



# We Came Back with Empty Hands

Understanding the Disarmament, Demobilization and  
Reintegration of Children Formerly Associated with  
Armed Groups in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

EASTERN  
CONGO  
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HARVARD  
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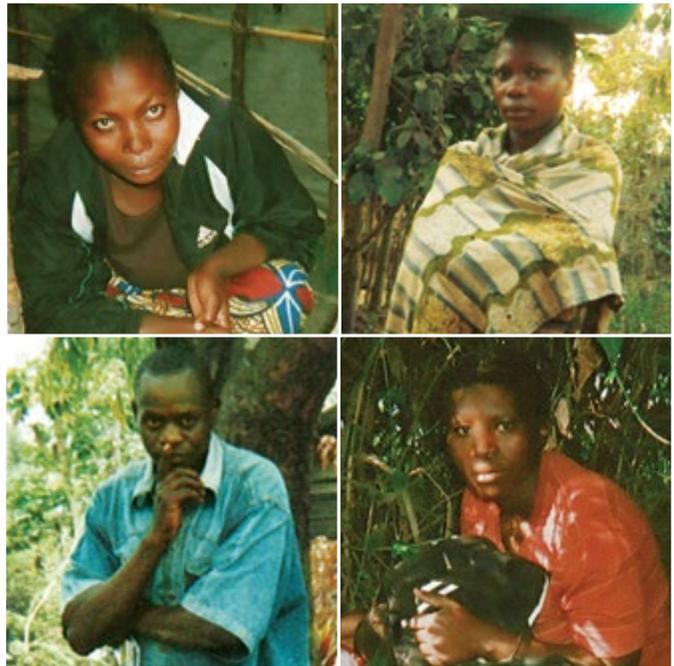
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**When we got the ability to come back,  
we came back with empty hands.**

We came back in the village just like little children. We were given a warm welcome and a place to stay. Villagers started taking care of us. They even looked for ways to take us back to our parents or relatives who might be available in the village; just to make sure we are back in our homes. Unfortunately, things became bad once [we were] in our homes for some of [the] others. For others, things were good. To leave the army was not easy. **It was just through determination.**

—Female former underage combatant, Mahagi

## Participating Organizations

Founded by Ben Affleck, **Eastern Congo Initiative (ECI)** is the first U.S. based advocacy and grant-making initiative wholly focused on working with and for the people of eastern Congo. We envision an eastern Congo vibrant with abundant opportunities for economic and social development, where a robust civil society can flourish. ECI believes that local, community-based approaches are essential to creating a sustainable and successful society in eastern Congo.

The **Harvard Humanitarian Initiative (HHI)** Women in War Program seeks to investigate and address women's needs in today's most unstable environments. The Women in War program employs a participatory research approach grounded in collaborations with international and local non-governmental organizations as well as community-based associations. This approach helps us bring the voices of the experts—those affected by violence and instability—to practitioners and policy makers to catalyze the development of more effective programming.

**Appui à la Communication Interculturelle et à l'Autopromotion Rurale (ACIAR)** operates DDR programs in Mahagi and Dujugu. ACIAR has supported the socioeconomic reintegration of more than 1,200 youths since its official establishment in 1998. It is financed by UNDP.

**Association des Jeunes pour le Développement Intégré-Kalundu (AJEDI-Ka)** is a NGO based in Uvira. AJEDI-Ka's mission is to support the development of youths in Kalundu, particularly vulnerable youth and former underage combatants. They have previously worked in partnership with a range of organizations including American Jewish Services, UNICEF, Save the Children and Amnesty International.

**CARITAS Bunia** runs DDR programs throughout the district of Ituri, for both youths and adults, with the support of COOPI, IRC, UNICEF and UNDP. CARITAS Bunia has supported the reintegration of more than 2,000 youths in Ituri.

**Education et encadrement des traumatisés de Nyiragongo (ETN)** is based in Goma and coordinates socioeconomic reintegration programs for former combatants in Masisi, Walikale and various suburbs of Goma. ETN has partnered with Norwegian Church Aid, Finn Church Aid, CARE and UNDP.

**Groupe d'Actions et d'Appui pour un Développement Endogène (GRAADE)** is active in Walikale territory and supported by UNICEF. GRAADE supports the reintegration of former underage combatants and operates a residential and training center in Walikale for youths formerly associated with armed groups. GRAADE also helps these youths to return to their communities after the completion of the training program.

**Projet de réinsertion des enfants ex combattants et autres vulnérable—Hope in action (PREV-HIA)** is an initiative of CELPA, a branch of the Congolese protestant church. The organization implements DDR programs for vulnerable youths in Mwenga, Kalehe and Rutshuru. It is supported by Hope in Action, the Norwegian Embassy and the Swedish Embassy.

## Acknowledgments

The eight organizations who undertook this project would like to thank all of those who took the time to share their experience and expertise with us. By doing so, they became co-collaborators in this work, and made this effort possible.

We would also like to thank the Washington Network for Children and Armed Conflict for their substantive help reviewing and commenting on the report.



# Executive Summary

## Introduction

Tens of thousands of children are estimated to be actively participating in combat situations or serving as support personnel for armed groups in at least 15 conflicts around the world (UNICEF, 2012). Children may be enrolled through abduction, coercion or forced recruitment (Landau, 2007), and forced to undertake a variety of roles in armed groups, from serving as active combatants to acting as porters or sexual slaves. Military leaders have expressed a preference for younger recruits as “they are less likely to question orders from adults and are more likely to be fearless, as they do not appreciate the dangers they face” (Amnesty International, 1998, p. 39). Youth associated with armed groups face prolonged exposure to violence, including being forced to kill or harm others and undergoing repeated personal victimization, including sexual violence (Betancourt, Brennan, Rubin-Smith, Fitzmaurice, & Gilman, 2010). Underage combatants are robbed of many normal opportunities for physical, emotional and intellectual development, both as individuals and as members of communities.

The use of underage combatants was widespread in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in both the First Congo War (1996–1997) and the Second Congo War (1998–2003). When the *Global and Inclusive Agreement on Transition in the Democratic Republic of the Congo* formally ended hostilities in 2003, DRC had approximately 30,000 underage combatants awaiting demobilization (Child Soldiers Global Report, 2008). This made it one of the countries with the highest numbers of underage combatants in the world at the time (Amnesty International, 2003).

The United Nations (U.N.) has found that “the recruitment of children is directly related to active conflict, with new outbreaks of hostilities typically resulting in higher trends in child recruitment” (U.N. Security Council, 2008, p. 5). The recent aggression by the rebel group M23 rebel group raises new concerns about the recruitment of underage combatants as hostilities intensify in eastern DRC. Thousands of people in North Kivu have fled their homes to escape the recent upsurge in violence and, as of August 2013, as many as 2,000 underage combatants were active in the conflict (UNICEF, 2013). These reports highlight the fact that abduction and recruitment of underage combatants are ongoing in eastern DRC. The lessons learned from past efforts to disarm, demobilize and reintegrate underage combatants will be vital to address these new security threats.

Despite increasing attention to the scope and importance of child soldiering globally, there is still limited systematic research on the successes and challenges of reintegration programming for former underage combatants. While the importance of undertaking reintegration programming has been recognized as an important step for both reintegrating individuals into communities and promoting peace and security at a societal level, significant gaps in understanding how to implement sustainable and successful reintegration programming remain. This project uses DRC as a case study to examine the community experiences and attitudes around Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration

(DDR<sup>1</sup>) programming to generate lessons learned for improving future programming for former underage combatants and at-risk youth.

## Project

This project represents a collaboration between Eastern Congo Initiative (ECI) and the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative (HHI), as well as six Congolese community-based partners: Appui à la Communication Interculturelle et à l'Autopromotion Rurale (ACIAR); Association des Jeunes pour le Développement Intégré-Kalundu (Ajedika); Caritas Bunia; Education et encadrement des traumatisés de Nyiragongo (ETN); Groupe d'Actions et d'Appui pour un Développement Endogène (GRAADE); Projet de réinsertion des enfants ex combattants et autres vulnérable—Hope in action (PREV-HIA). The goal of the work is to use lessons learned from past reintegration processes to improve future programming for former underage combatants and youth at-risk for joining armed groups. The community-based participatory research approach engaged partner communities and collaborating organizations in contributing fully to all aspects of the research process. This project was undertaken in the provinces of North Kivu, South Kivu and the district of Ituri in Orientale Province. Local partner organizations worked alongside ECI and HHI to collaboratively undertake research that examined the experiences of former underage combatants and communities with conflict and reintegration processes.

This study triangulated information by applying a range of methods and speaking with multiple groups affected by the process of reintegrating former underage combatants. The research was conducted using an iterative approach, with visual methodologies informing the design of subsequent qualitative research. The design of this report mimics that structure by first presenting results of the visual work and then presenting the results of the focus groups. Service providers, community-based organizations (CBO), local leaders, families of former underage combatants and the combatants themselves all narrated their conflict and reintegration experiences. The project also incorporated reflections from practitioners and policymakers involved in reintegration programming on the strengths and limitations of DDR programming.

