



# **Child Soldiers: Rhetoric and Realities**

**An examination of human rights organisational discourse on the issue of  
'agency' and its implications on the best interests of the child**

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## Declaration Form

The work I have submitted is my own effort. I certify that all the material in the Dissertation which is not my own work, has been identified and acknowledged. No materials are included for which a degree has been previously conferred upon me.

Signed: Marci R. Macomber

Date: 27 May 2011

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## **Abstract**

Recent peace processes have led to the demobilisation of tens of thousands of children from armed groups around the world. An understanding of the initial motivations and subsequent experiences of these children is crucial in ensuring that their needs are met once they are safe from harm. This understanding is largely informed by the work of international human rights organisations (HROs). While these organisations are working for the good of the children, they will also always have an element of self-interest in sustaining their activities. This study draws upon an analytical framework that combines elements of framing theory and discourse analysis. Using this framework as both a theoretical and methodological tool, the study examines how the understanding of child soldiers is constructed by leading HROs, particularly with respect to their exercise of agency, and seeks to critique these representations against alternative perspectives. The dissertation then explores both the potential ways in which the discourse could be seen to work in the interests of the organisations by appealing to various social structures and the extent to which it serves the best interest of the child. The study concludes by arguing that the HRO discourse is not dismissive of agency, but that the impact of their work on the well-being of demobilised child soldiers would benefit from the adoption of a more direct and consistent approach in this regard.

**Key words:** agency, child soldier, human rights organisation, best interests of the child, discourse, framing

## **List of Abbreviations and Acronyms**

|              |  |
|--------------|--|
| <b>CDA</b>   | Critical Discourse Analysis                            |
| <b>CRC</b>   | Convention on the Rights of the Child                  |
| <b>CSUCS</b> | Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers            |
| <b>DRC</b>   | Democratic Republic of Congo                           |
| <b>FUC</b>   | Front Uni pour le Changement (United Front for Change) |
| <b>GUSCO</b> | Gulu Support the Children Organisation                 |
| <b>HRO</b>   | Human Rights Organisation                              |
| <b>HRW</b>   | Human Rights Watch                                     |
| <b>ICC</b>   | International Criminal Court                           |
| <b>IRA</b>   | Irish Republican Army                                  |
| <b>LTTE</b>  | Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam                       |
| <b>NGO</b>   | Non-governmental Organisation                          |
| <b>RUF</b>   | Revolutionary United Front                             |
| <b>SLA</b>   | Social Linguistic Analysis                             |
| <b>UN</b>    | United Nations   |

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

*"...if we are to reach real peace in this world and if we are to carry on a real war against war, we shall have to begin with children..."*

- Mohandas K. Gandhi<sup>1</sup>

### 1.1 Context of study

Children are our future. This phrase has been reproduced countless times in countless contexts and, while it may be overused, it is also true. Children are tomorrow's world leaders and Nobel Laureates. Unfortunately, they are also today's soldiers. When they should be playing, learning or exploring their options in life, many children are instead going to war. Children are currently serving in 51 armed groups<sup>2</sup> in 14 countries around the world (United Nations, 2011).<sup>3</sup> It is difficult to measure the exact number of child soldiers, but recent estimates place it around 250,000 (Pugel, 2010). The modern wars in which children are involved consist primarily of low-intense warfare where direct targeting of civilians and the commission of atrocities are commonplace (Bracken and Petty, 1998). As a result, children are often exposed to violence and hardship. Furthermore, they are prevented from realising many of the human rights guaranteed to them in international law, such as education, health, recreation and even the right to life.

With this in mind, the movement towards eradicating children from armed groups has been strong and progress has been evident. Since 2004, tens of thousands of children have been demobilised (CSUCS, 2008), with nearly 5,000 discharged in 2010 (UN, 2011). The international community has endeavoured to protect all children affected by conflict and to help

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<sup>1</sup> Mohandas K. Gandhi, known better as Mahatma Gandhi, made this statement in a speech to Montessori Training College on 28 October 1931 (<http://www.peace.ca/montessoriangandhi.htm>).

<sup>2</sup> The definition of an 'armed group' will include both national armies and non-state armed groups. Non-state armed groups are defined by the United Nations as "groups that have the potential to employ arms in the use of force to achieve political, ideological or economic objectives; are not within the formal military structures of States, State-alliances or intergovernmental organizations; and are not under the control of the State(s) in which they operate" (United Nations, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Countries where children are recruited into armed groups include Afghanistan, Central African Republic, Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Myanmar, Nepal, Somalia, Sudan, Colombia, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Uganda and Yemen.

them rebuild their lives. Services provided in this regard include recruitment prevention strategies, rehabilitation and reintegration programs as well as specialised justice mechanisms.

Most of the research on child soldiering is compiled by international, non-governmental human rights/humanitarian organisations (HROs). These groups act as both investigators and advocates (Drumbl, in press; Utas, 2005). They argue what is called the “Straight 18” position, wherein childhood is seen as a period of innocence lasting from birth to age 18. Individuals in this stage of life are seen as vulnerable to adult manipulation and/or environmental pressure. As a result, HROs call for a universal ban on the involvement of anyone under 18 in an armed group. It is this image of child soldiers that has come to dominate the international discourse and inform the services mentioned above. This is illustrated in a statement by a representative of the United Nations Office for Children and Armed Conflict, who said, “NGOs in particular have played a critical role in the development and advancement of the agenda [on children and armed conflict]” (in Chikuhwa, 2010: 41). HROs have helped to shape international treaties on the subject of child soldiers, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (Rome Statute), and continue to influence best practices, policies and guidelines (Drumbl, in press; Rosen, 2005).<sup>4</sup>

There are, however, challenges to the HRO discourse. Many academics argue that the image presented by HROs is based upon a Western-centric notion of childhood and that it emphasises the incapacity of individuals under the age of 18 to exercise any type of agency<sup>5</sup> (Drumbl, in press; Honwana, 2006; Denov and MacLure, 2006; Rosen, 2005, Shepler, 2005; Utas, 2005; West, 2004; Peters and Richards, 1998). What seems to be lacking from these broad arguments is a detailed analysis of exactly how language is employed by HROs to portray child soldiers. Because of the influential role HROs play in the current political landscape, a deeper understanding of this process is required.

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<sup>4</sup> For example, Eglantyne Jebb, founder of Save the Children, contributed to the inception of the CRC by sending a “Declaration on the Rights of the Child” with five points on child protection to the League of Nations. This was adopted and later inspired the CRC (Save the Children UK, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> In this dissertation, I adopt the concept of ‘human agency’ described by Amartya Sen as the ability of individuals to act on behalf of goals that they rationally decide are important to them. He states that “people have to be seen ... as being actively involved - given the opportunity - in shaping their own destiny, and not just as passive recipients” (in Alkire, 2005: 218).

## 1.2 Research objective and questions

The broad objective of this study is to examine the HRO discourse with respect to its portrayal of child soldier agency and discuss some possible ramifications of these representations on the realities of demobilised children. I take as my point of departure the notion of the “best interests of the child” as espoused in Article 3(1) of the CRC, which states:

In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.

The “best interests of the child” is left to interpretation, but a reading of the CRC as a whole reveals that it is based on three basic, interlocking principles – namely protection, provision and participation (Bluebond, 2007). The latter is expressly stated in Article 12(1) of the CRC:

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

While Article 3 has a protective focus (i.e. someone else making decisions for children with their best interests in mind), the indivisible nature of human rights<sup>6</sup> requires that these two clauses be read together (Zermatten, 2010). In this context, children are not only viewed as objects of rights dependent upon adult obligations. They are also seen, ideally, as subjects of rights participating in decisions that affect their development. The CRC, thereby, recognises some form of intrinsic agency (Denov and MacLure, 2006; Drumbl, in press).

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<sup>6</sup> See Freeman (2002) for a discussion of the indivisible and inalienable nature of human rights.

To meet its objective within the context described above, this study uses elements of framing theory and discourse analysis to explore the following research questions:

- How are child soldiers perceived and portrayed by HROs with respect to the exercise of agency?
- What other views regarding the question of agency among child soldiers exist?
- What may be the strategies/structural reasons behind the HRO discourse?
- To what extent are the best interests of *all* children being met by the current HRO discourse?

### 1.3 Significance of the research

Initiatives and services developed for and provided to demobilised child soldiers are largely guided by international treaties and institutions such as the UN. In light of the strong influence HROs have over the international agenda and, therefore, the programming bodies that implement it, there is a clear link between the rhetoric adopted by HROs and the lived reality of the children in question. There are even cases where programs, such as rehabilitation and reintegration, are developed and implemented directly by HROs.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, ensuring that the portrayal of child soldiers in dominant HRO discourse is as accurate as possible is of utmost importance. If children are framed in a way that does not recognise the complex nuances of their situation, those who do not fit the mould could be overlooked, or even intentionally ignored, by the human rights community. If they are not seen, service provision may be based on incomplete information resulting in the needs of some children going unfulfilled.<sup>8</sup>

Unsuccessful treatment could have negative consequences for both the children and their communities. For example, it has been reported that over 70% of prisoners in the juvenile crime unit in Gulu, Uganda are former child soldiers who have been incarcerated on charges of rape,

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<sup>7</sup> Save the Children is one such example.

<sup>8</sup> For instance, current rehabilitation programs do not work in every case. Gulu Support the Children Organisation (GUSCO) – which has operated a reception centre in northern Uganda for vulnerable children for ten years – reported that 12 out of 82 young people who had been involved with the rebel Lord’s Resistance Army and attended the centre between 2009 and 2010 did not show improvement as per its criteria for rehabilitation (GUSCO, 2010: 8). While this amounts to an impressive 85.4% success rate, it also shows that treatment is extremely complex and even experienced organisations are not meeting the needs of all children. It must be noted that the report did not describe the criteria against which improvement was measured.

assault and theft (Akello et al, 2006). Among the population of demobilised children in El Salvador, there has been a proliferation of gangs and violent crime (Dickson-Gómez, 2002).<sup>9</sup> Additionally, the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Committee reported that a number of ex-combatant children who had not been accepted by their communities became “enmeshed in a self-destructive lifestyle” or live “rough” on the streets (in Drumbl, in press).

The research questions become even more salient when it is considered that HROs, despite their power, have inherent challenges of accountability. This is related to their membership in civil society – a realm located somewhere between the public and private spheres. Unlike governments and corporations, their donors are not the same as their beneficiaries. Therefore, their value is not necessarily measured by continued support (Kaldor, 2003). While HROs are answerable to donor bodies, Boards of Trustees and, if applicable, their members (Leat, 1996; Kaldor, 2003), these levels of accountability monitor only whether the organisation is remaining true to its stated mission – not whether that mission is appropriate. Due to their charitable nature and the authoritative position they have achieved on the international stage, this is likely to be assumed rather than tested.

In any event, performance assessment, which is usually measured by output, outcome and impact, is especially difficult for organisations that do not provide direct services (Fowler, 1995). The majority of the HROs studied here fall into this category. In these cases, output could be seen as the number of research/advocacy reports published; the outcomes as the influence these have on policies and programs; and the impact as the improved well-being of the children they seek to help. It is the impact of their efforts that most concerns this research. While it is acknowledged that HROs working with child soldiers have good intentions, the impact of the discourse may benefit from periodic monitoring by those outside the system. These organisations believe in the necessity of the role they play and, therefore, have a degree of self-interest in maintaining their activities. It will always be important to ensure that this self-interest does not supersede the best interests of the child.

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<sup>9</sup> Honwana (2006) has documented a similar phenomenon in Angola and Mozambique.

## 1.4 Chapter overview

**Chapter one** sets out the background of the issue, highlights the context in which the study is necessary and identifies the research questions.

**Chapter two** identifies the conceptual and theoretical framework on which the study is based. The methodology used to collect and analyse data is outlined.

**Chapter three** discusses the current status of child soldiers in both international law and debate. It points to the evolution of the minimum age(s) for participation in hostilities and the tension between universal and culturally relative notions of childhood.

**Chapter four** elaborates on findings of the research in relation to the features of HRO discourse and how specific frames are used to create a particular social reality.

**Chapter five** highlights other approaches to the exercise of agency by child soldiers as found in academia and critiques them against available evidence.

**Chapter six** identifies a form of potential agency that has not been explored by either HRO discourse or academic literature. Possible implications for rehabilitation and reintegration of child soldiers in this regard are highlighted.

**Chapter seven** examines findings in relation to the network of practices the discourse is located in and how the construction of meaning relates to these practices.

**Chapter eight** looks at potential and real outcomes of the various approaches to agency and discusses the extent to which the best interests of the child are being served by current HRO discourse.

**Chapter nine** presents a synthesis of the research findings, draws some overall conclusions and puts forth some tentative recommendations.

## CHAPTER 2: RESEARCH DESIGN

### 2.1 Conceptual Framework

The objective of this study, with its focus on the discourse of HROs, lends itself to a language-based analysis. In this regard, elements of framing theory and discourse analysis – both of which embody a theoretical model and methodological approach – are drawn upon. The guiding assumption of both perspectives is that language is not simply a neutral way of communicating, but is used to create meaning and compel certain conclusions on a subject (Tonkiss, 2004). People have particular goals in mind that they want to achieve when they communicate and framing theorists/discourse analysts suggest that people employ different strategies in order to accomplish the result they desire (Bryman, 2008). Consequently, this study approaches the research questions from a constructionist ontology, seeing reality as constructed through the descriptions of it given by those who live in the social setting being investigated, rather than simply existing as separate from the individuals involved (Bryman, 2008). In summary, the way in which an issue, such as child soldiers, is discussed can determine the way it will be treated in reality.

