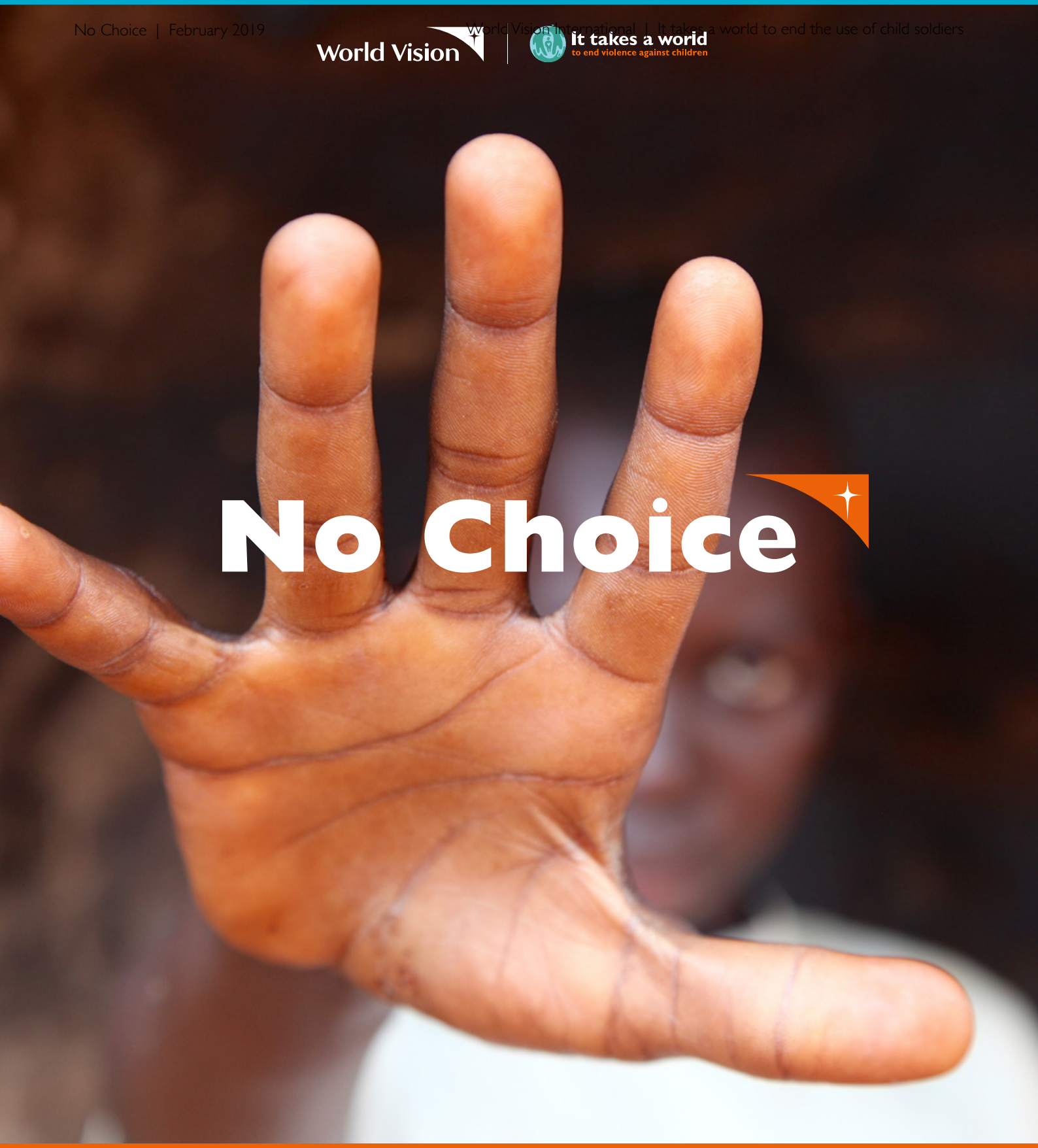
World Vision | it takes a world to end violence against children



No Choice

It takes a world to end the use of child soldiers

This report was prepared by World Vision International. Lead author Erica Hall. Significant contributions from Child Frontiers and Lyndsay Hockin. Input was provided by a number of World Vision Field Offices including Central African Republic, Colombia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq and South Sudan.

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Fourteen year old Francis in the Central African Republic was once a child soldier in the Anti-Balaka armed group. He says others should not join - that what his country needs is peace..

The names of all children quoted in this report have been changed to protect their identities.

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President's foreword

Every year violence steals the childhoods of 1.7 billion girls and boys around the world. This astonishing statistic reminds us that children are being physically, sexually and emotionally abused, neglected and exploited in every country, city and community. They are forced to fight in adult wars, make decisions and witness things no child should see.

Ending violence against our most vulnerable citizens – our children – is an urgent issue for me and one that I believe should be a priority for all of us. Through World Vision's global campaign, It takes a world to end violence against children, we are relentlessly advocating for every society and culture to make changes.

Our faith drives us to prevent violence, wherever it occurs, so no child has to experience it. You cannot change what you do not understand, so we have released No Choice: It takes a world to end the use of child soldiers. This report is our latest contribution to the evidence about violence against girls and boys. It delves into the ways they are forced to join armed groups, and the reasons they tell us for why they did. We have a clear message to governments and those in power – focus on stopping this problem before it starts - by investing in quality education, child protection, peacebuilding, and interventions that empower and create opportunities for children. Show the next generation that a better way is possible.

We work with survivors, strengthening the child protection systems and services available to them to ensure they have the chance to heal and recover. We partner with governments, the United Nations and the good offices of the UN SRSG Virginia Gamba to advocate for an end to grave violations and to help rescue children from the ranks of armed groups and reintegrate them into society. We seek to get them back into school, learning to laugh and play again in environments free from conflict. We empower children to become the peace-builders in their communities.

And we learn from them as they do this, amplifying their stories and voices.

For tens of thousands, and maybe hundreds of thousands, of children, there is no real choice when it comes to joining armed groups. It's kill or be killed. They are promised education, protection and a future. Once they are involved, escaping is difficult and fraught with danger.

"Three of us decided to try and escape. We were caught. One boy was killed immediately in front of the other boy," said Martin, 17, from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Martin is now free and being helped to re-start his life again.

These children grow up invisible and ignored. It doesn't need to be this way. An end to the use of child soldiers is possible, but it will take all of us to make it happen.

Andrew Morley
President and Chief Executive Officer
World Vision International

Foreword

'Children are both our reason to struggle to eliminate the worst aspects of warfare, and our best hope for succeeding at it.' These words, in Graça Machel's 1996 landmark report on children and armed conflict, have never been more relevant than they are today. Despite significant progress over the past two decades, children continue to be recruited and used to fight or serve in other roles in wars around the world.

The situation is untenable; we must urgently move to an era of prevention. For this reason I am very pleased to support this inspiring report 'No Choice: It takes a world to end the use of child soldiers'.

Ending child recruitment is possible. We must continue to work to ensure armed forces and armed groups around the world do not recruit children, and that children who have been recruited are demobilised and receive the immediate and long-term reintegration support they need. And, we must do more to reduce children's vulnerability to being recruited.