This report does not evaluate interventions of international and national humanitarian actors, as reintegration programming varied widely across time and geographical areas. Rather, this research documented the experiences and attitudes of former underage combatants in eastern DRC who went through the reintegration process, the families and communities who received them and the organizations that funded and implemented reintegration programming. The report proposes recommendations based on their collective experiences with the reintegration process and their perceptions of the current situation.

## Results

Findings from this work emphasize the complicated nature of reintegration programming in a context defined by decades-long conflict. Research participants described the dynamics at play in their

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1. This report refers to Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) processes. In newer documentation, this process is also called Disarmament, Demobilization, Repatriation, Reintegration and Resettlement (DDRRR). Since this report addresses reintegration, but not explicitly resettlement and repatriation processes, it uses the DDR acronym.

communities. While problems and challenges were manifold, participants also identified ways to improve reintegration programming and policy related to underage combatants in eastern DRC.

Community members and former underage combatants spoke of the importance of building participatory and context-appropriate reintegration programs. These programs should provide not only training and marketable professional skills, but should also impart basic communication, stress coping and conflict-resolution skills to both former combatants and their families. Reintegration is a long-term process that must fully engage former combatants, their families and their communities in the design and implementation of programs. At its best, this process can be seen as an opportunity to help communities collectively heal and critically examine the ways they choose to rebuild.

**Hardships associated with war contributed directly to youth enrollment in armed groups. Recruitment can take many different forms, indicating the need for programs that better identify children and adolescents at risk for enrollment into armed groups.** Former underage combatants spoke in detail about the factors leading to their recruitment and abduction. **Males and females both described being abducted by armed groups, but with gendered differences in their experiences.** For males, abduction often occurred in the course of daily activities, such as playing or going to school. Females instead described risk factors for abduction, which included being orphaned, separated from their family or having to walk to remote places to perform daily chores, such as working in the field or fetching water.

**While abduction for forced labor was one of the most commonly cited ways that boys and girls became underage combatants, there were also other reasons that youth became associated with armed groups.** Understanding and addressing these reasons through educational programming, and providing opportunities for alternate activities is critical. Former underage combatants described joining to avoid exploitation by armed groups; to protect or avenge family members affected by the war; or because they felt that, in the face of grinding poverty and few educational or employment opportunities, joining an armed group was the best of the available options. Some former underage combatants even sought out military life in order to access a surrogate family structure.

**Once in armed groups, underage combatants were relegated to the lowest rank—that of *kadogo*, or “little ones.” In this role, they were last in line for goods or material comforts. At this rank, they also faced severe physical punishment and abuse.** The results were poor health and high mortality. Faced with chronic malnutrition and inadequate access to food, nearly all former underage combatants who participated in the research described their time in the militia as one of near starvation and physical misery. They spoke of a feeling of deep dehumanization and described being treated as slaves or animals.

**Girls and young women said they were forced to fulfill dual roles as both combatants and sex slaves.** In addition to the abuse, neglect and intimidation common to all underage combatants, female underage combatants also experienced sexual abuse and cited unintended pregnancies in the forest as one of the greatest dangers they faced. If women survived childbirth, they faced the distress of not knowing the father of their children and were left with no social support structure and no husband to help provide for them.

**Widely varying exposure to, and experiences with, reintegration programming suggested that efforts varied greatly throughout eastern DRC and were unevenly implemented.** Those who did participate in DDR programs articulated frustration with false promises and inadequate support.

Both former underage combatants and community members recognized that combatants undergo behavior changes and psychological trauma during their time in armed groups. **Community members expressed a mix of sympathy for, and distrust of, former underage combatants, noting that they could act as a destabilizing force in civilian contexts.** Civilians often regarded former underage combatants as volatile and believed they brought antisocial behavior into already fragile communities. Community members stated that former underage combatants need psychological services as well as material assistance in order to be able to fully reintegrate.

Former underage combatants were aware of the mistrust they faced from community members, and noted that one of the greatest obstacles to reintegration was the social stigma they encountered. These individuals described how, once returned, they were seen as criminals and blamed for all the wrongdoing in their neighborhoods. Former underage combatants also spoke about the injustice of having “missed out” on the civilian lives they left when they entered armed groups. During reintegration, former underage combatants described seeing their peers with jobs, families and an education, and felt that they had no avenues for pursuing the same opportunities. **Becoming a participating member of the community—either through employment or education—was listed as critical. Finding a functioning role in society had both practical importance and also served as a way to rebuild a sense of dignity, agency and social belonging.**

Association with armed groups has profound and long-term mental health consequences. Former underage combatants described suffering from a range of mental health symptoms and noted that they often lacked the communication and social skills to seek the social support they need. Successful reintegration requires an ability to negotiate job prospects and consistently pursue education opportunities that will ultimately lead to sustainable income. Former underage combatants, who generally had no decision-making power and no experience of working cooperatively, were not able to reintegrate seamlessly into communities. **Reintegration programs must not only provide material assistance but also impart basic skills related to conflict negotiation, communication and stress reduction.**



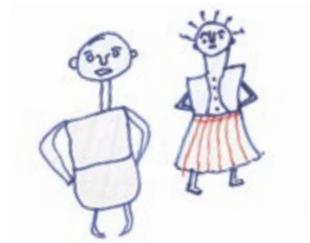


# Recommendations

- 1. Provide Comprehensive Reintegration Programming:** Programming for the reintegration of former underage combatants should be holistic and include professional skills training, literacy and education opportunities, mental health and/or psychosocial support mechanisms and community engagement throughout the process. Referral structures should be in place so that organizations with different areas of expertise can coordinate their efforts. Careful case management of individual beneficiaries is vital to ensuring each former underage combatant is able to access necessary services as effectively as possible.
- 2. Improve Access to Mental Health Services:** Upon reintegration, former underage combatants confront the severe psychological effects of their experiences while seeking to re-establish themselves in their communities. Due to the short-term nature of funding and limited human resources, mental health services and psychosocial programming were limited or non-existent. International funders with expertise in mental health should invest in the training of capable local organizations to undertake basic mental health care.
- 3. Promote Community and Family Involvement in Reintegration:** Communities and families play an essential role in ensuring successful reintegration. Programming should engage community leaders, religious leaders and educators in the dissemination of professionally developed information that shares how experiences in an armed group psychologically affect former combatants and how family, friends and others in the community can contribute to reintegration and reconciliation efforts. Reintegration programming also needs to engage with communities to offer practical assistance to former underage combatants. This can take the form of business owners providing internships or vocational training, educators providing tutoring or religious leaders offering guidance. Counseling and mediation services are often needed to help estranged family members reestablish healthy relationships. Families have the potential to positively influence former underage combatants and ease their transition to civilian life. Conversely, families that are not brought into reintegration programming as stakeholders can act as stressors on former combatants.
- 4. Build Capacity of Local Organizations:** The quality of services provided by local organizations was often compromised for the sake of quantity because local organizations are frequently contracted to implement short-term reintegration programming and required to reintegrate a specific number of former underage combatants in a restricted time period. Local organizations did not always have access to the professional skills required for technical interventions, such as mental health or vocational training. International funders should invest in building the technical capacity of these organizations to implement more

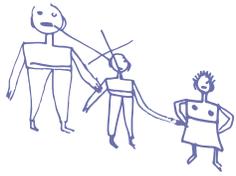
complex, long-term programming. Investing in the professional capacity of Congolese institutions, such as universities, to provide expertise to local organizations would increase the potential for sustainable, prevention-based programs that serve at-risk youth.

5. **Coordinate Funding Mechanisms:** Former underage combatants' widely varied exposure to reintegration programs reveals the disconnects in reintegration programming. The large range of reintegration programs and "packages" created conflict between community members and beneficiaries as well as among beneficiaries. The difficulties coordinating government actors, international funders and international and national implementers were noted as a barrier to effective reintegration. Working in concert and adhering to a universal strategy agreed upon by all stakeholders that incorporates measurable success metrics would improve the efficacy of interventions and allow for better measurement of impact and best practices.
6. **Determine Successful Programmatic Models Through Monitoring and Evaluation:** Monitoring and evaluation were described as among the weakest areas of reintegration programming. Objectives and specific indicators were not identified or agreed upon by stakeholders, and funding structures did not allow for long-term follow up of beneficiaries. These factors make it almost impossible to establish the long-term impact of programs. The focus on a "quickly demobilize and transfer" strategy without adequate attention to tracking social impact resulted in interventions that could not be evaluated over the long term. Reintegration programming should not be designed as a short-term intervention, but instead as a long-term investment, with strong case management and established metrics that can be used to measure success.
7. **Undertake Security Sector Reform:** The continued proliferation of armed groups in eastern DRC poses a significant risk to communities. At the time of the publication of this report, communities noted that recruitment of underage combatants into non-state armed groups was active and on-going, particularly as a result of clashes between M23, Raia Mutomboko and FARDC. The DRC government should prioritize reform of its security sector to ensure police, military and judicial systems are sufficiently organized, resourced and trained to respond to security threats. Such systems are critical to long-term reintegration success. Security sector reform would provide the local and regional security through which the country's other development challenges could be addressed. International support for security sector reform should be considered a priority for donor countries, and coordinated through an agreed upon framework.
8. **Focus on Prevention:** Programming for youth at risk of joining armed groups is critical. As noted above, ongoing insecurity and hardships associated with conflict and poverty contribute directly to underage enrollment in armed groups. Professional skills training that is relevant to the needs of local markets and buttressed with education opportunities will help address the underlying factors which make children and youth vulnerable to recruitment and abduction into armed groups. International funders should build the lasting capacity of local Congolese organizations to invest in these at-risk populations. A longer-term view of the risk factors associated with underage combatants will ensure that programming is preventative, instead of reactionary.