Bryman (2008) highlights that the term ‘discourse’ does not have a broadly agreed upon definition. Different researchers interpret it differently, which then influences their approach to analysis. To clarify the term ‘discourse’, I adopt the approach used by Sandberg (2003) in his exploration of the discursive success of a Norwegian NGO. Although taking a narrow view of framing theory, which in his view lacked the capacity to look behind language at the structures reinforcing it, he applied it as a tool to examine individual units of language within a discourse analysis.

#### 2.1.1 Framing theory

Framing theory posits that an issue can be viewed in a variety of ways and, depending on how it is articulated by a message-sender, can be interpreted by message-receivers as appealing to different values (Chong and Druckman, 2007). ‘Frames’ are defined as representations (i.e.

words or phrases) meant to help an individual “locate, perceive, identify, and label” things they encounter in the world (Goffman, 1974: 21). Chong and Druckman (2007) state that, as such, frames can be used to mobilise individuals behind a cause and motivate social action. They further say that the most successful frames are those presented by credible sources and that play on established cultural values. They caution that strong frames can contribute to support of policies that resonate with the public, but do not necessarily address the central features of an issue.

### 2.1.2 Discourse analysis

There are many variations of discourse analysis. Phillips and Hardy (2002) situate them along two key dimensions. The first is the degree to which the emphasis is on individual texts or the surrounding context to identify processes of social construction. This is reflected by the vertical axis of Figure 1 below. The second dimension, illustrated by the horizontal axis of Figure 1, looks at the degree to which the research focuses on the dynamics of power, knowledge and ideology surrounding discursive practices. By combining these axes, Phillips and Hardy identify four major perspectives that fall under the umbrella of discourse analysis. Because these exist as continuums and not simple dichotomies, not all research fits neatly into a single category and studies can combine elements of the different perspectives (Ibid, 2002).

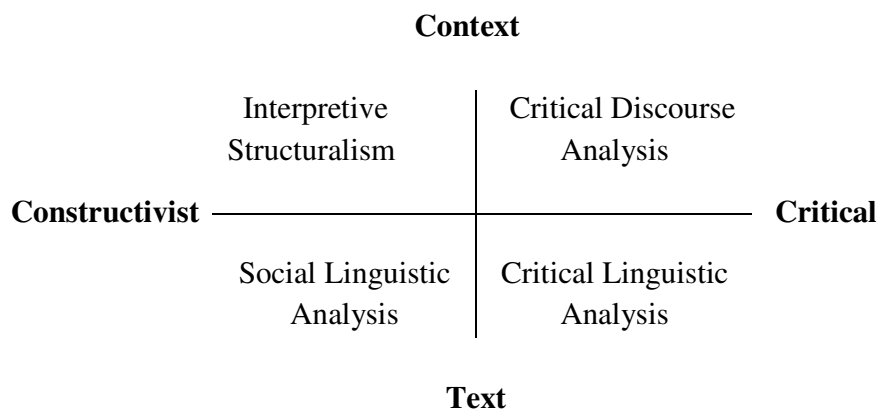


Figure 1 – Different Approaches to Discourse Analysis (Phillips & Hardy, 2002: 20)

According to this schema, the present study can be located between social linguistic analysis (SLA) and critical discourse analysis (CDA). SLA is text-based in that it examines specific



examples of texts, relating them only marginally to the surrounding context or power dynamics. The goal of SLA is to “undertake a close reading of the text to provide insight into its organization and construction, and also to understand how texts work to organize and construct other phenomena” (Phillips and Hardy, 2002: 22).

CDA differs from SLA as it recognises a pre-existing material reality that limits individual agency in communication.<sup>10</sup> It posits that discourse is shaped by existing social structures and the power relationships behind them (Bryman, 2008). The approach of CDA sees language as a vehicle for the exercise of power (Foucault, 1977 in Bryman, 2008), and is used most popularly to expose situations of dominance and oppression. In the present case, the mandate of HROs is to assist individuals at the ‘bottom’ of the social hierarchy (i.e. children affected by conflict), rather than oppress them. Therefore, strict adherence to CDA methodologies is not wholly appropriate. The usefulness of CDA lies in its ability to probe the motivations behind the use of particular language within existing social structures.

Fairclough (2001) presents a CDA framework that has inspired this research design, yet is not followed absolutely. Fairclough focuses on social practices and combines the perspectives of structure and action. He describes a ‘social practice’ as “a relatively permanent way of acting socially which is defined by its position within a structured network of practices, and a domain of social action and interaction which both reproduces structures and has the potential to reform them” (2001: 122). He further states that a ‘social order’ is created by the networking of social practices in particular ways. Social orders have an inherent process of meaning creation, or semiosis. The products of this mainstream semiosis may become seen as ‘common sense’ and will no longer be questioned. The discourse will consequently become legitimate in the eyes of its audience (Fairclough, 2001).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> While CDA recognises the existence of a reality outside of a particular discourse which then influences the discourse in question, it must be noted that this extant reality was at one time also shaped by discourse (Sandberg, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> This approach has similarities to the concept of ‘hegemony’ and to Bourdieu’s notion of ‘common sense’ (in Holton, 1997) as a commonly-shared view of the world that limits consideration of alternative perspectives, thus attaining the power of self-fulfilling prophecy. Bourdieu posits that common sense is restrictive and that a break with common sense is required in order to fully understand the dynamics of the social world.

This study adopts Fairclough's suggestion to explore the structural element of discourse by looking at the linguistic features of the discourse itself, the network of social practices in which the discourse is located and the way in which semiosis relates to those practices (Fairclough, 2001). Where the usefulness of this model diminishes is in its view that these things are used solely to benefit those in power and are obstacles to be overcome in order to emancipate a group suffering from oppression. Rather, starting from the position that HROs work to assist child soldiers, these elements are examined only to unpack the discourse to determine whether – in the interests of appealing to social structures – some children may be overlooked. Phillips and Hardy used CDA in a similar manner to study the refugee determination system in the United Kingdom and to examine the way in which organisations “used power to discursively shape the conceptualization of a refugee in ways that protected their interests” (1997 in 2002: 61). They found that refugee identities were constituted through the discursive practices used by organisations, thereby shaping the way in which the system operated.

### 2.1.3 Synthesis of framing theory and discourse analysis

As mentioned above, I employ the theoretical concepts of framing and discourse analysis concurrently to clarify the terms ‘language’ and ‘discourse’. ‘Frames’ are seen as particular units of language, or words, that have a specific meaning within a social order. The structure or nature of a discussion is regarded as a ‘discourse’. Frames draw their strength from the discourses they indicate (Sandberg, 2003). The identification of frames is used as a tool to examine features of the discourse in Chapter 4. This incorporates aspects of SLA by looking at specific texts to explore the processes behind the construction of the image of child soldiers. Elements of Fairclough's framework of CDA are then drawn upon in Chapter 7 to look at broader social practices and examine the structures that create, necessitate and perpetuate these frames.

## 2.2 Discourse samples

The HROs I have chosen to study are Amnesty International (Amnesty), Save the Children, Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers (CSUCS). These were selected following discourse analyst van Dijk's (1993) notion of ‘power as control’, in

which he says those seen as having power arising from “knowledge, information or authority” are able to direct the opinions of others. This also complies with framing theory’s assertion that frames are more successful when put forward by credible sources. Amnesty, HRW and Save the Children belong to the Steering Committee of CSUCS, an umbrella organisation promoting adherence to international standards. CSUCS and its partners are among those HROs described by the Chairperson of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in Chapter 1 as having substantially contributed to the policy and human rights agenda regarding child soldiers (in CSUCS, 2008: 10). Thus, these organisations rank among the leading HROs in the field. Their texts can be seen as representative of the HRO position in general and as having the most impact on the realities of child soldiers.

As it is not possible to analyse a discourse in its entirety, it is necessary to find selections of texts that embody and (re)produce the discourse (Phillips and Hardy, 2002). Texts selected for analysis include policy statements and the most recent advocacy reports directly addressing the issue of child soldiers. These are the types of sources most often referenced by others. They are, therefore, relevant to a framing and discourse analysis (Sandberg, 2003). Consideration was limited to publications released during or after development of the Special Court for Sierra Leone in 2000. Following the cessation of its decade long civil war, the age of criminal responsibility to be recognised by the Special Court was a question that sparked heated debate among practitioners and academics respecting the agency of child combatants (Rosen, 2005; Rikhof, 2009).

The texts studied were:

- Amnesty International (2000), *Child Soldiers: Criminals or Victims? (International Policy)*
- Amnesty International (2011), *A Compromised Future: Children Recruited by Armed Forces and Groups in Eastern Chad*
- Human Rights Watch (2000), *Letter to U.N. Security Council members on the Statute for the Special Court for Sierra Leone*
- Human Rights Watch (2007), *Early to War: Child Soldiers in the Chad Conflict*
- Save the Children (2001), *Children Not Soldiers: Guidelines for working with child soldiers and children associated with fighting forces*

- Save the Children (2010), *Policy Brief: Child Soldiers – and other children used by armed forces and groups*
- CSUCS (2008), *Global Report 2008*
- CSUCS (2011), *Child Soldiers: Frequently Asked Questions*<sup>12</sup>

### 2.3 Limitations and ethical issues arising from methodology

Because this study is based on secondary analysis of publicly available data, it avoids many of the ethical issues that can be of concern to researchers, such as confidentiality, informed consent, etc. The foremost limitation identified by practitioners of framing and/or discourse analysis is that it does not claim to represent absolute truth. Due to its interpretative nature, conclusions will be based on the assessments of the researcher and alternative claims could be made regarding the same discourse (Tonkiss, 2004; Powers, 2001). Additionally, when using CDA to explore the network of practices the discourse is located in and the motivations behind the use of particular frames, it must be noted that I cannot claim to be presenting a factual account. Rather, I attempt to capture the intentions of HROs only by implication. The research must, therefore, be able to withstand demands of external validity by providing persuasive, well-supported conclusions that will open up dialogue to challenge and test any meanings that are commonly taken for granted (Tonkiss, 2004).

The research could have been enriched by interviews with individuals involved in the development and implementation of rehabilitation/reintegration programs regarding the extent to which they depend upon information presented by HROs and the way in which they perceive child soldiers. Efforts were made to contact a number of these programs, with limited success.<sup>13</sup> As such, the dissertation relies largely on written sources for this information.

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<sup>12</sup> As CSUCS did not have a policy statement, other website material specifically laying out their position on the nature of the issue was examined.

<sup>13</sup> Attempts were made to contact the following rehabilitation/reintegration programs, all based in Uganda: World Vision Children of War Rehabilitation Centre, Gulu Support the Children Organisation (GUSCO), Rachelle Rehabilitation Centre, Freidis Rehabilitation and Disable Centre, Northern Uganda Youth Development Centre, and Kitgum Women's Association. An additional attempt was made to contact the Norwegian Refugee Council, which is involved in supporting a number of these programs. Requests to these organisations either did not incur responses or were answered with expressions of regret that the organisation could not expend the resources required to respond to the research questions. One interview was conducted with the Program Coordinator of Ker Kwaro Acholi, a Ugandan cultural institution assisting with reintegration of former child soldiers. This interview is reproduced in Appendix A.

## CHAPTER 3: CURRENT STATUS OF CHILD SOLDIERS IN INTERNATIONAL LAW AND DEBATE

### 3.1 Legal status

Legislation on the involvement of children in armed groups began with Additional Protocols I and II to the Geneva Conventions in 1977, which set the minimum age for direct participation in hostilities at 15. This was echoed by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1989. The CRC is the most widely ratified UN Convention.<sup>14</sup> As such, it is often described as having achieved ‘near universal’ status. The ban on under-15s participating in armed groups was strengthened in 1998 when the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) designated their recruitment as a war crime. In 1999, the international community went one step further with the International Labour Organization Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention 182, which prohibited the compulsory recruitment of individuals below 18 years of age. This continued to allow voluntary enlistment of children 15 and older.

The strongest global protections of children came in 2000 with the Optional Protocol to the CRC on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (Optional Protocol), which raised the minimum age of conscription and direct participation in hostilities to 18. It did, however, allow voluntary recruitment by government forces of under-18s for indirect participation, provided that certain safeguards were ensured.<sup>15</sup> Non-state armed groups are strictly prohibited by the Optional Protocol from recruiting anyone under the age of 18 in any circumstances. Twenty-three states have yet to ratify the Optional Protocol. As the only regional body in the world to legislate on child soldiers, the Organization of African Unity (now African Union) pre-empted the Optional Protocol in 1999 with the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, imposing a total ban on the involvement of anyone under 18 in direct hostilities. It is important to note that non-state armed groups are not bound by international treaties, such as the CRC and its Optional

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<sup>14</sup> The only two States not to have ratified the CRC are United States of America and Somalia.

<sup>15</sup> These safeguards are: 1) Such recruitment is genuinely voluntary; 2) Such recruitment is done with the informed consent of the person’s parents or guardians; 3) Such persons are fully informed of the duties involved in such military service; and 4) Such persons provide reliable proof of age prior to acceptance into national military service.

Protocol. However, both non-state and government forces are subject to the Geneva Conventions. Individuals in both these groups can also be prosecuted for child recruitment by the ICC.

Further international efforts to define a ‘child soldier’ took shape in the Paris Commitments and Paris Principles of 2007. Although not legally binding, the Paris Principles are a collection of best practices for the demobilisation and reintegration of child soldiers. These were endorsed by 76 member states (United Nations, 2011) and define a “child associated with an armed force or an armed group” 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, [...] It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities (2007b: 7).

These documents further stated that all children under 18 who were unlawfully recruited into an armed group and who are accused of international crimes should be “considered primarily as victims of violations against international law and not only as alleged perpetrators” (2007a: 4 and 2007b: 9).