As this report demonstrates, we must take urgent action to build a protective environment for children and to address the factors pushing children into armed forces and armed groups. 'Voluntary' recruitment is not an accurate description of the reality these children experience; as long as any child sees joining armed actors as his or her only or best option, we must recognise recruitment as inherently coercive. This report shines a spotlight on this – and offers concrete solutions to give children living in conflict zones hope and opportunities for a brighter future.

I have heard from hundreds of children affected by recruitment during my country visits, including all of the countries in this report, in my two years as the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict. The push factors for child recruitment outlined in this report – ongoing insecurity and displacement; lack of educational and employment opportunities; peer pressure; poverty and lack of basic necessities; community and family expectations and vengeance; and family breakdown – are all a sad reality for too many children living in conflict settings.

Moving towards an era of prevention means the provision of adequate resources. More than 10,000 children were reached in 2017 by reintegration support provided by child protection actors such as World Vision, but many more need this help. Effective reintegration significantly reduces the chance of re-recruitment and gives these children a future. But more can be done.

World Vision's global campaign It takes a world to end violence against children is a rallying call to end the use and abuse of children in, for and by armed conflict forever. I am pleased to join forces with them in this endeavour and am calling on everyone – governments, the international community, donors, humanitarian actors and parties to conflict – to join the movement. Together we can make a difference and give all children the childhood they deserve.

Virginia Gamba, UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict

Children in conflict zones are often forced to flee violence in their home towns. These children made it to temporary facilities in Dahuk, Iraq

© World Vision/Meg Sattler

Executive Summary

Founded by Bob Pierce in 1950, World Vision was then and continues to be a global force for good. A community of millions, driven by our desire to protect, empower and transform the lives of vulnerable girls and boys in the most fragile places all over the world. According to the United Nations (UN), 357 million children live in areas affected by armed conflict, and that number has risen dramatically over the past ten years. Children are disproportionately affected by war – including facing increased risk of all forms of violence and exploitation – yet are the least responsible. The recruitment and use of children are grave violations of children's rights, with lifelong effects on children and their communities. And yet tens of thousands of children are used by both armed forces and armed groups in at least 20 countries around the world.

This report draws on World Vision's experience working on the issues related to children and armed conflict as well as on the findings of a multi-country study conducted for World Vision by Child Frontiers. The study included primary qualitative research in the Central African Republic (CAR) and Colombia, as well as desk research on the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Iraq and South Sudan. The primary research relied on focus groups of affected community members, key informant interviews, and testimonies from people who were associated with armed forces or armed groups as children.

For the past 20 years, a great deal of effort at the international level has focused on changing policies and practices in armed forces and armed groups on the recruitment of children. Less attention has been paid on the national and global stage to reducing children's vulnerability to recruitment. The majority of children involved with armed forces and armed groups are not abducted or forced to join at gunpoint. Most become associated with armed actors due to various forms of desperation – they have no other options or feel that this is the best of their bad options. Although they may have some agency in the decision, it is by its nature coercive and can be seen along a 'continuum of coercion'[1] with abduction on one end, and volunteerism on the other. While abduction and recruitment by force is a reality in many places around the world, World Vision believes that the rest of the continuum has received much less attention and it is therefore the focus of this report. While the continuum is helpful for understanding where a push factor may sit, in reality the perception of how coercive the factor may be is extremely subjective and varies across contexts and by audience.

This report is expected to contribute to the dialogue on protecting children from the effects of armed conflict by elevating their voices and providing evidence on factors having an impact on their resilience. The weight of these factors differs by context and by individual children but include absence of physical safety and presence of violence due to conflict, lack of opportunities, poverty, lack of access to basic necessities such as food, ongoing insecurity and displacement, community and family expectations, peer pressure, a need for belonging, family breakdown and a desire for revenge. In many cases it is not one factor making a child join but rather a convergence of vulnerabilities that ultimately tip the balance.

While boys seem to join armed forces/groups more than girls in all contexts explored for this research, many girls are nonetheless involved, and in numbers that may be higher than previously assumed, depending on the location. Girls' needs, experiences and motivations are often different from boys', as are the risks. That girls are mostly seen as 'wives' or 'girlfriends' to fighters suggests a significant gendered difference in how they come to be involved in an armed group.

The drivers of recruitment must be addressed systemically in order to prevent it happening and to ensure that children who have been demobilised do not reenter armed forces or armed groups. This prevention work must happen at both the macro level (reducing insecurity, conflict resolution, addressing wider inequality issues, strengthening national protection systems, and so on) and the micro level (strengthening community-based child protection, increase availability of child protection and gender-based violence response services, access to education, intergenerational dialogue, social norm change, parenting skills, psychosocial support, livelihoods, and so forth).

Children themselves called for better opportunities and protection, including quality education, sports and other activities, and a safe environment. We must involve them in their own protection.

This report makes recommendations for governments, the international community (including the United Nations and donors) and organisations working on the ground in order to prioritise the protection of children in humanitarian responses and prevent children's engagement with armed forces and armed groups. No armed actor should recruit children, and no boy or girl under the age of 18 should see

joining an armed force or armed group as his or her only or best option. It is therefore imperative to work together to change practices in armed forces and armed groups, prioritise the rights and protection of children and reduce the factors making children vulnerable to recruitment by committing to action on the following:

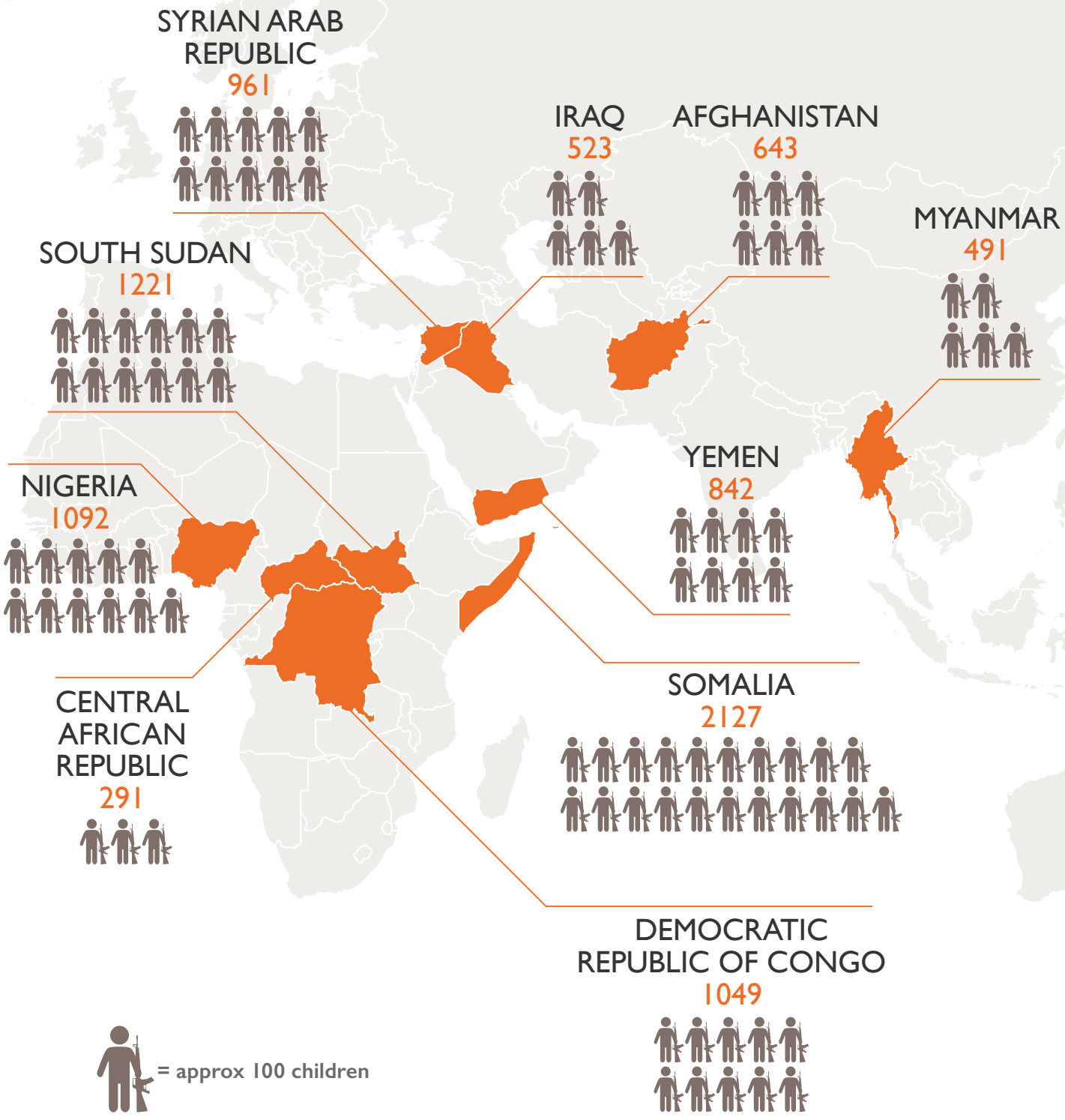
- All armed forces and armed groups must prohibit the recruitment of children under the age of 18 in policy and practice. This includes appropriate national legislation and its enforcement.
- Effectively and sufficiently resource child protection, education and social protection services in national budgets and prioritise the protection of children from grave violations in national policy.
- Recognise prevention and response to grave violations against children as a life-saving intervention and dramatically increase funding for child protection in conflict settings, including long-term funding for both prevention of and response to violence against children.
- All donors and humanitarian actors should mainstream a systems approach to child protection across funding mechanisms and programmes with the aim of protecting children from the six grave violations identified by the United Nations as well as other violations of their rights.
- Prioritise the participation and empowerment of children and young people in peacebuilding and community life, in programme design and evaluation and in global discussions on issues affecting them.

In Damara, Central African Republic, World Vision runs Peace Clubs and facilitates dialogue between different faith leaders

© World Vision/Corey Scarrow

TOP TEN COUNTRIES FOR CHILD RECRUITMENT

(2017 UNITED NATIONS SECRETARY-GENERAL'S REPORT)



Introduction

According to the United Nations, 357 million children – or one in six – live in areas affected by armed conflict.[2] This figure has risen by 74 per cent in the past decade.[3] Children are disproportionately affected by war – including facing increased risk of all forms of violence and exploitation – yet are the least responsible. Globally, the UN documented at least 21,000 cases of grave violations against children, including nearly 10,000 cases of child recruitment and use in 2017 and identified 61 parties to conflict in over 20 countries as recruiting children.[4]

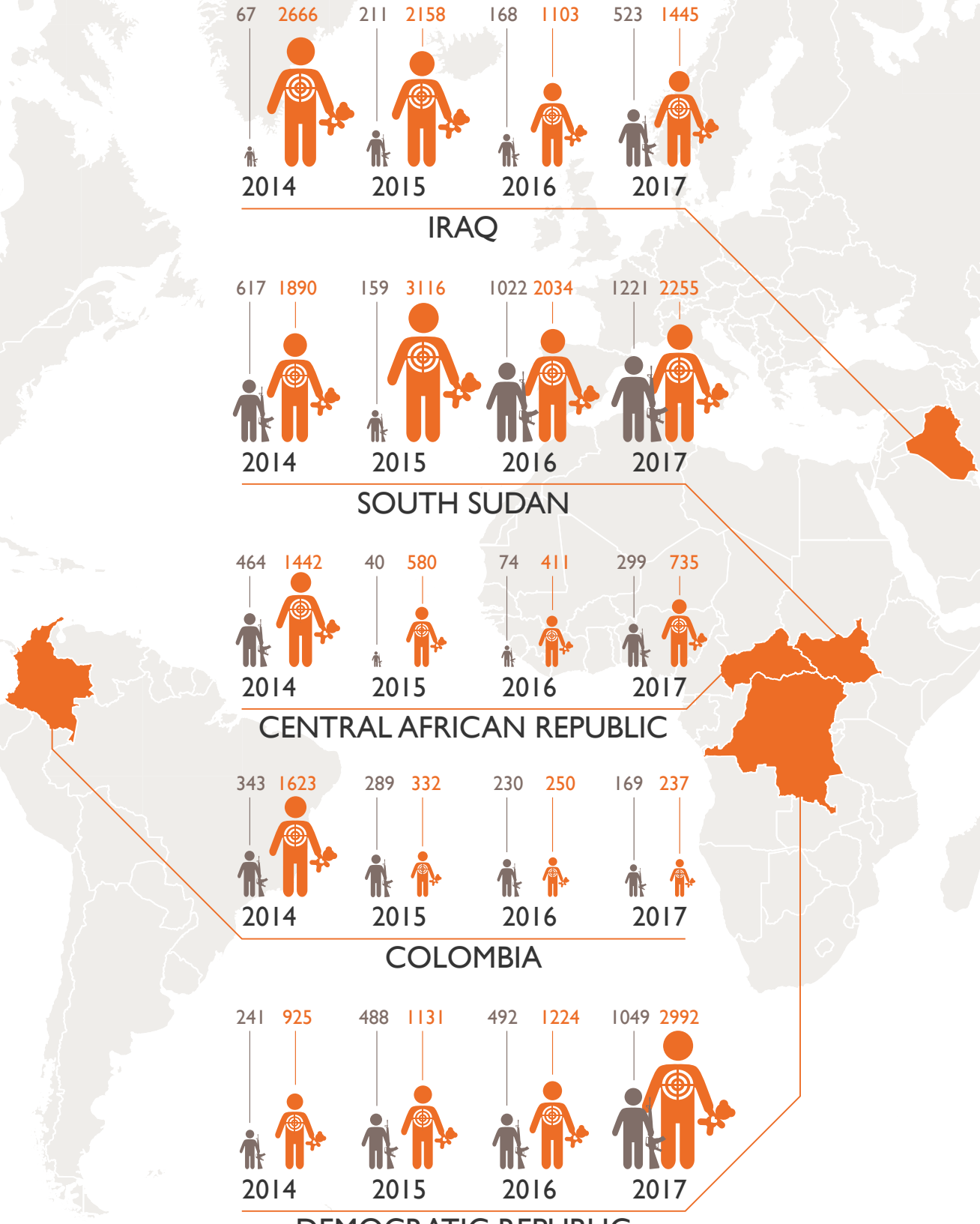
For the past 20 years a great deal of effort has gone into changing the policies and practices of armed forces and armed groups to prevent the recruitment of children. There has been notable success, with emerging consensus among countries that children do not belong in government forces in conflict zones. However, while a number of governments in conflict settings still recruit, even more countries allow children to join the armed forces from the age of 16 or younger (albeit with the caveat that they will not be deployed to a conflict zone until they are 18). Moreover, the number of armed groups keeps increasing in different conflict settings, so as one stops the conduct, another somewhere in the world may start recruiting.

