergo training and to make their children's lives more useful and meaningful rather than spending it with their friends, sports, or worse, (going) into drugs."¹⁰ There are young Muslims who decide to join by themselves because of the spiritual dimension and the pride it brings.

It would also be interesting to find out not only why children join, but also why they continue to stay and why they eventually leave. Some of the reasons why they continue to stay are the same reasons why they joined especially if these conditions do not change. Another reason is the

bonding and support they experience with comrades and friends in the armed group. This is related to the identification with peers and membership in a group that can substitute for family. Other important reasons are the lack of opportunities, limited skills and education, and the feeling of helplessness and resignation over one's situation.

Why they eventually leave usually results from being arrested or wounded in an encounter or, because of their want to have a normal life after experiencing difficulties and hardships. Another reason is that they found or were offered better opportunities such as jobs or the possibility of going back to school.

It can be gleaned from the above reasons that from the perception and views of children there is a positive side to participation. Some view their personal security to be greater inside these armed groups than outside where they can easily be into drugs, become street children or displaced civilians. They feel they found another home and have developed a sense of discipline, loyalty and pride as well as a feeling of empowerment. They also feel physically fit, needed and important to the community, making their lives more meaningful. They feel a deep sense of nationalism or spirituality, saying they learned self-sacrifice for a greater good.

Short and Long Term Consequences of Participation in Armed Conflict

Arrest, torture and detention

When children participate in an armed conflict, they are of course vulnerable to being arrested by the military. "When children are arrested by the Armed Forces of Philippines (AFP), (the AFP is) mandated by law to immediately inform the DSWD when child soldiers are captured. This is to ensure the safety of the children and prevent their further trauma during interrogation. Unfortunately, there are reports where the AFP does otherwise. In these cases, the child's best interest and security is compromised as they may be used as informants or propaganda pawns in the conflict."¹¹ While in the custody of the military, there have been documented cases where the child soldiers were tortured in order to "obtain information, force a confession, and to get a testimony incriminating others."¹²

A case in point is Akbar who was 17 years old when he was arrested by the military at home on suspicion of being a member of the MILF. He was brought to the headquarters of the 4th Special Forces Company with four other men. During detention, he was boxed repeatedly by soldiers, his right foot was repeatedly burned with lighted cigarettes, his neck and legs were hit with the butt of an armalite rifle and his hands were tied for three days straight.¹³

Girl-children are particularly at risk of rape. One study on children who were tortured documented 21 girls who were raped. These sexual assaults resulted in the pregnancy of some girls. One girl was diagnosed by a psychiatrist as suffering from psychosis as a result of being raped by members of the CAFGU.¹⁴ They were likewise made very vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases.

Grave and Serious Physical Injuries

Physical injuries are primarily caused by armed encounters with the military, torture during detention and accidents in the field. Armed encounters may be face-to-face exchange of fire or through air strikes. United Nations International Childrens Fund (UNICEF) blamed aerial bombardments for the increase of children dying as combatants and for extending the potential battle zone to entire national territories.¹⁵

Torture may result in bruises, broken bones and joints, lesions, mutilations and permanent disabilities. Wounds from bullets result in scars and may lead to permanent disability. Brian, a case documented by the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies-Psychosocial Trauma (UP CIDS PST) and UNICEF, said "I was hit on my upper right arm. The bullet that hit me came from an M16 armalite. I did see the bullet. It went right through."

There are accidents during training or while patrolling over rough terrain and these result in deep cuts, wounds, sprains, and broken bones. Mariel, a 17 year old girl who was captured by the military when she was wounded during an encounter with the NPA shared that, "At night, we had to walk barefoot. I endured it despite the deep cuts on my feet."¹⁶

The children are also very vulnerable to diseases caused by prolonged exposure to the elements, e.g., diarrhea, influenza, pneumonia, and

malana. Since armed groups usually patrol remote areas, their sickness may not be immediately detected or properly diagnosed.