Regarding accountability, no international law specifies an age of criminal responsibility (Aptel, 2010). National courts and international tribunals must decide this issue for themselves. The ICC declined jurisdiction to prosecute individuals under 18 years of age. The intention was not to declare them incapable of being accountable, but simply that their cases cannot be dealt with by the ICC. The Special Court for Sierra Leone, after much debate, claimed jurisdiction to try children over the age of 15, although sentencing was to include only rehabilitation and reintegration rather than imprisonment. The prosecutor later decided not to indict anyone under 18 as the Court’s mandate was only to try those most responsible for atrocities and it was not felt that children would fall into this category (Rikhof, 2009).

### 3.2 What is a child?

Any examination of the extent to which child soldiers exercise agency must necessarily include a discussion of what a child *is*, for this forms the foundation of the entire debate. The fact that discussion on the minimum age to become a soldier has been ongoing since 1977, culminating in the Optional Protocol which does not have the support of all UN member nations, shows that this particular issue has been, and continues to be, contentious. Despite the near universal acceptance of the CRC definition of a child as any person under the age of 18, there is no consensus on what this *means*. Rosen (2005) argues that the notion of childhood espoused by HROs as a prolonged state of being innocent, weak and in need of segregation from/protection by adults is a Western concept derived in Europe and spread following the industrial revolution with the introduction of formalised schooling. Boyden supports Rosen's argument and adds that this model of childhood "has resulted from the historical interplay of the Judeo-Christian belief system and changes in the productive and demographic base of society corresponding with capitalist development" (Boyden 1997: 192 in Shepler, 2005: 15).

Many anthropologists, viewing childhood as a social construct, object to the universal application of this concept and identify individuals in non-Western cultures who take on adult roles long before the age of eighteen. For example, Schafer (2004) tells of persons in Mozambique as young as twelve who engage in labour migration, independently making all decisions associated with employment and leaving home. Mawson (2004) highlights the Acholi people of Uganda who mark the end of childhood based on physical maturity, social expectations, peer group seniority and position within the family, rather than chronological age.<sup>16</sup> Rosen challenges the global applicability of the "Straight 18" position simply due to the number of ratifications garnered by the CRC and its Optional Protocol. He says many Sierra Leoneans, whose State ratified the Optional Protocol in 2002, only go along with this view because "it is tied to a resource structure that enables them to rebuild their lives" in the wake of conflict (2007: 304). In

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<sup>16</sup> In addition, Shepler (2005) in her study of former child combatants in Sierra Leone says child soldiering "makes sense" in the cultural milieu of child work, apprenticeship, fostering and secret society membership.

essence, he is saying they use it for the platform it provides rather than because it is a reflection of their cultural values.<sup>17</sup>

Cultural relativism, however, in the same way as universal notions of innocence and vulnerability, cannot be used as a blanket under which to view child soldiering. While some authors argue that recruiting children as combatants is linked to history and culture (Rosen, 2007; Andvig and Gates, 2010), others posit that it is actually linked to politically realist factors. Ames (2004) provides examples of armed groups in African and South American countries that began to use children only after there was a logistical change that made it necessary, such as a decrease in financial support or manpower.<sup>18</sup> In addition, Gates and Reich (2010) found that the presence of child combatants varies considerably in different countries with similar ethnic make-ups, that such use has not been historically consistent and that groups whose forces are composed of a high number of children are spread across the globe. These studies suggest that child soldiers may not be the product of culturally specific notions of childhood but, rather, the product of necessity and/or opportunity.

I find convincing evidence, however, for the use of chronological age – at least to the point of fifteen years as initially envisioned by the CRC – as an indicator of the (in)appropriateness for inclusion in combat in testimony given by people who have experienced child soldiering first-hand. They often describe a difference in behaviour and cognition between older and younger soldiers. For instance, a former child combatant who joined the paramilitaries when he was sixteen stated:

There were small boys who were not even my rank. Fifteen, fourteen [years old] and even younger, small boys. They are more brave than the bigger boys. A person [not yet reaching adolescence] does not think much. What he desires to do, he will do it (in Peters and Richards, 1998a: 97).

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<sup>17</sup> Twum-Danso (2009) makes a similar argument, stating that many leaders may have rushed to ratify the CRC either without a full understanding of the commitments they were making, or simply with no intention of fulfilling them. She says this is evidenced by the fact that over twenty years after ratification, many states have not made policy and legislative changes reflective of its text. Furthermore, it took ten years for the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child to attain its requisite fifteen ratifications to come into force, even though its text was largely similar to that of the CRC.

<sup>18</sup> Ames' examples include armed groups in Sierra Leone. This challenges the Shepler's argument, put forward in a previous footnote, that child soldiering 'makes sense' through a cultural relativist lens.



Sierra Leoneans have told Shepler that “[t]he rebels only want young boys and girls because they are more easily controlled. If you tell them to kill they will” (2005: 112-113). Similarly, a Congolese rebel officer indicated that children are such good soldiers because “they obey orders; they are not concerned with getting back to their wife and family; and they don’t know fear” (in Andvig and Gates, 2010).

This information seems to confirm the position of HROs that individuals below a certain age lack some of the precautions/maturity of their older counterparts, no matter which hemisphere they come from. Inferences can also be drawn in this regard from secondary data such as reports that young children participate in highly fatal “human wave attacks”<sup>19</sup> (Singer, 2005). It is very likely that it is their immaturity which prevents them either from seeing the consequences of these actions or resisting the orders of their commanders.

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<sup>19</sup> “[A] human wave attack tactic is a frontal assault by densely concentrated infantry formations against an enemy line, without any attempts to shield or to mask the attacker’s movement. The goal of the human wave attack is to manoeuvre as many men as possible into melee range, hoping that the shock from a large mass of attackers engaged in melee combat would force the enemy to disintegrate or fall back” (Wikipedia, 2010).

## CHAPTER 4: FEATURES OF HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANISATION DISCOURSE

Turning now to an analysis of the language used by the human rights organisations (HROs) selected for study, I examine some of the features of the discourse itself that serve to construct the image of child soldiers. Within the policies and reports noted above, a number of frames have been identified through which the issue of child soldier agency is presented.

### 4.1 Use of “child” with reference to accountability

The most prevalent frame, yet likely the most overlooked by general audiences, is use of the word “child”. Although the current legal definition refers to any person under the age of 18, this may not distinguish between young children and what others might refer to as adolescents or young adults. Wessells has shown that the majority of children in armed groups are between the ages of 13 and 18 (2006: 7). Those at the latter end of this spectrum may not always consider themselves, or be considered by their communities, to be “children”. Drumbl, a legal scholar currently researching the reintegration of child soldiers, states that HROs use this term broadly as a “deliberate semantic move” to conjure images of very young individuals in need of protection, no matter where they fall on the spectrum (in press).

I have found, however, that the HROs studied employ different age descriptors for different purposes. They tend to use “child” or “children” when discussing prohibition, vulnerability, mitigated responsibility and special protections/safeguards to be used in the criminal process. In contrast, they use phrases such as “young person” or “person under the age of 18” when discussing the potential for conscious action or criminal responsibility.<sup>20</sup>

To illustrate this point, in *Child Soldiers: Criminals or Victims?* (2000), authored in contribution to the debate over whether child combatants should be prosecuted by the Special Court for Sierra Leone, Amnesty International (Amnesty) states:

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<sup>20</sup> The term “child soldier” is used in contexts of both protection and accountability. This may be because it has come to be an internationally recognised idiom and, while it still evinces an emotional response in the reader, it might not have the same emotional effect as referring exclusively to a “child”.

In a situation where crimes have been committed by *children*, particularly when they have been terrorized and brutalised into submission, [...] It makes little sense to hold someone criminally responsible for their actions in such circumstances (Amnesty, 2000: 2) [emphasis added].

Any *child* who is detained should be held separately from adults, unless it is in the *child's* best interests to remain with a particular adult, for example, a parent (Ibid) [emphasis added].

Yet with respect to those they feel may be held criminally responsible, they declare:

[...] it is vitally important that in those cases where *persons under 18* acted entirely voluntarily, and were in control of their actions, they should be held to account for their actions in an appropriate setting (Ibid) [emphasis added].

While age descriptors in addition to “child” are used on occasion to discuss protection, it is almost never the reverse. There are, however, two notable exceptions to this within Amnesty’s text. The first is when it states that it would “not oppose prosecutions of children between 15 and 18” (2000: 9), providing the process respects international standards of juvenile justice. The second exception is its statement that “[c]ontinuing psychological assistance may be vital in helping the child to realise his responsibility for his acts and come to terms with them” (2000: 9). The use of “children/child” in these instances could be explained by the attached reference to protective measures.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) communicated an opposing opinion to the Special Court for Sierra Leone regarding its jurisdiction over child soldiers, yet followed the same linguistic pattern, using “children” to emphasise their need for protection:

[...] in light of their inherent immaturity as well as the subjection of many child combatants to forcible abduction, brutalization and other forms of coercion, we recommend that the Special Court’s limited resources would be far better used in pursuit of justice for adult offenders, rather than *children* (2000:2) [emphasis added].

Amnesty and HRW, however, appear to restrict direct discussions of accountability to legal opinions and opt to veil such issues in their advocacy material. Consequently, in their reports on the conflict in Chad there is no semantic discussion between “children” and “persons under 18”, as protection is the main theme. They focus on prevention strategies and on the failure of government and opposition forces to respect their international obligations. I asserted that references to accountability are ‘veiled’ because Amnesty’s report *A Compromised Future: Children Recruited by Armed Forces and Groups in Eastern Chad* (2011) does include a brief discussion of eight children sentenced to death by Sudanese counter-terrorism courts between 2008 and 2010. However, it opposes only the imposition of the death penalty on “children below the age of 18” in contravention of international human rights law, rather than condemning the trials in general. Similarly, HRW’s report *Early to War: Child Soldiers in the Chad Conflict* (2007) refers to special measures to be taken should children be detained for the commission of a crime without declaring that they should not be charged at all. As such, it can be said that even in their advocacy material, Amnesty and HRW do not discount the potential for accountability and, therefore, some degree of agency. The catch is that the reader must ‘read between the lines’ to appreciate this.

CSUCS and Save the Children follow the semantic pattern respecting use of the word “child” with no exceptions. In CSUCS’s *Global Report 2008* the words “child” and “under-18s” are used with no discernible difference in the context of protection. In a brief section entitled “Children and criminal responsibility”, CSUCS speaks directly to the issue of responsibility in only one instance. Here, it did not use the word “child”, but instead used “individual”:

In at least some cases, where the *individual* was clearly in control of their actions, and not coerced, drugged, or forced into committing atrocities, acknowledgement and atonement, including in some instances prosecution, might be an important part of personal recovery (2008: 36) [emphasis added].<sup>21</sup>

Save the Children’s publications also focus solely on protection and “child” is the lone age descriptor used. The potential for responsibility or accountability is not addressed. In its report

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<sup>21</sup> In the section of its website titled *Frequently Asked Questions* (2011) this position is repeated with the phrase “child soldier” replacing the word “individual”.

*Children: Not Soldiers* (2001) there is a section titled “The protection of children in the justice system”, but this only discusses protections to be guaranteed during the judicial process. However, it must be noted that, like Amnesty and HRW, Save the Children does not denounce the inclusion of children in the justice system.

Two overarching conclusions can be drawn from this data. The first is that, in contrast to general criticisms that HROs stick solely to ‘faultless victim’ narratives (i.e. Shepler, 2005; Rosen, 2005; Drumbl, in press), these organisations do address the issue of agency indirectly by discussing the potential for responsibility, however narrow, on behalf of child combatants. While none use the word ‘agency’ in the publications studied, this concept lies at the foundation of any discussion of responsibility.<sup>22</sup> The second inference that can be drawn is that, even though these HROs might acknowledge the possibility of conscious action, they attempt to contain the scope of its application by focusing the reader’s emotional attention largely on the whole group as very young “children” in need of protection. This is an example of how frames become successful if connected to existing values. When other age descriptors are used, such as “individual”, it seems to serve the purpose of lessening the apparent severity of their position on responsibility and prosecution. It could also imply that they would be willing to consider holding accountable only those children at the oldest end of the spectrum. In this way, they can still be seen as advocates for child protection, yet also as receptive to arguments regarding accountability.

#### 4.2 Force vs. volunteerism

Criticism is levelled at HROs for placing too much emphasis on force as the reason children join armed groups or commit atrocities while part of the group (Drumbl, in press; Rosen, 2005). In three of the four samples studied, however, the use of force was not a principal focus. CSUCS mentioned it only twice in its *Global Report 2008* and once in its *Frequently Asked Questions*. These references were in relation to Myanmar and Uganda where it is uncontested that many children have been abducted by government and rebel groups. In the quote reproduced in the section above, CSUCS even expressly stated that some children are “clearly in control of their

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<sup>22</sup> In legal doctrine, one can only be responsible for his/her actions if the element of *mens rea*, or active intent, is present (Rikhof, 2009).

actions, and not coerced, drugged, or forced into committing atrocities” (2008: 36). Amnesty also directly recognises non-forcible participation in *Child Soldiers: Criminals or Victims?*, using the exact language as CSUCS while adding, “Some have become child soldiers voluntarily and committed atrocities voluntarily” (2000: 2). Conversely, HRW does not recognise voluntary action in its letter regarding the Special Court for Sierra Leone, mentioning only “the subjection of many child combatants to forcible abduction, brutalization and other forms of coercion” (2000: 2).

The advocacy reports of both HRW and Amnesty, however, present a largely neutral picture in this regard – perhaps even indicating a prevalence of voluntary enlistment. While not expressly saying this, all personal accounts of former child soldiers presented in Amnesty’s report portray them as having joined willingly. Whenever a motive for enlisting was given, the children said they joined out of a desire for revenge or because their families did not have the means to support them. On three occasions the report indicated that “some” children have been forcibly recruited while “[o]thers have joined up” for a variety of motivations (2011: 5-6).