# We Came Back with Empty Hands

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# Introduction

Tens of thousands of children are estimated to be actively participating in combat situations or serving as support personnel for armed groups in at least 15 conflicts around the world (The United Nations Children’s Fund [UNICEF], 2012). Children may be enrolled through abduction, coercion or forced recruitment (Landau, 2007), and forced to undertake a variety of roles in armed groups, from serving as active combatants to acting as porters or sexual slaves. Military leaders have expressed a preference for younger recruits as “they are less likely to question orders from adults and are more likely to be fearless, as they do not appreciate the dangers they face” (Amnesty International, 1998, p. 39). Youth associated with armed groups face prolonged exposure to violence, including being forced to kill or harm others and undergoing repeated personal victimization, including sexual violence (Betancourt, Brennan, Rubin-Smith, Fitzmaurice, & Gilman, 2010). Underage combatants are robbed of many normal opportunities for physical, emotional and intellectual development, both as individuals and as members of communities.

The use of underage combatants was widespread in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in both the First Congo War (1996–1997) and the Second Congo War (1998–2003). When the *Global and Inclusive Agreement on Transition in the Democratic Republic of the Congo*<sup>2</sup> formally ended hostilities in 2003, DRC had approximately 30,000 underage combatants awaiting demobilization (Child Soldiers Global Report, 2008). This made it one of the countries with the highest numbers of underage combatants in the world at the time (Amnesty International, 2003). Despite the formal end to the conflict in 2003, almost 1,500 children were removed from state and non-state armed groups in 2012, while hundreds continued to be recruited or conscripted into them (U.N. General Assembly, 2013).

The UN has found that “the recruitment of children is directly related to active conflict, with new outbreaks of hostilities typically resulting in higher trends in child recruitment” (U.N. Security Council, 2008, p.5). For instance, there was a sharp increase in 2008 in the number of children recruited in North and South Kivu—a 38 percent increase from the previous year (U.N. Security Council, 2008)—due to the 2008–2011 period of increased hostilities between the Congolese Armed Forces (FARDC<sup>3</sup>) and non-state armed groups, including CNDP<sup>4</sup> and the Mai Mai PARECO<sup>5</sup> (Child Soldiers Global Report, 2008). Another spike in recruitment efforts occurred during the processes of *brassage*<sup>6</sup>—the integration of all the warring factions into one national military—and *mixage*—a negotiated agreement that kept militias intact, but had them work alongside the

2. This agreement, which was signed by the Congolese Government, the Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD), the Movement for the Liberation of the Congo (MLC), the political opposition, civil society, the Congolese Rally for Democracy/Liberation Movement (RDC/ML), the Congolese Rally for Democracy/National (RCD/N) and the Mai Mai, resulted in the formal cessation of hostilities between the parties; detailed a transition plan for the creation of an integrated national army; and established the necessary structures for a new political order (See Reliefweb, 2002).

3. FARDC is the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo – in French: Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo.

4. The National Congress for the Defence of the People— in French: Congrès national pour la défense du peuple—(CNDP) is a non-state armed group in the Kivus created by Laurent Nkunda in December 2006.

5. The Coalition of Patriots in the Congolese Resistance – in French: Patriotes Résistants du Congo – (PARECO) is the political wing of the collection of community militias known as the Mai Mai in eastern DRC.

6. The culmination of *brassage* was to be 18 integrated and deployed brigades by March 2006. This did not happen (See International Crisis Group, 2006).

national army in joint operations.<sup>7</sup> Almost all armed groups have been documented to have had underage combatants in their ranks; in 2010, 42 percent of underage combatant recruitments were allegedly carried out by FARDC, 26 percent by various Mai Mai groups, 16 percent by PARECO, ten percent by various FDLR<sup>8</sup> factions and six percent by CNDP (U.N. Security Council, 2010).

The recent aggression by the rebel group M23<sup>9</sup> raises new concerns about the recruitment of underage combatants as hostilities intensify in eastern DRC. Thousands of people in North Kivu have fled their homes to escape the recent upsurge in violence and, as of August 2013, as many as 2,000 underage combatants were active in the conflict (UNICEF, 2013). These reports highlight the fact that abduction and recruitment of underage combatants are ongoing in eastern DRC. The lessons learned from past efforts to disarm, demobilize and reintegrate underage combatants will be vital to address these new security threats.

Despite increasing attention to the scope and importance of child soldiering globally, there is still limited systematic research on the successes and challenges of reintegration programming for former underage combatants. While the importance of undertaking reintegration programming has been recognized as an important step for both reintegrating individuals into communities and promoting peace and security at a societal level, significant gaps in understanding how to implement sustainable and successful reintegration programming remain. This project uses DRC as a case study to examine the community experiences and attitudes around Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR)<sup>10</sup> programming to generate lessons learned for improving future programming for former underage combatants and at-risk youth.

## Project Background

This project represents a collaboration between the Eastern Congo Initiative (ECI) and the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative (HHI), as well as six Congolese community-based

### Partner Organizations by Site\*

Partner Organization	Site(s)
ACIAR	Mahagi
Ajedika	Uvira
ETN	Goma
Caritas Bunia	Nizi, Bambu
Graade	Walikale
PREV-HIA	Kalehe, Mwenga

\*To view a map of participating project sites, please see Appendix 1, p. 114.

partners: Appui à la Communication Interculturelle et à l'Autopromotion Rurale (ACIAR); Association des Jeunes pour le Développement Intégré-Kalundu (Ajedika); Caritas Bunia; Education et encadrement des traumatisés de Nyiragongo (ETN); Groupe d'Actions et d'Appui pour un Développement Endogène (GRAADE); Projet de réinsertion des enfants ex combattants et autres vulnérable—Hope in action (PREV-HIA). The goal of the work is to use lessons learned from past reintegration processes to improve future programming for former underage combatants and at-risk youth. The community-based participatory research approach engaged partner communities and collaborating organizations in contributing fully to all aspects of the research process. This project was undertaken in the provinces of North Kivu, South Kivu and the district of Ituri in Orientale Province. Two organizations were chosen in each province for a total of six participating partners. These partners then each chose one or two sites in which to do the research. Each organization worked alongside ECI and HHI to collaboratively undertake research that examined the experiences of former underage combatants and communities with conflict and reintegration processes.

This project sought to investigate, through visual and qualitative methods, how conflict and reintegration processes affected families and communities in selected project sites in eastern DRC. At the heart of this project was a participatory research approach aimed at generating strong partnerships between United States and Congo-based organizations. Participatory action research (PAR) was chosen as the

7. In January 2007, General Laurent Nkunda, the then-leader of the CNDP, negotiated a specific programme of 'mixage' for security and economic reasons (See Lucas, 2008).

8. FDLR is the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda – in French: Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda.

9. M23 is the March 23 Movement—in French: Mouvement du 23-Mars. The armed group, which largely operates in North Kivu, is named after the date the CNDP signed a peace agreement in 2009 with the Congolese government for the armed group to join the national armed forces. M23 was formed and became active in April 2012 because of frustration over poor conditions in the FARDC and the Congolese government's failure to fully implement the 2009 peace agreement.

10. This report refers to Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) processes. In newer documentation, this process is also called Disarmament, Demobilization, Repatriation, Reintegration and Resettlement (DDRRR). Since this report addresses reintegration, but not explicitly resettlement and repatriation processes, it uses the DDR acronym.

## Overview of Project Phases

	Phase 1	Phase 2
Events	Training conference 1	Training conference 2
Methodologies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PhotoVoice</li> <li>• Body Mapping</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus Groups</li> <li>• Interviews</li> </ul>

approach for this project both to ensure full partner participation in the design, conduct and dissemination of the findings and to avoid extractive research practices. Rather than producing a traditional research product, PAR is a form of knowledge creation that is owned and used by stakeholders (Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998). The goals of PAR are well suited to the topic of reintegration programming as they emphasize the importance of producing practical and applicable knowledge. Unlike traditional academic research, the purpose of PAR is not to produce theories about actions or theories based on empirical findings. Rather, PAR encourages the inclusive development of “living knowledge,” in which the “process of inquiry is as important as specific outcomes” (Reason & Bradbury, 2001).

To realize this process, the project was structured around two training conferences that brought together project partners to collaboratively design and implement the research. At the first conference, colleagues from each of the eight partner organizations came together to discuss issues related to their experiences with reintegration programming and former underage combatants. The conference also addressed research philosophy and design; ethical research issues; and potential research methodologies. During the conference, project partners decided to undertake a technique called PhotoVoice, a method of understanding former underage combatants’ issues through the creation of photographic narratives. These narratives were supplemented by another visual methodology called Body Mapping, which allows participants to visually depict the effects of an issue on their physical and emotional selves.