Less attention has been paid on the national and global stage to reducing children's vulnerability to recruitment. The majority of children involved with armed forces and armed groups are not abducted or forced to join at gunpoint. Most become associated with armed actors due to various forms of desperation – they have no other options or feel that this is the best of their bad options. Although they have some agency in the decision, it is by its nature coercive. It is therefore clear that we will not end child recruitment just by working with armed actors; we need to change the situation of vulnerable children and give them an alternative future.

Through sports, children in World Vision's Nace la Esperanz project in Colombia improve their physical and social skills and develop their life project.

© World Vision/Juan Pablo Orjuela

NUMBER OF RECRUITED CHILDREN (🧍) AS A PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL GRAVE VIOLATIONS (🧍) WITHIN CASE STUDY COUNTRIES OVER THE PAST 4 YEARS



In addition to the moral imperative to end children being used in wars, doing so is at the core of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Ending child recruitment features in Goal 8 on decent work and economic development and it is central to Goal 16 on peaceful, inclusive societies and the end of all forms of violence against and torture of children. Preventing recruitment and use in conflict zones is also essential to ensure quality education (Goal 4) and good health and well-being (Goal 3). At the heart of the SDGs is the commitment to leave no one behind and to reach those furthest behind. Children living in war zones are clearly being left behind, and more must be done to reach them. In the countries forming the backbone of this report – CAR, Colombia, DRC, Iraq and South Sudan – grave violations against children have been fluctuating year to year. However, with the exception of Colombia, they rose between 2016 and 2017. Globally, documented cases of grave violations against children rose by 30 per cent in this time.

In 2016, parties to the World Humanitarian Summit called for ending grave violations against children as part of 'upholding the norms that safeguard humanity'. The year 2019 marks the 30th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which includes the full gamut of rights for children – including prevention of recruitment and the need for reintegration support for those affected. And yet children living in conflict zones are among the least likely to be guaranteed these rights.

Now is the moment to change this reality for children, to change the narrative on preventing recruitment of children and free them from both the rock and the hard place. It takes a world to end the use of child soldiers – and it begins with each of us.

'Lily', 17, was abducted by an armed group in South Sudan in 2015. She and her 2 girls, aged 5 months and 2 years, are participating in activities at a vocational training center supported by World Vision.

© World Vision/ Oscar Durand

FACTORS IMPACTING RECRUITMENT

Lack of educational and employment opportunities

Sense of belonging and peer pressure

Poverty and lack of basic necessities

Family breakdown

Community and family expectations and vengeance

Ongoing insecurity and displacement

Identifying those at risk of recruitment

The most vulnerable children

Previous studies have identified several categories for children with increased vulnerability to involvement with armed actors: orphans, out-of-school children, street children, displaced children, child heads of households, children who experience violence in the home and children exposed to drugs.[5] Boys and girls from the poorest families were recognised as more likely to be associated with armed groups in the study countries, although poverty alone is not the defining characteristic.

Children become associated with armed forces and armed groups in a variety of ways. While some children are abducted – taken from their homes, schools and communities – the vast majority join because of varying levels of coercive factors in their environment. The research conducted for World Vision found that the perception (by children, families and communities) of whether joining is 'coercive' or 'voluntary' is context dependent and largely subjective. In focus groups and interviews in the CAR and in Colombia, participants initially said that most engagement was 'voluntary'. However, in the majority of cases the discussion revealed adversities and limited options for children. Many simply said that children had no choice.

Although the existing literature for the study countries (CAR, DRC, South Sudan, Iraq and Colombia) shows that adolescent boys from 14–16 make up the largest group of children associated with armed groups, with 16–17 being most common in those armed forces that allow recruitment under the age of 18, seeing children as young as 8 in armed groups is not uncommon. In the Kasai Region of DRC, children as young as 5 have been part of militias.

Child recruitment and gender

'There are not many girls in the group, but those who are there have the same roles as boys.'

– Focus group discussion with boys aged 15–17, Central African Republic

While it is clear that more boys than girls are associated with armed forces and armed groups in the broadest sense of the definition,[6] more girls may be joining than previously acknowledged. Of the children in World Vision's reintegration programme in South Sudan, 66 per cent have been boys and 34 per cent girls. In CAR, girls account for 30 per cent of all child soldiers.[7]

While much literature portrays boys as fighters and girls as forced wives,[8] the reality depends very much on the context. Girls may also be spies, be responsible for cooking and cleaning and for preparing fetishes for purification rituals, and also be fighters. In Iraq, DRC and CAR, girls may be affiliated to the groups by marriage, becoming 'wives' for the fighters, often as a means of survival – to gain protection or food, for example.[9] In South Sudan, girls have participated in combat activities, intelligence gathering, forced marriage and childbirth, and have taken the lead on domestic duties.

Push factors for recruitment

'As long as there are not options, there is no such thing as voluntary recruitment.'

– Colombian government Intelligence official, Bogotá

Lack of opportunities, poverty, lack of access to basic necessities such as food, ongoing insecurity and displacement, community and family expectations, peer pressure, family breakdown and a desire for revenge are all factors for boys and girls becoming associated with armed forces or armed groups. These factors differ by context and by individual child; age and gender also play a significant role. The study showed that generally there is not one factor making a child join, but rather a convergence of vulnerabilities that ultimately tip the balance.

For example, a boy in CAR who saw his parents killed now lives with abusive relatives, cannot go to school and does not feel he belongs anywhere sees no other option and, even if he understands he is risking death, feels he has nothing to lose. But a similar child taken in by a caring extended family and able to access education will not join.

A study by the UN University in 2018 highlights a 'continuum of coercion' of child recruitment, with abduction on one end and volunteerism on the other.[10] Abduction and recruitment by force is a reality in many places around the world, including across the five countries considered for the present report. However, World Vision believes that the rest of the continuum has received much less focus and attention, and it is therefore the focus of this report. While the continuum is helpful for understanding where a push factor may sit, in

reality the perception of how coercive the factor may be is extremely subjective and varies across contexts and by audience. The perception of coercion may be very different for girls and boys who are recruited, and for younger or older children. While the reality is that children have little or no choice because of coercive push factors, children face an added burden (particularly with reintegration back into the community) where joining is seen as voluntary.

Lack of educational and employment opportunities

Where armed conflict is present, children's opportunities for education, jobs and even leisure activities are limited. Of the 303 million children out of school globally, more than one-third live in countries affected by conflict and disasters.[11] In the crisis that began in August 2016 in the Kasai Region of the DRC, for example, 150,000 children lost access to school as a result of violence, damage to school facilities and displacement.[12] Schools are destroyed or occupied by armed groups or by families who have been displaced. Resources that may have already been very limited no longer exist, and quality teachers are in short supply. Where schools are functioning, disruption to economic activities, such as farming, leave parents unable to afford to send children or requiring their help to provide for the family's basic needs.[13]

Where large numbers of children are living in refugee or displacement camps or informal settlements, access to education and basic services is often a challenge. While education is prioritised by children themselves, it is one of the least funded sectors in these contexts (alongside child protection), and short funding cycles limit the ability to bridge the humanitarian-development nexus.

