



Wilton Park



Report

## Reintegration of children associated with armed forces or armed groups

Wednesday 15 – Friday 17 February 2023 | WP3101

In association with:



Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for  
**CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT**



unicef 



Norwegian Ministry  
of Foreign Affairs



Save the Children





## Report

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### Introduction

This Wilton Park event on 'Reintegration of Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups' addresses a core recommendation from the April 2022 Wilton Park event 'Preparing the children and armed conflict agenda for the future'. Besides being a critical issue on the global peace, security, and development agendas, recruitment and use of children by armed forces or armed groups continues to seriously impact children's rights and protection in situations of armed conflict. Release and provision of adequate reintegration support for affected children is a critical response to this problem.

This event brought together representatives from governments, UN agencies, civil society organisations, legal, counter-terrorism, juvenile justice and child rights advisors as well as academics to discuss how actors can better cooperate to address existing gaps and needs to achieve successful reintegration of Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups (CAAFAG) while also taking a preventive approach.

### Context and key policy issues

In April 2022 key stakeholders convened at Wilton Park to take stock of the progress made since the creation of the CAAC agenda 25 years ago. The event was an opportunity to discuss how the CAAC mandate has contributed to improving the protection of children in armed conflict, including for children associated with armed forces or groups. Participants celebrated good practices and identified barriers and challenges that remain to be addressed to increase protection for children and prevent the Six Grave Violations against children from taking place, and discussed how the mandate might be further strengthened for a second 25 years.

Against this backdrop, the reintegration of children who have exited armed forces or armed groups was identified as a key continuing challenge that needs to be addressed more holistically. As recruitment and use of children by armed actors continues to rise in many countries around the world, continued efforts aimed at preventing and ending this practice are still strongly needed.

Drawing on the key recommendations of the April 2022 event, this event, held 15-17 February 2023, aimed to build stronger programmatic linkages between humanitarian and longer-term development initiatives across the Humanitarian and Development Nexus. It also discussed how to secure access to longer term innovative financing by placing a focus on responses to children's needs using a prevention lens.

“My hope is that this conference might be a defining moment on the issue of reintegration.”

## Goal and objectives

1. Unpack key issues that arise in reintegration policy and practise such as: the links with socio-economic strengthening, social cohesion and peacebuilding and the intersection of reintegration with the justice system(s), particularly in relation to children associated with or living under the control of armed groups designated as terrorist organisations;
2. Identify key actors and constructive approaches to advance progress on reintegration policy - including funding, programming and increasing access for all children exiting armed forces and groups;
3. Address the siloing of standalone humanitarian and development programming and funding;
4. Identify key indicators of successful reintegration based on child and community consultation, research, and other data, building on the evidence base derived from various initiatives focused on child reintegration.

## Intended outcomes

Develop greater synergies and closer collaboration between the existing range of activities by various actors in the child reintegration space;

Agree on a key set of actions to enhance cooperation and accelerate progress in the reintegration agenda which includes time-bound actions to address key barriers/challenges to reintegration;

An action-oriented report will summarise the discussions, conclusions, policy recommendations, and agreed next steps, which will be widely circulated and promoted to interested parties and posted on Wilton Park and other websites.

## Key themes throughout the conference

- Building the evidence base in particular:
  - learn more about what practice and programming has worked so far
  - identify gaps in evidence base
  - recommendations on the way forward.
- Recognising, protecting, and fulfilling children’s rights in the context of security-led agendas.
- Bridging the Humanitarian Development Peace Nexus for unified work for sustainable, successful reintegration.
- How to promote adequate and sustainable funding for reintegration.
- Inclusion of children’s voices in the planning, design, and implementation of reintegration programmes.

## Building the evidence base

1. Presentations were given on the latest evidence from research and good practices which illustrated successes and challenges when it comes to programming approaches. Findings shared also came from consultations and engagement with children, families and communities on their perceptions and experiences of reintegration:
  - CAAFAG toolkit, findings from context analysis.
  - Findings from Managing Exits from Armed Conflict project.
  - Joint Global Programme on Child Reintegration – findings from consultations with communities and children.
2. Research and practice so far. Key findings
  - i. A critical factor discussed was longer term programme cycles as this would assist with recovery and the sustainability of children’s reintegration and allow for the promotion of children’s rights and protection.

