TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE AND YOUTH FORMERLY ASSOCIATED WITH ARMED FORCES AND ARMED GROUPS: ACCEPTANCE, MARGINALIZATION AND PSYCHOSOCIAL ADJUSTMENT

T.S. Betancourt and A. Ettien

IWP 2010-17

June, 2010
UNICEF Innocenti Working Papers are intended to disseminate initial research contributions within the Centre’s programme of work, addressing social, economic and institutional aspects of the realisation of the human rights of children.

The findings, interpretations and conclusions expressed in this paper are entirely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the policies or the views of UNICEF.

The designations employed in this publication and the presentation of the material do not imply on the part of UNICEF the expression of any opinion whatsoever concerning the legal status of any country or territory, or of its authorities, or the delimitation of its frontiers.

Extracts from this publication may be freely reproduced with due acknowledgement.

© 2010 United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF)
ISSN: 1014-7837

For readers wishing to cite this document, we suggest the following form:
The UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre

The UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre in Florence, Italy, was established in 1988 to strengthen the research capability of the United Nations Children’s Fund and to support its advocacy for children worldwide. The Centre (formally known as the International Child Development Centre) generates knowledge and analysis to support policy formulation and advocacy in favour of children; acts as a convener and catalyst for knowledge exchange and strategic reflections on children’s concerns; and supports programme development and capacity-building.

Innocenti studies present new knowledge and perspectives on critical issues affecting children, informing current and future areas of UNICEF’s work. The Centre’s publications represent contributions to a global debate on child rights issues, and include a range of opinions. For that reason, the Centre may produce publications which do not necessarily reflect UNICEF policies or approaches on some topics.

The Centre collaborates with its host institution in Florence, the Istituto degli Innocenti, in selected areas of work. Core funding for the Centre is provided by the Government of Italy and UNICEF. Additional financial support for specific projects is provided by governments, international institutions and private sources, including by UNICEF National Committees, as well as by UNICEF offices in collaborative studies.

For further information and to download or order this and other publications, please visit the IRC website at http://www.unicef-irc.org.

Correspondence should be addressed to:

UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre
Piazza SS. Annunziata, 12
50122 Florence, Italy
Tel: (+39) 055 20 330
Fax: (+39) 055 2033 220
Email: florence@unicef.org
Children and Transitional Justice Working Paper Series

The Children and Transitional Justice Working Paper Series is intended to generate dialogue and consensus, and to better inform children’s protection and participation in ongoing or planned transitional justice processes in diverse country situations. Based on experience, the papers document and identify challenges, dilemmas and questions for further debate and formulate recommendations to better protect the rights of children involved in transitional justice processes.

The research conducted has created broad interest and visibility, helping establish a child rights-based approach to transitional justice that addresses advocacy, policy and programme concerns within UNICEF and among partners. Key areas of focus include:

- International legal framework and child rights
- Children and truth commissions
- Local processes of accountability and reconciliation
- Transitional justice and institutional reform.

The identification of topics and authors in this Working Paper Series was undertaken in the context of strategic partnerships with the Human Rights Program at Harvard Law School, and the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ). The review of the Series was guided by a peer review oversight panel, chaired by Jaap Doek. A network of practitioners, academics, legal experts and child rights advocates participated in the peer review. The Series was initiated and overseen by Saudamini Siegrist, with the support of Ann Linnarsson.

An Expert Discussion on Children and Transitional Justice was convened by UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre (IRC) in June 2008 to provide comments to individual authors and to assess the range and coverage of the Series. A subsequent conference on Children and Transitional Justice was jointly convened by the Human Rights Program at Harvard Law School and IRC in April 2009 in Cambridge, MA USA.

UNICEF IRC’s research on children and transitional justice was generously supported by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Cooperazione allo Sviluppo) and by the Government of France.


Titles in this series, with authors’ affiliations, are:


- No. 7: Children and the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation in Timor Leste. Megan Hirst, International Criminal Court, Victims’ Participation and Reparation Section; Ann Linnarsson, UNICEF, IRC.
- No. 10: Children, Education and Reconciliation. Alan Smith, University of Ulster.
- No. 11: Child Victims of Torture and Cruel, Inhumane or Degrading Treatment. Dan O'Donnell, Independent Consultant; Norberto Liwski, Ministry of Social Development, Argentina.
• No. 12: Genetic Tracing, Disappeared Children and Justice. Michele Harvey-Blankenship, Department of Pediatrics, University of Alberta; Phuong N. Pham, Human Rights Center, University of California at Berkeley; Rachel Shigekane, Human Rights Center, University of California at Berkeley.


• No. 15: Restorative Justice after Mass Violence: Opportunities and Risks for Children and Youth. Laura Stovel, Department of Global Studies, Wilfred Laurier University; Marta Valinas, Catholic University Leuven.

• No. 16: Transitional Justice and the Situation of Children in Colombia and Peru. Salvador Herencia Carrasco, Advisor Constitutional Court of Peru.

• No. 17: Transitional Justice and Youth Formerly Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups. Theresa Betancourt and A'Nova Ettien, François-Xavier Bagnoud Center for Health and Human Rights.

Other papers produced by the project have been published in *Children and Transitional Justice: Truth-Telling, Accountability and Reconciliation* (UNICEF and Harvard Law School, 2010), and are available on the UNICEF IRC website.

• Chapter 1: *Child Rights and Transitional Justice*. Saudamini Siegrist, UNICEF IRC.


• Chapter 3: International Criminal Justice and Child Protection. Cecile Aptel, ICTJ.

• Chapter 4: Children and the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Piers Pigou, South African Archives.


• Chapter 7: Accountability and Reconciliation in Northern Uganda.

• Part I: Accountability for Sexual and Gender-Based Crimes by the Lord’s Resistance Army. Khriostopher Carlson and Dyan Mazurana, Feinstein International Center, Tufts University.

• Part II: The Potential and Limits of Mato Oput as a Tool for Reconciliation and Justice. Prudence Acirokop, Norwegian Refugee Council.

• Chapter 8: Disappeared Children, Genetic Tracing and Justice. Michele Harvey-Blankenship, Department of Pediatrics, University of Alberta; Rachel Shigane, Human Rights Center, University of California, Berkeley.


Transitional Justice and Youth Formerly Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups: Acceptance, Marginalization and Psychosocial Adjustment

T.S. Betancourt and A. Ettien

a Director of the Research Program on Children and Global Adversity, François-Xavier Bagnoud Center for Health and Human Rights; Assistant Professor of Child Health and Human Rights, Department of Global Health and Population, Harvard School of Public Health. Boston, MA, USA

b Children and Armed Conflict research coordinator, Research Program on Children and Global Adversity, François-Xavier Bagnoud Center for Health and Human Rights. Boston, MA, USA.

Summary: To support true healing of war-affected populations, including children formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups, transitional justice efforts must attend to the often lasting psychosocial consequences of war in the post-conflict environment. We use key informant and focus group interviews (2002, 2004) to examine the war and post-war experiences of youth, with particular attention to the reintegration experiences of former child soldiers. We found that war-affected youth continued to struggle with a number of issues that thwart their desires and efforts to fulfil their life ambitions, including limited school access, economic instability, social isolation and stigma. Young people were better able to navigate daily stressors when endowed with individual agency and perseverance and surrounded by robust family and community supports. For more troubled youth, social services programmes and formal mental health services set up immediately after the war have not been sustained in Sierra Leone. Voluntary child welfare committees established after the war focused mainly on younger children and largely dissipated with time. Our findings support the need to adopt a broader view of transitional justice to meet the needs of war-affected children and families, particularly former child soldiers. A developmental view of the impact of war experiences on children is needed that includes advocacy for investments in social services to monitor and support healthy family and community reintegration over time. Advocacy pursued under a transitional justice agenda has a role to play in emphasizing the need not just for special courts or truth and reconciliation processes but also for the funding of social services institutions and the development of sustainable health infrastructure, thus helping post-conflict governments to deliver social services to their citizens as part of a strategy to support collective healing and secure peace.

Keywords: transitional justice, child soldiers, Sierra Leone, psychosocial adjustment, mental health.