In field research in CAR and Colombia schools were seen uniformly as substandard and, in many places World Vision works, are inaccessible. For some, this is a primary driver of children engaging with armed groups. The inverse is also true: a number of participants in the research cited children being in school and receiving good education as a factor preventing them from being recruited.

In research sites in CAR and Colombia children noted a lack of structured opportunities for learning skills, for participating in community life and generally for occupying themselves. Even where they have access to education, children and communities in all of the study sites reported extremely limited prospects for employment. As noted in a 2018 study, 'When armed groups are the only employer . . . joining an armed group may be the only realistic survival strategy.'[16] This lack of opportunities may have been an issue before the conflict and is only exacerbated by the presence of armed violence. For children and young people who grow up in protracted conflicts, the situation is often even more dire. Having alternatives for making a living is, on the other hand, a preventive factor. In one discussion with adolescent girls in CAR, already having a job was listed as an important factor for boys not joining an armed group.

'I hadn't been to school in a long time, and I wanted an education'

'Iréne',[14] 16, was demobilised from Kamunia Nsapu in Kananga, Kasai region of DRC. This is her story:

'I lived alone with my mother in Dibaya, when someone to my village came and said they'd pay my school fees if I joined the movement.[15] The guy was high up, friends with the chief. It was difficult to say no. I hadn't been to school in a long time, and I wanted an education.

'I was in the bush for seven months. It was pretty cold, there wasn't a lot to eat, and we had to fight whenever the commanders told us. There were a lot of other children, all 8–18 years of age. I heard they were demobilising kids, so I escaped. I knew if I stayed I would eventually die in a horrible way. Some commanders brought us to the stadium in Kananga, and BNCE [Bureau National Catholic pour les Enfants, a local NGO which runs a centre for demobilised children] was there as well as MONUSCO [the UN peacekeeping force]. They told us to lay down our weapons – that it was 'against the rights of the child' to fight, that I should be in school. I didn't know that before.

'Now I'm at the centre, and things are okay. We eat three times a day, and we have lessons. I feel safe here. Sometimes I still hear bullets at night, but I know I don't have to wake up and fight. I can go back to sleep.'

Sense of belonging and peer pressure

It is natural for children to want to belong, and as they develop, their identity is entwined with their social surroundings. Classmates, members of common clubs and others give children a sense of inclusion. Where children's and youth clubs do not exist and children are not in school, children can feel isolated and seek out belonging. Where peers and friends have already joined an armed force or armed group, the need to belong somewhere can be a driver for children becoming part of this group.

Children in Shekan IDP camp in Iraq playing football

© World Vision/Suzy Sainovski

'My friend was recruiting children saying the group would take care of us'

Twelve year old 'Joseph' was part of the armed group Kamunia Nsapu in Kasai-Central, the DRC. This is his story:

'Before I joined the group, I was living with my grandmother in Nganza, a suburb outside of Kananga. I helped her sell peanuts every afternoon. My life wasn't easy, and there wasn't a lot to eat. One day a friend told me he was recruiting children to work in an armed group, saying the group would take care of us. I knew this was an opportunity that I couldn't miss, particularly because there was so little to eat.

'We had to go through an initiation ceremony to join the group. The initiation made sure that no bullet could touch me. After I was initiated, they gave me my main weapon – a stick. It would help kill all enemies in our path. Yet some of us still died.

'Now I'm living in [a] transit centre with other children. They take care of us, but I haven't heard anything about whether we'll be able to go to school. I'd really like to become a mechanic.'

Significant numbers of children are reportedly recruited because friends or family members have already joined.[17] Many children interviewed in Iraq in 2017 reported that they first heard about armed actors from family members.[18] In the field research in CAR and Colombia parents and friends were said to exert the most influence on a child's decision to join or not join an armed group.

Children in World Vision programme areas in CAR and the DRC mentioned wanting to be with friends who had already joined or being recruited directly by them. In CAR some research participants talked about children coming back with money, new shoes and other goods, and encouraging their peers to join them and get the same things. In South Sudan older boys have also reported finding a sense of brotherhood or belonging, wishing to be with friends and act as adults, and being able to put aside the fear and terror that come when there are attacks on their home villages.

Poverty and lack of basic necessities

'There are not really any common traits among the children who engage, except that most of these children are from a poor family.'

—Male community leader and pastor, Damara, CAR

Economic drivers ranked very high for children's recruitment in all of the countries involved in the study. In conflict settings resources like food and shelter can become scarce. Families in DRC struggle to feed themselves when they return home after being displaced only to find fallow fields and their livestock seized or killed. Disruption to economic activities, such as farming, may leave parents turning to children to help to provide for the family's basic needs. And where children are separated from or have lost their parents, survival becomes the only objective: having food, a place to sleep, feeling protected from the violence around them.

Interviews with former child soldiers supported by World Vision child protection programming in South Sudan found that for older children economic factors and lack of basic necessities influenced the decision to join, or, where children were abducted, the decision to stay. Barracks provided a basic sleeping mat and availability of food at a more regular rate than many had in their homes, particularly after active hostilities in their local area destroyed homes, farms and

food sources. For girls, where marriage was not forced, economic factors can influence parents or elders to influence a 'push' to join so parents will receive a dowry from the male commander for their daughter. Some girls reported the sense that staying with the armed groups offered them protection because of associating with the armed group itself, but also because of now being married.

'This whole problem [of armed groups] is all about inequality. Some [rich people in the North of Bogotá] have all the luck, and others no.'

—Volunteers in a feeding centre for children near Bogotá-Soacha, Colombia

'Only my cousins were left'

'Innocent', 16, is from CAR. This is his story.

'The Séléka saw me selling cigarettes in our shop by the side of the road. They wanted my brother-in-law, and when they couldn't find him, they tied me up and kept me until a neighbour was able to get them to release me. I was badly injured and went back to my village to recover. When I got home, no one was there. People told me that the Séléka had killed my parents. Only my cousins were left, and I had nothing – no money. So the situation was not possible and my cousins integrated me into the Anti-Balaka [rebel opposition to the Séléka].'

Family breakdown

Weak families, intra-familial tension, domestic violence and abuse, being orphaned or living with extended family can all be factors increasing children's vulnerability to becoming involved with armed groups. Boys in CAR highlighted that children orphaned by war are vulnerable to recruitment because no one is left to take care of them.

'They join because they are unprotected and have no parental guidance. Children who do not join armed groups are the ones who have guidance. You know good from bad, because you have someone teaching you at home. Parents have expectations for you.'

—Youth activist, Villavicenso, Colombia

Community and family expectations and vengeance

The reality of conflict today in protracted crises, where the movement of armed groups is unpredictable and villages may be repeatedly attacked over a period of time, creates a sense in communities that they must protect themselves. Where the community views adolescents more as adults than children, this call to arms extends to them. It is not that children are singled out to protect the community, but rather that all community members (male and sometimes female) are expected to play their part. For example, it is considered normal and a source of pride that boys from age 15 defend their land in the Kurdistan Republic of Iraq (KRI). Families and community leaders are said to encourage this.