During the second conference, project partners discussed the first phase of work. Preliminary data were presented to the group and partners discussed how to build on the visual data through focus groups with affected communities. Participants undertook applied training on focus group moderation and interviewing techniques, and drafted a

focus group questionnaire that each partner organization worked from and adapted to their context.

Finally, ECI and HHI undertook key informant interviews with programmers and policy makers working on reintegration issues in DRC. These 16 semi-structured interviews were conducted with staff from international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in DDR programming and allowed providers of DDR services to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of the process and share their own perspectives. These interviews supplemented the opinions of the beneficiaries of these programs. To facilitate frank responses, the interviews were not recorded, nor are the responses attributed to individuals or organizations. At least one person took notes during each interview. Two researchers undertook close reading of the notes, and used grounded coding of the transcripts to identify themes. Text from these notes was then coded by theme, and the results of the interviews were synthesized into the conclusion and recommendations for improved programming.

This research project sought to:

- Foster strong partnerships between U.S. and Congolese organizations, ensuring that local partners developed the expertise to conduct their own research in the future;
- Generate qualitative data to inform understanding of the strengths, gaps and challenges in reintegration programming at the project sites;
- Create recommendations based on local knowledge to inform future reintegration programming and policy;
- Advance project activities and findings that can link local beneficiaries and actors involved in the reintegration programs to policy makers who implement these programs.

In the following sections, we present the methods and results of each of the research methodologies undertaken collaboratively by the partner CBOs, ECI and HHI. The sections cover Body Mapping, PhotoVoice and focus group results. The “Conclusions and Recommendations” section synthesizes the research findings from communities, former child soldiers and their families, and programmers involved in the DDR process.

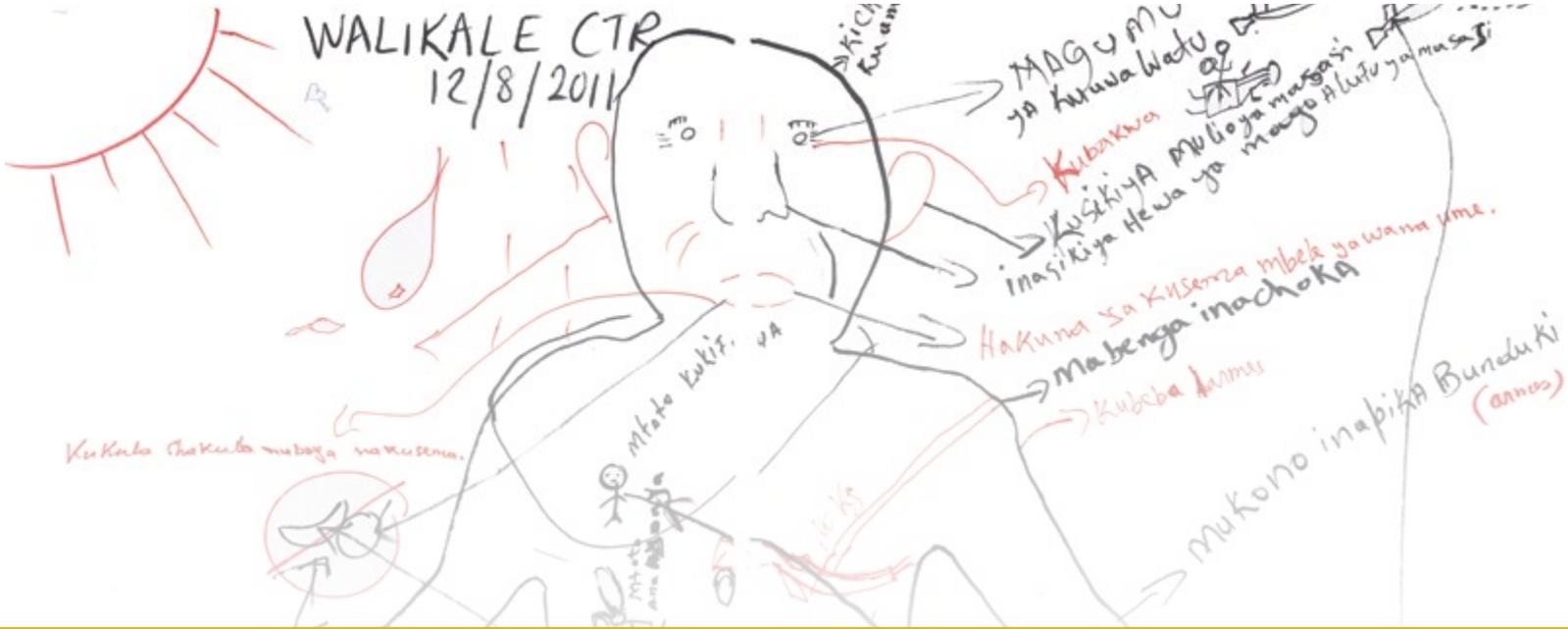
# Illustrating the Self's Journey

## Body Mapping about War and Recovery

Body mapping is a unique methodology that empowers participants to portray the physical, psychological and social impacts of war. In this section, we see the power of visual narrative as participants, many of whom had never drawn before, created deeply striking images that act as both art and data.

Using a life-sized outline of a human body, each group collaboratively illustrated phenomena that affected their bodies, their families and their communities before, during and after conflict. The exercise resulted in maps of the seen and unseen factors individuals confronted as they attempted to rebuild their lives after war.

WALIKALE CTR  
12/8/2011



MAGYU MU  
YA KURWA WAKU

Kubakwa

KUSIKIYA MULO YA MANGA SI  
inasikiya HEWA YA MANGO ALUFI YA MASA SI

HAKUNA SA KUSENZA MBEKE SA WANANA UME.  
Mabenga inachoka

Kubeba kumu

Mukono inapika Bundeiki  
(amos)

Mfata kutif. YA

Mataji  
ana mabanga

Kukula chakula maboga wakusema.

shich  
kuram

10/15



# Introduction

Body mapping is a technique that depicts the effects of a disease, profession or phenomenon on the human body. It is a visual methodology that can be undertaken individually or in groups. The process elicits pictorial representations of emotions, memories and identities, as well as the physical and psychological effects of an issue. This methodology places less emphasis on written research, and instead allows community members—including those with no formal education—to tell their stories through drawings. Participants in this process discussed the physical and emotional experiences of conflict and reintegration and collectively marked their observations on the body outline. This process empowered communities to self-define their individual and social experiences.

Each part of the human body, as well as the open space on the body maps, communicates the complex reality of reintegration. From hunger portrayed as a knife in the stomach to rocks in the chest symbolizing “a heavy heart,” these images possess a universality and immediacy. Each body part’s interaction with conflict was explored, as seen from the notes associated with a body map from Walikale:<sup>11</sup>

Her eyes have seen bad things: people dying and being raped. Her nose has smelt the dead people and bullets, as her ears have heard the bullet’s crackles and large missiles of war. Her mouth has eaten bad food but does not talk.

Participants also portrayed complex ideas using the body maps. In the Uvira body map, lines connect an empty stomach, a hand taking traditional crops and a gun on a child’s back. This image lays out the cycle of conflict predation by armed groups looking for food, using an individual as a symbol of a greater regional dynamic.