Acknowledgements: We would like to thank UNICEF and the Innocenti Research Centre, as well as the International Rescue Committee, USAID, the Displaced Children and Orphan’s Fund, and the United States Institute of Peace. For their kind review and feedback, we are grateful to Ilene Cohn, Norman Daniels, Pernille Ironside, Mindy Roseman, Michael Wessels and Wendy Wheaton. We also thank Marie de la Soudiere and Memunatu Pratt. This work would not be possible without our research staff in Boston and Sierra Leone, including Moses Zombo, Musu Momoh, Mahmoud Feika, Sarah Meyers-Ohki, Julia Rubin-Smith and Mikaela Chase.
Contents

1. INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................. 1
   1.1. METHODS .................................................................................................................. 3
2. CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND .......................................................................................... 5
   2.1 THE CONFLICT IN SIERRA LEONE ............................................................................. 5
   2.2 UNDERSTANDING CHILD SOLDIERS’ EXPERIENCE OF WAR ................................. 5
   2.3 MENTAL HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES NEEDS AMONG
       WAR-AFFECTED YOUTH ................................................................................................. 6
   2.4 SIERRA LEONE’S TRANSITION FROM CONFLICT TO PEACE ................................ 7
   2.5 TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE AND YOUTH ....................................................................... 8
3. LONG-TERM FINDINGS ON WAR-AFFECTED YOUTH ..................................................... 9
   3.1 THE AGENCY OF YOUTH .............................................................................................. 11
   3.2 THE AGENCY OF FAMILIES ......................................................................................... 12
   3.3 INVESTIGATING WHETHER COMMUNITIES ‘TAKE CARE OF THEIR OWN’ ........... 14
   3.4 SUPPORT STRUCTURES FOR WAR-AFFECTED YOUTH ........................................... 15
4. INTERNATIONAL POLICY DEVELOPMENT ..................................................................... 17
5. EVALUATING TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE EFFORTS WITH
   A BROADER VIEW .............................................................................................................. 19
   5.1 ADVOCATING FOR SERVICES ..................................................................................... 20
   5.2 ADDRESSING COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS .......................................................... 20
6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS ................................................................... 22
   6.1 CONCLUSIONS ............................................................................................................ 22
   6.2 RECOMMENDATIONS ................................................................................................. 23
REFERENCES .......................................................................................................................... 27
1. INTRODUCTION

Of the many dangers of war, involvement with armed groups is considered particularly damaging to the development and psychosocial well-being of children. According to the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers (CSUCS), in 2008 children were conscripted into fighting forces in at least 86 countries, a figure that remained comparable to totals it has reported since 2001. Accurate statistics are difficult to come by, but it is estimated that 300,000 to 500,000 children are involved with fighting forces worldwide at any given time (CSUCS, 2008). In post-conflict settings, children associated with armed forces and armed groups, commonly referred to as ‘child soldiers’, face a number of challenges. These range from community stigma to a lack of educational and vocational opportunities and, in some cases, ongoing struggles with the psychological effects of extreme trauma.

It is clear that reintegrating former child soldiers is a lengthy and complex process, yet many of the programmes designed to facilitate this transition are short-lived and under-funded and do not provide long-term follow-up. In considering the reintegration of former children associated with armed forces and groups, research (Betancourt and Williams, 2008; Wessells, 2009a) and current policy guidelines (IASC, 2001; Paris Principles, 2007) have recommended combining individual support and monitoring with holistic, community-based psychosocial programming.

Following the end of a conflict, a variety of approaches are generally employed to support the recovery and development of the nation and its people. These include humanitarian relief efforts, peace-building activities and transitional justice approaches. All of these are important elements in establishing peaceful development and all play a role in stabilization and recovery. Transitional justice responses have unique potential to advocate for and promote mechanisms to support longer term individual and community healing. Yet research convincingly shows gaps in this response. For youth affected by war and human rights abuses, it is an injustice not to rebuild systems that allow young people to be resilient, flourish and realize their life potential. If transitional justice is to make good on its pledge of non-repetition of trauma, these efforts must advocate for longer term investment in social services for war-affected young people and communities.

Transitional justice refers to a broad range of activities that help a society come to terms with “a legacy of large-scale past abuses, in order to ensure accountability, serve justice and achieve reconciliation” (United Nations, 2004). One of its primary aims is judicial reconciliation at the national level, and it is generally assumed that these transitional justice efforts will be meaningful to the full constituency of the nation’s society. But little work has been done to determine to what degree transitional justice efforts extend beyond narrow

---

1 This paper uses the terms ‘child soldier’ and ‘child associated with armed forces or armed groups’ interchangeably. The use of these terms is not meant to confer any legitimacy on the appalling crime of recruiting children. Graça Machel defines ‘child soldier’ as “any child – boy or girl – under the age of 18, who is compulsorily, forcibly or voluntarily recruited or used in hostilities by armed forces, paramilitaries, civil defence units or other armed groups. Child soldiers are used for forced sexual services, as combatants, messengers, porters and cooks.” (Source: The impact of war on children: A review of progress, London, Hurst and Co., 2001, p. 7.)
judicial mechanisms and into public responses and services that can assist in the daily lives of war-affected populations.

At the theoretical level transitional justice responses are collectivistic, but on a practical level to date they have often taken a narrower approach, focusing on mechanisms of civil and political justice through structures such as truth and reconciliation commissions and special courts. These activities address the revelation of truth and punishment of war criminals, which are important elements in the process. However, in this narrow application, transitional justice efforts are limited in their potential to help the larger population recover from war. To address the long-term consequences of the human rights abuses levelled at civilians during conflict – particularly on children, youth and families – it is critical to adopt more fully elaborated transitional justice approaches.

One way to assess the impact of transitional justice efforts on a population at large is through the physical and psychological well-being of war-affected youth and families. The consequences of conflict are well documented, but transitional justice processes have not effectively addressed mechanisms to support longer term healing for individuals or society at large. The right to reparation addressing the physical and psychosocial consequences of war is formally acknowledged within the body of international human rights documents. For instance, in 2006, the UN General Assembly adopted by resolution the Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law (United Nations, 2006). The principles recognize reparation as a broad and inclusive concept ranging from restoration of liberty to compensation for material damages to rehabilitation, which “should include medical and psychological care as well as legal and social services” (emphasis added).

This paper argues that, as part of the reparation component, fully elaborated transitional justice approaches must work to activate the spirit of these human rights principles, as well as the Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups. They should do so by implementing sustainable mechanisms at the community level to monitor and respond to the social service needs of war-affected children, youth and families that have arisen as a consequence of war. Humanitarian responses after the post-war reconstruction period present a particular opportunity to launch the development of sustainable, community-based services and supports for those who continue to suffer as a consequence of war long after the end of hostilities.

Illustrating this point are data from our longitudinal study of war-affected youth and interviews with former child soldiers and their families. As opposed to other studies of war-affected youth focusing mainly on trauma, this study was designed to attend equally to risk and protective processes that shape psychosocial adjustment over time. In examining the transition of these children from war to peace, the research assessed the relative contributions of various factors on long-term psychosocial adjustment and social reintegration. These included past war experiences as well as post-conflict risk and protective factors, including stigma, post-war hardships, community acceptance, employment, staying in school and social support. This study involved collection of quantitative and qualitative data. It includes several
analyses of survey data investigating the long-term consequences of being a child soldier and the extent to which post-conflict factors can either reduce or exacerbate the deleterious effects of war-related experiences on psychosocial adjustment (Betancourt et al., 2010; Betancourt, et al., in press)

Collection of data used for the present analysis involved interviews with key informants and focus groups to examine the reintegration experiences of male and female child soldiers in Sierra Leone. In addition, focus group interviews were conducted with community members who had not been involved with armed forces, paying particular attention to community dynamics which are relevant to post-conflict programming and transitional justice efforts. This paper defines a child as anyone under the age of 18 (consistent with the definition in the Convention on the Rights of the Child), while noting that war-affected youth often experience abrupt changes in their normal developmental trajectory. To give context to these findings, it is important to understand the role of children and youth in Sierra Leone’s civil conflict and the transitional justice processes initiated after the war.