HRW did not provide any direct quotes from children stating they had been forced into an armed group, but did cite a government official as saying, “The Army arrives in the village and tells the people, ‘We need this many soldiers.’ Boys between the ages of 12 and 15 are obliged to join. [...] It is forced recruitment” (2007: 19). HRW referenced force on only two other occasions where it had evidence of such. In contrast, it provided seven quotes from either children or their family members indicating they had joined willingly – either for security or financial reasons. For example, a 12-year-old was quoted stating, “The village is not safe, it is better to go to war, [...] I’m a man. I want to participate” (2007: 22).

The approach of Save the Children in this regard is slightly different. Force, both to enter the group and to engage in violence afterward, is a major focus of its four-page *Policy Brief* in that children are described on four occasions as being forcibly recruited or made to carry out atrocities. For example, it states:

Children recruited into armed groups are killed, maimed, abused and exploited in the most appalling ways. They may be forced to observe or take part in atrocities, including against their own families and communities, and may be profoundly disturbed by what they have experienced (2010b: 2).

Conversely, voluntary enlistment is mentioned only once. On the other hand, Save the Children's report *Children Not Soldiers* (2001) follows the same pattern as Amnesty's and HRW's advocacy reports and immediately balances discussion of force with a corresponding discussion of volunteerism. It uses country-specific examples to discuss forcible recruitment on six occasions, while eight examples of voluntary enlistment are provided. Further, these eight examples are spread across the globe. As such, the report does not use semantics to conflate all conflicts by making the reader assume one example of force applies to all groups in which child soldiers are found.

One caveat to even the most balanced discussions of force/volunteerism is that, when discussing the demobilisation of children from armed groups, all four organisations almost exclusively use the word "release" when referring to cases where the group negotiated their exit with organisations like UNICEF, and "rescue" or "recover" when they were seized by government forces during military action. Although Save the Children and HRW also use "demobilise", the consistent use of these terms implies that these children were in a state of captivity, thereby downplaying the element of 'voluntariness' and leaving the impression that their presence with the group was a result of force.

Sometimes it is not only what is expressed in discourse that has meaning, but also what is omitted (Bryman, 2008). It is noticeable that these reports do not include numerical breakdowns of the proportion of children interviewed who were forcibly recruited and those who enlisted voluntarily. As stated, Uganda is one of the countries in which children are known to often be abducted by the rebel army. However, the Survey of War Affected Youth found that in 2006 only 1/3 of male and 1/6 of female child soldiers in Uganda had been victims of abduction (in Rosen, 2007: 299). Similarly, a 2003 study conducted by the International Labour Organization found that 2/3 of child soldiers in Burundi, Congo Brazzaville, DRC and Rwanda enrolled voluntarily (in Brett and Specht, 2004: 1). This data indicates that, even in the most severe cases

of forcible recruitment, the vast majority of children volunteer. Such statistical information would be useful to include in HRO reporting as it would ensure that rhetoric does not create a skewed perception of reality.

### 4.3 Passive vs. Active Involvement

#### 4.3.1 Enlistment

While recognising recruitment without physical force, there are a number of frames commonly used by all organisations studied that continue to refer to volunteers in a passive voice. Children are construed as objects being acted upon rather than as active subjects. This phenomenon has also been the subject of the most ardent criticisms of HROs in the past (see Drumbl, in press; Rosen, 2005; Shepler, 2005). In the material reviewed, children are portrayed as unable to weigh their options, rationally exclude some, and choose an armed group as the best alternative available for meeting their needs. Societal factors such as poverty, abuse, lack of education and conflict are often said to “push” or “draw” them into an armed group or allow them to be “exploited” or “targeted” by the group. They are presented either as unable to choose a different course of action in light of these circumstances or as having no other choice. For example:

For many children, enlistment in fighting forces may be the only way they can survive. Sheer desperation pushes them to join, a situation that recruiters frequently exploit. This ‘push’ factor of the denial of basic rights combines with the ‘pull’ factor of active targeting of children (Save the Children, 2001: 37).

While conditions facilitating child recruitment persist, as they do in countless countries worldwide, it will remain easy for armed groups to exploit children. Many children have few alternatives to, or defences against, joining armed groups. When hostilities are ongoing, poverty, social dislocation and other environmental factors create conditions of extreme vulnerability to recruitment (CSUCS, 2008: 26).

Thousands of children caught up in the conflict, including those in refugee camps and at sites for internally displaced persons, continue to be easy targets for recruitment (Amnesty, 2011: 6).



Insecurity [...] continued to drive many children to seek safety in the ranks of the FUC [...]. But at the same time, active recruitment on the part of the FUC, including promises of money, pulled children into the group (HRW, 2007: 3).<sup>23</sup>

Though some child soldiers appear to join the FUC of their own accord, it is difficult to assert that they made free decisions given the lack of other options (HRW, 2007: 22).

Other terms used in this regard are “compel”, “incite”, “propel” (Amnesty, 2011), and “cause” (CSUCS, 2008; Save the Children, 2001). These frames, along with repeated indications by all that children are “vulnerable” to recruitment (CSUCS, 2008; Save the Children 2010b & 2001; Amnesty, 2000; HRW, 2007), diminish the decision-making capacity inherent in what these organisations cautiously refer to as ‘voluntary’ enlistment. In short, even though HROs do not frame physical force as the sole *modus operandi* of armed groups, the message in this regard is watered down by conjoined references to coercion via lack of alternatives. The element of voluntariness is downplayed when children’s ability to make a rational decision is taken away.

#### 4.3.2 “Use” of children by armed groups

Child soldiers are also overwhelmingly portrayed by the four HROs studied as being “used” by armed groups, rather than “participating” in them. For instance, HRW says it has “observed the use of child soldiers in village-level self-defense forces” in Chad (2007: 17). This frame is so prevalent that it even forms part of the name of Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers. A phrase repeatedly utilised by all organisations is “the recruitment and use of child soldiers” (CSUCS, 2008; Amnesty International, 2000 & 2011; HRW, 2007). This particular wording is drawn directly from the Optional Protocol to the CRC, and is now also included in the Paris Principles and Commitments. This is an example of what Fairclough (2001) refers to as intertextuality, wherein other texts are directly quoted or otherwise referenced to strengthen a particular discourse. In fact, all international treaties and policies on the issue are referenced by these HROs. This in itself obfuscates the accountability of these organisations. They derive justification for their activities by reference to such documents, yet it was these same

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<sup>23</sup> Front Uni pour le Changement/United Front for Change (FUC)

organisations that helped to shape the content of these texts in the first place. Their construction of legitimacy is therefore circular.

While there are rare exceptions to the use of passive verbs, this is the general rule.<sup>24</sup> These frames clearly place blame on the adults doing the “using”, rather than on children for making decisions of their own to participate. Instead of being seen as actors in conflict, they are presented as the ‘tools’ of war. This is in stark contrast to the portrayal of children as active participants in disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programs or truth and reconciliation commissions. In these processes, children are never portrayed passively or as being “used” or “exploited”. Rather, action-oriented terms such as “participate” or “involvement” are utilised. For example, CSUCS said that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission for Sierra Leone was “the first with an explicit mandate to pay ‘special attention’ to the experiences of children during the conflict and the first in which children participated” (2008: 34). Conversely, Save the Children discusses former girl soldiers who *choose* not to “participate” in formal reintegration processes for fear of being stigmatised by the community(2010b: 3).

#### 4.4 Victim Status

With the exception of the narrow recognition of mitigated accountability, the HROs studied generally portray child soldiers as victims. While this revelation is not new, this analysis suggests that it is done in two ways. This image is created indirectly by all four organisations through employing the above frames. In addition, both CSUCS and Amnesty make this statement explicitly. CSUCS follows “the principle that child soldiers should be treated first and foremost as victims in need of support and assistance for reintegration” (2008: 18) and Amnesty states that “[c]hild soldiers should be seen primarily as victims of conflicts” (2000: 17). The latter is another example of intertextuality as this language mirrors that of the Paris Principles. In

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<sup>24</sup> A slight exception to this general rule is found in the publications of Save the Children in which they state, “Other children join armed groups [...] because they have few other choices and this is the best option for survival” (2001: 33) and “For many child recruits, taking their chances with an armed group is preferable to living in poverty or in a camp for refugees or displaced people, where they have no chance of getting an education or of earning a living” (2010: 1). In this way, Save the Children suggests that children may be aware of options other than joining an armed group, but that, after consideration, decide that the armed group is “best” or “preferable” to the other alternatives. This could suggest an ability to make a rational choice and act as agents in the creation of their own futures, but any recognition of agency this may demonstrate is mitigated when read along with statements of children’s “vulnerability” to “push” and “pull” factors or exploitation as described above.

the material examined, similar explicit statements were not made by Save the Children or HRW. However, in personal communication with staff, Save the Children advised that it views “all child soldiers as victims of abuse and as having their rights violated in the most grave ways” (personal communication, 06.04.11).

#### 4.5 Conflation of Roles

The texts considered also tend to present children associated with armed forces as a group with homogenous needs, not taking into account the consequences of the different roles that they play. While these HROs do clearly identify duties other than fighting that are taken on by children, such as spying, cooking, carrying heavy loads and serving as ‘wives’ (HRW, 2007: 3; CSUCS, 2008: 22; Save the Children, 2010b: 1; Amnesty International, 2011: 6), all groups are silent on what this means for programming. The reason for raising this seems only to insist that all children associated with an armed group in any way receive the same protections and services as those who carry weapons. Although it is certainly important to ensure that all children involved in or affected by conflict receive appropriate services, failing to make distinctions in this regard could have negative consequences with respect to identifying exactly which services are required. These challenges are discussed in more detail in Chapter 8.

## CHAPTER 5: ACADEMIC APPROACHES TO AGENCY

Before we can discuss the implications of the HRO approach to agency on the best interests of the child, we must also consider other perspectives contributing to the debate that the HRO approach can be evaluated against. Thus, the focus of the next two chapters will shift from empirical analysis of organisational discourse strategies to a theoretical examination of child soldier behaviour. Submissions in this regard are largely found in academia, particularly within anthropological ethnographies and legal discussions of accountability. Many researchers in these fields feel children should be credited with making conscious decisions based on clear objectives, rather than automatically reacting to circumstances beyond their control. Analysis of the academic literature has resulted in identification of three principal types of agency believed to be exercised by child soldiers. They are categorised here as political agency, tactical agency and victimcy agency.

### 5.1 Political agency

I use the category of political agency to refer to instances where children are identified as having joined an armed group either because they agree with the group's ideology or out of a desire for revenge. 'Choosing a side' based on belief in a greater good demonstrates an ability to act with a particular objective in mind. The best evidence in support of children's ability to act based on ideology is put forward by Brett and Specht (2004) in their reproductions of interviews with 53 former child soldiers in ten conflicts around the globe. For example, action based on adherence to inherent value systems was illustrated by children in South Africa and Pakistan. A South African boy said he was inspired to join the revolutionary army as a result of membership in a student group fighting for non-racial education. He stated, "we must be aware of what is happening in the country, what happened in our education, and how can we change this education to the People's Education" (Ibid: 21). A child from Pakistan said, "I fought for the sake of my belief and for Islam...It was our Islamic duty against infidelity. It was also a national duty upon us to fight against foreigners and occupiers" (Ibid: 29).

The decision to defend one's community from tyranny and abuse can also be characterised under political agency. This attitude was demonstrated by a boy from Northern Ireland who said, "I wanted to be fighting for the cause of the Protestant people. I didn't like the way Sinn Fein/IRA ran about and shot innocent Protestant people" (in Brett and Specht, 2004: 28).<sup>25</sup> Similarly, a child combatant from Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) stated, "I joined after having seen the sufferings of the population. I decided to drive out Mobutu's men, who maltreated us" (Ibid).

Joining an armed group out of a desire for revenge for harm done to oneself or relatives can also be included under the rubric of defence. There are many examples indicative of this throughout HRO and academic literature. A Sri Lankan child who became a rebel combatant at age eleven stated: "The killing of my mother and my little sister that happened before my eyes made me decide to join the LTTE immediately and I made up my mind to take revenge" (Ibid: 75).<sup>26</sup> However, as this reasoning takes place on a much more individual level, it may not demonstrate the same degree of abstract thinking as adopting an ideological cause. From a policy perspective, a distinction in this regard would be necessary as it would likely have ramifications respecting the actions needed to address issues of social dissent versus individual justice.

Care must be taken, however, not to attribute sophisticated political/ideological reasoning to all child combatants who use the above language. There are many examples of children who say they were fighting to "defend" or "control" their country (Peters and Richards, 1998b: 208; Murphy, 2003: 61). Yet, their explanation rarely goes deeper than that. They do not explain what they are defending it from or how they would control it differently if given the opportunity. This may be simply because they were not asked these questions at the time of their interviews. It is potentially significant, however, considering that children are recruited into armed groups more often in wars that are fought without a clear ideology, as groups that do not enjoy grassroots support have more need to obtain recruits through abduction or indoctrination (Singer, 2005). For example, most former child combatants interviewed by Human Rights Watch in Myanmar had no idea why they were fighting (Becker, 2010). Moreover, evidence is provided in the next section indicating that children often have unrealistic expectations of what a soldier's life

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<sup>25</sup> Irish Republican Army (IRA)

<sup>26</sup> Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)

involves. Even in cases where they join out of belief in a cause, some may not be able to weigh the risks to themselves against the desired outcome.

## 5.2 Tactical agency

Tactical agency is a term coined by Honwana (2006) following extensive research on child soldiers in Africa. She says it is exercised by child combatants in a position of weakness “to cope with the concrete, immediate conditions of their lives in order to maximize the circumstances created by their violent military environment” (2006: 71). Tactics are seen as “complex actions that involve calculations of advantage but arise from vulnerability” (Ibid: 73). She says these individuals may not be fully conscious of the ultimate goals of their actions and are focused only on immediate, rather than long-term, benefits.