When child soldiers get sick or are injured, they are usually far from hospitals or health centers where they can receive professional medical help. Although there are medics available, their ability to help is limited by the small supply of medicine obtained by the rebel group.

Psychological Effects

The effects of children's participation are not limited to physical injuries. Psychological effects sometimes hurt more deeply. Victims of torture displayed "generalized fear of their immediate environment, excessive anxiety at the sight of a stranger, sleeping problems, hopelessness and apathy. Behavioral changes were also observed such as withdrawal, aggression, destructiveness and over dependence on adults."¹⁷

Girl-children who are victims/survivors of sexual torture usually showed neglect in maintaining hygiene. They had feelings of shame, fear, anger, denial, helplessness, and confusion. The harrowing experience also resulted in physical and emotional numbing, shortened attention span, nightmares, panic attacks, flashbacks, and chronic fatigue.¹⁸ These are aggravated when the family and community ostracize the children. The girl-children who got pregnant because of the sexual assaults had to face harsher circumstances. They had to endure the pressure from their families to agree to marry the soldier or member of the Citizens Armed Forces Geographical Unit (CAFGU) who raped them. There are those who mentally broke down but there are those who were resolute in their decision not to marry the perpetrator/abuser and to continue the pregnancy despite the pressure from their families and the negative reaction from their communities.

The scars that resulted from injuries, bullet wounds, and from torture often caused children to be ashamed. It was evident on the way they tried to conceal their scars from their friends and classmates. They fear that they will be teased and ostracized by their peers when they find out the reasons for the scars.

Witnessing the violent death of friends and comrades during encounters with the military often results in feelings of guilt and nightmares. Those who died or were seriously wounded were usually left behind when the squad or company had to retreat. This worsens the feelings of guilt and helplessness as bonds have been formed among other members of the squad. Another reaction is apathy and numbness. Sonia, a 16-year-old girl interviewed by UP CIDS-PST for a UNICEF study narrated:

There was an encounter where one of us was shot and his head got blown off. I was near him and was actually shouting at him to dive for cover but he stood up to shoot back. I saw the brain splattered everywhere. I laughed when I saw him and said, "Oh, he's dead!" ... I didn't feel ill when I saw a dead body; maybe I got a bit scared when I imagined that the corpse might suddenly open its eyes. I recently helped our housemother bury a child from the center that died at the hospital. I don't think that my reaction is normal.¹⁹

Having had to shoot and kill somebody – even if they were “the enemy” – also had serious effects. Feelings of guilt could be so intense that children could be literally immobilized by the thought that they have killed somebody. Sonia narrated:

There were some who pretended to be tough after they learned that they killed someone. Their eyes would flash and they seemed to be very alert. But then I noticed that they did not seem to be aware of what was happening around them. I think they were in shock. I saw a 17-year-old girl cry and pray to God to forgive her for what she did.”

Brian, a 16 year old boy who was also part of the study said, “I think my comrades felt bad when they killed a soldier in an encounter. No matter how you looked at it, they were all Filipinos.”

Children who have decided to stop their participation in the armed groups fear retribution. Brian who was apprehended by the military while he was at a hospital due to a gunshot wound said, “I wouldn't think of going back to the movement. My comrades would suspect that I told the military information about them. They might think that I betrayed them.”

Issues and Problems in Moral Development

A child participating in an armed conflict is constantly faced with moral dilemmas. Here are a few examples:

- Brian felt that during training, firing a gun seemed like firing a toy. But during the actual encounter, he hesitated to shoot. He found that he could not fire at his fellow Filipino – even in self-defense. However, he shared that he was not afraid to die, "It would have been a worthwhile death because I was helping those in need."

- Young Muslim fighters find fulfillment and pride in fighting in a *jihād*. However, Kunesa Sekak, regional director for the Department of Social Welfare and Development in Mindanao, observed that there are those who have nightmares, those who 'cannot control or manage their feelings and cannot comprehend life's (meaning).'²⁰

- Sonia referring to having to shoot "the enemy" said, "There were comrades who found it easier to kill after the first one. They got used to it. 'It's kill or be killed.' When I think about it – that I might have killed someone – I feel afraid, uneasy and guilty. If I did shoot anybody, I feel sorry for him."