1.1. Methods

This working paper draws from key informant and focus group interviews held with former child soldiers and their caregivers, as well as from focus groups with war-affected youth and community members conducted in 2004 and 2008 during the second and third waves of a longitudinal study of war-affected youth in Sierra Leone (Betancourt, et al., in press). In focus groups and key informant interviews, we used maximum variation sampling/purposeful selection to derive our sample, seeking balance between older and younger ages as well as in gender, region and involvement/non-involvement in armed groups.

In 2004, individual interviews were conducted with former child soldiers and, where possible, their caregivers. Researchers were able to complete these interviews with a total of 31 male and female former child soldiers and 12 of their caregivers. In addition, 10 focus group interviews were carried out with a total of 90 male and female youth participants. A total of 120 caregivers and community members in Kono, Kenema, Bo and Bombali districts also participated in focus groups; of these, eight were with caregivers of children formerly associated with the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and nine were with community members and caregivers of non-RUF youth.

Follow-up interviews were conducted in 2008; about half of the original key informant participants were located and completed a follow-up interview. Also in 2008, 11 focus group interviews were carried out with a total of approximately 40 male and female youth and 35 caregivers and community members in Kono, Kenema, Bo and Bombali districts. One of these involved caregivers of youth formerly associated with the RUF, and another consisted of community members and caregivers of non-RUF youth. In addition, to examine the attitudes of policymakers and service providers, a graduate student conducted 40 interviews with key informants from local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs); current and former staff of the Sierra Leone ministries of Health and of Social Welfare, Gender and Children’s Affairs; and local formal and non-formal health care providers who had been involved in psychosocial support to youth affected by the war. All interviews were
recorded; transcripts were prepared in the language of the interview (English or Krio), and interviews conducted in Krio were translated into English for analysis.

The core goals of this investigation were to identify and describe the individual, family, community and formal resources that influence the psychosocial adjustment and social reintegration of former child soldiers and other war-affected youth. We also explored themes related to marginalization and acceptance of child soldiers and how such dynamics contribute to positive and negative developmental trajectories. All interviews were coded and analysed according to a uniform analysis scheme, drawing mainly from grounded theory approaches to data analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

Our analysis of interview and focus group data began with category construction. We started with an open coding process, in which English transcripts were reviewed and initial codes were suggested based on the data. To complement the grounded theory-derived categories, some theory-driven categories and codes were included. These were related to individual, family and community resources involved in the social reintegration and psychosocial adjustment of young people and themes particular to transitional justice such as reparation and reconciliation. Once the codebook was complete, we applied it with the assistance of qualitative data analysis software (NVivo). Direct quotes from participants were sorted to substantiate categories and themes. Quotes from multiple informants and across settings were used to triangulate findings.
2. CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

2.1 The Conflict in Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone’s decade-long civil conflict, which ended in 2001, was devastatingly violent. The conflict permeated the population through campaigns of terror against civilians that included amputation of limbs, widespread abduction of children into armed groups and the physical and sexual exploitation of young people. By some estimates, some 75 per cent of the population was displaced over the course of the war (Williamson, 2005). The RUF were widely known to force children to commit atrocities against others, including loved ones, as a means of severing community ties and subduing new recruits (Amnesty International, 1998; Human Rights, 1998; Human Rights Watch, 2005; Simons, 2009). Given their involvement in violence, some child soldiers may fall into the category of perpetrator as well as that of victim. This ambiguous status has implications for the stresses they may face, their treatment under transitional justice mechanisms, and for their psychosocial adjustment.

2.2 Understanding Child Soldiers’ Experience of War

To understand the varied reintegration and recovery pathways of children affected by war, including child soldiers, it is important to consider a range of influences on these children throughout their development. In understanding psychosocial well-being and adjustment, the child’s individual qualities are of course important, along with family and community influences on adjustment and societal views of children and youth (Betancourt and Kahn, 2008). Some researchers have termed this an ‘ecological framework’. These multiple levels of consideration all help explain how a former child soldier reintegrates, or fails to reintegrate, into a post-war community.

War disrupts the life of a developing child at all of these levels – individual, familial, community and societal (Betancourt and Khan, 2008; Boothby, 2006; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Elbedour, Bensel and Bastien, 1993). Threats include exposure to violence and physical injury or abuse. Family-level threats may include family separation or loss and economic hardship. On the community level, child development is threatened by poor infrastructure and lack of basic services such as health care, education and economic opportunity. Societal environments of distrust and fear may also impede social relationships and distort perceptions of war-affected youth, especially those associated with armed forces or groups (Annan, et al., 2008; T. S. Betancourt, et al., 2008). Community stigma and discrimination are other harmful societal influences that affect many child soldiers (Betancourt et al, 2009).

Conversely, just as these multiple layers present sources of risk, they also provide sources of strength and protection that can counterbalance risks from war (Betancourt and Kahn, 2008). For instance, a young person’s sense of self-efficacy (agency) and ability to cope in the face of hardship may help him/her to weather multiple adversities (Bandura, 1986). The love, support and encouragement of committed caregivers can help children to navigate difficult experiences (Garbarino et al., 1992). Family and community support may also promote more positive outcomes in young people who face significant risk, by providing guidance and support to pursue personal goals such as completing one’s education or securing a successful livelihood (Annan, et al., 2008; Paardekooper, 2002). Community-level processes, such as
traditional healing ceremonies or efforts at atonement consistent with social norms, may also facilitate healthy reintegration of young people (Stark, 2006; Wessels, 2007, 2009a). An accumulation of such protective factors and processes over time can contribute to more resilient outcomes despite situations of significant risk (Luthar and Goldstein, 2004; Rutter, 2006). In our research sample, some of the youth most at risk were those whose indigenous systems of protection – their family and community supports – were weak or damaged.

2.3 Mental Health and Social Services Needs among War-Affected Youth

The lasting consequences of war on the mental health and psychosocial well-being of young people are often striking in the case of children associated with fighting forces, many of whom were forcibly abducted (Wessells and Jonah, 2006) (Betancourt et al., in press). As Stovel (2008) found in post-conflict Sierra Leone, many former child soldiers still face daily reminders of their past: “…while Sierra Leoneans generally agreed to coexist and interact with ex-combatants, they had not reconciled in any deeply felt way. They still did not trust ex-combatants, and few formal avenues existed to help people discuss their war experiences.”

In this manner, former child soldiers may be subject to stereotyping and stigma by others in the community. Because of this discriminatory treatment, along with their past experiences, former child soldiers may also have an altered perception of their role in the community. Lee’s research on child soldiers (2009) shows that youth who were involved in fighting perceived themselves as adults, having taken on many aspects of adult roles and responsibilities. Such youth may not be prepared or have the capacity to take on the same familial or community roles they held prior to involvement in armed groups. Past events can have lingering effects on the lives of war-affected youth: their internal memories of the past may be kept alive by routine stigma and discrimination which can serve as continual reminders of the past.

Our prior research in Sierra Leone found that post-conflict experiences of discrimination explained a significant amount of the relationship between past involvement in wounding/killing others and subsequent increases in hostility over time. Stigma also mediated the relationship between surviving rape and increases in depression over a two year follow-up period (Betancourt et al., 2010). As noted in the Paris Principles, past trauma, community stigma and a changed self perception (either diminished or aggrandized) may impede an individual’s ability to reintegrate into a transitional post-conflict environment. Female child soldiers may face particular challenges due to their unique gender-based experiences, such as increased exposure to sexual violence, diminished access to disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) services, and the different types of stigma they face upon returning to their communities (McKay and Mazurana, 2004).