“It’s important to be reminded that existing evidence shows that there are answers to this very complicated issue.”

- ii. Another key finding was the importance of consulting and engaging with children to understand their needs and wants as well as to inform programmatic approaches. Children are not a homogenous group and solutions identified need to centre the experiences found in each context.
- iii. Protection from security forces and payment for school fees (long term and sustainable) were also discussed.
- iv. Data collected also showed the need for gender-sensitive programming due to the different needs and concerns identified by girls and boys which raised the question on whether the right level of support was being currently provided. Girls, for example, expressed a concern around losing access to dignity kits and basic services which they could secure through their husbands as the resources were under their control. While both boys and girls face stigma for being associated with an armed group, women and girls raised particular concerns about the stigma they face when they return to their communities with children from combatants. This raised the question of what demobilisation looks like for this particular group.
- v. When it came to priority areas to achieve successful reintegration, health, food, employment and education were considered key areas by girls. In comparison, for boys, it was security, protection, support and access to education. The need for psychosocial support for their families and mental health support for themselves once they exited a group was also highlighted.
- vi. Children have been found to be less likely to admit their association with armed forces and groups compared to adults, which presents challenges when working to improve access to services.
- vii. Differences were observed between certain categories of CAAFAG. Communities' level of acceptance in some contexts was largely dependent on whether those children joined the armed group 'voluntarily' or were recruited forcibly, with children joining of their own accord facing increased rejection after they exited.
- viii. On successful factors for reintegration, inter alia, engagement with religious and traditional community leaders, was one of the factors identified. They were seen to serve as entry points into a community where their support in promoting acceptance of children associated with armed groups played a critical role in ensuring successful integration for children.
- ix. Research has demonstrated, that especially in contexts where there are non-state armed groups, children cannot simply 'opt out'; they are in highly politicised contexts which pre-empts their ability to decide their own fate. Children associated with "terrorist" groups are more commonly seen as security threats and/or treated as criminals. They are not treated first and foremost as victims in line with their rights under the UN CRC. Instead, they are being treated as criminals and /or terrorists - in some cases in connection with genuine crimes committed as CAAFAG, but more often simply because of their real or assumed association with such groups. They do not benefit from transfers to civil protection actors to ensure; in line with their rights and international standards and norms, such as the Paris Principles, due to the way they are perceived.
- x. According to the UN CRC, a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years. In many communities however, other factors determine whether someone is an adult besides just their actual age - if they look older, if puberty has taken place, their marital status and if they have children themselves. There are often social and religious definitions of a child, which further confounds efforts to protect children in these contexts. This highlighted the need to challenge assumptions made by practitioners and the need to recognise that

"All children associated with armed forces or armed groups deserve reintegration, regardless of what they have thought of, done, or intended."

transition of childhood to adulthood looks different in each context and must be accounted for in reintegration efforts. That said, children in all states that have ratified the UN CRC have the right to be treated as children. It is a huge challenge that many states that have ratified the UN CRC, have not implemented those obligations in domestic law.

- xi. Reintegration programming has been seen occasionally to create tension in communities due to the perception it is providing former CAAFAG with increased access to services and better resources. While it has been addressed in many contexts, it remains an area that needs further attention to ensure equity and that CAAFAGs are supported and accepted by their host community.

### 3. Gaps in evidence base

- i. Robust evidence is needed to isolate the impact of recruitment and use on children. Future research will need to compare the lives of children before they were in the armed group/force or include information from those that were not recruited to better understand protective factors and those that led to association. Closely linked to this is looking at the entire period of recruitment - the factors that led to children joining the group, their experiences while in the group, and the factors that influenced whether they remained in the group need to be assessed. The period between children leaving the group and before they access support also needs further analysis.
- ii. Research is required around children who were recruited and have become internally displaced, children who were victims of sexual violence (the situation for all children, including boys has been seriously underreported). One organisation shared a study where it conducted focus group discussions in Central African Republic and found that many were aware of its prevalence but no action was being taken. To date, programming has failed to adequately take this violation into account which is needed in the future.
- iii. There is a need to develop overarching key policy messages from the evidence gathered so far which needs to be shared with those that work in development and the security sectors. Non-governmental organisations also need to state the limitations of their research and share not only their findings and recommendations but the challenges faced, failures and lessons learnt so far.