The resolution of moral dilemmas is part of the child's development but child soldiers are faced with extremely polarized ones. Child soldiers are mentally, emotionally and morally torn by having to choose between self-preservation and killing or shooting another human being; and in trying to reconcile to themselves that they had to shoot somebody for the glory of God, freedom and the oppressed people.

Child soldiers may also come to believe that violence is the only answer to every problem. Some children shared that later on they feel that they have become numb to acts of violence. They have detached themselves from the events by dehumanizing their victims and themselves. The soldiers are not people – they are the enemy. The children separate themselves from their acts by thinking they are soldiers, an "entity" separate from their true "self."²¹ But the interviews and life stories of child soldiers show that they just bury the guilt and self-loathing. The psychosocial effects of doing so emerge in their daily lives when they have a chance to reflect.

Other Developmental Problems

Since child soldiers stay full time with the groups they belong to, they do not have time to go to school. Their education is limited to the training that the armed groups provide, which are mainly skills in warfare, first aid, and political or ideological lessons.

Some children develop learning problems when they stopped soldiering and are re-integrated into their community. They have difficulty adjusting to the school setting and the routine that it brings. The child soldier may also find it difficult to re-adjust to his community and this may result in juvenile delinquency and discipline problems.

Homelessness or Being Orphaned

The family or community does not always welcome the child soldier who wants to come back and lead a normal life or has been demobilized. They might not be able to forgive the child for what he or she did while he or she was with the armed group. This makes it harder for the children to recover as they might be placed in foster homes or they may be forced to fend for themselves.

Without proper and adequate support from family, friends or community, recovery from their traumatic experiences and reintegration in "normal life" are severely affected. These children may return to being child soldiers where they find camaraderie and support from the other soldiers or they might become juvenile delinquents.

Responding to Recruitment and Participation of Children in Armed Conflict: Issues and Recommendations

Policy Matters: State and Non-state actors

The Philippine government is clear-cut in its laws and policies against the use of children as soldiers. Among the laws and policies are:

- The 1991 Republic Act No. 7610 (6) provides for the protection of children in situations of armed conflict. Article X (22) (b) states that: "Children shall not be recruited to become members of the Armed Forces of the Philippines or its civilian units or other armed groups, to be allowed to take part in the fighting, or used as guides, couriers, or spies." As

defined in Section 3 (a) of said act, children is defined as persons below 18 years of age or those over but unable to fully take care of themselves or protect themselves from abuse, neglect, cruelty, exploitation or discrimination because of physical or mental disability or conditions."

- Moreover, the legal protection afforded children was clarified in 1994 with the drafting of the rules and regulations for implementing Article X of Act No. 7610. Section 3 provides that: "Children shall not be recruited or employed by government forces to perform or engage in activities necessary to and in direct connection with an armed conflict either as soldier, guide, courier or in a similar capacity which would result in his being identified as an active member of an organized group that is hostile to the government forces.

In the international scene, progress has been made in strengthening the legal framework with the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict, the ILO Convention 182, and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

The Philippine government is one of the earlier countries to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Children. It is signatory to the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child which bans the use of children under the age of 18 in armed conflicts. The Philippines is also signatory to the ILO Convention 182, which considers forced or compulsory recruitment of children under 18 for use in armed conflict as one of the worst forms of child labor. The Statute of the International Criminal Court makes conscripting or enlisting of children under the age of 15 years or using them to participate actively in hostilities or war, both in international and internal armed conflict and whether in state armed forces or armed groups.