The need to address the longer term implications of conflict experiences on young people must be considered within the global context. Overall, mental disorders are the second-largest contributor to the global burden of disease among youth and adults aged 14-55 and are projected to be the greatest contributor to the shortening of healthy life through disability (disability-adjusted life years, or DALYs) by 2020 (World Health Organization, 2008).
Historically, however, few resources have been allocated for mental health and social services in post-conflict settings. Due to limited levels of services and inefficient use of existing resources, the majority of people with mental health problems and mental illness go untreated, despite the existence of effective treatments (Saxena, Jane-Llopis, and Hosman, 2006). It is estimated that as many as 78 per cent of those adults in low- and middle-income countries who suffer from mental disorders do not receive treatment (Kohn et al., 2004). This figure is likely to be even higher for children and adolescents with mental health needs. A European survey of 36 countries showed that the coverage and quality of services for children and adolescents were generally poorer compared to that for adults (Levav et al., 2004). Low- and middle-income countries with a higher proportion of people under age 18 are the most lacking in (1) mental health policies to address the needs of children and adolescents and (2) resources to provide mental health and other social services, according to recent reviews by the WHO Child and Adolescent Mental Health Atlas Project (WHO, 2005). This is most striking in war-affected countries.

2.4 Sierra Leone’s Transition from Conflict to Peace

When the civil war in Sierra Leone was declared to be over in 2001, a number of programmes were initiated to help the country recover from violence and abuse. A national DDR programme for former child soldiers was undertaken, and assistance was given to support the safe return home of internally displaced persons and refugees. In addition, the new, democratically elected government established two formal transitional justice institutions: the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL). The TRC promoted healthy coexistence between divided factions and aimed to produce a truthful account of the war, while the mandate of the SCSL is to prosecute individuals deemed to bear the greatest responsibility for the war. A blanket amnesty was given to most children associated with armed groups; only those youth who were high command leaders recognized as major decision makers were brought to trial (Cohn, 2001).

These formal mechanisms eased the transition from wartime to peacetime. However, the TRC struggled to elicit significant engagement from the community. Many people were sceptical of its open request for testimonials, as it was rumoured that testimonials would be used to prosecute civilians for their involvement in war events. As Rosalind Shaw and others have noted, the TRC process in Sierra Leone quickly became disjointed. Not only did the process fail to build on indigenous mechanisms for coping and reconciliation, it also created a public spectacle that acted in direct opposition to the widely accepted approach of “directed forgetting” (Shaw, 2007).

Recently, a number of leaders responsible for civilian attacks and child abductions have been convicted of international war crimes (Simons, 2009). These convictions are an important step not only towards justice within Sierra Leone but also in establishing an international precedent concerning the significance of these crimes. However, the broader issues of war-affected youth – their rights and needs – remain largely unaddressed. Although international humanitarian law protects war-affected youth (Betancourt, 2008), few formal policies address the human side of post-conflict rehabilitation and development. Article 39 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) notes:
States parties shall take all appropriate measures to promote physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of a child victim of: any form of neglect, exploitation, or abuse; torture or any other form of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; or armed conflicts. Such recovery and reintegration shall take place in an environment which fosters the health, self-respect and dignity of the child (United Nations, 1989). [Emphasis added]

This working paper takes a broad and holistic view of rehabilitation, including basic dimensions of physical recovery and health and recognizing the critical importance of psychosocial elements of recovery. Fulfilment of article 39’s charge to foster the “health, self-respect and dignity” of war-affected youth cannot be accomplished without a more fully elaborated understanding of justice and reparations and how they affect children formerly associated with armed forces and groups and other war-affected youth.

2.5 Transitional Justice and Youth

Transitional justice speaks to formal and informal mechanisms that facilitate a progression from human rights violations towards democracy. In most conflict-affected countries, such activities have focused on elements of civil and political rights, providing victims with a voice through truth and reconciliation processes or through court systems, both international and local, including high-level war crimes tribunals. Much debate over transitional justice has centred on its scope, inspiring a differentiation between victim- and community-centered justice (Aldana, 2006) and examining the expansion of transitional justice to affect larger-scale issues of development and marginalization (Mani, 2008).

There is a recognized need to broaden how transitional justice approaches are enacted. In a 2004 report on the rule of law and transitional justice in conflict and post-conflict societies, the United Nations Secretary-General noted that:

The international community must see transitional justice in a way that extends well beyond courts and tribunals. The challenges of post-conflict environments necessitate an approach that balances a variety of goals, including the pursuit of accountability, truth and reparation, the preservation of peace and the building of democracy and the rule of law. (United Nations, 2004)

This stance was reaffirmed by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in a 2008 publication on reparation programmes, which stated that, “[P]articularty in situations of transitional justice where national societies are seeking to repair serious harm and injury inflicted as a result of gross and massive violations of human rights, States are under a moral and political duty to take comprehensive remedial measures and introduce elaborate programmes offering reparation to broader categories of victims affected by the violations” (United Nations, 2008, emphasis added). In Sierra Leone in 2004, the TRC advocated for reparation measures that “deal with the needs of victims in the following areas: health services (including mental health), pensions, education, skills training and micro credit, community reparations and symbolic reparations”. (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2004)
In the same report, the TRC acknowledged the need for a highly inclusive societal-level approach to repairing the damages done by the war and to building national stability: “The present Government and future governments must be seen to be establishing infrastructure and delivering health, education, justice and security services in all Provinces.” In light of these statements, along with recent policy developments such as the Paris Principles and Guidelines (United Nations Children's Fund, 2007) and UN Security Council Resolution 1882 (United Nations, 2009), Sierra Leone presents an example of the real living conditions of war-affected children, youth and families and of how applying broader interpretations of transitional justice may suggest appropriate responses.

In Sierra Leone’s post-conflict context, reconciling past crimes with the impending future presents a pressing challenge. During the civil conflict, children were involved with a range of armed groups, including the RUF, the Sierra Leone Army and the Civilian Defense Forces. Children were victims of atrocities; they were also perpetrators. Despite the broad involvement of youth in Sierra Leone’s conflict, youth and children’s issues have not been broadly addressed in transitional justice efforts. These efforts have focused primarily on children’s involvement with the courts; prosecution of those who have committed atrocities against children; and the question of whether or not children should testify, and if so, with what protections.

While these questions speak to the critical, national-level participation of children, a deeper discussion is needed at the community level about how transitional justice plays out in the longer term recovery process of former child soldiers and other war-affected youth. Reparation and reconciliation, in particular, are two specific elements of transitional justice that affect a child’s reintegration and recovery, but neither process has been fully explored for its impact on children and youth in Sierra Leone.

3. **LONG-TERM FINDINGS ON WAR-AFFECTED YOUTH**

A number of factors shape the process of reintegration and psychosocial adjustment among children formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups over time. These factors include the gender of the young person; the agency of youth and families; community response; and supportive structures available to the young person. The young people we interviewed demonstrated an impressive capacity for resilience and agency despite the horrendous experiences of their past. However, for many youth the effects of the war linger and were described as being linked to ongoing distress or high risk behaviour:

I am also getting difficulty to free my mind of the war experiences. Each time I remember an instance, I feel bad or upset… (12-year-old male former child soldier, Kono).

Some are still on drugs and their attitudes are different . . . their actions and the way they interact are aggressive…A majority of drug addicts now were with the fighters [at the time of the war] (former child soldier, male focus group, Kenema).
There is this lady we share the house with. She was with the fighters and they used to
give her hard drugs. Although she is not on drugs anymore, there are times when she
becomes aggressive with everybody, even her guardian (former child soldier, male
focus group, Kenema).

Some noted that the effects of the war differed by gender, with girls facing particularly
detrimental effects:

It is the women who are affected the most...There are some of our peers who go into
the streets and sleep with men just so they can survive (former child soldier, female
focus group, Makeni).

In addition to the extreme and lasting personal impact of the war, children formerly
associated with fighting forces have had to contend with further difficulties upon return to
their communities. Despite the attention paid to setting up community sensitization
programmes, many of these children faced stigma and blame upon their return, and even two
years later. The initial stage of returning home usually involved a period of testing or
‘provoking’:

That time was a particularly difficult period for them ... Some people called them
names and even fought them physically. And when these things happen[ed], they felt
sad and stay[ed] by themselves alone (caregiver, Kono).

... He always say[s] people are saying he’s a rebel – that is why he is discouraged
(caregiver, Pujehun).