Vengeance is also often a push factor. Children who have been abducted or tortured by one party to the conflict or have had family members killed by them can have an overwhelming desire for revenge. And joining the opposing group or force is a means to this end. This is overwhelmingly true in CAR, but also in KRI, DRC and South Sudan

'I still don't know where they buried my father'

'Celine', from Yaloke, CAR, was 13 when she joined an armed group. Here is her story:

'When the Séléka [armed group] came, my mother was in the mine and came out to look for my younger siblings and the Séléka killed her. They took my father and killed him too. They also took our goods and animals. I still don't know where they buried my father. My older brothers joined the Balaka [an opposing armed group] to avenge the death of our parents, and they took me with them – I also wanted vengeance.

'One of our professors came into the bush to tell us to come back and continue our schooling, and it was then that I quit the armed group. I left with my brothers to go to school and to take care of my younger siblings.'

Ongoing insecurity and displacement

Growing up in a conflict-affected or insecure area is in and of itself a factor that pushes children's engagement in armed forces or armed groups. In protracted conflicts, like in the DRC, violence and the presence of armed groups become normalised. The ever-present, 'everydayness' of guns, violence and conflict may desensitise children and families to the generalised violence around them and reduce their fear of children becoming involved.

Another characteristic of ongoing insecurity is forced displacement, where families are forced to flee their home area, becoming either internally displaced or crossing international borders as refugees. The displacement that occurs at the time of conflict is terrifying, chaotic – a total interruption of daily life as it was, destroyed the second the bullets fly. Where attacks are during the day, children are often separate from their parents – at school, in the market, collecting water, or playing away from the home. Night attacks cause panic, with family members scattering. Either circumstance will leave many children unaccompanied or separated, alone and vulnerable. This vulnerability significantly increases the risk for children to see becoming associated with an armed group as a way to replace the protection they formerly received from their family, or even as a means to find and reunite with their family by moving with the armed group.

'This is all these kids know. They have never had it any other way.'

—World Vision Colombia staff member near Bogotá-Soacha

Moreover, this insecurity is interlinked with recurring displacement, a situation that is itself linked to child recruitment into armed groups. Refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) end up in new settings where they may experience high levels of poverty, violence and social isolation – in places like Colombia and Iraq. Displacement can also be driven by the threat posed by armed groups to children.

'They just leave. That's one way of protecting the children'

'Claudia', the leader of a community-based organisation near Bogotá-Soacha, whose son was killed in gang violence, explained:

'We had a bunch of kids the other day that were in the gangs and they were called upon to sell drugs but the families said no, and they had to make the decision just to leave the community. It's another form of displacement. But a lot of people do it. We had to do it ourselves. I myself was living somewhere with my family and I felt [my kids were in] danger and we had to get out.'

Kosa George, a World Vision social worker supervisor, motivates and encourages former child soldiers in South Sudan.

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A systems approach to protecting children from recruitment

The drivers of recruitment must be addressed systemically in order to prevent it happening and to ensure that children who have been demobilised do not reenter armed forces or armed groups. This prevention work must happen at both the macro level (reducing insecurity, conflict resolution, addressing wider inequality issues, strengthening national protection systems, and so on) and the micro level (strengthening community-based child protection, access to education, intergenerational dialogue, social norm change, parenting skills, psychosocial support, livelihoods, and so forth).

In all settings there are some child protection initiatives working to prevent recruitment and re-recruitment of children into armed groups, albeit with limited reach. These mostly focus on access to education, intergenerational dialogue and parenting skills, psychosocial support and livelihood opportunities. Typical initiatives provided by government and nongovernment actors in the countries studied include

- **establishment or strengthening of community-based child protection committees responsible for promoting the safety and rights of children, and monitoring and reporting child protection concerns**
- **provision of child protection services, including availability of social workers to provide psychosocial support and links to other child-friendly support services**
- **establishment of safe spaces for children to play sports; participate in dance, arts and crafts; and receive psychosocial support**
- **provision of vocational training, small business support and/or income-generating activities**
- **provision of school supplies, school construction and teacher training**
- **provision of opportunities for children to increase their social, decision-making and coping skills through clubs, sports, recreational spaces, peer mediation and basic conflict resolution skills**
- **sensitisation with parents and adolescents on child recruitment.**

No child should see joining an armed force or armed group as the only or best option. Some of the examples of what World Vision knows is effective in addressing underlying factors include attitudinal change, strengthening community-based protection networks, social and economic reintegration for children coming out of armed forces or armed group, mental health and psychosocial support for children who are affected by conflict, strengthening legislation, policy and its implementation, family strengthening, and engaging and empowering children and youth.

Changing attitudes

In communities where it is expected that adolescents will help defend the community, or where joining an armed group is seen as an acceptable career path for someone under 18, changing social norms is critical. Although religion is sometimes used as a recruitment tool, the research conducted by Child Frontiers for World Vision showed that faith leaders are, in many cases, key influencers in children not joining armed forces or armed groups. In CAR, for example, religious groups actively discourage children from engaging with armed groups through messaging during mass, prayer and group activities. Given that peer pressure and a need to belong are also factors in recruitment, working with child and youth leaders to raise awareness of the harm and the importance of protecting children and enabling childhood is also vital to keeping children out of armed forces and armed groups. World Vision Peace Clubs, which include demobilised children in some areas, promote peace and inclusion.

> ‘The church is very active in preventing recruitment.’
>
> – Focus group discussion with boys aged 15–17 in Damara, CAR

Faith leaders, children and youth groups and women’s groups are all potential champions for attitudinal change that could prevent child recruitment. World Vision’s Channels of Hope model mobilises and builds the competencies of community leaders – especially faith leaders – to respond to some of the most difficult issues affecting their communities, including child protection issues. Channels of Hope is an interactive, facilitated process to create a safe space for faith leaders and faith communities to learn, share and debate to reach the

WORLD VISION'S SYSTEMS APPROACH FOR THE PROTECTION OF GIRLS AND BOYS

root causes and deepest convictions that affect attitudes, norms, values and practices toward the most vulnerable. Community-change programmes like this can help to ensure children are seen as children and not soldiers.

Strengthening community-based protection networks

Child protection includes all measures taken to prevent and respond to abuse, exploitation, neglect and all other forms of violence against children. The system for child protection includes services and support mechanisms across the continuum of care for children at risk of or who have experienced violence. On a practical level, strengthening community-based protection systems includes working at the local level in collaboration between formal and informal (such as child protection committees) actors to, for example, strengthen reporting and referral mechanisms and identify the most vulnerable children and families.

Social and economic reintegration for children coming out of armed forces or armed groups

Demobilised children who do not receive adequate social and economic reintegration support are at heightened risk of re-recruitment, as they often embody all of the push factors mentioned in this report. Reintegration programmes must be timely and take account of both the immediate and long-term needs of these children.

