

Chapter 68

Maintaining a Safety Net and Peace for Former Child Soldiers in Africa: Evaluation of Peace Education Programs

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on the challenges and opportunities associated with the implementation of peace education programs in Africa. Peace education programs are used widely to create peaceful environments for at-risk children. Their intended goals are to end violence through modeling human consciousness to resolve conflicts peacefully and to provide children with a stable socioeconomic future. Using a systematic review of literature, the authors examine how humanitarian agencies with support from the World Bank utilize peace education programs to create safety nets for former child soldiers in Africa. The challenges and opportunities of such programs are examined. The authors then propose for the adoption of a community-based participatory practice to facilitate the sustainability of peace education programs. The chapter will benefit at-risk children in war-torn African regions and all stakeholders involved in the creation of safe environments for children.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-7464-8.ch068

INTRODUCTION

Generally speaking, both militaries of reigning parties and members of armed opposition groups around the world target children in their recruitment efforts (United Nations, 2011). According to Listverse (2009), 10 years old is the prime time during which serious recruitment efforts begin (Listverse, 2009, para. 22). This is because children are gullible and sometimes bullied into not only enlisting but committing atrocious crimes as well. It is estimated that about 250,000 children below 18 are “fighting in conflicts around the world” (Listverse, 2009, para. 22). In addition to active military duties, other children serve as porters, cooks, guards, messengers, spies, and sex slaves (Achvarina & Reich, 2006; Hart, 2006; Johannessen & Holhersen, 2013; Tonheim, 2011; www.child-soldiers.org, n.d.).

Former child soldiers are considered at-risk children because of the traumatic experiences they were exposed to during the war. The International Rescue Committee admitted that children are currently being trained for combat, or to be spies or sex slaves for the wars around the world (Achvarina & Reich, 2006; Child Soldiers International, 2017; Global Report, 2008; Lancet, 2004; Rakisits, 2008). Some countries on the African continent such as Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia and the Central African Republic contribute enormously to the recruitment of child soldiers (Schauer & Elbert, 2010 Global Report, 2008). Evidence indicates that if the children were lucky to be left alive, participating in combat whether willingly or through force does not benefit them after the wars had ended. Rather, most if not all these children are reported to suffer from both social and psychological problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which affect their educational progress in schools as well as successful reintegration back into their communities (Bayer, Klasen & Adam, 2007; Hermenau et al., 2013; Ovuga, Oyok, & Moro, 2008). According to a 2007 report published by the American Institutes for Research, educating child soldiers is a complicated matter, let alone reintegrating these children back into society. As a result, such efforts need to be community-based since the issue itself is not an individual, but a community dilemma.

Child soldiers are victims who are seemingly desensitized to violence that they may perpetrate on family members and other students in school. These children are psychosocially in a dark place and they need help to function optimally (American Institutes for Research, 2007). In addition, crime and suicide rates are also reported to be relatively high among this distressed group of children (Bar-Tal & Rosen, 2009; Betancourt, Brennan, Rubin-Smith, Fitzmaurice, & Gilman, 2010; Crombach, Weierstall, Hecker, Schalinski & Elbert, 2013; Salomon 2002; UNICEF, 1999). As a result, for decades humanitarian aid agencies working in war-torn African countries have been engaged in peace education efforts to recognize the needs and vulnerabilities of both these children and their communities.

BACKGROUND

In this chapter, constructivism is used as a realistic theoretical lens which helps us comprehend the issue of child soldiers because during the war they engage in something that could be considered “collective violence” (Conteh-Morgan, 2005, p. 73). Adopting this perspective confirms that child soldiers are groomed by the prevailing socio-political context. The phenomenon of child soldiers in Africa and the world over is “as a result of social structures constructed by human beings” (Cherwon, 2014, p. 14). Something within their society makes the idea appealing, reasonable, and valuable. So, when it comes to peace education programs targeting child soldiers, social structures are vital for the success of

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