When you are now alone people start calling you a rebel or collaborator. And nobody
wants to associate with a rebel or collaborator, so they can’t help you even if you are in
need (female former child soldier, Makeni).

Stigma and marginalization were also shaped by gender. In many instances, association with
the rebels has led to perceptions of females as sexually permissive girls or ‘damaged goods’,
which carries great social costs including limited prospects for marriage and even barriers to
pursuing an education:

...when I came and stayed with my cousin. She wasn’t willing to put me back in school
because she said I had known the world [no longer a virgin] and I have stayed with the
rebels. She said it would be a waste of time and money (female former child soldier, Makeni).

Even beyond the initial ‘provoking’ period, many of the former child soldiers continue
to face stigma in the community. Girls in particular described efforts to keep others
from knowing about their involvement with the rebels. As this young woman from Kono explained:

The reason … I left … is because of … statements they made against me. … they said that we open-handedly welcomed the rebels into the community (female former child soldier, Kono).

Now I thank God. Most of the people who were here do not live here anymore. They have left for Freetown and a lot of strangers have taken their place. These strangers know nothing about our past ordeal and are willing to become our friends (female former child soldier, Makeni).

Many such youth have faced stigma that prevents them from seeking appropriate care. Youth advocates identify the ongoing stigmatization as a manifestation of the belief that the former child soldiers should suffer for their past actions, as one NGO worker explained:

No attention to youth was paid at the end of the war. For the mad. So a lot of them are still on the street. And people just say, ‘Well, they created a lot of problems. They did a lot of atrocities, so that is the payment they have.’ (NGO worker, Makeni).

In this manner, stigma and resentment may contribute to a lack of attention to the social and emotional problems endured by children formerly associated with fighting forces. An important task of justice and reconciliation efforts is working to change the negative perceptions of former child soldiers and to support youth in shifting to more positive community roles. Transitional justice efforts towards restorative and/or retributive justice can contribute to these efforts, but often they do not reach into the community level in meaningful ways. A substantive shift in perceptions of former child soldiers (both by themselves and by others) must include opportunities for young people to take on relevant social roles and become valuable contributors within their communities.

3.1 The Agency of Youth

Youth have many ways of exercising agency in navigating their post-conflict lives. Some survival strategies, such as the risk-taking behaviour discussed earlier, lead to negative outcomes; however, many youth reported using strategies that show positive self-efficacy. In the face of the ‘provoking’ that characterized the initial period of return, many child soldiers were able to ease their transition through their own agency. The youth we interviewed appeared to use two strategies – avoiding conflict (passive behaviour) and being helpful to others (pro-social behaviour) – both of which represent an effort to project trustworthiness and neutrality:

... since I came back I have not caused any problems for my family. I have not fought or quarreled with anybody within and out of the family. I have always been peaceful (female former child soldier, Kono).
Even though you are called a rebel if your attitude is good they won’t hold anything against you. They would want to make friends with you (female former child soldier, Kono).

Young people, aware of the need to fit themselves back into their communities, show both the desire to do so and the adoption of some appropriate strategies. However, many young people may not be able to accomplish this alone.

### 3.2 The Agency of Families

Youth who had the support and advice of key attachment figures appeared to better navigate stressors such as stigma, ‘provoking’, and testing from peers and community members in the post-conflict environment.

It depends on the way your family takes care and encourages you – some really don’t have people to encourage them to do something. If you have relatives who correct you when you do wrong … things would be better (male, mixed focus group, Kono).

When my child returned, I advised him not to think of doing anything evil and that he should try by all means to live peacefully with others. Since he came he has caused no problems. Although people were afraid of him and called him funny names he never did anything to retaliate. Now he plays peacefully with other children (caregiver, Bo).

I just continued to counsel and talk to him. Now he has started reforming. Now when someone bothers him he complains to me. Some of his peers in his school are even more often in trouble than he is lately (caregiver, Kenema).

I used to tell him not to be hot tempered to people. If you do, people will say you are a rebel because you are coming from rebel zone whether you are a rebel or not. I told him to be calm and that is what he does. He has never had a problem with any person (caregiver, Kenema).

These responses show the importance of guidance and the impact of supportive, understanding caregivers. They indicate the relevance of the ecological model in thinking about children associated with armed forces and groups as they underscore how important family and community supports are in ensuring healthy reintegration.

In envisioning a more sustainable response to the needs of war-affected youth, it is important to build on the existing infrastructure. Implementers must draw on the tremendous agency of young people and sources of strength and guidance emanating from families and the community. Our interview subjects revealed valiant efforts to better both themselves and the situation of their families, despite community stigma, lack of educational opportunities and unemployment. During key informant interviews, several participants divulged an ambition to take ownership of and responsibility for their lives.
... there was a certain year that my father was unable to pay my school fees. I had to try hard to raise the money myself so I could go to school again (male former child soldier, Kono).

For some it is easy. Those whose parents can afford, they sent their children back to school. It is the children who choose to drop out because of early pregnancy and free lifestyles. But for us whose parents are poor it is really hard. For example, right now it hurts me so much because I am not in school because my parents cannot afford it. It is because of this reason that I enrolled in some skills training with CARITAS center (female former child soldier, Makeni).

One older male adolescent from Kono explained how he and a friend had started a car wash business. His story illuminates the success they had by proactively pursuing support for their initiative and enlisting the help of a local businessman.

… after school I had no tasks to occupy me, so I decided not to be idle so my ideas would not run to other things that would be bad things…we saw these people, this Fullah man working there. So we called and told him that ‘Father, we want you to help us. We are students and our families are not here. But we don’t want to return from school and be idle and go cussing and doing bad things in the street. So we want you to engage us so we would learn and we would be able to buy small things like books and pens.’ So he allowed us. So that is how we are here now (male former child soldier, Kono).

The burden of providing financial support to family members may also necessitate taking ownership of one’s economic prospects. It has been observed that even slight contributions to the family’s economic security are very important for many youth returning home. One female former child soldier from Makeni described how her relationship with her family changed after she began making a financial contribution.

It has changed because now I can work and make some living for us. For example I go and buy firewood for one thousand and sell for four thousand Leones. The profit I make, I give to them for our sustenance.

Youth respondents were also thinking strategically about their futures. When asked if her cassava business would be able to support her or her family and what other business she was engaged in, an older female former child soldier in Makeni noted:

No, it cannot satisfy all my needs let alone serving to help someone. It is a very small business. I am just doing it to prevent myself from asking for each and every thing that will be needed … I want to embark on skills training most especially Gara tie-dying
which I believe will generate more income for me that will be enough for me to help my family.

3.3 Investigating Whether Communities ‘Take Care of Their Own’

Youth who demonstrated an ability to reframe their war experiences in positive terms manifested more positive pathways of adjustment. These young people were able to find inspiration from past experiences, leading them to recognize renewed desires to succeed, contribute to the community and pursue their ambitions. However, youth with unsupportive or abusive families were impeded in their ability to build a more positive vision of the future for themselves and for those around them. Our interviews with more troubled youth revealed these dynamics:

I will never trust my mother. She does not like me. All she wants from me is, for me to do everything even sleep around so I could give her things (female former child soldier, Makeni).

Things are difficult for me, the caretaker that I am with is not treating me well, he always tell[s] me of my attitude…of that of a rebel ... it makes me think of my mother and father who up till now [I have] not seen…I feel sad and resort to doing things I’m not supposed to do (older male former child soldier, Bo).

These findings contradict a common idealized vision of rural African communities in which the whole village raises the child: Our data did not show that communities always ‘take care of their own’. In fact, many instances of community abuse, maltreatment and ongoing provocation were evident:

... they [community members] used to disturb him; beat him saying they were reforming him. We were all here together. The townspeople would come and beat him. There was a time when everybody gathered around him, wanting to beat him up. They said they wanted him to change, I don’t know which change they wanted. I had to come and fight them off for the sake of my son. I didn’t see any sense in beating a child in the name of correcting him (parent, Motema).