A holistic approach that places the child at the centre is critical. This includes ensuring comprehensive case management, multi-sector services to address a child's protection concerns and reduce vulnerability, and economic strengthening to help mitigate push factors that are driven by a lack of opportunity or extreme poverty. Most critical is social reintegration – supporting children to reconnect with family, friends and peers, but also supporting parents and the broader community to no longer fear those children who leave armed groups, and to become positive influences in the lives of those children, creating an essential feeling of safety, care and well-being for the child.

World Vision currently supports children coming out of armed forces or armed groups in South Sudan, the DRC and Myanmar. However, funding for reintegration programmes globally does not come close to addressing the need; in key countries, and in some country contexts, reintegration programming resources were reduced between 2018 and 2019. Many children wait a considerable time for critical support or never receive it.

Mental health and psychosocial support for children who are affected by conflict

Children in some conflict areas cite vengeance as a key driver in their recruitment. Where children have witnessed and experienced violence, death, fear and deprivation linked to conflict, their mental well-being is naturally affected. Mental health and psychosocial support are vital to help them deal with the emotions and address anger linked to what they have seen and experienced. Providing such support could reduce the imperative to join an armed group for vengeance.

In Iraq, World Vision is supporting women, men and children in coping and treatment of mental illnesses including trauma, post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, and severe cases such as psychosis. The population served includes returnees, IDPs and local communities affected by the ISIL invasion in Iraq. In South Sudan, World Vision supports former child soldiers with one-on-one focused psychosocial support by a social worker and reinforces this care with family-based psychosocial support, partnership with faith actors to provide religion-based family counselling, and basic community level psychosocial support in Child Friendly Spaces.

Strengthening legislation, policy and its implementation

The Convention on the Rights of the Child, which celebrates its 30th anniversary in 2019 and is the most widely ratified international convention, commits governments to promote and protect the rights of all children within its borders. On a regional level the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child enshrines the same rights and includes a requirement for States that are parties to it to 'take all necessary measures to ensure that no child shall take direct part in hostilities and refrain, in particular for recruiting any child.'[19] International humanitarian law also prohibits the use of children in armed conflict. The laws and policies in many – although not all – countries affected by conflict already include strong child protection, education and labour provisions. However, implementation – including in all of the countries in this study – is falling well behind. National-level advocacy is required to encourage governments to fulfil their obligations.

In humanitarian contexts where the State may be unwilling or unable to protect the rights of its citizens, World Vision particularly supports community-level advocacy to promote the rights and protection of children and works to increase knowledge and awareness of national legislation or policies designed to protect children.

Family strengthening

As noted above, family breakdown, whether by strained relationships or the loss or separation from family members, can push children into armed forces or armed groups as a means of protection. However, families have also been identified as key influencers in the decision for a child to become involved with an armed group. Having supportive parents can be key to avoiding engagement, but parents can also push children to join.

> 'Fathers can encourage their sons not to join with the promise of sending them to school. They tell their children that they can die if they join. The most influential [in discouraging children from joining] are the parents.'
>
> — Adolescent girl, Damara, CAR

In crisis settings families face additional stresses and parents also experience anxiety, fear and other emotions linked to the insecurity in their surroundings. Providing support to parents and caregivers can help to improve children's overall well-being and potentially reduce the risk of children leaving home or being at heightened risk of recruitment. Good parenting programmes, like World Vision's Celebrating Families tool, can help to foster an environment where children are discouraged from engaging with armed groups. Alternative formal or informal foster arrangements are imperative for children who are without caregivers, as is support to foster carers.

Engaging and empowering children and youth

Children do not start wars, but they are a powerful resource for building peace in their communities. Active participation of children and youth in peacebuilding gives them a voice and a stake in their future without requiring them to be part of an armed force or armed group. Where protracted crisis exist and peacebuilding remains elusive, the humanitarian community must do more to create safe spaces to raise up the voices of children and youth in humanitarian contexts and, where safe to do so, include them in humanitarian needs assessments, planning, response and accountability mechanisms in age and gender appropriate, accessible ways. World Vision has seen the impact of programmes like Empowering Children as Peacebuilders, a model it has been using and adapting for decades, in providing children with a sense of purpose and hope for the future. By including children as partners in designing solutions and engaging with their experience, community, national and global actors can ensure they are better protected from recruitment.

'Joseph' joined an armed group in South Sudan when he was 17 because he didn't see any opportunities for his future.

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Moving forward: protecting children from recruitment

Children should not be part of any armed force or any armed group. This is their right, enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, international humanitarian law, and other regional agreements and national legislation. A world without children fighting wars can be a reality. They deserve better, and we owe it to them to do more. Furthermore, ending child recruitment is already central to many global agendas and commitments – including the Sustainable Development Goals, the UN Security Council's children and armed conflict agenda, and the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children.

But in order to end it, both sides of the problem must be approached at the same time. Building the resilience of children to prevent being recruited – by building a protective environment, ensuring alternatives and giving them a voice in the issues affecting them – must go hand in hand with influencing the policies and practices of armed forces and armed groups.

To create a world where children are not soldiers, World Vision calls for the following actions:

Governments:

- **Prohibit recruitment of children.** All governments and their armed forces must prohibit the recruitment of anyone under the age of 18 in law, policy and practice. The government obligation to end recruitment of under 18s extends to any recruitment in their territory, including by non-state armed groups. This includes appropriate national legislation and its enforcement.

- **Adequately resource child protection and associated services.** Governments must effectively and sufficiently resource child protection, education, social protection and child health services in national budgets and strengthen the capacity of ministries with child protection mandates. The protection of children from grave violations must be prioritised in national policy. Policies and funding must reach the local level.

- **Prioritise the participation and empowerment of children and youth in humanitarian programming, peacebuilding and community life.** Children have a right to participate in decisions affecting them and are important actors in their own protection. Governments should implement the key recommendations of the UN Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security.[20] For example, children (of sufficient maturity) and youth should be involved meaningfully in peace processes and humanitarian, resilience and recovery programmes.

- **Ensure security and access.** Governments must prioritise the security and protection of child protection actors in their territory and facilitate humanitarian access.

United Nations, Donors and the International Community:

- **Recognise child protection as life saving.** The United Nations, donors and the international community must recognise and define prevention of grave violations against children, specifically child recruitment, as a life-saving intervention in emergencies and the responsibility of all humanitarian actors.

- **Increase funding to end violence against children in conflict and ensure that prevention and response are both prioritised in this funding.** The child protection sector and cross-sectoral work on violence against children must be prioritised in humanitarian response planning and advocacy. Donors should support innovative long-term interventions around prevention of grave violations against children and other child protection issues. including by
  - increasing the use of multi-year partnership agreements to realise greater impact of community-based prevention strategies
  - providing multi-sectoral approaches that bring together child protection, gender-based violence, education, food security, livelihoods and cash-based programming to promote prevention and reduce vulnerability
  - using longer-term programming to ensure continuity of care for demobilised children from a Do No Harm perspective.

- **Support the role of child protection systems in preventing grave violations.** All actors must recognise the role that both formal and informal child protection systems play in the prevention of children's recruitment into armed forces and armed groups as well as other grave violations against children. These systems must be strengthened, including in humanitarian and emergency contexts.

