

*“Children who have been recruited in armed conflict carry the scars of conflict and effective reintegration is vital so that they can live full lives and contribute to a peaceful society”.<sup>1</sup>*

**Purpose:**

This paper provides guidance on considerations for reintegration into schools for children formerly associated with armed forces or groups. This guidance is limited to education and factors that influence or facilitate safe and dignified return to schools and factors that can promote learning outcomes. This paper does not provide guidance on general reintegration needs that are equally important for boys and girls to reintegrate into the community; neither is it an education in armed conflict settings strategy.

**The Issue:**

Military life has a strong impact on the physical, psychological, and emotional wellbeing of children. This impact has been identified as an obstacle to children’s reintegration into their families and communities, and remains a risk factor for re-recruitment or return of children to armed groups. In armed conflict settings, access to education is difficult for all children due to safety concerns including attacks on schools. If they are able to return to school, Children Formerly Associated with Armed Forces or Groups (CAAFAG)<sup>2</sup>, have an even more challenging experience as they are stigmatized by the other children and school personnel, they struggle with authoritarianism experienced in schools and have difficulties in catching up after having lost years of education. This is further complicated by poor school infrastructure, damaged as a result of conflict, and a lack of investment may be combined with weak teacher capacity.

Children returning home from armed forces and groups need appropriate support and care to be able to start/resume school. The support they require depends on each child’s individual circumstance, needs (including psychosocial needs), age, gender and existing support structure as well the time they spent in recruitment. For education reintegration, the support required will depend on what foundation the child had before, how much of the school year they have missed and how supportive the environment is to enable the child to adjust and learn in a safe environment. Given a child lives in a community, supportive environment for education reflects the relationships within the home, at school with teachers and peers and the physical environment that facilitate access to schools. Ultimately, the objective of school reintegration is to ensure the child has a chance to realize her or his potential through education.

**Theory of Change**

The accompanying theory of change therefore, is that: **“If** boys and girls are safe and supported within the family, and **if** boys and girls have safe access to stimulating, functioning and responsive schools and **if** boys and girls can meet basic requirements to facilitate reintegration into schools, and **if** boys and girls do not face stigma and discrimination from peers, school personnel and from discriminatory education policies, and **if** boys and girls have support to enable them catch up on education, and **if** boys and girls can receive

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<sup>1</sup> Reintegration of former child soldiers: Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Children and Armed Conflict (2018).

<sup>2</sup> CAAFAG includes children who have been used in combat and non-combat e.g. to spy, carry luggage, sexual slaves, cooks etc.

support to recover and have a non-militarized life, *then* boys and girls will reintegrate safely in schools and have a chance to realize their potential”.

### **Considerations**

Based on your context, the above theory of change may fully apply or may need adaptation. The following considerations will help you achieve the proposed hypothesis that will enable safe reintegration to school for boys and girls. In your reintegration efforts, consider a neutral targeting criteria that will not expose boys and girls as formerly recruited children, therefore other children who may not have been formerly recruited but face similar needs or at risk of protection violations should be included in the considerations below and in the overall education/child protection programs.

#### *1. Support within the family and community*

For a child to be able to thrive at school, they need a supportive environment not only at school, but also within the home. The role of male and female caregivers, siblings and other household members in ensuring the child has a positive environment and wellbeing is important to reduce stress or any adversities that the child has faced in the past, and may face in the present, which ultimately would affect their concentration and uptake of education.

To ensure supportive environment within the family, the following approaches can be considered:

- a. Parenting Interventions that help caregivers to promote child wellbeing, prevent violence against children and support the child to recover from harm faced during involvement with armed groups
- b. Working sessions with parents, siblings and community members to stop stigma and promote healthy acceptance and promote school reintegration of boys and girls
- c. Child care support for girls and boys who may have a child, to enable them to have child care alternatives and time for education
- d. Speak to boys and girls of different age groups, gender and disabilities to understand and address their support needs and priorities for better education reintegration

#### *2. Safety in schools and safe location of schools and access to schools*

For children and adolescents to be able to thrive in school they need to feel safe and protected both on their way to and from school, and while they are in school and under the protection of teachers and other school personnel. Consider:

- a. The routes to school should be safe and limit the chance of girls getting harassed or boys and girls facing intimidation or risk of being abducted by armed groups. Consider community safety plans, and working with children on safety planning and practical mitigation measures to minimize risks of safety on the road to and from school
- b. Existing community capacities, as well as capacity of boys and girls themselves to strengthen and improve the safety on the way to school and in schools. Identify strategies to enhance these capacities.