The chief called my parents and told them that they should have informed him about my arrival ... The chief told them that I should join a secret society and bring some other things ... I refused to join the society because I was afraid to have scars on my body. They took a huge sum of money from my parents and threatened that if anything happens in my community, I’ll be held responsible (focus group, former male child soldier, Kono).

For me it is not easy. When I came back, I told my aunty that I want to go back to school. She became very angry and drove me out of her house, saying I should be
thinking of raising money. After a couple of days she called me back but the topic of education didn’t go any further (female former child soldier, Makeni).

3.4 Support Structures for War-Affected Youth

In light of the reality that indigenous systems of child protection, child rearing and youth guidance sometimes fail, what alternatives exist? As part of the reintegration process in Sierra Leone, child welfare committees were formed as an important component of the post-conflict response for child protection (Williamson, 2005). They were comprised mainly of volunteers who received some logistical support from United Nations agencies and the Government. They were very important in troubleshooting community issues in the immediate post-conflict period and for some time after the war, as explained by these interviews with local NGO and government workers in Sierra Leone:

The child welfare committees are community-based organizations, groups sort of, that were set up to deal with the protection issues of all children, but it was born out of the reintegration of both former child combatants and separated children…some families were very cruel to their children, so these were the local response groups (NGO worker, Makeni).

Some of these children committed hideous crimes that were not their fault. But when we took them to their communities, in some cases they were rejected ... So we used these community structures [child welfare committees] ... to mediate for us (staff, Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children’s Affairs).

Although established in each district, the committees relied mainly on unpaid local community members who received very little long-term training, support or monitoring. Interviews conducted in 2008 indicated that most child welfare committees functioned erratically at best, and in many places they were defunct:

Right after the war, there were child welfare committees ... in each and every part of the country. But now, the structures are there but they are not very effective... we must ask ourselves – are these child welfare committees effective? Are they as effective as they were directly following the war? And definitely, the answer to that is “No” (NGO worker, Freetown).

It is not fair to judge if they [the child welfare committees] are effectively working or not, because they don’t have funding (NGO worker, Makeni).

Respondent: There is a Child Rights Act and there is a plan for that act to be implemented. When you look at that act, the force is on local structures that will take care of children because if you have effective local structures at that community level, then child protection would be maximized.
Interviewer: So do you think that those local structures currently exist?
Respondent: Well, they are not existing at the moment …. If we have child welfare committees in as many communities as possible, believe me, things would be different. So people would be aware of the rights and responsibilities of children. (NGO worker, Freetown)

Beyond informal community networks, some psychosocial services were also established by NGOs. These organizations took the most proactive role in addressing the support needed in children’s daily lives, particularly activities and counselling resources:

We decided to give people psychosocial support. And this psychosocial support – life skills and basic skills that will bring them back to the community and integrate them with community children (NGO worker, Freetown).

NGOs are the major players [in psychosocial support]. Because they are the ones doing all of the capacity building, doing most of the work to address psychosocial problems. But also the people who have gone through this capacity building who have actually attained attitudinal change…are also part of the major players. People are actually implementing what they have learned. And they have learned this from NGOs (NGO worker, Makeni).

While short-term services were provided for war-affected children in Sierra Leone in the immediate aftermath of the war, few of the psychosocial services originally provided by NGOs have continued. The models developed during the humanitarian response period have not been followed by other more sustainable services to assist children, adolescents and youth experiencing ongoing distress and functional impairments and who lack natural systems of protection such as a robust family and community support. There is also little awareness of the services that do exist.

No, I really do not think enough has been done [in terms of social service provision for children and youth]. DDR provided the skills for combatants and some tools, but at the end of the day, those who went through DDR are still crying. There really aren’t enough counselors in Sierra Leone – the numbers are few – [NGO X] is one of the few places that provides counselling services (NGO worker, Kono).

The DDR did not counsel people in depth…because when you look at the activities of the DDR, all of the activities were being prescribed by external donors…The idea of dealing with the capacity – most of these issues were not taken into consideration. So they do everything in a rush, take the gun – I don’t know if they did anything for them (NGO worker, Freetown).
The services are not available as they were before [immediately after the war]…The first ones were emergency – and now the country is working towards development. They have forgotten about emergency issues – as far as they are concerned, the war is over and many problems were solved (social worker and former NGO worker, Makeni).

These respondents clearly speak to the common situation in conflict-affected countries, in which psychosocial supports and mental health services are offered related to a crisis. Emergency humanitarian programmes are of course necessary, but they will dwindle, leaving a vast number of former child combatants and others in need of ongoing monitoring and support. Assistance provided through DDR programmes clearly cannot solve all problems, and greater emphasis is needed on ensuring that a continuum of services and supports for children extends beyond the relief period. In the best case scenario, these services would build on local systems and resources; however, where indigenous systems falter, supplemental formal services are needed to ensure adequate responses to child survivors of human rights abuses. Although current United Nations and NGO policies and approaches, underscored by the Paris Principles and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee’s Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings (IASC, 2007), have improved considerably since the conflict, the lesson of Sierra Leone cannot be forgotten, nor can the ongoing needs of youth and communities in the country today.

4. INTERNATIONAL POLICY DEVELOPMENT

The international community and local governments of war-affected countries have struggled to fulfil their mandate to meet the longer term needs of war-affected children as required by article 39 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Interventions to support recovery and social reintegration have been poorly resourced and poorly sustained. In 2007, five years after Sierra Leone’s peace accords, two major policy developments offered guidance for interventions to support the mental health of war-affected populations and for the reintegration and recovery of children associated with armed forces and groups.

First was establishment of the IASC guidelines, which underscored the critical need to develop a comprehensive framework to protect and promote child well-being while also anticipating, preventing and treating mental disorders resulting from war-related traumas. The framework, which has four layers of intervention, has previously been applied to former child soldiers by Wessells (Wessells, 2009a). The bottom layer of the IASC framework represents interventions providing access to basic services and security for large segments of the population, including children. The second layer represents family and community supports, which are essential to restoring the natural caregiving environment to which many of these children and youth return. The third layer represents focused, non-specialized supports, including traditional healing, community reconciliation and access to education and livelihood opportunities for war-affected youth and families. The fourth (top) layer represents the minority of war-affected populations, including some former child soldiers, who require access to specialized services to address persistent distress and impairment in their daily lives.
The number of former child soldiers at the top layer will vary according to a number of factors, including the nature, length and age of a young person’s involvement; the child’s role inside the armed group; the degree of exposure to toxic stress such as surviving the loss of loved ones, rape or the experience of injuring and killing others (Betancourt, et al., in press); and post-conflict experiences including opportunities for education and livelihoods. Other factors are pre-existing conditions exacerbated by the conflict experience and the degree of stigma a young person faces upon returning home. Effective systems require coordination between mechanisms, as a child may need supports in multiple layers.

The second major policy development of 2007 was the finalization of the Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups. The principles resulted from a UNICEF-led review aiming to incorporate a wealth of field experience accumulated by the United Nations and NGOs into recommendations and to lay out comprehensive principles and programmatic guidelines on prevention of child involvement in armed forces and release and reintegration of child soldiers. The Paris Principles and Guidelines were adopted by 58 UN member States.

The Paris Principles not only address numerous aspects of treatment and care for children affected by war, but also contain articles that speak directly to psychosocial support and mental health care. Specifically, the Principles:

- Warn against preconceptions and advise implementers not to assume that all children associated with an armed force or group are traumatized (7.75.2);
- Recommend incorporating psychosocial care and support into the release process early and throughout reintegration programming (7.73);
- Recognize that a subset of children may benefit from a period of intensive psychological or medical support (7.52);
- Note that children in counselling should be allowed the opportunity to talk about their future and past experiences at their own pace, without expectation of ‘opening up’ (7.75.5);
- Affirm that reintegration and healing take place in a broader context and that opportunities for education, vocational and skills training, and livelihoods activities are essential elements of reintegration (7.77).

The Principles also note that not all former child soldiers require direct material assistance, and in some cases singling them out for services can impede reintegration by adding to stigma (7.33). Recognizing that stigma is a barrier to reintegration, the Principles call for ongoing community-focused programming to address negative perceptions (7.39).