Honwana uses this concept to describe children who, with no power base from which to act within a militarised environment, seized opportunities to have secret conversations about home and family, found time to laugh and play and even made escape plans or deceived superiors in order to avoid undesirable or dangerous tasks. She also uses it to refer to children who carry out actions to impress their commanders and achieve a higher rank. Essentially, she is stating that young people use their ingenuity to ‘make the best out of a bad situation’ while within the ranks of an armed group.

I would suggest that this same concept can be applied to the agency attributed to those who initially seek out military life in reaction to the desolation of civilian existence. Pugel (2010) identifies socioeconomic circumstances as the most commonly cited causal factor in anecdotal evidence circulating today. I see this approach as referring to the same dynamics HROs describe as externally “drawing” young people into armed groups, but from a different angle. It instead posits that “oppression does not void one’s capacity for decision-making” (Drumbl, in press). Arguments put forward in this regard stress that children and youth should be recognised as making tactical decisions arising from rational considerations of these factors. For example, Peters and Richards (1998a), who also carried out extensive interviews with former child soldiers, state that in countries where poverty and population overwhelm educational and

employment opportunities, joining an armed group is seen as more desirable than starving on the street.

Using Weber's theory of patrimonialism/clientalism Murphy (2003) saw children as clients in an environment of instability who viewed armed groups as patrons capable of providing economic assistance and protection. According to Boyden, enlistment is an "appropriate adaptive strategy" for youth in Uganda and an "extremely practical survival mechanism" if armed groups appear as a source of food, shelter and some protection from other violent groups (in West, 2004: 106). For instance, a boy from Congo-Brazzaville said, "There I knew that I was going to take up the weapon to feed my family, because at this time I knew that the Ninjas gave some manioc to their recruits. They even gave money" (in Brett and Specht, 2004: 67). A girl from DRC stated, "The army, it's the only job here, so you stay in the army to stay alive" (Ibid: 99). In this way, young combatants have even been said to be making the same decisions as adults, for both groups are affected by societal breakdown (Pugel, 2010; Drumbl, in press). In fact, Pugel's (2010) study of youth and adult combatants in Liberia found that many of the issues previously broadcast as singular to child soldiers were just as pervasive in the sample of adult combatants.

While this data suggests that children are capable of making rational choices to increase their chance of survival, I am inclined to concur with Honwana's suggestion that many are likely doing so without a full understanding of the consequences of their actions. This hypothesis is supported by anecdotal evidence, as highlighted in Chapter 3, demonstrating that children below a certain age lack the maturity of their older counterparts. Further support is found in many of the quotes reproduced by Brett and Specht (2004). For example, a child from DRC stated:

I didn't think of killing people; I thought more about the fighting and shooting [...] You see, at the beginning I didn't think of that, because I watched the television, and I didn't know about the consequences and how it could happen, and so on. I didn't think of that, I was still a kid. I was so impressed by the action, the way they handled weapons, the way they dressed (Ibid: 35-36).

A young Afghani soldier said, “I did not have any knowledge and experience of war and its aims, consequences, and that it may cause my death. I was just for supporting a member of my family, and for the sake of kinship relationship I joined to war” (Ibid: 50). Another from DRC stated:

I didn't think of that [...]. I didn't know in the army I would suffer.  
[...] When we saw a soldier, we used to say that he got a job, it's  
money too. We didn't know what happened in the army. We  
only saw from behind (Ibid: 60).

Notably missing from the HRO texts and academic writings analysed in this study, is scientific evidence with conclusive findings regarding the age at which individuals become capable of understanding the consequences of voluntary enlistment. Further information in this regard, incorporating the perspectives of subjects and researchers from a variety of cultures, would be a useful addition to the debate.

### 5.3 Victimcy agency

Utas (2005) uses the term ‘victimcy’ to describe the “agency of self-staging as a victim of war” exercised by individuals in order to represent themselves as “legitimate recipients of humanitarian aid” (2005: 409).<sup>27</sup> He points out that research on child soldiers is generally done by “strangers” seeking to collect stories of deeply traumatic events during the course of one or two interactions. There is much to gain for these young people to present themselves as victims. Through this, they are able to rid themselves of social blame and open up potential socioeconomic opportunities. As such, he cautions that any ‘victimcy’ narrative must be interpreted and understood within the context in which it is being made.

I find Shepler’s experience interviewing demobilised child combatants in Sierra Leone to be supportive of this concept. She found that she would repeatedly receive a “set of stock answers” and described it as a “script [she] came to know well” (2005: 19). Within this script often came themes of “abdicated responsibility” materialised in statements such as, “It was not my fault that I fought with the rebels. I was only a child!” (Ibid: 25). This demonstrates that ex-child

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<sup>27</sup> Utas (2005) developed this concept as a result of his discussions with young women involved in the Liberian civil war, all of whom said they had been raped as a result of the conflict, whether or not it was true.



combatants can exercise a form of agency by emphasising their non-agency. Shepler believes these children are taught this language through their interactions with international aid agencies and then use it to strategise and negotiate their way through post-conflict society. She encountered children who registered with reintegration programs even after having reintegrated informally in order to access benefits and ‘shopped around’ to find the programs with the most desirable benefits. One boy she met at an interim care centre even created a fictional family in Freetown that he asked to be reunified with in order to be transferred to a different centre with better facilities.

While Utas considers this a form of tactical agency as described by Honwana, I feel it should be distinguished as Honwana says tactical agency is born out of weakness. For those child soldiers fortunate enough to have access to demobilisation and rehabilitation programs, Shepler’s experience suggests that they are able to wield a degree of power. In a similar but opposing strategy, some children seek to avoid the label of ‘victim’ all together because they do not want their involvement with an armed group to become known to communities in which they wish to reintegrate.<sup>28</sup> This might mean bypassing reintegration programs and reintegrating informally (Shepler, 2005). This notion differs from the two previous categories of agency, as it refers to conscious actions taken outside of or unrelated to the armed group. It is, however, relevant to this analysis for, if these children can identify and weigh their options so as to conduct such a cost/benefit analysis, it could suggest that they may also be capable, at least to some extent, of negotiating the social landscape to their benefit in times of war.

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<sup>28</sup> Some reintegration programs require the child to be identified to the community as a former soldier. This could be done with the intent of ‘sensitising’ the community to the child’s status as a victim rather than that of a perpetrator. It could also be done to facilitate traditional cleansing ceremonies in which community participation is required (Shepler, 2005; Okema, interview, 28.03.11).

## CHAPTER 6: ADDING TO THE DISCOURSE

### 6.1 Gaps in the literature

Throughout discussion of children's agency in conflict, whether indirectly by HROs or expressly by academics, the focus is largely on its exercise regarding entry to or exit from an armed group. Exceptions to this general rule include tactical actions taken during service to maintain a sense of normality or achieve a higher rank as highlighted by Honwana (2006). Little attention is paid to agency in relation to the commission of violence or atrocities while part of an armed group. Shepler (2005) touches upon this inconsistency when she highlights how HROs' portrayals of children as passive while they were 'captive' differs from descriptions of demobilised children as *choosing* to learn a skill and *deciding* what they want to be.

This contradiction is also reflected in the discourse of the United Nations. In the Paris Commitments and Principles discussed previously, children are largely presented as passive victims. Yet in regards to the assessment, planning, implementation and evaluation of programs to prevent their involvement in armed groups and ensure their effective reintegration, it states that all stages "should include the active participation of those communities concerned, including children" (2007b: 10). This pattern paints a largely optimistic – and one-sided – picture of young people's ability to act as agents in positive ways. As Bluebond puts it, "[a]lthough we want to acknowledge agency in acts that we consider to be morally good or right, we do not want to do so regarding acts that we deem morally wrong" (2007: 243-244).

I argued above that HROs do not discount the *possibility* of children exercising agency to commit violence. Yet, portraying child combatants as largely passive has allowed their violent actions to be seen primarily as the result of duress and trauma. The technical definition of 'trauma' as stated in the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV)* is:

[an event that involves direct personal experience of or witness to actual threat of death or serious physical injury to one's self or someone else, or of learning of the unexpected or violent death or

serious injury of a family member or other close associate.]<sup>29</sup> The person's response to the event must involve intense fear, helplessness, or horror (or in children, the response must involve disorganized or agitated behavior) (in Briere and Scott, 2006: 3).<sup>30</sup>

While laymen and HROs might use this term more generally in colloquial discourse, it is this definition that guides professional treatment. Yet, if looked at literally, exposure to such traumatic events may not explain away the violent behaviour perpetrated by some children while part of an armed group. Symptoms of trauma-related illnesses include, among others, depression, panic attacks, re-experiencing the traumatic event, avoidance of trauma-related stimuli, numbing of general responsiveness, and persistent hyperarousal<sup>31</sup> (Ibid, 2006). These are issues that may need to be dealt with once the child leaves the group, but (in the absence of physical force to commit atrocities) do not seem likely to result in later incidences of murder, rape and/or torture.

## 6.2 Agency within acts of violence

Within existing accounts of violence by former child soldiers, I have found a number of statements suggesting there was a degree of personal intention at play.<sup>32</sup> Some children have expressed experiencing a sense of enjoyment from their actions. For example, Amnesty International quoted a fifteen-year-old stating that he “enjoyed hearing the mother’s screaming” as he was beating her baby’s head against a wall (1999: 65). A sixteen-year-old was quoted by Peters and Richards as stating:

I liked it in the army because we could do anything we liked to do. When some civilian had something I liked, I just took it without him doing anything to me. We used to rape women. Anything I wanted to do [I did]. I was free (1998a: 90).

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<sup>29</sup> Due to the length and cumbersome language of this quote, I have paraphrased the first half of it here. The second half is a direct quote from the *DSM-IV* as reproduced in Briere and Scott (2006: 3). Indentation was used despite extensive paraphrasing in order to highlight the relevance of its content and for ease of reference.

<sup>30</sup> It should be noted that the *DSM-IV* is criticised for limiting trauma to “threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one’s physical integrity,” since many events may be traumatic even if life threat or injury is not an issue (Briere, 2004 in Briere and Scott, 2006).

<sup>31</sup> Persistent hyperarousal is said to include increased startling, disturbed sleep, irritability, angry outbursts, etc. (in Briere and Scott, 2006: 3).

<sup>32</sup> It is notable that some of these examples come from HRO reports. However, these organisations do not interpret them as indicating intent. Rather, these behaviours are described as resulting from trauma.

Many children have said that killing became easier for them over time (see Peters and Richards, 1998a & 1998b; Human Rights Watch, 2003; Singer, 2005). For example, a young rebel soldier in Sierra Leone stated:

I didn't have the mind to kill someone initially...but later on I enjoyed the wicked acts...I was responsible for killing anybody that was assigned to die. I was so happy and vigilant in carrying out this command (Denov and MacLure, 2006: 78-79).

Another young soldier said, “The first time I killed someone, I got so sick, I thought I was going to die. But I got better...My fighting name was Blood Never Dry” (in Singer, 2005: 70). A twelve-year-old expressed a desensitisation to life when saying, “[s]ometimes, when I was angry, I’d kill some of my fellow rebels. If we fell into an ambush and these bigger boys made a mistake, we’d kill them” (Singer, 2005: 106).

Other narratives indicate that some children emerged from an armed group with lasting behavioural characteristics indicative of new violent worldviews that affected their reintegration. For example, staff at the Gulu Support the Children Organisation (GUSCO) rehabilitation centre in Uganda reported that some demobilised child soldiers who had gained rank in the Lord’s Resistance Army felt disrespected within their communities and would force individuals to render them some level of recognition (GUSCO, 2010a). Honwana spoke with a young former soldier who stated that she “can’t look at red wine because [she] feel[s] like killing and sucking blood again” (2006: 62) and another who said, “I think a lot about the war and feel like taking a knife and hurting or killing somebody to see blood” (Ibid: 143). As noted in Chapter 1, many former child soldiers also continue in violent roles, such as armed gangs (Dickson-Gómez, 2002; Honwana, 2006). While gang membership may have many other explanations, such as continued poverty, lack of alternative means of subsistence, etc., these phenomena could suggest that some children have come to define themselves through violence.

Some scholars use evidence such as this to advocate for retributive (Romero, 2004; Rosen, 2005) or transitional justice (Drumbl, in press; Aptel, 2010). Yet even in those examinations of children’s intentionality, the processes leading up to violent actions have not been explored in

detail. It is possible that these children may not have had violent predispositions prior to becoming involved in conflict, but that exposure to violence during the period of identity formation<sup>33</sup> resulted in a violent identity that the child otherwise would not have developed. If it happens that even children who volunteer to join an armed group may do so without a full understanding of the consequences, as is suggested above, then their subsequent socialisation into a culture of violence – as opposed to being exposed to a variety of life choices – would mitigate their responsibility. Therefore, the victim status accorded to child soldiers by HROs would seem to be appropriate. Where a deeper awareness of the specific process of this identity creation becomes useful is in terms of rehabilitation, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

### 6.3 Perspective from symbolic interactionism

The theory of symbolic interactionism, stemming from Mead and Blumer, could be used as a tool to explore and understand the identity shift child soldiers may undergo in this regard.<sup>34</sup> Symbolic interactionism is a micro-sociological approach based on the premise that society is comprised of individuals who are socially constructed beings. They start life as a “blank slate” and develop constantly through interaction with others and participation in group life (Wallace and Wolfe, 2006). There are three basic premises of this theory. First, human beings act towards things on the basis of the meaning those things have for them. Second, the meaning of things arises out of the social interaction one has with others. Lastly, the meanings of things are modified through an interpretative process used by the person dealing with the thing he encounters (Ibid).