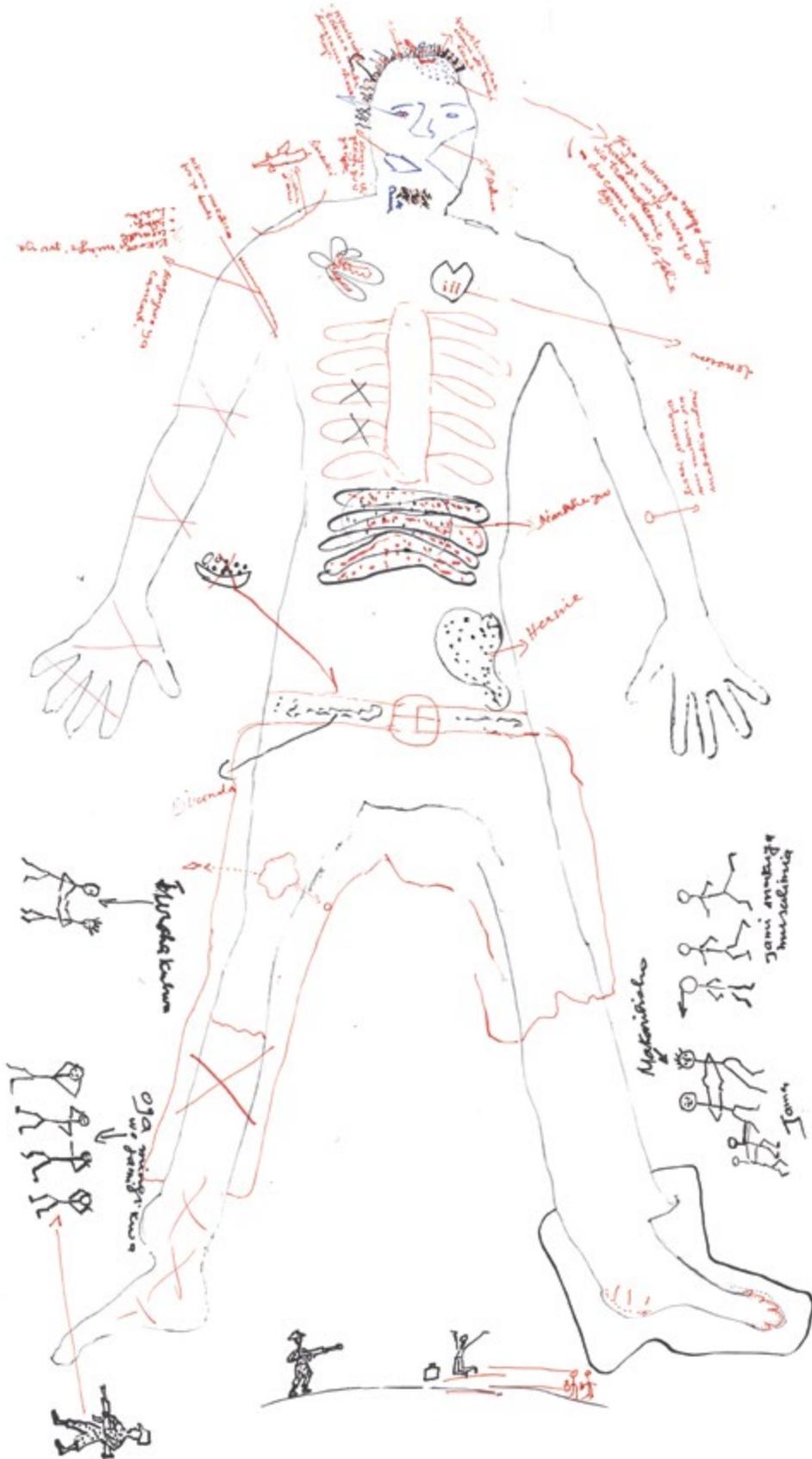
The white space around the human form was often used to indicate shared social space. For instance, the same Uvira body map cited above features a vignette in the white space of a former underage combatant sitting on a chair, drawn much larger than the other children below. This vignette illustrates how some former underage combatants intimidated other children when they returned to their communities and began to attend school again.

These participatory body maps illuminate how each community defined its environmental and social geographies. Although the body maps depict an anatomical form, the data revealed psychological and social phenomena in addition to physical experiences. Through engaging with, analyzing and comparing the body maps of both genders, a picture emerged of how former underage combatants and their communities interpreted their experiences with conflict and reintegration.

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11. Walikale 1.





Goma 2



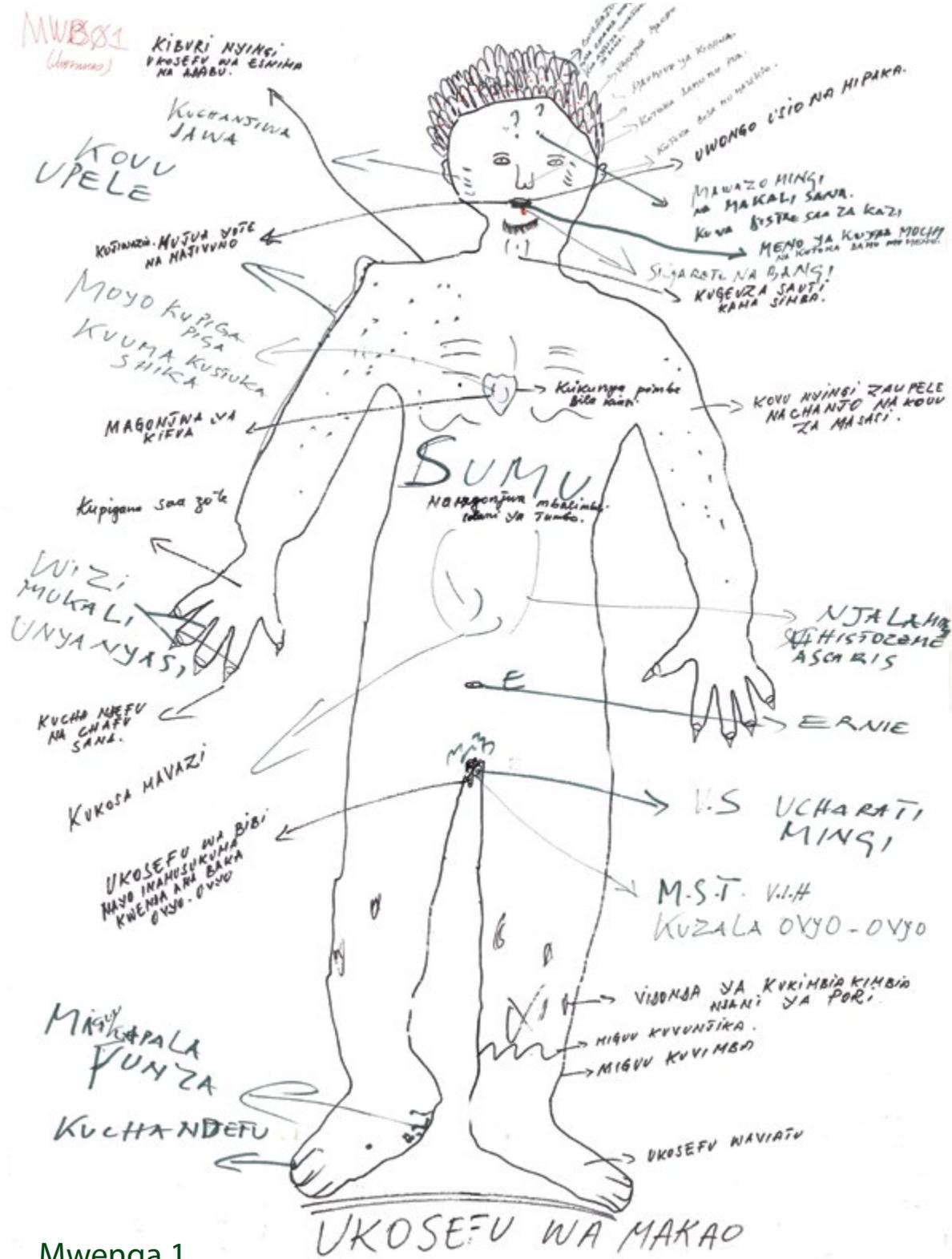
# Methodology

During the first project conference, the six local partner organizations discussed the merits of the body mapping methodology and chose this technique as part of the research process. Each local organization chose which groups they wanted to engage in the body mapping process. While some organizations chose to exclusively have former underage combatants participate, others involved a wider set of stakeholders, such as family and community members.

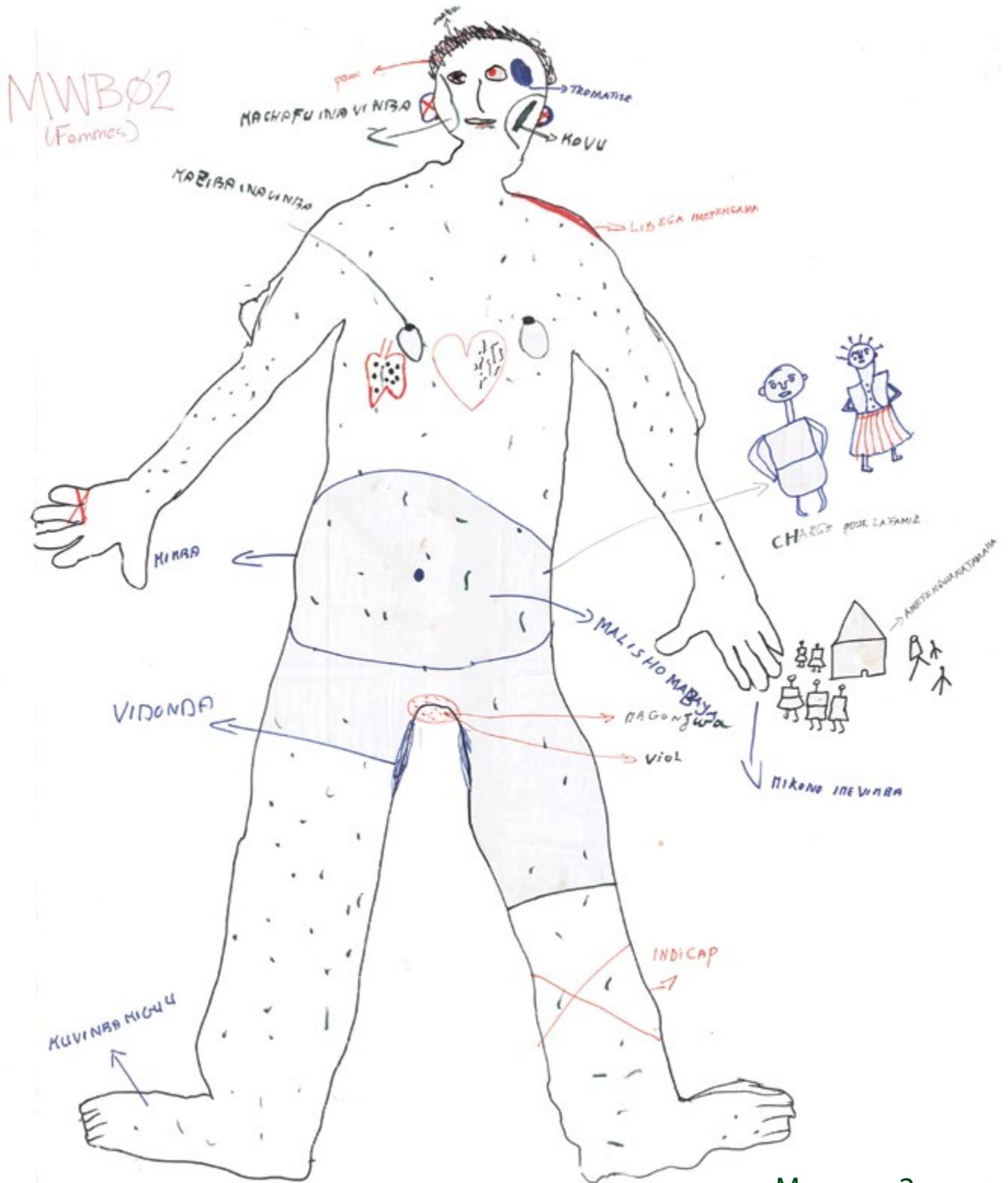
Each body mapping session began with a moderator explaining the methodology and engaging the group in a short example of the technique. After this, the participants were presented with a large piece of blank paper. The outline of a person was traced upon this paper, and the moderator began the session by asking a number of facilitating questions. Often the process began at the head and worked downwards. As a starting point, the moderator would ask the group: "What is the effect of being a child soldier on a child's head?" Questions were intentionally left open to elicit either physiological answers (such as headaches and vertigo) or an emotional state (depression, confusion, trauma). Sessions typically lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. All sessions had at least one moderator and one note-taker present. A total of ten body maps were collected for this project.