### 4. Way forward

- i. With regards to solutions, the need for longitudinal research was highlighted to isolate impact and ensure a better understanding of each context. There is the need to recognise there is no one size fits all and needs will be different depending on context.
- ii. Further evidence needs to be generated to look at the wider set of vulnerabilities, including children with disabilities, gender and sexual identity, minority groups and others. There is a need to learn from education and health interventions and capture learnings that apply to CAAFAG-focused work. Further funding for monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (MEAL) and research evidence is required as well as a library/shared database.
- iii. There were observations that funding cycles are short, (most often too short,) and focus on concrete outputs but not enough attention is given to outcome indicators in projects. There is no built-in process for recording learnings, as 'failure' is not seen as acceptable. An action for agencies, policymakers and donors to take forward is advocating for reintegration programmes to run a minimum of two years to collate results, but better for 3-5 years as this is the timeframe identified by child experts, as the minimum to ensure that children are fully reintegrated. Currently, very few, if any, receive that amount, with an average of a few months for only some of the children exiting these groups.

## Recognising, protecting and fulfilling children's rights in the context of security-led agendas

"The national security agenda needs to include reintegration if it is to succeed."

5. While there have been positive changes as a result of the Optional Protocols to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Paris Commitments and Principles, Vancouver Principles, and national and regional instruments, implementation and adherence are lacking both in spirit and letter. There is a need for increased advocacy in relation to counterterrorism measures and operations so that they are in line with child rights obligations and to reconcile the security and child rights agendas. More work with communities is also needed to challenge their perceptions of children associated with armed groups.
6. Governments and communities have been resistant to recognising CAAFAGs as victims of rights violations, particularly when they are associated with or perceived to be associated with 'terrorist' groups. While there are opportunities to engage with security actors, challenges remain due to perceptions and differences in national legal frameworks. There is a serious concern regarding the perception that even the slightest act of support or potential connection with a terrorist group is seen as more important than other acts of violence and international crimes such as genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity, creating a distorted hierarchy of victimhood.
7. Children who have been recruited and used by armed groups and designated as terrorist organisations are seen and treated as security threats rather than as victims. Governments and the broader international community must respect that legal and normative frameworks apply to all children without any distinction. Children associated with armed forces or armed groups, must be treated in accordance with their rights.
8. It is important to promote understanding that the juvenile justice system is part of the child protection system and that a functioning justice system must include a system for children (such as taking into account handover protocols and restorative justice). It will be important to communicate to security actors that there is no dichotomy between security interests and child rights, and that handover protocols and diversion are not in conflict with justice and accountability.
9. Research in Indonesia, Iraq and Nigeria has shown that armed groups are often willing to adopt child protection measures when states take non-punitive approaches and there are more positive experiences after disengagement from armed groups. Placing emphasis on how counterproductive short-term policies currently adopted by security personnel are - which in turn negatively impact on the security environment - could align interests between the security and child rights agendas. By respecting international frameworks and instruments and treating people fairly and humanely, States can lessen grievance, and undermine the goals and objectives of armed groups.
10. The dual role of a juvenile justice system needs to be highlighted - that it both protects children and exists to preserve public safety. Although children who have been recruited by armed groups need to be recognised as victims, in exceptional circumstances where serious crimes have been committed, and proper evidence exists, children may be prosecuted according to international juvenile justice standards.
11. Engagement with youth and community organisations is essential due to their knowledge and experience of the context in which they live. There is need to engage with those in opposition or passive to protecting CAAFAGs and collaborate with those who can challenge and influence perceptions in the community. There needs to be engagement with government institutions and ministries to address different aspects and processes related to the reintegration process (arrest, detention, release).
12. There is also a need to tailor the language in a way that resonates with those in the security sector. Research can be utilised to share recommendations of what can

"We need new messaging around why reintegration is critical for our peace and security."

work. Research can also be further improved by ensuring that it addresses security concerns and shows how different interventions also positively impact on security goals. Moreover, governments and donors can use their bilateral and multilateral influence to create common ground with security actors and relevant governments.