Agency is a factor within this perspective as it views the individual as an “active organism” and “not a passive receptacle that simply observes and responds to stimuli” (Wallace and Wolfe, 2006: 205). Human beings are not seen as reacting to each other’s actions in an automatic way.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> In Western theories of child development, largely based on the work of Jean Piaget, the process of identity formation is thought to begin in childhood, with the most significant stages occurring in adolescence (Dawes, 1990; Blaustein and Kinniburgh, 2010).

<sup>34</sup> A review of the existing literature on the subject suggests that the theory of symbolic interactionism has yet to be directly applied to explain the processes in which child soldiers become able to commit atrocities. It has, however, been used to explain the socialisation processes that people undergo in order to become part of other kinds of groups, including marijuana users (Becker, 1953), criminal delinquents (Denzin, 1974; Matseuda, 1992), teachers (Blase, 1986), popular high school students (Kinney, 1993) and so on. These studies provide a helpful framework in which to apply the concept of symbolic interactionism to the issue at hand.

<sup>35</sup> The perspective of symbolic interactionism does recognise instinctual reactions in certain circumstances.

Rather, people interpret or define each other's actions on the basis of symbols or objects. A person in any situation will designate meaning to the objects present, judge their suitability to his/her activity and organise his/her actions based on this interpretation. For example, a person "must designate a tomato as an object of nutrition before he eats it or as a weapon before he throws it out of anger. It is neither of these things until the person designates them as such. It is just a thing. Therefore, the person is more active than just being passively influenced by social factors" (Ibid: 206). Similarly, through his/her interactions with an armed group, a child would have to learn to designate an object such as a gun or knife as a weapon or a person as a legitimate target to be killed before they could form intent to murder or torture.

Mead describes this process as beginning in childhood as soon as one can understand the roles of several individuals in a game situation and how they relate to each other (Wallace and Wolfe, 2006).<sup>36</sup> As such, this theory would be useful in examining exactly how interactions between newly recruited children and their commanders – or more experienced child soldiers – could reshape the symbolic meanings of *things* such as guns, drugs, blood, family, and human life or *deeds* such as killing, rape and torture to enable them to carry out actions that they previously knew to be morally wrong.

#### 6.4 Supporting research

Wessells looked at the psychosocial impact of political violence on children and argued that children can be "active in the face of adversity" (1998: 642). He asserted that children interpret and appraise violence-related events and use active coping strategies such as coming to define their own identity, in part, by extreme opposition to those perceived as the enemy and finding significant meaning in "the cause" (Ibid). He stated that active coping strategies such as these reduce psychological stress and dysfunction more effectively than passive ones (Ibid). Although Wessells' study was not aimed specifically at children engaged in combat, it could easily be applied to child combatants. While some children try to escape the group and others use strategies to avoid violence, such as lying to their commanders, this does not mean that these

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<sup>36</sup> While this theory has similarities to modern theories of child development, it is categorised as a micro-sociological approach as it can/has also been applied to adults learning to define themselves in new ways through interactions with others (i.e. marijuana smokers and teachers).

children should necessarily be valued more than those who cope with their situation by ‘becoming’ a killer. Before any judgements in this regard can be made, more understanding is needed of why certain coping strategies are chosen over others.

Researchers have touched upon some of the ways armed groups can socialise children to reinterpret symbols. Murphy and Singer describe how commanders enhance the allure of guns and risk-taking through exposure to “*Rambo* iconography” (2003: 78; Singer, 2005). The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka have been reported to show children pictures of dead bodies to desensitise them to death (Singer, 2005). In this way, groups are able to manipulate the meaning of negative situations for children and re-define them as something acceptable or desirable.<sup>37</sup> Although these studies were not framed through symbolic interactionism, many of the same concepts apply. They provide an excellent foundation for an analysis of how a child could become a ferocious soldier capable of forming intent to commit violence, but they do not go far enough into the specifics of interactions between newly recruited child soldiers and other members of the armed group that serve to create and foster this new worldview. They glaze over the processes of meaning creation and focus largely on the impact that the child soldiers’ new identities have on society and on the children themselves when they return from conflict.

While this approach would not be applicable to children forced to commit violent acts, it might apply to those who later describe deriving enjoyment from – or at least being desensitised to – violence. These could be children who enlisted for ideological or tactical reasons, or who were originally forced to join an armed group but later came to identify with it. Because this theory approaches the topic from the perspective that children exercise some agency in how they designate certain objects and redefine their actions/identity, it may be a useful addition to existing rehabilitation strategies, such as trauma counselling. It could help to improve the effectiveness of reintegration efforts by specifically designing programs to reverse the effects of violent socialisation. As trauma counselling largely encourages individuals simply to ‘process’ their feelings by talking about traumatic events they have experienced (Shepler, 2005), alone it may

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<sup>37</sup> Additional studies have illustrated other ways in which children’s identities can be shaped towards violence in times of conflict. For example, Dickson-Gómez (2002) described how violence became normalised and revered by children in El Salvador living in impermanent guerrilla camps who, even when they played, played games of war.

not be enough. If further study finds that some children have re-created identities as individuals who see acts such as rape or murder as appropriate/desirable, they may not have feelings symptomatic of trauma. They may require instead a way of again redefining the meanings attributed to certain objects and actions so as to redirect development of an identity appropriate to living in a peaceful society. Such an approach may also assist in preventing remobilisation of children who would otherwise return to the armed group for the perceived lack of any other meaning to their lives.

### 6.5 Limitations to the present analysis

The present study has not been able to explore this theory further, as sufficient information with respect to the details of personal interactions regarding violence-related objects and activities is not present in available excerpts of child soldier interviews. There are also significant challenges involved in collecting this kind of primary data. Participant observation is the ideal method of data collection for symbolic interactionist studies (Jones, 1985), but access to operational armed groups is unlikely. The next best option would be fresh interviews with recently demobilised child soldiers and their commanders. Such a research design has not been possible.<sup>38</sup> It remains, however, an interesting area for further research.

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<sup>38</sup> This would involve considerable resources in the form of travel and the use of translators as well as social workers and/or child psychologists to ensure no further harm is brought to the children.



## CHAPTER 7: DISCOURSE STRATEGIES IN PRACTICE

The previous chapters identified frames used in the discourse of human rights organisations (HROs) to construct an understanding of child soldier agency and critiqued them against other perspectives. Drawing on elements of Fairclough's framework for critical discourse analysis (CDA), this chapter sets out to explore the network of practices in which HRO discourse is located and how this structure may create, perpetuate and necessitate the frames identified in Chapter 4. This section is not intended to be an exhaustive account of every social practice in which semiosis plays a role. It attempts only to capture some issues which may appeal to HROs' self-interests and, therefore, must be opened up for challenge.

### 7.1 'Naming and shaming' in relation to fundraising

A review of websites of the organisations under study reveals that their primary activities are investigative fact-finding, public awareness-raising and advocacy/lobbying of governments and international institutions.<sup>39</sup> A social practice underlying these activities is that of 'naming and shaming' wherein the organisations publish information on human rights violations committed by state and non-state armed groups and urge reform. The intent is that the target will react to public criticism and change its ways in order to avoid further negative press. While the efficacy of this practice is debatable<sup>40</sup>, fundraising requirements make it an attractive exercise for organisations dependent on donations from members, the public, big business and sympathetic governments. This practice depends on the dichotomous representation of young, vulnerable children being preyed upon by unscrupulous adults who use them as tools in their savage wars. This image captures the attention of the public and is more likely to foster donor appeal than are images of children who have somehow rationally chosen to engage in conflict. Studies show certain communities that see children to be responsible for their conduct while part of an armed group do not want to accept them back (GUSCO, 2010a; Veale, 2006 in Drumbl, in press). It may be assumed that donors could have similar negative reactions if fed information emphasising the agency of children in war.

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<sup>39</sup> Save the Children, in addition, partners with communities and national governments to develop and implement child protection programs.

<sup>40</sup> See Hafner-Burton (2008) for a discussion of the efficacy of 'naming and shaming'.

Economists van Dalen and Reuser (2006) have put forward various hypotheses for donor behaviour. While these are mostly applicable to international development aid policies of governments, their argument that donors are more likely to act when an issue is framed to align with their moral values, religious beliefs or worldview can also be applied to individuals and corporations. It has already been asserted by Rosen and Boyden above that the notion of childhood pervading HRO discourse is largely Western. This approach will clearly serve to reinforce calls for donations from affluent Western individuals and bodies who share this ideology. For example, of the nine corporate partners listed on Save the Children International's website, eight are based in North America or Western Europe with one headquartered in Korea (Save the Children, 2010a). In its 2010 *Director's Report and Financial Statements*, CSUCS identified twenty organisations and governments who had contributed funds, all of which – with the exception of one anonymous donor – are based in Western Europe or North America (CSUCS, 2010). While similar information could not be accessed from HRW or Amnesty International, it can be tentatively assumed that the majority of their donations also come from similarly Western-based organisations.

## 7.2 Use of passive images to facilitate partnerships with programming bodies

While the texts analysed in this study do not deal specifically with treatment, the image portrayed in the HRO discourse informs the way child soldiers are viewed in general and, thus, the basis for treatment. This is illustrated by the fact that the best practices for working with child soldiers embodied in the Paris Principles have largely adopted the HRO approach. As I have argued above, the construction of legitimacy for HROs is to some extent circular. They lobby international bodies who develop and implement programming, such as the UN, to adopt their vision. They then use their influence on/relationship to these bodies as justification for both their position and their continued support. Consequently, it would be in their best interest to portray the image of a clientele (i.e. child soldiers) that programming bodies will readily accept. It may be that the financial implications of various approaches to treatment are of concern in this regard.

For example, a knowledge-base of child soldiers dominated by images downplaying the 'voluntariness' of enlistment indirectly leaves trauma as the only explanation for violent behaviour. This counteracts the need for costly criminal investigations and trials (Drumbl, in

press). For example, Gulu Support the Children Organisation (GUSCO) had a budget of less than USD \$100,000 for treating/supporting 1,540 children in Uganda deemed “vulnerable” for various reasons from May 2009 to January 2010. Eighty-two of these children were former child soldiers in the Lord’s Resistance Army (GUSCO, 2010b). This figure is dwarfed by the USD \$26.1 million required by the Special Court for Sierra Leone from January 2010 to June 2011 to investigate and prosecute only a handful of individuals (Special Court for Sierra Leone, 2010). While these bodies and figures may not be directly comparable, they provide a sense of the disparity between the resources required for rehabilitation and reintegration versus prosecution and punishment.

Seeing trauma as the main or sole reason for violent behaviour also circumvents the need to engage in more individuated assessment which would also be more capital-intensive (Drumbl, in press). Although trauma counselling is conducted primarily through individual meetings between the client and therapist, it assumes all children to have experienced soldiering (or other distressing situations) from the same starting position – passive beings simply reacting to traumatic events. For instance, the 82 former child soldiers treated by GUSCO received largely the same care as others who were referred to it for reasons such as child labour, neglect, early marriage, school drop-out, etc. (GUSCO, 2010b). Implementing initial assessment procedures to distinguish between children who fit the description of one who is traumatised and others who, for example, may not have symptoms of trauma due to the assumption of a new violent identity would be time-consuming and costly. In summary, it seems that economic constraints could have the potential to influence perception and diagnosis. The scope of this study does not allow for an in depth examination of this complex issue, but raises it as an important question for further deliberation.

Where programming bodies seem to vocalise the need for individuated programming is not with respect to rehabilitation, but with a focus on reintegration. The United Nations states:

The aim of child-based reintegration is to offer children a participatory support programme that has been specifically designed for their needs and gives them a viable, long-term alternative to military life. Circumstances or an attempt to be fair often dictates that the same support is offered to all children,

but programmes should be planned to take into account differences in age, sex, individual resilience, the capacity of the child to make informed decisions, the length of stay and individual experiences within the armed force or group, and reintegration opportunities in an environment that will inevitably have changed during the child's absence (2006: 25).

While this does emphasise the need to consider “individual experiences” and “the capacity of the child to make informed decisions”, it is only in reference to providing them the opportunity to choose between education, a trade, etc. This harkens back to my suggestion that agency is acknowledged only when it is used in positive ways.

### 7.3 Maintenance of Legitimacy (Master Frames)

Due to the prevalence of intertextuality in this area, if HROs were to go against what has become the dominant international discourse, they might lose legitimacy in the eyes of their colleagues and the public. When power in this field comes from “knowledge, information or authority” (van Dijk, 1993), credibility is the life-blood of any organisation. The concepts that led to and were enshrined in the Optional Protocol to the CRC and the Paris Principles and Commitments can now be seen as what framing theorists Benford and Snow call ‘master frames’. Master frames are “collective action frames that are broad in scope and colour and constrain the framing and activities of other movements” (Benford and Snow, 2000 in Sandberg, 2003: 28). Master frames are developed by earlier actors in a movement and exist at a macro-level as they are shared by a number of organisations. Once a frame has become a master frame, it limits the linguistic activity of other actors “because [it has] constructed a language and a repertoire of action that movements must relate to whether they want to or not” (Sandberg, 2003: 28). If organisations were to abandon exclusive adherence to a dominant frame which has become ‘common sense’ – as envisioned by CDA theory – colleagues and potential supporters may view any deviation from it as being indicative of incompetence and the organisation could be excluded from the discourse (Sandberg, 2003).

## CHAPTER 8: AFFECTS OF DISCOURSE ON THE BEST INTERESTS OF THE CHILD

As mentioned in the beginning of this dissertation, the principle of the best interests of the child lacks a precise definition. Understanding, interpretation and application of this concept have evolved over time. They are influenced by increasing participation of children in public life and legal decisions at national and international levels (Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children, 2009). I cannot presume to be an authority in this area, for “[d]eciding what is best for a child poses a question no less ultimate than the purposes and values of life itself” (Mnookin, 1975 in Parker, 1994: 30). As is the case in the application of discourse analysis, I can simply attempt to make an evaluation informed by the body of knowledge heretofore explored and ensure that my arguments are rational and well-supported.