Members of the research team studied each body map and then recorded insights and distinctive characteristics. Two researchers coded salient themes and analyzed notes from each session. Researchers organized these notes into six categories: head, torso, arms, legs, genitalia and space outside of the body. Once these data were organized, the body maps' geographical origin, gender of the depicted body, participants' role in their community and themes relating to both pictorial and written data were recorded in a spreadsheet. After examining the data, the research team sorted the data into three dominant categories that emerged: mental health issues, physical issues and social issues.

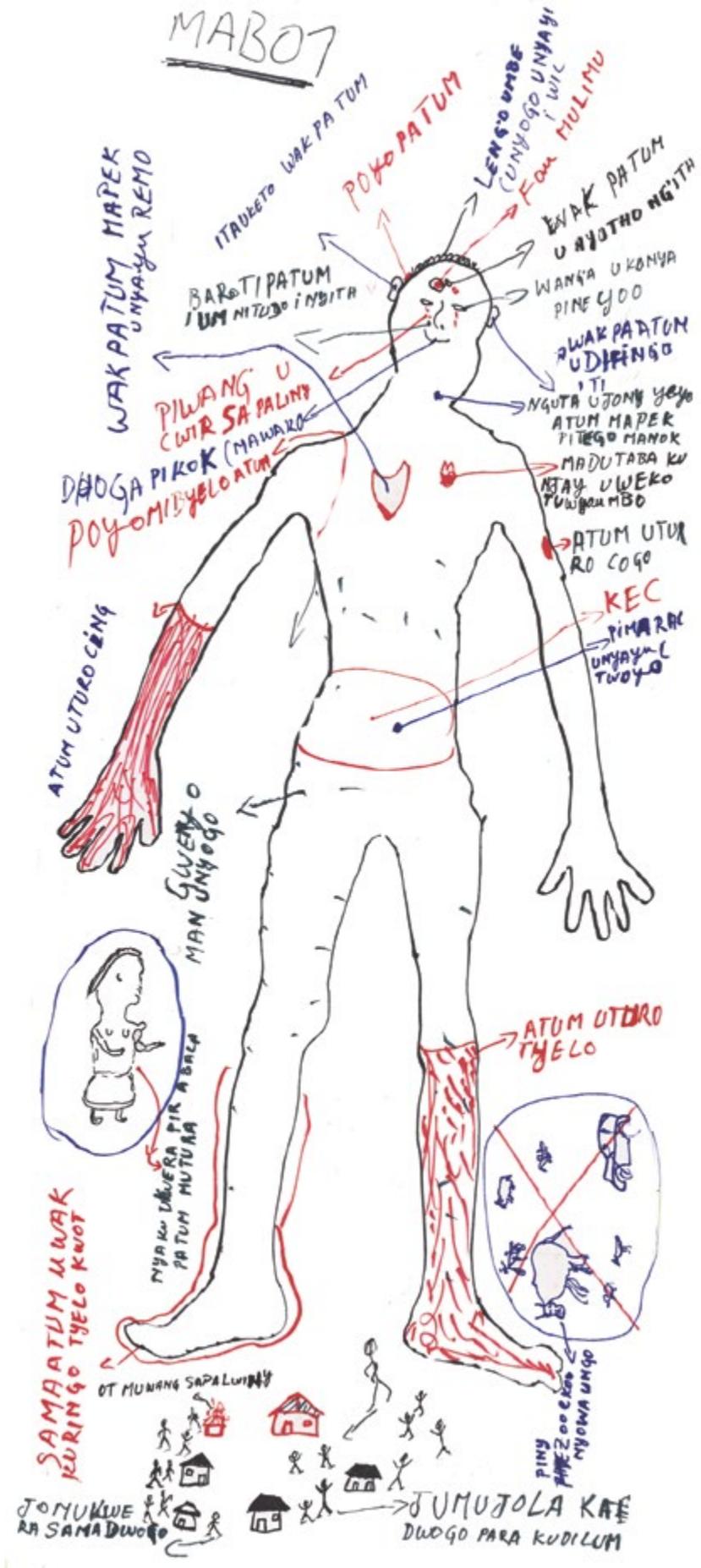




Mwenga 1



Mwenga 2



Mahagi

# Results

This section presents an analysis of the body maps and the notes that moderators took during each body mapping session. The data reflect three dominant themes that emerged from both the visual and written information: mental health issues, physical issues and social issues.

## Mental Health Issues

The body maps depict both males and females surviving a great amount of psychological trauma. There were, however, clear gendered differences in the experience of these problems. Overall, participants portrayed males as enduring more armed violence than females and more likely to abuse alcohol and drugs. Body maps represented both men and boys as struggling with psychological issues like anxiety, aggression and altered self-perception. In contrast, female underage combatants were portrayed as experiencing abuse, including sexual violence within armed groups, rather than direct combat. The body maps illustrate effects of sexual abuse, including sexually transmitted infections, such as HIV/AIDS, and unintended pregnancies. The body maps also portray females experiencing greater social stigma than men during reintegration.

While both females and males were shown to struggle with trauma, participants portrayed females as experiencing less visible expressions of mental trauma than males. Body maps represented males as more commonly exhibiting obviously altered behavior, such as aggression and anxiety, while females were shown to struggle internally with social exclusion and stigma without, however, manifesting visible behavioral changes. Despite challenges related to social stigma, participants described female former underage combatants as accessing positive social support systems. Female former underage combatants seemed, even in the

most difficult situations, to have found sources of mutually caring relationships, while similar support structures were never mentioned in relation to males.

## Trauma

### Trauma and Despair – “Heart that is Hurting”

Former underage combatants' experiences with conflict prompted a deep sense of despair, which have social and physical consequences. The Mwenga participants<sup>12</sup> depicted a female underage combatant as having a “heart that is hurting with many thoughts of hardships of life.” The “hurting heart” theme also appears in the Uvira body map. Participants explained that the pain was so pronounced that females turned to self-medication: “Eyes have seen violence which hurts her heart. This causes her to smoke cigarettes and cannabis.” (*Figure 1*)



Figure 1

12. Mwenga 2.



strain a male former combatant's relationships and potentially lead to violence during reintegration.

Aggression was only depicted in relation to male combatants.<sup>21</sup> This disparity may indicate a gendered difference in the way males and females express trauma, with aggression as a more common coping mechanism for males.

## Perception of Self

### Enlarged Ego —“His Mouth Tells Lies Endlessly”

Participants across all locations frequently referred to arrogance when describing male former underage combatants. The Mwenga participants<sup>22</sup> explained that this pride could be so inflated that it impeded communication: “His mouth tells lies endlessly, and he has arrogance and pride from knowing everything.” The Bambu participants pointed to this self-importance as a source of conflict: “He has become rude, immoral and arrogant resulting from the use of weapons and training received in the bush.” Despite these depictions of self-importance, the Uvira participants recognized that an inflated ego was tied to the pain one suffered: “He does not want to hear the counsel from someone else and his spirit is broken.” The participants described arrogance as a trait former underage combatants developed while in armed groups, as well as one that prevented them from successfully rebuilding relationships in their communities.