### **How to bridge the Humanitarian Development Peace Nexus and work together for sustainable, successful reintegration?**

13. There was a strong focus throughout the event on the Humanitarian Development Peace (HDP) Nexus and how child reintegration efforts inherently span the Nexus. The challenges that arise for reintegration as a result of a highly fragmented system were discussed and highlighted. For example, it was agreed that because of different mandates within the three areas of the Nexus, it is difficult to find agreement and common understanding that child reintegration is a joint responsibility and touches on the work of many different sectors, not just the humanitarian one. It was agreed that there is significant need for developing this shared understanding as well as common goals and metrics on reintegration amongst relevant actors. Such a common understanding will allow for innovation and collaboration while connecting existing silos. It was also emphasised that while a common understanding is needed, it is imperative that this does not necessarily translate to a 'cookie cutter' approach for all countries as there are differences between contexts and a need to tailor approaches to the nuances within each.
14. While it was recognised that relevant actors across the three pillars must have specific responsibilities and activities in the reintegration process, it was equally highlighted that they must work together, sharing responsibility and accountability to affected populations. Given that the process is not linear and requires a significant investment of time, the need for collaboration and communication is crucial to a more holistic approach which is more aligned with the complexity of the issue. Collaboration needs to be supported by a coalition of actors that can deliver.
15. Generally, reintegration has been viewed as a humanitarian issue which has prevented a more long-term approach and engagement of relevant actors across the Nexus. Child reintegration has been prioritised by humanitarian actors, while long-term drivers of child recruitment have been prioritised by development actors. In order to address reintegration needs, and prevent further recruitment and use, both need to be addressed with equal urgency. The silo-ing of the sectors has created challenges which are further exacerbated by a heterogenous architecture of financing and funding for reintegration programming. As a result, children are falling between the humanitarian-development-peace pillars which the international community has created—but which it can also fix.
16. Additionally, when discussing peace within the Nexus, it was highlighted that peacebuilding actors need to engage more with security actors. This will allow for a more holistic look at the transition from 'military' to civilian life, which is so important to reintegration. Peace comes with security: we need to be clear about the transition from military to civilian life. Different funding streams need to be tapped into - for example stabilisation funding, where supported appropriately, has promoted reintegration.
17. It was stressed that for the affected populations, in this case CAAFAG, it is not of concern who is providing the support as long as it is being provided and in a timely, meaningful way. A flexible, comprehensive continuum of care and the availability and accessibility of appropriate services and support within communities is essential. It is important to ensure that colleagues from all pillars of the Nexus are on board. This can be done through sharing of information on how their work will contribute to successful reintegration, or by looking at different and innovative areas such as human rights, the environment, gender, and conflict. On the programmatic side this can be achieved by jointly identifying outputs and outcomes amongst the sectors, i.e.

“Working together could be a game changer for reintegration.”

“Our security commitment should be aligned with our humanitarian and development agenda: we’re all working towards the same objective.”

a common theory of change, and then articulating it in a way that resonates with donors and policymakers. It is important to always keep HDP outcomes in mind, during planning, implementation and engagement - with civil society, governments and communities. “The problem with reintegration is that there are no quick fixes- it can take up to 5 years with children needing community, family, and mental health support as well as education, training and employment. It’s a complex task”.