With this in mind, I find the three pillars previously identified as underpinning the Convention on the Rights of the Child – namely protection, provision and participation – to be a useful framework for discussing the extent to which the current HRO discourse meets the best interests of the child. Although there may be some self-interest detected in the discursive agenda of HROs, it is clear by the widespread acceptance of their work and the success of programs and policies influenced by their efforts that it is applicable when it comes to a large number of child soldiers. However, the findings of this study suggest that the current HRO discourse may not be appropriate in every case. As such, the more pertinent issue – and that which constitutes the last research question of this study – focuses on the extent to which the best interests of *all* children are met by the current discourse. As has been alluded to throughout this dissertation, the two areas where this becomes most salient concern accountability mechanisms and rehabilitation/reintegration.

### 8.1 Protection

It is in this area where I would argue the HRO discourse best serves the best interests of the child. The term ‘protection’ is most generally used “to describe action to remove children from harm” (Masson, 2009: 145). This can be seen as including physical and/or emotional harm. Advocating

a 'Straight 18' position, if successful, will protect the greatest number of individuals from the dangers of active combat. Through emphasising child soldiers as victims of adult manipulation and constraining discussions of accountability to only those at the oldest end of the childhood spectrum, children are protected from potentially unfair prosecutions and from receiving the most severe punishments (Drumbl, in press; Rosen, 2007). For instance, the HRO discourse in no doubt contributed to the international community's resistance to prosecuting children in the ICC and imposing imprisonment as punishment in the Special Court for Sierra Leone.

Additionally, I have seen evidence that protection from blame, in some instances, assists reintegration by fostering forgiveness – both the child of themselves and the community of the child. This was certainly the case with Ishmael Beah, a former child soldier in Sierra Leone who has since come to be seen as a 'spokesperson' for the cause. In his biography *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*, Beah describes being able to recover from his experience after repeated assurances by rehabilitation workers that "it's not your fault" (2007). He stated later, "If I choose to feel guilty for what I have done, I will want to be dead myself" (in Swango, 2006). As for the community, GUSCO reports that all Ugandan children who pass through its rehabilitation centre are viewed as innocent and that the majority of them are received by their families and communities with sympathy and welcome (2010a). Ker Kwaro Acholi, a Ugandan cultural institution facilitating reintegration based on traditional cleansing rituals, considers all individuals below eighteen as unable to make decisions and to have been forced into service. This is the information it imparts to the community and it states that returning children are never stigmatised (Okema, interview, 28.04.11).<sup>41</sup>

On the other hand, while an image of child soldiers as passively faultless can be advantageous for many, in some cases it may clash with local understandings of children's participation in war and/or the experiences of victims (Rosen, 2007). Communities often care about what children actually did during conflict (Drumbl, in press). For those who see these children as responsible for their decisions, accepting them back without the imposition of some sort of justice may be very difficult. In this regard, GUSCO also reports that some communities in Uganda have expressed resentment towards returning child soldiers which has resulted in discrimination,

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<sup>41</sup> See Appendix A

stigmatisation and even violence (2010a). Rosen (2005) has identified communities in Sierra Leone who would have preferred certain child soldiers to have been held accountable. Moreover, a purely passive approach could also ignore the needs of children who wish to make amends for their actions (Humphreys and Weinstein in Drumbl, in press).

This indicates that some recognition of accountability may be necessary in certain circumstances to avoid vigilante justice and/or provide closure to children who wish to express remorse. This analysis has shown that, despite emphasising child soldiers' status as victims, HROs are not completely adverse to this possibility. Thus, in terms of protection of the children in question, the current discourse encompasses both scenarios. As for the translation of the latter into 'on the ground' programs, however, the image of total innocence applied by GUSCO and Ker Kwaro Acholi indicate that it may be too subtle. Humphreys and Weinstein suggest that "aspects of a combatant's wartime history should be taken into account more prominently in the design of DDR programs" (2007: 563)<sup>42</sup>. Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers (CSUCS) was the only group to state this directly, when it said "in some instances prosecution, might be an important part of personal recovery" (2008: 36). A more direct emphasis on *this* area in HRO reporting could lead to more frequent inclusion of child soldiers, when appropriate, in transitional justice processes. This could include truth and reconciliation commissions, such as is advocated by academics like Drumbl (in press) and Aptel (2010). Furthermore, in cases where a child's identity has changed such that they do not see their violent actions as wrong, engaging a justice mechanism – albeit one adapted to suit their age – within rehabilitation processes to address these issues could have positive results on both the individual and community level.

## 8.2 Provision

Regardless of whether a person – of any age – makes a rational decision to go to war, hardship follows. Assistance and services are required to rebuild physically, socially and psychologically. Resources are limited and there are innumerable populations around the world with a legitimate claim to them. Distribution of these resources is largely mediated by public awareness. In this regard, Ames states that advocacy groups are "useful precisely because they awaken the world to the horrors of child soldiering" (2010: 14). While HROs may use the most extreme cases in their

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<sup>42</sup> Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR)

reports to create a 'shock and awe' effect, the attention they bring to this issue is invaluable in stimulating service provision (i.e. demobilisation, interim care centres, family re-tracing, etc.) for the children involved.

In addition, advocating for access to these services by all children involved in conflict, no matter their motivation or role, is certainly in the children's interest as a group. However, the lack of distinction highlighted in this study between the children who participated in combat and those who did not, or those who were forcibly recruited and those who volunteered, could "induce simplistic policies, instead of segmented or particularized initiatives that pivot around the divergent reintegrative needs of various subgroups of child soldiers" (Drumbl, in press). These subgroups could include children who experience trauma-related symptoms and those who do not as a result of an identity shift as contemplated using a symbolic interaction approach. The former group may require only trauma counselling, while the latter might benefit from alternative treatment or participation in specially-adapted justice mechanisms, such as what was envisioned by the Special Court for Sierra Leone. This is not to say that children who come to identify with an armed group should be penalised while others should not. As I have posited earlier, such socialisation should not create guilt and any justice mechanism employed should take this into account. For example, had the Prosecutor of the Special Court for Sierra Leone chosen to include children in its proceedings – where rehabilitation and reintegration were to be the only sentences – this may have been such an opportunity. To echo the discussion on protection, a more direct approach to agency in the HRO discourse would be beneficial in this regard.

The tendency of HROs to minimise the agency exercised by children in deciding to join an armed group has raised concerns that the underlying political, social and economic factors fuelling voluntary enlistment may be overlooked. Peters and Richards' (1998a) fear is that if these issues are not addressed in the discourse, appropriate community-level solutions will not be provided, resulting in recidivism/re-recruitment. It seems, however, that even though HROs largely present children as being "drawn" in and "used" by the group rather than rationally choosing it as the best option for meeting their needs, the factors HROs say are doing the "drawing" are the same as those identified by the children quoted in academic research as being weighed when making their



decision. Thus, while the HRO approach to these factors may not be through a lens of agency, it nevertheless results in identification of the root causes of voluntary enlistment.

### 8.3 Participation

Participation means simply to be actively involved in something. This involvement must have an actual impact on the outcome of the situation, rather than take the form of “tokenistic consultation” (Kellett, 2009: 51). It is in this area where the HRO discourse falls short. It provides an inconsistent message regarding children’s capacity to be active agents in the creation of their own future. While there is much evidence in the ethnographic record to indicate that children can, to some extent, tactically navigate the social landscape of conflict, the discourse largely brushes this aside. Agency is present only on the fringes and ‘in between the lines’. Yet, it is front and center as regards their participation in reconstruction activities. These representations are incompatible. Article 12 of the CRC, as referenced in Chapter 1, requires that “due weight” be given to the views of the child. However, if children are not recognised as capable of reason in one arena, it becomes difficult to see how policy makers can take their views seriously in another. Shepler goes so far as to argue that “NGO activities purported to help former child soldiers are in some ways buttressing patrimonialism and taking away the existing forms of youth power” (2005: 27-28). She says that being seen as a vacant, passive entity before and during involvement with an armed group results in the loss of any political power children otherwise would have had in post-war reconstruction.

## CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 9.1 Conclusions

This dissertation set out to answer four research questions. It asked how child soldiers were perceived and portrayed by human rights organisations (HROs) with respect to the exercise of agency, and how this compared to academic perspectives on the issue. Additionally, it asked what structural factors influenced discourse strategies and what implications the discourse had on the best interests of all children associated with armed groups. To answer these questions, it drew upon elements of framing theory and discourse analysis to look both at the role of semiosis in the construction of dominant understandings of child soldier agency and its relationship to the part HROs play in the social order.

The study began by describing the development of the international status of child soldiering. It was shown to be a concept that, while practically legally universal, remains culturally controversial. Within this context, the first research question was addressed by conducting a detailed examination of how HROs use language to construct the understanding of child soldiers and their capacity for rational decision-making. This analysis revealed that agency is recognised in the potential for accountability (i.e. the ability to form intent), but is limited in two ways. Through linguistic framing, HROs seemingly attempt to restrict its scope to only the oldest child combatants. This goal is in line with the position advocated in this study that children under 15 are less able to independently navigate their environment, but it is not so explicitly stated. Secondly, although force is not presented as the sole catalyst for recruitment, children are portrayed as unable to weigh the options available to them in situations of conflict. Socio-environmental factors are described as acting on children, rather than children acting within them.

The examination of academic perspectives on child soldier agency exposed the HRO discourse as somewhat incomplete. Neither the academic literature nor the present study disputes that, in many cases, children are robbed of the element of choice. However, many instances came to light in which children have demonstrated the ability to exercise rational thought based on realistic consideration of their circumstances. Total deference to children's ability to choose an

armed group as the best available option for meeting their needs is mitigated, however, by the finding that they often are not fully aware of the consequences of such a decision. Determination of whether this cognitive limitation applies to older, as well as younger, underage soldiers was not possible as ages of interviewees were not consistently provided in the literature. Resulting from analysis of the first two research questions, the dissertation also identified a tendency in both the HRO and academic discourse to overlook agency exercised in the commission of violence while within an armed group.

The final two research questions afforded the opportunity to explore whether omissions identified in the HRO discourse could be used strategically to serve the interests of the organisations over those of the children. In this regard, it was posited that the image constructed by HROs, whether intentional or not, has advantages both financially and with respect to enhancing or maintaining credibility. The dissertation argued that, in most respects, discursive strategies amenable to these pursuits do not overshadow the interests of the children. However, more explicit recognition of the diversity of children's responses to conflict – before, during and after – would be beneficial to ensuring that their needs are met once they are safe from harm. This might take the form of diversifying treatment options or in assessing whether involvement in appropriate justice mechanisms would facilitate reintegration by providing closure to children and their communities.

Due to the limited scope of this study, there are a number of issues that remain unresolved. The suggestion that children could exercise agency to create a violent identity as a coping mechanism is based on anecdotal evidence indicating that some children came to embrace their new roles and had subsequent difficulties re-adapting to civilian life. This hypothesis needs to be tested. Additional research is also required into whether such an occurrence would necessitate alternative treatment and, if so, what form that treatment should take.<sup>43</sup> Additionally, this dissertation has raised questions regarding how cost restrictions associated with treatment and accountability mechanisms could compel presentations of child soldiers as passive and/or traumatised. As these propositions were extended based on circumstantial evidence,

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<sup>43</sup> Any implications this hypothesis may have on mitigated accountability in reference to general issues of juvenile justice, such as children and youth who are socialised into gang culture at an early age, were out of the scope of this research and, therefore, have not been considered.

investigation into whether tangible links exist between strategic framing and the social structures identified in the dissertation would be another intriguing area for further study.

To conclude, the general theme of this study has been that the phenomenon of child soldiering is complex. There will never be one approach that covers every situation. Even this brief dissertation has oscillated between circumstances in which children express agency and exceptions to those rules. Agency exists on a spectrum, the full length of which should be recognised in the discourse. Just as children are individuals – so are their experiences and needs. While this will not be an easy task, it is a necessary one to ensure that children’s interests with respect to protection, provision and participation are served.

As regards the features of the HRO discourse, many of the generalities presented in this analysis are not new. Past critiques have established that, in general, it emphasises the vulnerability, passivity and faultlessness of children involved in armed groups. The present study has found these contentions to be largely accurate. Where this dissertation makes a contribution to the field, is in its assertion that the HRO discourse is more inclusive of the complexities of child soldiering than many critics claim it to be. Close analysis of the texts themselves reveal that, while not emphasising agency, they do not erase its existence. Overall, this dissertation advocates for a more direct and diverse approach that continues to protect children, yet remains sufficiently flexible to allow for consideration of individual and community dynamics. In order to accomplish this goal, it will be of paramount importance to ensure that children are viewed as subjects of rights and as having voices worthy of listening to.

I began this dissertation with a quote from Ghandi. Let me end with one from another inspirational narrator:

*"Don't give up! I believe in you all. A person's a person, no matter how small!  
And you very small persons will not have to die  
If you make yourselves heard! So come on, now, and TRY!"*  
- Theodor Seuss Geisel (a.k.a. Dr. Suess)<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Taken from: Dr. Suess (1954) *Horton Hears a Who*, New York: Random House

## 9.2 Recommendations

### *For practice:*

In order to align rhetoric more consistently to reality, HRO discourse should:

- Make a linguistic distinction between ‘children’ (i.e. under 15) and ‘youth’ (i.e. 15 and over).
- Restrict general frames minimising agency to children under fifteen. While any limit based on chronological age will be inherently arbitrary, one is required to facilitate non-discriminatory policy and program development.
- Wherever possible, include consistent identification of the ages of children and youth quoted in reports so as to allow for subsequent assessment of age-related issues.
- Wherever possible, include numerical breakdowns of the proportion of children abducted by various armed forces and of those who joined voluntarily, so as to avoid presenting a skewed view of reality.