As for the non-state actors, the New People's Army and the Communist Party of the Philippines have issued directives that children are not to be actively recruited as soldiers. The Military Commission of the CPP stated that, "The revolutionary movement consciously abides by the international laws and rules of war that prohibit the recruitment of children below 15 years of age for combat work...In 1988 the Political Bureau of the Party's Central Committee issued a clear decision

stipulating that the NPA may only recruit persons who are 18 years old and older for its combatants.²²

The Moro Islamic Liberation Front likewise claimed that no individual under 18 years of age could join their combat unit.²³

But the pronouncements by non-state armed groups are not enough. While the leaderships of these agencies and organizations may deny the existence of child soldiers, reports from the media and NGOs confirm that there are child soldiers in the field. Non-state actors should commit to international standards and policies that prohibit the involvement of children in armed conflict, and adhere to the concept of children as zones of peace – hence schools, child care centers and health facilities should not be targeted. (See R.A. 2610)

There must be serious sanctions against those that recruit and abuse children in armed conflict situations even for non-state actors. Commitments of the armed groups of state and non-state actors must be monitored to ensure that they are followed in the field. The armed groups must be pressured by the local and the international community to monitor their own ranks and strictly enforce their own policies in recruitment.

Governments, local and international NGOs, and other agencies should work together to build momentum for a global ban on the use of children as soldiers.

Handling of captured child soldiers while in detention

Children involved in armed conflict are vulnerable to experience other human rights violations such as summary executions, arbitrary detention, torture or ill treatment while in the custody of the military. They are also vulnerable to criminal prosecution especially those who have no birth certificate to prove their age.

This is a common occurrence in far-flung areas where families do not register their children at birth. If they are proven to be minors, no case will be filed against them but in borderline cases where the children claim to be 16 or 17 years old but have no documents to prove it, they may be

tried as adults where they could be charged with criminal cases and removed from the custody of the DSWD.

The AFP is mandated by law to immediately inform the DSWD when child soldiers are captured. This is to ensure the safety of the children and prevent their further trauma during interrogation. There is even a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) between defense, health, local government and welfare agencies regarding the handling of captured child soldiers signed on March 21, 2000. Unfortunately, there are reports where the military do not follow the regulations and laws on handling captured children especially in remote areas. Celia Yangco, the DSWD Assistant Secretary for Field Operations admitted that there have been a number of times when the DSWD found themselves in conflict with the military over the treatment of children detained because of alleged involvement in armed groups.²⁴

In these cases where the military refuses to surrender custody, the child's best interest and security are compromised as they may be used as informants or propaganda pawns in the conflict. The DSWD would usually respond immediately to reports that a child soldier is detained by the military but they have to be informed by the military themselves and there are times when the military fail to do so.

There must be a strong political will to enforce the laws and regulations on the handling of child soldiers by the AFP. It must be ensured that children's rights and needs are instilled in the training of security and armed forces. There must be sanctions on officers who refuse to turn over custody of captured child soldiers to the DSWD as soon as possible. The gaps in the MOA between concerned agencies on the handling of child soldiers also need to be addressed. One of these gaps is the non-inclusion of the CAFGU in the MOA.²⁵

Rehabilitation and reintegration

Stranger ties with networks

Governments and non-governmental organizations should work together towards building capacities of the agencies and communities directly concerned with the rehabilitation and reintegration of former child

soldiers into the mainstream of society. Although the DSWD is mandated to immediately obtain custody of captured child soldiers, it is still improving its methods to better help them. There is also a need to develop the capacities of DSWD social workers specifically in addressing the needs of child soldiers.

There are NGOs who are currently working with children involved and affected by armed conflict for years. They have developed methodologies that are culturally appropriate in their areas. Their delivery of services, however, is hampered by limited resources and security problems. The strengths and weaknesses of the GOs and the NGOs only underscore the need to work together and define clearer roles.

The need for a safe environment

In helping children involved and affected by war, one of the decisive factors in their recovery and reintegration is the need for a safe environment. A safe environment would be places where the children are physically safe from bodily harm and safe from persecution. Former child soldiers often fear that their ex-comrades would target them for assassination. Communities and some family members may ostracize and refuse to accept former child soldiers.