- **Invest in operational research on root causes and what works.** Donors should invest in operational research to generate better understanding of root causes, more

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Children involved in World Vision Colombia school and community activities.

evidence of 'what works' to prevent child recruitment and recidivism, how to contextualise interventions and increasing understanding of the unique vulnerabilities and push factors for girls' recruitment.

- **Ensure that prevention of child recruitment, influencing the behaviour of armed forces and armed groups as well as reducing children's vulnerability to recruitment, is prominent on the global agenda.** The UN Security Council, UN agencies, regional organisations and other influential actors must use their influence to press all parties to conflict to stop recruiting those under 18. Additionally, reducing children's vulnerability to recruitment must be on the global agenda – not only in relation to processes on children and armed conflict, but also priorities such as the Sustainable Development Goals, ending modern slavery and children on the move.

- **Champion and support the voice of children and youth in humanitarian and emergency contexts.** The global youth peace and security agenda, stemming from the 2015 UN Security Council Resolution 2250, recognises the contributions of young people to peacebuilding efforts. The international community and donors can support children and youth in humanitarian settings by speaking out on their concerns and giving them platforms to speak for themselves. They need to be listened to – and heard in all global forums where peacebuilding, child recruitment and the worst forms of child labour are discussed.

NGOs and civil society:

- **Mainstream a systems approach to child protection across programming, ensuring a focus on child recruitment is included.** Initiatives to protect children and strengthen child protection systems can be stand-alone but must also be mainstreamed across programming sectors to tackle vulnerability and risk. It is essential to prioritise child protection mainstreaming across the programming cycle and continue to build this capacity among humanitarian actors in all sectors as well as engaged civil society actors, especially faith actors, local partners and community organisations. Mainstreaming should not only consider prevention and risk mitigation of general child protection concerns but also include a more specific focus on the grave violations, including child recruitment.

- **Strengthen coordination for prevention of and response to child recruitment.** Preventing and responding to child recruitment requires leadership by child protection actors, but in coordination with actors that provide child-focused services, such as in health, education, livelihoods or gender-based violence prevention and response. Where child recruitment is prevalent, coordination mechanisms for addressing child recruitment should be established or strengthened, ensuring terms of reference include the engagement of multi-sector actors.

- **Work with community actors to scale up initiatives.** NGOs working in conflict contexts must continue to scale up initiatives that strengthen community-based child protection systems, tackle harmful gender norms, and promote positive parenting and social cohesion. This should be done collaboratively with faith actors, youth leaders/groups, local women's organisations and community-based organisations.

- **Ensure the participation of children and youth in programming.** Actors working on the ground should systematically engage with children and youth, listening and involving them in age-appropriate and gender-appropriate ways, and address barriers that may prevent this. The opinions of girls and boys are vital to ensure programming meets their needs.

- **Invest in building the evidence base.** NGOs and civil society actors on the ground should collaboratively invest in building a stronger evidence base for effective strategies to prevent recruitment and support reintegration, moving from use of general programming assumptions to context-driven approaches responsive to local realities.

Research considerations

Child protection considerations

The research team ensured safe and ethical participation of children, adhering to World Vision's child protection protocols. All names have been changed to protect the identity of the children involved. All photos in the publication were taken and are used with informed consent. The photos come from a range of World Vision programme areas and do not necessarily represent children involved in the research or children who have been involved with armed forces or armed groups.

Ethical and quality-assurance considerations

- **Publication standards for protection of children**: To ensure the safety of the participants, all personal information such as names and contact details were removed from the notes. Child participants are identified only by their gender, age and pseudonym.
- **Consent**: The research team ensured that participation was voluntary and informed. Children were not offered any kind of compensation for their participation in the research. Consent was acquired from parents or caregivers, making sure they understood the rationale, the type of activities to be conducted and the way the research would be used.
- **Ethics**: This research followed ethical considerations to ensure that the principles of justice, respect and doing no harm were upheld. Measures were taken to ensure the safety, rights, dignity and well-being of the participants.
- **Cultural appropriateness**: Children participated in their local language in order to minimise misinterpretations.
- **Gender**: The project team ensured equitable participation of boys and girls and took into account potential cultural sensitivities.

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'Mandella', 18, shows his work during a tailoring class at the Tindoka Vocational Training Center in Yambio, South Sudan.

Endnotes

1 This term comes from the 2018 UN University report 'Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict', ed. Siobhan O'Neil and Kato van Broeckhoven (2018).

2 Kate Gilmore, UN Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, statement, at Protecting the Rights of the Child in Humanitarian Situations, Day on Child Rights, 5 March 2018, https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/03/1004122.

3 'Fighting for the rights of children in armed conflict', statement by UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta H. Fore at UN ECOSOC High-Level Panel Discussion Addressing the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children – Strengthening the Response to Meet Children's Needs, New York, 20 June 2018.

4 United Nations Security Council. Children and Armed Conflict. Report of the Secretary-General (New York. 2018). The six grave violations against children in armed conflict, as identified by the United Nations, are killing and maiming, recruitment and use, abduction, rape and sexual violence, attacks on schools and hospitals and denial of humanitarian access.

5 Emma de Vise-Lewis, Stefano Schwarz and Bavon Mupenda, Tug of War: Children and Armed Groups in DRC (War Child and Child Frontiers, 2018).

6 The Paris Principles and Commitments and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups use this term to describe 'child soldiers' and define the term as 'any person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls, used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities.'

7 UN University, 'Cradled by Conflict'.

8 See UN Security Council, 'Children and Armed Conflict. Report of the Secretary-General' (New York, 2018); UN University, 'Cradled by Conflict'; interviews with International Rescue Committee (IRC) and World Vision.

9 UN Security Council, 'Children and Armed Conflict'; UN University, 'Cradled by Conflict'; interviews with IRC and World Vision.

10 UN University, 'Cradled by Conflict.'

11 UNICEF, 'A Future Stolen: Young and Out-of-School' (September 2018).

12 '150,000 children in Greater Kasai region need emergency support to continue education', press release, UNICEF, 9 June 2017, https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/150000-children-greater-kasai-region-need-emergency-support-continue-education.

13 World Vision, 'Will You Hear Us: 100 Children in DRC Tell Their Story' (September 2018), https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/Will%20You%20Hear%20Us%20Sep%2016_FINAL.pdf.

14 Her name and the names of others below have been changed to protect their identity and keep them safe.

15 Children consistently referred to Kamunia Nsapu as 'the movement'.

16 UN University. 'Cradled by Conflict'.

17 UNICEF and Transition International, 'Executive Summary. Assessment of the Push and Pull Factors of Child Association with Armed Actors in Iraq, Opportunities and Capacities to Support Reintegration and Prevention (2017); UN University, 'Cradled by Conflict'.

18 UNICEF and Transition International, 'Executive Summary'.

19 Article 22(2). NB : CAR and the DRC have not ratified the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

20 UN Security Council, 'The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security', https://www.youth4peace.info/ProgressStudy.

'Joseph', 12, used to be part of the Kamunia Nsapu armed group in Kasai-Central, the Democratic Republic of Congo. He is now in a transit centre, receiving support with other children.

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We believe a world without violence against children is possible, and World Vision's global campaign It takes a world to end violence against children is igniting movements of people committed to making this happen. No one person, group or organisation can solve this problem alone, it will take the world to end violence against children.

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