18. “How can we answer the impatience of policy makers and donors who want a quick fix?” A highlighted challenge was the need to create political will for the Nexus to work in the service of child reintegration, and not against it. This includes educating policy makers and donors on the complexity of the problem, the benefits of working across the HDP Nexus and taking the time needed for meaningful reintegration processes as well as leaving room for learning from failure. Political will at the national level is a key factor in longer-term reintegration efforts but can be very difficult to achieve due to poor coherence between key ministries and a lack of resources. For most governments, child reintegration is simply not a priority during or after conflict.

### **How to promote sustainable funding for reintegration?**

19. Linked very closely to the challenges with the activities found across the HDP Nexus, is the question of sustainable funding. As with programming across the Nexus, there are silos for funding created by the existing, fragmented system. It was agreed and highlighted that it is generally humanitarian funding that is aimed at supporting reintegration programmes. But the relatively short life cycles of humanitarian funding (a few months to maybe 18 months) do not cover the amount of time needed to fully support child reintegration. It was recognized that such contributions to restoring children to a healthy state is not only a human imperative, but also an investment in breaking cycles of conflict.
20. It was agreed that there needs to be advocacy and action toward further, more long-term investment into reintegration processes and for funding streams to be more complementary. Currently each of the three pillars receives some funding, but there are challenges to secure funding that works across the pillars in a coherent way to support children throughout their reintegration journey. With the aforementioned common theories of change and metrics, as well as increased cooperation amongst actors on the ground, it could be an easier task for donors and institutions to support a new and more cohesive child reintegration programming picture. In addition, there was agreement on the need to bring development and peacebuilding donors into the CAAC/CAAFAG/reintegration discussion.
21. It was discussed that there are streams of funding that are largely untapped for child reintegration – for example, funding for climate, democracy, rights, and governance. It was agreed that such funding sources could be useful, and perhaps there needed to be a strategy for reaching out to donors and institutions to demonstrate the value of reintegrating future leaders and citizens of conflict countries.
22. A natural corollary of child reintegration is aiming to prevent recruitment in the first place. Some research presented pointed to nine main drivers of recruitment that need to be tackled so cycles of reintegration can eventually end: governance, social cohesion, food security, access to basic social service, livelihood opportunities, education, rule of law, agency and marginalisation. These thematic areas touch on topics that could also be brought into the reintegration funding sphere to link up programming for these children with longer-term initiatives that could create a virtuous cycle and help break conflict cycles.
23. Government ownership and accountability was discussed as key, and that reintegration efforts should not be strictly externally funded in the longer term. It was stressed that governments need to take responsibility and allocate funds from their budgets to the reintegration process as soon as feasibly possible. Thus, political will

“We need to rearticulate the narrative on reintegration.”



is particularly important in discussions about funding reintegration in a sustainable way. Discussions focused on how the international community and actors in the reintegration space can garner political will and vested interest, particularly in states where resources are scarce and there are a number of competing priorities. The group agreed that it is essential for actors in the reintegration space to continue to educate states and officials on the importance of reintegration and the impacts it has on society more generally.

24. Funding for reintegration from the private sector was also a topic of discussion with participants agreeing that the private sector also could hold some responsibility to ensure the sustainability of reintegration. This could be done, for example, through microgrants to CAAFAG directly, market assessments to identify areas for job training, providing internships or providing jobs. Where international companies and multinational corporations are investing large amounts of money, a request to support social issues within the country could also be placed. This could be part of the 'hook' for access to resources of the country.
25. It was emphasised it is important that reintegration receives sufficient interest and the corollary funding required to change the status quo and ensure all former CAAFAG and their communities receive the support they need. An important first step is to look at existing pools of money and the funding landscape generally to ensure funds are being used most coherently and to make it more accessible to governments, civil society, local authorities, UN agencies, regional organisations, etc.
26. The discussion continued by calling attention to the fact that there is very little interest to invest in failure. Donors want to see best practices and success. But without the opportunity to learn from failure, it is challenging to innovate, to push the envelope, and to be more daring in strategies related to reintegration. Thus it was proposed that a more iterative learning model be used or piloted to allow for learning throughout the process and a collection of good practices developed.
27. While the uptake may be slow, donors are listening to the experts on the ground regarding their needs and progress is being made in the way of innovative funding. Some donors are adapting the way they fund reintegration programmes. One example shared was that specific donors have begun earmarking funding specifically for prevention and reintegration in CAAFAG programming.
28. It was also stressed that there is a need to put aside competition for funding at all levels. This is not only necessary within the HDP Nexus but also between all relevant stakeholders. It was suggested that funding be pooled so that key stakeholders have access to funding specifically for reintegration processes when and as needed.