A program similar to the "witness protection plan" should be developed for children whose security is confirmed to be compromised by their decision to leave the armed group. Foster families where former child soldiers are placed should be thoroughly oriented on their special needs. A carefully developed program of psychosocial activities towards recovery and healing should be developed by the child's care-givers, parents and with the participation of the children themselves.

The need for a secure economic base

One of the factors that lead children to participate in armed conflict is extreme poverty in the countryside. There were children who tagged along with NPA guerillas so that they could have some food to eat. When former child soldiers come home only to be faced with the same conditions of destitution, it is likely that they will go back to the armed groups. Psychosocial recovery is also hard to facilitate when physical needs are not met.

Therefore, any effort to help former child soldiers in recovery and reintegration should have a component where the economic problem could be addressed. Children should be provided with skills in industries or occupations that are marketable, e.g., computer literacy. Scholarships for their chosen fields should also be provided. They should also be assisted in job placement. It must be stressed that the children should be consulted and guided on what economic endeavor they want to do.

Research

In order to better develop methods in helping child soldiers, the gaps in research should also be addressed. Some of the gaps are:

1. An in-depth study on the effects of the participation of children in armed conflict in the Philippines;
2. Study on what happens to these children when they become adults; and,
3. A study on the culturally appropriate methodologies in helping child soldiers.

Prevention

The phenomenon of children participating in armed conflict are caused by numerous factors, socio-economic, structural, political, historical and cultural factors all come in play. Thus, there is no one answer to its prevention.

There are efforts to make social services accessible in far flung areas in the countryside. Opportunities to go to school should reach the far flung communities. DSWD's *Framework for a Comprehensive Program for Children in Armed Conflict* has components on the prevention of children's involvement in armed conflict. These are:

1. Livelihood programs;
2. Appropriate educational assistance and other alternative learning programs;
3. Health care and nutrition services;

4. Food security which includes enhancement of sustainable agriculture and appropriate farming practices;
5. Provision of basic facilities and infrastructure; and,
6. Participation and capacity building for local governance and community development inclusive of the people's organizations at the community level.

The prevention component uses the resources of the Comprehensive and Integrated Delivery of Social Services (CIDSS) of the DSWD. The impact and effectiveness of this program still remains to be seen. Considering the limited resources of the DSWD, not all areas affected by the armed conflict could be reached. Thus, networking and coordination with local NGOs are again important.

The culture of impunity that surrounds the use of child soldiers should also be addressed.²⁶ This could be done through advocacy, education and mobilizing activities that will pressure the armed groups to comply. Peace building and conflict resolution activities should be included in the school curriculum. The schools are venues where children, teachers, and parents can unlearn a culture of violence and learn peaceful alternatives. In all the efforts in prevention, a crucial factor is the vigilance of the NGOs, concerned government agencies, and the people in the communities in implementing the laws and protocols that are already in place.

A Message of Peace

In the end, the children who participated in armed conflict or even those still with the armed groups, all yearn for peaceful lives. A former child soldier shared the following message when she was asked about her future plans.²⁷

I never regretted my decision in joining the NPA. I learned and experienced a lot. In a way, I was happy there as I am happy now that I am at the Center. My immediate plan is to finish high school. I believe that children join the NPA because they had no other choice. They shouldn't be carrying guns and fighting. It is dangerous for their bodies and their minds. It is very scary. Parents should be responsible for their children. They should love them, send them to school, and take care of them.

I left and joined the NPA because I wanted to run away from my family because it was so bad and very noisy. There was so much trouble and I hated getting hurt by my own family. Even without the friend who helped me out, I was planning to leave the NPA. You know, I only wanted the experience really. But I was afraid that if I left on my own, I might come across soldiers who would only kill me.

I want to tell other children who are thinking of joining the NPA that in the end, it is their decision if they want to join or not. I just want to add that life in the mountains is hard and that you might die. To all the children who are living away from the conflict, be good and make the most of your life. You are lucky that you can sleep without fearing the enemy might ambush you. You have a better life because you are safe."



Endnotes

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