As indicated by the themes addressed in both the Paris Principles and the IASC guidelines, addressing needs for psychosocial support and mental health care in war-affected children and youth is not a peripheral issue in the transition from conflict to peace; it is in fact central to recovery and development. In addition, our study documents the importance of reconciliation between former child soldiers and communities, and it shows that this takes place in diverse ways. However, it remains an open question whether youth are well served by the standard reconciliation mechanisms and services offered under transitional justice.
initiatives. In fact, the mechanisms involving ‘truth-telling’ may not be a natural or helpful process of reconciliation in Sierra Leonean communities. Anthropologist Rosalind Shaw has documented that such action may in fact cause friction (Shaw, 2007). She writes, “In northern Sierra Leone, social forgetting is a cornerstone of established processes of reintegration and healing for child and adult ex-combatants. Speaking of the war in public often undermines these processes, and many believe it encourages violence”. (Shaw, 2005)

5. EVALUATING TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE EFFORTS WITH A BROADER VIEW

Now, almost a decade after the war, it is essential to evaluate the success of transitional justice approaches not simply at the level of judicial processes but also in terms of their societal impact. The field of transitional justice has tended to focus on civil and political rights, giving very little attention to social and economic rights (Mani, 2008; Pasipanodya, 2008). The narrowness of these initiatives has limited the inherent potential of transitional justice to promote the healing needed by war-affected populations, particularly children. There is a delicate balance between the national-level focus on participation in official truth and reconciliation processes (commissions or courts) and community practices of reconciliation, reintegration and recovery.

Reconciliation that builds on effective community practices is an important first step. An additional step is close monitoring of potentially harmful practices, assessing how social services can be adapted to fit cultural and social constructs. However, a fuller implementation of reparation in the spirit of transitional justice would rightfully address lingering stigma and other psychosocial problems that continue to affect those who suffered human rights abuses during the war, including former child soldiers. Yet targeting social services at only a select few can contribute to division and increase stigma, given that the general population has also been broadly affected by war and is suffering lingering consequences. In this light, sustainable national and community-level systems are needed that respond to the social service needs of all war-affected youth and families experiencing ongoing difficulties. This approach would help to fulfil the reparations aspect of transitional justice on a societal level without causing division, and presents an exciting opportunity for TJ efforts to link with post conflict development initiatives.

Communities broadly affected by the war also deserve sustainable health and social services, consistent with the United Nations’ definition of victims of human rights violations as individuals or groups who have “suffered physical, mental or economic harm” (United Nations, 2006). Many child DDR services evolve into programmes that continue to serve children affected by armed conflict or children who have been orphaned or are otherwise vulnerable. However, it is rare to find institutionalized systems of social services and mental health care in low resource settings, particularly those affected by armed conflict (Belfer, 2008). Furthermore, few mechanisms set up to deal with vulnerable ‘children’ adequately address the needs of older war-affected youth. Our research documents that tremendous challenges arise for former ‘child’ soldiers and many other war-affected youth in later years, as they negotiate peer and community relationships, economic self sufficiency, marriage, child rearing and the loss of family members who provided guidance and support. NGOs and governments should consider the long-term reintegration and recovery of war-affected youth,
families and communities and put into place appropriate and sustainable services as part of the reparation component of transitional justice processes. In this manner, transitional justice and the development of sustainable systems of care and protection for war-affected children are intrinsically linked.

5.1 Advocating for Services

Transitional justice efforts present an opportunity to ensure that policies, procedures and human resources implemented in a humanitarian crisis contribute to the establishment of sustainable systems of psychosocial supports and social services. These mechanisms should build on, not supplant, local responses. It is critical to identify what indigenous or local processes can be augmented. Naturally occurring protective processes, such as family and community acceptance, can be strengthened to help mitigate the adverse consequences of war and encourage reintegration. For some youth this may include family-based mediation to ensure that family placements are maintained or appropriate alternatives are found. For others it may take the form of mentorship and apprenticeship programmes in the community, providing incentives and recognition to adults who become long-term mentors for troubled youth. Young people who lack the capacity to initiate positive contacts with community members due to depression or hostility may be labeled as ‘different’ or untrustworthy. In turn, community rejection can foster feelings of depression, isolation and hostility, creating a vicious cycle.

The lack of positive role models to help young people navigate community provoking can start a downward spiral. Furthermore, in addition to the need for community support, formal mental health services may be needed for young people whose sense of the future has been foreshortened by depression or traumatic stress reactions or for those exhibiting high-risk or antisocial behaviour. Services planning must attend to the need for specialized interventions such as drug and alcohol treatment and community mediation for youth who continue to face stigma and poor community relationships. At present, such services are not routinely advocated for as a part of the transitional justice response, despite their importance in healing and recovery from the effects of war.

5.2 Addressing Community Relationships

Reconciliation at the community level is a key element of transitional justice. Responses that build on local structures and resources, such as the *gacaca* processes in Rwanda, are likely to be more sustainable and culturally acceptable. They also help to avoid the risk of transplanting models from one setting into a different culture without appropriate modification. Our data from Sierra Leone shows that small-scale community-based approaches are necessary but not sufficient to address the complex burdens facing young

---

2 Following the genocide in Rwanda, more than 100,000 alleged perpetrators of related crimes were imprisoned. The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda was charged with trying the lead organizers of the genocide, but even so the remaining number of participants waiting to be tried is too great to be handled by the national courts. Seeking a solution to ensure timely judicial proceedings for perpetrators of genocidal crimes, Rwanda put into place a new type of justice process, *gacaca*, which is based on an indigenous mechanism for dispute resolution. *Gacaca* trials throughout the country are adjudicated by elected committees of lay judges, trying those accused of less serious crimes in open community trials. This tiered system of justice allowed trials to go forward for genocide leaders and perpetrators within a court tailored to the seriousness of their crimes.
war-affected people. These indigenous processes need to be complemented by state-sponsored formalized services which can link to, monitor and support nonformal community-based systems while also providing a safety net when indigenous responses are insufficient. When severed from public investments and monitoring, local voluntary processes (such as child welfare committees [CWCs]) struggle to address the needs of communities whose social resources are already stretched thin by war. This is a set-up for failure.

In fact, a recent review by Wessells (Wessells, 2009b) observes the paucity of evidence supporting the use of CWCs as a standard first step in community-based child protection. Quick fixes will not advance the goals of transitional justice. In Sierra Leone, a recent progress report by the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) (Suma and Cristian, 2009) on the reparation process in Sierra Leone underscores how the short-term mandate to enact reparations within one year has largely squandered resources allocated under the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund. The ICTJ report demonstrates that this time-limited approach can do little to achieve the broad social aspects of reparation highlighted in the recommendations of Sierra Leone’s TRC. The recommendations included provisions for mental health services for victims, calling upon the government to “expand its provision of mental health care treatment for victims by supporting existing programmes, training counsellors and ensuring that all districts have access to such services”. The importance of this issue was underlined with nine separate recommendations about mental health care, counselling, and psychosocial support in the TRC report (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2004). The TRC also explicitly recognizes the importance of long-term investment in social services for the population as a whole:

The provision of social service packages helps to promote the development of existing governmental institutions, thereby addressing not only the needs of the victim, but the community at large in the long-term. This is particularly important in a context such as Sierra Leone where almost every citizen is a victim of the war. (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2004)

In reality, however, much of the reparation funding has been expended in the form of one-time payments to victims (about $100 each), given the focus on producing quick results. The ICTJ report cautions that such short-term responses represent a lost opportunity to fulfil the broader social recommendations of the TRC, including the call for sustainable health, mental health and social services; pensions; and more educational access for war-affected youth. Our data support the concern that short-term thinking will lead the country and international community to fall short of achieving the goals of transitional justice in Sierra Leone.
6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Conclusions

Through evidence from the prospective longitudinal study and numerous key informant and focus group interviews, our research points to promising local strengths and resources that could be tapped to enact more sustainable approaches to the reparations aspect of transitional justice in Sierra Leone. Our findings support the argument that more broadly framed approaches are needed to advocate for policy and practices that are mutually reinforcing and support the longer term reintegration and recovery of all war-affected youth.