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- c. Involve parent-teacher committees on accessing and addressing safety needs of boys and girls and on measures to address these
- d. Ensure boys and girls are involved in identifying safety risks that affect all children, and those that affect girls differently than boys, and design mitigation measures: speak to the boys and girls themselves to hear their voice, views and ideas, and give their recommendations due weight. Periodically, conduct these safety assessments even if the context doesn't change drastically.
- e. Ensure school personnel and peers have knowledge about violence, and are motivated to not use violence, and that the schools code of conduct prohibits and actively monitors violence in the school setting
- f. School environment should have a zero tolerance policy on sexual exploitation and abuse. With the school personnel and relevant authorities, support the set up to prevent SEA.
- g. Ensure school infrastructure enables safe and conducive learning, including accessibility for children with disabilities, disaggregated toilet facilities for boys and girls, safe spaces for girls, and that the environment is adequate to promote learning.
- h. With girls and boys of different age groups and abilities, map out the risks associated with age composition of classrooms so that older boys and girls are not discouraged being in classroom with younger children, but also that younger children do not face any safety concerns being in classroom/school with older boys and girls.
- i. Consider child protection training and incorporation of child protection principles in the school's policies to enable teachers to understand what support they can provide in school setting and what they should refer for specialized support.

### 3. *Boys and girls ability to meet basic education material and other education requirements*

In many contexts, access to school is hindered by inability of boys and girls to meet basic requirements such as school fees, examination fees, uniform, books or any other supplies. Additionally, caregivers may choose to have children support livelihoods creation in lieu of education, in cases where families cannot meet their own basic needs.

The following approaches can be considered:

- a. Provision through various mechanisms including cash transfers (conditional or unconditional) or in-kind, school fees, school supplies such as books, uniforms, and other basic necessities required for boys and girls to (re)commence their education. Ensure these mechanisms are sustainable and take into consideration the entire school cycle and not limited to one school term/semester to avoid school dropout.
- b. Linking caregivers to livelihood opportunities including income generating activities that are grounded in revenue generation
- c. For girls who have commenced their menstrual periods, involve them to ensure appropriate and accessible provision of menstrual kits including menstrual hygiene management, and other hygiene considerations that can interfere with school attendance

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- d. Providing support to schools e.g. through school improvement plans, to allow unhindered access/free access to education for formerly recruited children. Provision of any support directly to boys and girls, their families or through schools should be informed by a do no harm analysis.
- e. Ensure boys and girls are involved in the analysis of their needs, priorities and inform how these should be delivered.

### *4. Elimination of stigma and discrimination*

Children returning to schools from recruitment can have difficulty adjusting to the routine and school environment. They may face stigma, they may not have friends or they may be labelled negatively. Schools where conditions are harsh and where violations such as corporal punishment thrive can also discourage boys and girls and lead to school dropout. Schools may also implement policies that hinder enrolment of formerly recruited children if they have been out of school for too long. In addressing these concerns, consider the following:

- a. Develop with school authorities a code of conduct if none exists. Promote adherence to teacher code of conduct, which should reflect child safeguarding measures, and that the expected code of conduct is owned by the teachers as a positive inclusion and important for learning outcomes
- b. Ensure teacher psychosocial wellbeing is considered and supported
- c. Conduct a teacher assessment to understand their priorities, questions and concerns related to reintegration of formerly recruited children, and tailor the response accordingly
- d. Conduct capacity building sessions with teachers and other school personnel so that they better understand psychosocial needs of boys and girls returning from recruitment, and that they are able to take this into consideration to support learning
- e. Ensure the schools have reporting mechanisms, a trained counsellor or a strong referral pathway, for girls or boys who need further support following violence or abuse in the school.
- f. Ensure peer to peer support through school clubs or other activities where boys and girls can learn how to treat each other with respect, eliminate bullying and stigmatization
- g. Map out relevant policies and barriers that limit reintegration of girls and boys into schools, e.g. policies that restrict reintegration of girl mothers into schools or age restrictive education policies. Advocate for non-discriminatory school policies such that boys and girls do not have barriers to enrolling and resuming or starting education

### *5. Boys and girls have support to catch up on education*

Children coming from recruitment have missed school sessions, and depending on the length of time spent out of school and their age, they may require different levels of support to catch up on education. In some countries, education policies restricts the type and manner of tutoring that can be provided. To support girls and boys

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- a. Consider organizing alternative pathways such as tutoring or catch up classes or accelerated learning programs which enable children to complete primary school faster and gain the relevant credential, and/or continue back into mainstream formal education, and ensure this is in line with the country policy on tutoring.
- b. Ensure boys and girls, based on their age, gender and study needs, provide input on the timing and method of receiving catch up
- c. Organize reading clubs and peer to peer support that can help boys and girls to receive the support they need to catch up with education
- d. Consider school years and breaks, so that boys and girls are able to (re)enroll back to school within the cut off time set by education departments.
- e. With the boys and girls of varying ages and abilities, analyze and address the barriers different faced by boys and girls, which hinder their ability to catch up on education. Work with different stakeholders, including caregivers, school committees, and school personnel in addressing these barriers in a time sensitive manner.
- f. For girls and boys for whom a return to formal education is not possible, explore alternatives in line with their developmental stage and wishes (see guidance on other forms of reintegration for further details).

### 6. *Boys and girls receive support to recover*

A healthy child who feels safe and included will be better able to concentrate at school, interact well with peers and learn better. To ensure boys and girls recover from the adversity they have faced:

- a. Consider social-emotional learning and life skills interventions that will help boys and girls interact well with each other and have positive outlook in life.
- b. Provide case management services that address individual needs of boys and girls to heal and recover
- c. Ensure boys and girls have age and ability appropriate access to information about their rights, the support they can receive, and that they are able to access these services
- d. The school environment should provide accessible referral mechanisms where boys and girls can safely report violations they face, so that these can be mitigated and they can receive support to recover. The mechanisms should be differentiated to consider gender, age and the different abilities and needs of boys and girls.
- e. School personnel need to understand their role in promoting mutual respect, eliminating bullying and enhancing a safe school environment for boys and girls and be equipped and motivated to ensure safety and understand their role in providing referral for specialized support and how to do this safely.
- f. Provide avenues informed by the boys and girls themselves, including referral pathways in schools and and feedback mechanisms, on how boys and girls can seek support from the school environment when they need it. .

### Examples of Evidence or Promising Practice

*Promising Practice:*

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- a. In DRC, IRC Child Protection team negotiated a MoU with the schools and local authorities, to enable boys and girls to access schools without paying school fees. IRC in exchange supported the schools in infrastructure development and provision of school supplies that the schools themselves had identified. With this MoU, the specific number of boys and girls were able to attend school for between 3-6 years, without paying school fees. The support provided to the school was not linked to a particular child but benefited the entire school.
- b. In DRC, IRC adapted their Families Makes a Difference Curriculum, to address the needs of parents of formerly recruited children. Based on an assessment to understand the needs of caregivers, IRC added modules that would help parents better understand the changes their children went through during their recruitment, how this affected the child's development, and how parents could connect with the child and promote their wellbeing.
- c. In DRC, IRC introduced tutoring to enable boys and girls returning from recruitment to be able to get extra support to catch up on school work that they had missed while in recruitment, and expanded this to include to other children not formerly recruited but needing additional tuition.

*Evidence Review on education reintegration – by REL*



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