## Key Themes and areas of consensus

29. Advocacy with concerned governments.

Although states have endorsed both legally binding instruments and non-binding frameworks, the rights of CAAFAG are still being regularly violated. In the name of security, they are often being treated as "criminals" and "terrorists" and being re-victimised by the authorities in the justice system. There is also serious concern regarding the perception that even the slightest act of support or potential connection with a terrorist group is seen as more important than other acts of violence such as international crimes, creating a distorted hierarchy of victimhood.

Way forward: there is a need for greater emphasis on respecting international legal frameworks (including the UN CRC and OPAC) and accelerating advocacy on child rights in relation to recruitment and use with governments, policy makers, donors and security actors. Children recruited and used in armed conflict, should be treated first and foremost as victims of grave violations and abuses of international law. They need to be provided with support for their return and reintegration into the

"Reintegrated children need to be seen as agents of positive change and champions for social and economic development- crucial to fulfilling the SDGs."

society/their communities. This applies to all children including those associated with armed groups designated as terrorist organizations.

30. Equity in programming.

Reintegration programming may create tension in communities due to perceptions it is providing former CAAFAG with increased access to services and better resources than other conflict affected children. While it has been addressed in many contexts, it remains an area that needs further attention.

Way forward: it is critical to consider the needs of all conflict affected children to ensure equity and strengthen programmatic interventions.

31. Advocacy with donors.

Funding cycles were observed to be short and focus on concrete outputs but not enough on outcome or impact. Moreover, it was found that there is no built-in process for recording learnings and 'failure' is not seen as acceptable.

Way forward: an action for agencies, policymakers and donors to take forward is advocating for reintegration programmes to build in outcome measurements on the impact of interventions over time. This can provide evidence on the success of various interventions but also to assess the impact of more sustained reintegration support. There needs to be a push for more meaningful outcomes for children and communities.

32. Engagement with a broader set of actors.

Building coalitions and collaboration is important, particularly between local, national, regional and global levels. It is also necessary to explore how coordination and collaboration support improvements in resource mobilisation.

Way forward: there is a need for engagement with actors that may not have been meaningfully engaged previously (e.g. security/counterterrorism actors, youth and religious/community leaders) and to expand work with communities. This means understanding different priorities and educating each other on the importance of reintegration and the secondary benefits it has on society, and last, but not the least: to find common ground. It is an accepted principle that human rights, which includes children's rights, must be upheld while countering terrorism in order to be successful.

33. Broadening the evidence base.

Investment in a deeper evidence-base needs to be promoted. Multiple push and pull factors drive child recruitment and use, and there is a need to challenge assumptions and address gaps in knowledge through the dissemination of credible research and analysis. It is important that this not only relies on academic studies, but also on experience and insights from programming as well as children themselves.

Way forward: national and local organisations as well as youth and community representatives must be supported to participate in policy and programme development. In recognition of the challenges in knowing what evidence there is on reintegration, there is interest to develop a platform for research and studies (covering academic studies, assessments, project reports etc.) There is also a need to learn from past work.

34. Meta messaging.

Actors across the HDP Nexus operate in parallel and thus need to align programming, funding, and priorities for delivering appropriate responses. This alignment will promote stronger collaborations and thus more longer-term impacts, allowing for the needs of CAAFAG to be addressed while at the same time meeting the global vision.

“Remember that there is no peace while a child is in pieces.”

Way forward: creative and closer dialogue is important to create space for sharing best practices and challenges, breaking down existing siloes, and working together across the humanitarian, development and peace sectors. The idea of meta messaging was presented as a way to bring the three sectors of the Nexus together under a common framework for and understanding of reintegration.

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