Although this study was focused on organisational discourse rather than treatment strategies, analysis of the effects of the discourse on the realities of demobilised child soldiers brought to light the need for:

- Increased investment into initial assessment of demobilised child soldiers to identify their diverse needs.

### *For further research:*

In order to better inform HRO discourse and, thus, programming, there is a need for further research directed towards:

- Understanding processes of meaning creation within armed groups.
- Identification and understanding of coping strategies used by children associated with armed groups.
- Collecting and making available comprehensive life stories of child soldiers so as to overcome the limitations of present anecdotal and time-specific narratives.
- Investigation into whether tangible links exist between social structures and preferences for perceptions of faultlessness/diagnoses of trauma.

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## Appendix A

### Interview of Santo Lazech Okema – 28 March 2011

Conducted and transcribed by: Marci R. Macomber

*Questions were submitted to Okema in advance of the interview. This interview was conducted via telephone. Okema was located in Gulu, Uganda. Macomber was located in Tromsø, Norway. The interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and was transcribed immediately after.*

Question (Q): Can you introduce yourself and briefly describe your position with Ker Kwaro Acholi?

Okema (O): My name is Okema Lazech Santo and I am Program Coordinator of Ker Kwaro Acholi. I am 53 years old and I hold a Masters of Arts in Human Rights from Makerere University in Uganda. My work is to coordinate all the activities of Ker Kwaro Acholi, both within Uganda and outside Uganda. So in this we cooperate with the national state, the national non-governmental organisations, the cultural institutions with Uganda and also with the neighbouring countries at the international scene.

Ker Kwaro Acholi has its legal basis in Article 246 of the Constitution of Uganda. Ker Kwaro Acholi is a cultural institution and is a constitutional body in Uganda. This cultural institution works on four major objectives. One, on the preservation of the culture of the Acholi people. Two, on peace and reconciliation. Three, on community empowerment issues like education, eradication of sexual and gender-based violence, health, etc. The fourth objective is on good governance and developing democracy.

Q: Is there a partnership between Ker Kwaro Acholi and Save the Children? If so, can you describe this?

O: Ker Kwaro Acholi has played a greater role during the LRA war in northern Uganda and all along was very supportive of all organisations, whether local NGO<sup>45</sup> or international NGO among which Save the Children is one. Because, by that the children who fled the war to live in towns in fear of abduction were housed by Save the Children and another Save the Children organisation called GUSCO in places like Gulu, and also another is World Vision.

Indeed, although there has been no formal contract as signed between Ker Kwaro Acholi and Save the Children, during the insurgency to save the life of the children the partnership was a mutual understanding where they did every work on saving the children in harmony.

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<sup>45</sup> Non-governmental organisation

Q: How does Ker Kwaro Acholi define a “child soldier”?

O: We at Ker Kwaro Acholi – to us child soldier means a child is somebody below the age of 18. And anybody below the age of 18 is...is abducted, or forced, or enticed to join armed forces. We call that person child soldier. And in the light of the northern Uganda insurgency many of our children were abducted and forced into armed conflict and, hence, they became child soldiers.

Ker Kwaro Acholi is a cultural organisation. It’s a traditional and cultural organisation that has a purpose enshrined in the Constitution of Uganda article 246 of the 1995 version. It has a role to play for the wellbeing of the people of Acholi. Indeed, we view formerly abducted children all through world involved in armed conflict...we view them as our children. We view them as innocent children. We view them as the children that hold the future of Acholi and they may require our service to receive them, to rehabilitate them, to reintegrate them and put them into our services that will make them better citizens.

Q: How are children who have been associated with an armed group viewed by Ker Kwaro Acholi? How was this view developed?

O: These children associated with armed group, we view them as innocent ones...innocent children completely who are vulnerable and may need our help. We came to that view because the war had reached us and we saw how our children were arrested, tied and made into the bush. And we see how helpless they are. And if they return or if they are captured by the national government soldiers, they are innocent. They are our children whose lives must be preserved even if it’s in the face of war.

Q: How soon after demobilisation from an armed group do former child soldiers come to Ker Kwaro Acholi?

O: They normally take a bit of time in reception centres, like World Vision like the GUSCO, undergoing other social therapy, and trying to counsel them and give them some work, to rehabilitate them... their minds. Because by being in the bush they will have been morally degraded into doing violent things and we want them to undergo those social therapies for some time. Then they are brought to Ker Kwaro Acholi for cleansing purposes so that the mind is also...in fact the mental strength is...they develop you know (*indecipherable*). Therapy may require those traditional activities to be accorded to them like cleansing. Indeed cleansing goes a long way into carving out those things that in most cases were threatening the lives of our children so much, in fact, that you find during the night the child has wild dreams and walking away shouting, and what have you. These have been the characteristics for how our children are behaving and indeed the cultural practices are the remedy to it by doing the cleansing.



Q: Can you describe the welcoming and cleansing ceremonies conducted by your organisation with children formerly abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army?

O: Cleansing is done in this way – the person to be cleansed will be brought to the cultural institution. As one or two or many of them are brought to the cultural institution, on the way they will be stopped. Where they are stopped the elders will put across the road a kind of a stick with a fork that is used for opening granaries. Locally, we call this a layebi. Then there is a kind of special tree. We call it an opobo tree that is very slippery itself. The bark is very slippery. It is also put across the road, across the foot path where they are coming. Then a new raw egg is also put there. So when those ones are brought they are made to step and break the raw egg and walk over the opobo branch that was put there across the road to enter their homes. That is one cleansing. It is believed that as the egg is raw and is innocent and has no sin and the child is innocent. The slippery opobo tree is believed to have a special property towards the death or sins or evil spirits one might have met in the bush. And the layebi is significant because it is used for opening granaries which is where we store food. So it is welcoming that the moment the child is entering the home the child will eat food.

Another function of cleaning is when one is entering the house all in the house are of the family where he or she belongs. All there will stand outside and will be asked to enter the room one at a time. As the child enters the local house, water is poured on the roof of the house to drip on the child as he enters, and the child comes, enters and comes out and again another round is poured on that child three times. And the third time the child enters the house, the door is closed behind the child. For some time the child will remain in the house and by that one it is believed that all the deaths, all the evil spirits, are washed and have remained outside. And after some few minutes the child will come out and will rejoice with the family together. They will put food and everybody will be happy. We celebrate.

Q: Are there other services provided to former child soldiers? If so, please describe.

Apart from cleansing and what have you, we...in fear of stigmatisation, we reunite our children without segregation into the communities. Along that line, the children are just peacefully received and accorded every service in the same way like those who have not been abducted. And for those who are growing older, maybe above the age of 18, they are regrouped in the formal structure of Ker Kwaro Acholi – the structure of grassroots, the structure of Kweri and the structure of Okoro. Kweri for the males and Okoro for the females. This is the production structure of Ker Kwaro Acholi in which every home state has a number of people who are engaged in production. They are formed in such a group so that whatever they do, they do in unity and they do all their work as a team. Indeed those are the families we give them because when we organise them into production groups we accord them the same respect and other services where we train them into modern farming. We train them into modern social

entrepreneurship and we also take some of them who are still willing to go back to school to go back to school under that activity.

Q: Are former child soldiers treated any differently than former adult soldiers by the organisation? If so, how?

O: We don't segregate people. They are all children (*indecipherable*). As long as you are home, you are accorded the same respect - the same services – except for children that when the child still desires to go back to school we help that child go back to school and continue study. If you want to take on professional activities they are also given prospects. We guide them to take on those.

Q: How does Ker Kwaro Acholi collect general information on child combatants/child soldiers to inform its work and develop policies/programs? Does Ker Kwaro Acholi conduct its own field work regarding the situations/experiences of children associated with armed groups or does it use external resources, such as research reports from other organisations?

O: Yes, we are one of the foreground to fight for the problems that exist in northern Uganda. We are the ones who are always the first point of reference in as far as child soldiers, and what have you, are concerned. The army gets them from the battlefield. Sometimes they escape by themselves and the moment they reach the members of members the community on the hunting grounds they are brought to a reception centre. There they undergo rehabilitation. Ker Kwaro Acholi does not have a special unit for collecting information. Most information about the child soldiers is collected by the army or the police because they want to. They always interrogate people in investigating them to know truly if they will not be harmful. So after the interrogation they are taken to rehabilitation centres. After the rehab centres they are brought here to us. We don't quite collect information but we have a record of our cleansing ceremonies and reintegration activities.

Ker Kwaro Acholi is not a non-governmental organisation and does not have its own reception centre. It depends on the reception centre operated by the World Vision and GUSCO Save the Children organisation and other therapy groups like that.

Q: Information about the organisation online indicates that Ker Kwaro Acholi works with “persons formerly abducted by the LRA”. Are all children associated with armed groups in Uganda considered by Ker Kwaro Acholi to have been abducted?

O: Yes, and no. Because a child below the age of 18 is never an adult and cannot on his own or her own make a decision to do things like joining armed forces or being employed. So we regard all of them at that point as persons forced against their will to do work that is detrimental to their life and persons. And indeed Ker Kwaro Acholi regards all the children in Uganda as children in

general. That's why when we when we go out like in DRC Congo, like in Central African Republic or in the Sudan, and talking peace about these children who are in the bush, we vocally tell that children are the same irrespective of colour and the languages they speak. They should be accorded all the respects and rights at the international community and of the law.

Q: Does Ker Kwaro Acholi work with communities where former child soldiers will be reintegrated?

O: Yes, we do. We do we do work at length with them. We cooperate with them and indeed we advise them. We invite them for other workshops and our meetings so that other organisations do what we want, because culturally we feel our children – if not accorded cultural cleansing – they always come home and they fall fate to...sometimes they experience hallucinations and wild dreams and what have you. And they feel they are not part of the community because we are the kind of natives, you see, we are the kind of natives who are not very much close to the Western religion where we say "I'm saved" and what have you. We still cling so much to our cultural values and practices that if you don't perform certain things, it haunts you and our children are ever like that. Ker Kwaro Acholi is just the centre of making our children confident of their position at home.

Q: What information is given to the community about the child? How do the communities generally respond to this?

O: You see, our community has been very humble because of our campaign. They consider all these children as innocent and they respect this. That's why in Gulu, the biggest city in northern Uganda – in which this war started – there is not quite...they don't point a finger at the child and say, "Look that child is one who has been to the bush." They are never stigmatised. They are just in school at the hospital along the road. They are never isolated.

Q: How does Ker Kwaro Acholi determine the needs of child soldiers who attend the centre?

O: We do not have a centre ourselves. Ker Kwaro Acholi is a cultural institution who does not have a centre of its own. It depends on the centres created by other bodies like World Vision, like GUSCO and others. You see? After rehabilitation from these centres, we receive them. And when we receive them, we see them as people who are vulnerable. You see? Vulnerable people require a lot of things. And they need to...sometimes on demand of the child that, "I want to go back to school." Fine. We shall now lead the child to school. "I want to remain in the army because I am now 18 and above." Fine. The army can take on that. And, "I want vocational work. I want to be a carpenter." We send that one to vocational schools. That is how we always determine the needs from the formerly abducted themselves who will be happy to tell what they want to do.

Q: Are all former child soldiers treated the same by Ker Kwaro Acholi, or is treatment individualised based on their particular experiences?

O: We treat them equally. We don't segregate our children. They are one and will always be one forever.

Q: Is information sought from the children regarding whether they were forced to join the armed group or whether they joined voluntarily? Is information collected regarding the roles children played with the armed group (i.e. whether they participated directly in combat or had support functions, such as cooking, etc.)?

O: Those are informations that are sometimes...I will not say they are got by the security, but not by Ker Kwaro Acholi as a cultural institution. But those informations are good sometimes to be the bases for truth telling when the children come home. But at this point we don't want to tell them that we know what they did as we settle them home. This question of truth telling is very natural in the Acholi setting. Because Acholi are never believed to be criminals. If an Acholi has killed someone in secret, within a short span of time he will reveal it out. Because we feel, the spirit of the dead will own that particular person. And because the culture has a remedy to it, you have to tell it out so that you are safe from the reach of the evil spirits

Q: Are there some children who continue to exhibit violence even after coming to Ker Kwaro Acholi from rehabilitation centres?

O: Here, we talk of the community. If they have already reached the community some of them have exhibited – if they were not cleansed – wild dreams and hallucination. Both have been there and we always work hard to make sure that traditional performances are done to put the child to a normal position.

Q: How does Ker Kwaro Acholi view the motivations of child combatants during combat?

O: I want to question what motivation is that? Is it motivation to defect from armed conflict? From being a combatant? If it is motivation to defect from the combat realm, or to defect staying in the bush...with child soldiers we always motivate them by telling them that their home is safe. And we send such information through the radio to the local populace in the local languages so that the children can defect and come back home.

Macomber: I was wondering, actually, with the question was what Ker Kwaro Acholi felt was motivating the children to go through violent acts while part of the armed group...

O: That is the core of our work. Because we don't want to see violence in the children who have returned, we have to keep them very close – on a close watch to see how they behave after all the cleansing and in other issues that we believe to put them to normal course.

If there is any queer behaviour, then those have not yet been reported to us at the moment. All along we have not received information from the seven districts of Acholi civilians concerning violent exhibition or violent behaviour of the children who have been in the bush.

Q: Are there children who have continued to exhibit violent behaviour after coming to Ker Kwaro Acholi?

O: No. In most cases, they are now very good. They are at least better than children who have not been in the bush. After undergoing the rehab and many of them are now at school, including a rebel commander who is no longer a child. He is going to complete his degree course this coming June. Yes, they have become normal. They are fully reintegrated.