In addition to more robust and sustainable systems of psychosocial support, mental health and social services, a number of interventions that helped to heal relations between former child soldiers and their communities following the war could be reinvigorated as a part of the longer term transitional justice response, such as community sensitization campaigns. In the post-conflict environment, “booster” sensitization campaigns could galvanize and sustain efforts to provide community and family support. Also needed are sustainable mechanisms that serve the broader community of conflict-affected children, adolescents and youth. In addition, with the establishment of formal monitoring and social services, it is important to use a mix of traditional and standard social work responses to assist youth not well served by indigenous protective responses. As emphasized by Wessells (2009), more emphasis needs to be given to evidence-based approaches that are integrated into systems of care such as school-based services and community-based health services (Betancourt and Williams, 2008).

Despite the many structural constraints in the post-war setting, there is considerable potential for war-affected youth to thrive in Sierra Leone. The nation’s young generation represents a tremendous reserve of untapped human capital (Lowicki, 2005). Despite the fact that ‘youth’ technically represent the majority of Sierra Leone’s population, the national and international communities have given little priority to sustainable intervention programs for youth. Evidence of this dynamic is found in the disappearance of many youth-focused NGOs and government initiatives, including major initiatives of the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund. Resources from the Peacebuilding Fund were ultimately redirected to establishing a stable power grid for the country, rather than towards acting on recommendations that the country make significant and meaningful investments in youth issues.

This reflects the reality that resources allocated to address the social needs of youth and families in war-affected countries are staggeringly limited. In Sierra Leone, for example, only 1.4 per cent of the annual budget was earmarked for youth issues in 2008, according to the United Nations (IRIN News, 2009). Social services are not prioritized in the current development agenda, nor is mental health addressed in the education or health systems. Sierra Leone’s Mental Health Policy is in draft form and has never been enacted (while neighbouring Liberia established its policy in 2008). The current annual operating budget for the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children’s Affairs is estimated to be approximately $785,000 (Massaquoi, 2009). The country’s single psychiatrist is located in Freetown, the capital city, where he runs the sole psychiatric facility, the Kissy Mental
Hospital, and an outpatient practice. Plainly, Sierra Leone’s capacity to meet the mental health and psychosocial needs of its war-affected populace is severely limited and short of resources.

Post-conflict development initiatives and policymaking often fail to consider the relationship of psychosocial factors to other aspects of development. Strategies for strengthening education, employment and health systems in post-conflict environments often miss the important opportunity to integrate mental health services or psychosocial supports into ongoing programmes. As a result, holistic and integrated systems of care are seldom put into place. In recent years, humanitarian actors put forth the paradigm of the ‘relief-to-development continuum’ as a means of envisioning a transition from the emergency phase of response to economic and social development. In terms of child protection or social and mental health services, this continuum has failed in Sierra Leone. Although war-affected civilians demonstrate impressive resilience and capacity, their strength cannot serve as an excuse for substandard or nonexistent mental health care and lack of social services. Along with community efforts to care for those still suffering the consequences of war, local and international leaders should prioritize the construction of culturally relevant and sustainable social service systems. More attention to these issues would represent a substantial move towards realizing the goals for recovery and culturally grounded reintegration set by article 39 of the Convention on the Rights of the child, the IASC Guidelines and the Paris Principles.

6.2 Recommendations

It is understood that transitional justice is a complex and lengthy process that cannot address every issue facing a post-conflict developing nation. Nonetheless, efforts should be made to ensure that transitional justice processes focus on societal healing and the reparations component directed at children, youth and families who suffered human rights abuses during the war. This should include children formerly associated with armed forces and groups but should not exclude others. Meaningful reparation does not consist of one-off or targeted compensation channeled through short-term material benefits. It results from the establishment of programmes and services that substantively improve the lives and prospects of conflict-affected populations. Transitional justice efforts can be expanded beyond their usual confines to include activities that foster ongoing community healing and address stigma. Transitional justice efforts can also advocate for youth access to positive opportunities such as education and job skills training programmes for war-affected youth, as well as psychosocial supports and mental health services.

Precedent already exists for a broad approach to the reparations component of transitional justice processes, as seen, for instance, in the report of Sierra Leone’s TRC. While TRC recommendations provide an excellent and comprehensive foundation, government actors are invariably called upon to prioritize what should be addressed given limited resources. To date, the TRC vision in Sierra Leone remains an unfunded mandate. At a minimum, those engaged in transitional justice efforts should consider the following when working with former child soldiers and other youth in post-conflict environments:
Development of Services and Supports

- Implement TRC recommendations regarding investments in psychosocial supports and mental health services.

- Be aware that many youth and community members are often affected by war, so responses should be broadly framed. Educational and livelihoods interventions should be targeted at all youth, while more specialized psychosocial supports and mental health services should be targeted at those most in need.

- Programmes that only serve certain groups (such as those limited to former child soldiers or survivors of gender-based violence) can worsen community stigma; they should be refashioned to have a more inclusive reach based on need rather than labels.

- Psychosocial supports and mental health care are most powerful when incorporated into existing initiatives on education and livelihoods along with social and health services.

- Relief agencies and NGOs from outside the community that engage in post-conflict recovery should think about children and youth from a developmental perspective, which recognizes that problems may arise several years after a child’s reintegration. Programmes should establish sustainable approaches to service provision, including monitoring to detect problems that may occur long after the end of conflict.

- Identify indigenous or local beliefs and processes concerning psychosocial support and mental health care and build on these in intervention design. To be sustainable, programmes should involve local healers and community workers, strengthening resilience in families and help to strengthen peer networks.

- Services and supports must be established with strong engagement and leadership from local government and its relevant ministries, international NGOs and other stakeholders. Some services, such as follow-up to monitoring of former child soldiers who have been reintegrated, will require long-term planning, supervision, government oversight and resources to ensure their viability after the humanitarian emergency response phase.

- Psychosocial and clinical mental health responses are not mutually exclusive; they are best used in tandem to care for war-affected youth, particularly those with weak family or community protection.

- As social service models are established, evidence-based interventions should be given priority attention and piloted in demonstration projects. Upon demonstrating success, such interventions can be appropriately scaled up to the national level; to ensure access, efforts must be made to establish services in the community rather than concentrating them only in capital cities.
Implementation and Management of Services

- Support must be allocated to establish and maintain child protection committees and community mental health workers, including ongoing professional development and appropriate compensation and incentives for time spent providing direct assistance to vulnerable youth.

- To ensure the cultural acceptability of services and build a firm foundation in the community, organizers should invite local input and make an effort to hire and train local personnel and engage community ownership, advisory groups and resources such as CWCs.

- Mechanisms for routine supervision and professional development must be included in training of local staff (such as those involved in CWCs) to support and care for vulnerable children. Professional development mechanisms are also vital to help prevent burn-out and retain talented staff.

These recommendations are consistent with the Sierra Leone TRC and ICTJ reports; bearing these priorities in mind, partnerships among state entities, international donors and the NGO community can ensure swift action to respond to weaknesses in the child protection and support systems. Ideally, the vision for child protection and other social services is strongest when it comes from the state. However, ensuring strong action from the state to act will require civil society efforts to galvanize political will; government actors must then actualize the vision through appropriation of funding and investment in capacity building within relevant government structures.

Although there are many challenges in setting a post-conflict development agenda, it also presents an opportunity to develop formal and sustainable systems of social services, monitoring and care for all war-affected youth. This paper argues that advocacy for such services is a critical aspect of transitional justice and of national rebuilding in the wake of conflict and massive human rights abuses involving children. A more fully elaborated and holistic approach to transitional justice can ensure a continuum of care in the transition from relief to development which has far reaching implications for the health of war-affected populations, particularly for vulnerable children. This view is consistent with state obligations to provide opportunity for the recovery and reintegration of child victims of abuse and exploitation under CRC article 39. To fulfil this obligation, states must harness support from the international community and commit to policies and programmes for war-affected children and families. They must then integrate these services into national development plans very early on – during the emergency phase – with a view towards the post-conflict period and beyond.
References