### Sense of Deficiency —“The Spirit is Broken”

While participants often portrayed former underage combatants as conceited, they also noted that these individuals simultaneously experienced deep self-doubt. Although the Bambu participants characterized male former underage combatants as “arrogant” and “proud,” they indicated a deep sense of insecurity as well: “He feels a loss of confidence and self-worth, and has an isolated and solitary living.” Other body maps echo the same sentiment; the Mwenga participants<sup>23</sup> labeled their image as feeling “rejected,” and the Uvira body map notes that the male former underage combatant's “spirit is broken.”

The data on female former underage combatants revealed



Figure 3

a more muted effect on self-perception, except for those who became mothers while in armed groups. Some female former underage combatants described experiencing a sense of rejection so significant they had to relocate to escape stigmatization. Overwhelmingly, the data on self-confidence referred to the male experience as inflated and stunted. These data suggest gendered differences in the way males and females in this research manifested trauma.

### Positive Relationships —“Many Good Things After Hardship”

Despite expressing moments of deep despair and pain, the female body maps show more instances of hope and positive social relationships than those of males. The Walikale female body map illustrates a rare instance of camaraderie in the military camp, describing a female combatant helping another give birth in the absence of a hospital. That same body map depicts a shining sun that “brings light, hope and many good things after hardship.” Even the Mwenga female body map, which expresses resentment for enemies, also highlights loving relationships: “She is separated into two parts (her relatives, people she loves, and those she hates).” These data demonstrated that positive relationships—or the hope for positive relationships—served as a source of support.

In contrast, the male body maps do not portray beneficial relationships. The Uvira body map, while illustrating the anger males expressed during reintegration, also expresses the desire

19. Walikale 2.

20. Walikale 2.

21. Bambu, Mahagi, Goma 2.

22. Mwenga 1.

23. Mwenga 1.



Figure 4



Figure 5

for positive relationships: “He also has a flower expressing that he wishes to be loved by his people.” (Figure 4).

## Physical Issues

The body maps depict how all underage combatants, both male and female, experienced constant and diverse forms of violence. Despite this commonality between the sexes, there were also significant gendered differences in experiences of physical trauma, drug use and sexual health and relationships. Female former combatants were depicted as facing much more sexual violence and abuse from fellow combatants and enemy soldiers than their male counterparts. The female body maps also reference significant issues related to HIV/AIDS, other sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy, revealing a lack of agency or ability to protect one’s sexual and reproductive health. The male body maps, on the other hand, portray more direct, gun-related violence. Males also depicted being more active users of alcohol and drugs, indicating this as a way one could escape from psychological problems.

## Physical Experiences of Conflict

### Multiple-Sensory Experience —“Lots of Things that Traumatized Them”

The body maps portray former underage combatants processing conflict experiences through a variety of senses. The Walikale participants<sup>24</sup> presented the experiences in the following way:

Her eyes have seen bad things: people dying and being raped. Her nose has smelt the dead people and her ears have heard the bullets crackle and the large missiles of war. Her mouth has eaten bad food but does not talk.

In this description, each of the female former underage combatant’s senses bore witness to violence. She saw, smelled and heard the horrors of the war.

In their description of female former underage combatants’ ordeals, the Kalehe participants highlighted the potential for witnessed, as opposed to directly experienced, violence as being painful in its own right: “Their ears heard lots of things that traumatized them. They heard a lot of awful stuff—noise. They heard gunshots.” On the body map, this is represented by an arrow coming from a combatant with a gun. The arrow also represents harsh words other combatants would say to women in armed groups. (Figure 5) The image of a gun not only presents a literal source of pain but also suggests that the secondary experience of conflict is destructive in its own right.

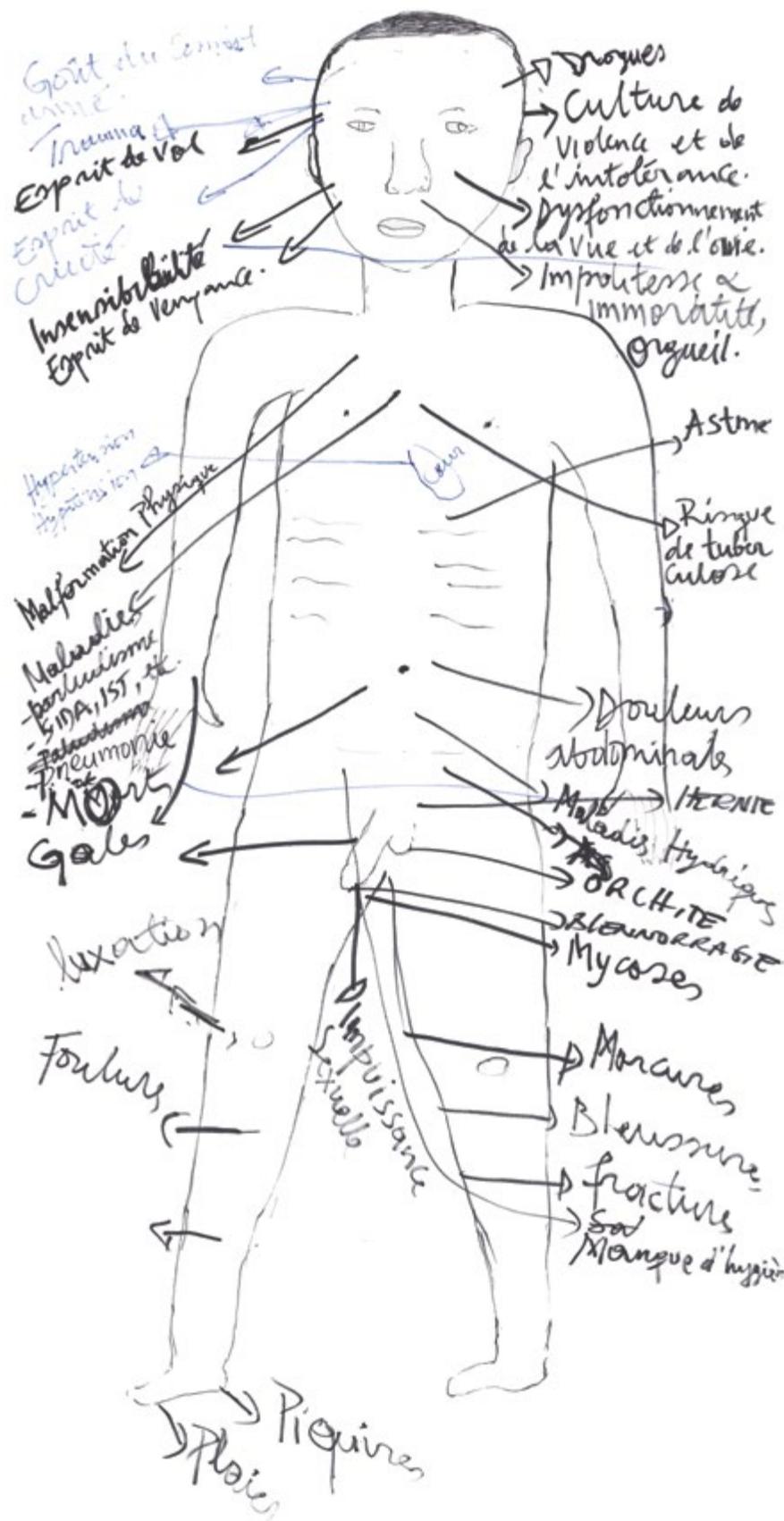
### Scars, Bullets and Injuries —“Beaten and Wounded”

The portrayal of scars and wounds on the body maps reveals different perceptions by gender and region. Firstly, while scars are present on both male and female body maps, their sources differ. The Mwenga participants<sup>25</sup> presented female former underage combatants as bearing scars from natural hazards or interpersonal violence, such as beatings: “The entire body has scars, rashes and various diseases due to lack of hygiene . . . [S]he bears a scar on the face resulting from being beaten and wounded.” (Figure 6) This female body map depicts scars that suggest they are from an intimate source, rather than the result of traditional warfare.

24. Walikale 1.

25. Mwenga 2.





Walikale 2

In contrast, males' scars were most commonly attributed to bullet wounds evidently acquired in combat. The body map from Bambu explains that the combatant depicted has "scars and wounds across his skin and bullet scars cover his abdomen." Numerous male body maps also mention experiences of gun-related violence. The Mahagi participants explained that "bullets graze his ears," and the Bambu participants wrote that "his eyes are also yellow, caused by the smoke from bullets and gunpowder." These body maps show that male former underage combatants are both victims of, and sources of, gun-related violence.

While both males and females are portrayed as experiencing violence, there were some gendered differences in the sources of violence. The body maps show that female former underage combatants received more scarring from interpersonal violence, while males were more likely to receive scarring from gun-related injuries.

### The Burden of Life in the Bush — "Carrying Heavy Loads"

Almost all body maps, regardless of gender or geography, present common challenges for the underage combatant in conflict, be they injuries from carrying equipment or traveling while in battle, hunger, poor hygiene or disease. The physiological nature of these complaints revealed the lack of even the most basic considerations for health: "Participants indicated hernias from carrying heavy loads and pain from wearing a heavy belt."<sup>26</sup> Other body maps explain that the constant movement through the bush takes its toll on an underage combatant's body: "Her feet are painful and swollen from so much walking and escaping the bush."<sup>27</sup>

Lack of food and access to clean water also demonstrated an absence of the most basic provisions. Without basic hygiene and adequate food, former underage combatants suffered from a range of health issues. Participants described how even the most fundamental tasks—carrying weapons, moving through terrain and finding food—took a toll on combatants' health.

### Use of Drugs and Stimulants — "To Keep on Fighting"

The body maps frequently reference drugs, alcohol and cigarettes. The Bambu participants drew red eyes and wrote that marijuana harmed eyes and destroyed teeth. According to

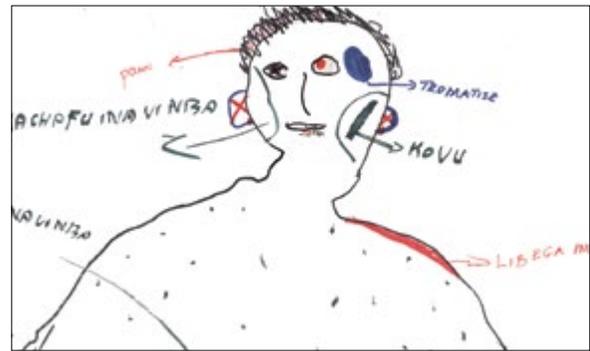


Figure 6

the Mahagi participants, marijuana and alcohol destroyed male former underage combatants' lungs and weakened their performance. The Walikale group,<sup>28</sup> in contrast, explained that alcohol and drugs actually benefited former underage combatants, as they enabled them "to keep on fighting." The focus is on male former underage combatants' experiences with stimulants—only the Uvira body map references them related to female former underage. Although this difference may reflect gender norms carried from former underage combatants' communities, the contrast also suggests distinct coping mechanisms for the two sexes in the conflict setting.

## Sexual Experiences

### The Perils of Childbearing — "Unwanted Pregnancy"

The body maps indicate that male and female former underage combatants prioritize different concerns regarding reproduction: males focus on the "unwanted" nature of children conceived in armed groups, while females highlight the absence of control over their own safety and reproductive health. The Bambu participants characterized male sexual experiences as "excessive sexual pleasure" that resulted in "unwanted pregnancies," among other things. The body maps of female underage combatants, however, focus on the lack of female consent during sexual experiences and an absence of support throughout unintended pregnancies.

The Uvira participants highlighted the potential for victimization of women and girls in the camps:

This shows sex without consent—something female soldiers are highly vulnerable to. The girl is carrying a

26. Goma 2.

27. Walikale 1.

28. Walikale 2.

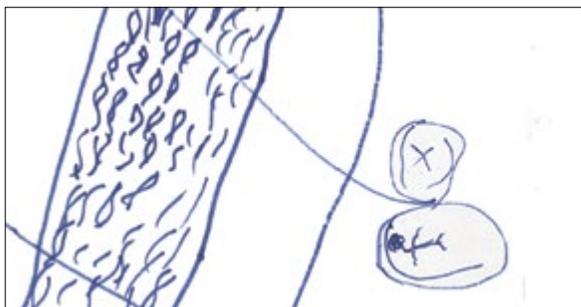


Figure 7

baby in her womb [illustrated by a circle with a small person inside] to show how girls are at risk of becoming pregnant in armed groups. (Figure 7)

The Walikale<sup>29</sup> and Kalehe participants echoed each other in lamenting the lack of reproductive health services. The Kalehe body map explains: “She is pregnant. No medicine, no midwives and they were expected to work just the same.”

### Sexual Violence and Sexually Transmitted Infections—“Wounds from Rape”

References to sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS, appear on body maps across communities and for both genders. The body maps for female former underage combatants, however, document sexually transmitted infections in greater numbers than those for male former underage combatants.<sup>30</sup> The body maps also indicate differences in how male and female participants speak about contracting sexually transmitted infections. More than half of male body maps mention raping females and many of the female body maps<sup>31</sup> mention experiencing rape. The Walikale participants<sup>32</sup> explained: “The sex organ is highlighted because [male underage combatants] would prove to enemies and inhabitants in conquered villages how strong they were. Even though it exposed them to sexually transmitted infections as a result of raping women.” The Uvira participants explained the predicament of a female underage combatant in an armed group: “She has various genital diseases. She is also an HIV and AIDS carrier. Moreover, her reproductive organ has pain or wounds resulting from rape and other sexual activity that took place without her consent.”

While both males and females were vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections, females were depicted as much more at risk. Data indicated that female combatants faced a separate battle within armed groups: though female combatants could be considered fellow combatants, gendered power differences in the camps also rendered them vulnerable to sexual violence from both fellow combatants and enemy forces.

## Social Issues

While reintegration could be a cause for celebration, tension existed between former underage combatants and the greater community. A lack of material resources and economic opportunities could intensify underlying friction. Male former underage combatants portrayed significant obstacles in finding a romantic partner during reintegration. Their female counterparts, however, described having so much trouble finding acceptance in communities that they were ultimately forced to leave and search for a new home. Returning from an armed group with a child further complicated female former combatants’ ability to successfully reintegrate. Though female former underage combatants often regarded their children as a source of happiness and social support, this did not change the fact that a woman with a child who “has no father”<sup>33</sup> was often stigmatized and isolated. These findings showed a significant and complex social burden for female former underage combatants with children.

All body maps, regardless of gender and location, express a sense of alienation and rejection upon return to communities. Although the basis for rejection was depicted as gendered, a sense of isolation and alienation runs throughout the majority of the body maps. The stigma that former underage combatants endured after returning home served as a constant reminder of the physical and psychological damage that resulted from conflict.

## Preserved and Fractured Relationships

### Communication —“She Does Not Listen”

The body maps illustrate how former underage combatants

29. Walikale 1.

30. Kalehe is the only female body map out of the four that does not depict sexually transmitted infections. Only three of the seven male body maps depict sexually transmitted infections, including Mwenga 1, Walikale 2 and Uvira-male side.

31. Three of the four female body maps discuss rape, specifically Uvira-female side, Kalehe and Mwenga 2.

32. Walikale 1.

33. This was the phrase used by focus group discussants; see page 96.

often use foul language and display hostile attitudes that hindered social acceptance. The male body maps from Goma<sup>34</sup> and Uvira note combatants cursing in their speech. Participants in Goma understood the language as a result of the combatants' pain: "The soldier uses swear words and does not know how to express himself well, a sign of traumatization."

The female side of the Uvira body map reveals that former underage combatants not only have trouble expressing themselves but also listening to advice. Notes from the body mapping session echoed this struggle, stating "She is prone to using very bad language," to describe dark lines and a dialogue bubble with waving lines representing curses emerging directly from the mouth. The notes went on to describe: "She does not listen to her family," which is illustrated by the girl's mother, who is portrayed as a smaller female with a line going to the girl's ear. At the end of the line, an "X" and a question mark indicate that the mother's advice does not reach the girl. The notes ended with: "Her mother gives her counsel, but she does not follow any of her advice." (Figure 8)

The Uvira participants also described the male former underage combatant as refusing to "hear the counsel of someone else." Often, the socialization that combatants experienced in armed groups further isolated them from civilian society upon reintegration. This disconnect was particularly evident in regards to verbal communication, one of the most basic foundations of social relationships.

#### Children Born to Female Combatants — "The Heart . . . Is Glad"

According to participants in the study, many female combatants returned to their communities with children born during their time in an armed group. Although many of these children were a result of rape, the body maps express a close relationship between mothers and their children, with some even expressing joy. The Walikale participants<sup>35</sup> drew a large heart, many times larger than the size of the heart in the underage combatant's body, explaining: "The heart that is drawn [outside and to the right of the body] is glad when she returns home, together with children and their lovely parents." In this image, the female former underage

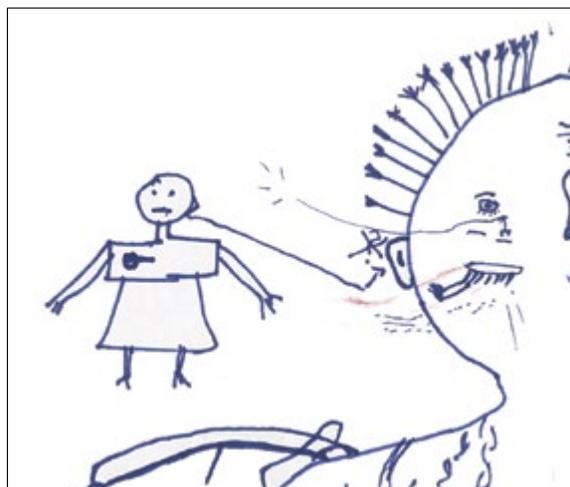


Figure 8

combatant feels joy at having both her children and her parents in her life. Even in body maps where affection for the offspring is not explicitly stated, such as the Mwenga participant's female body map and the Goma participants<sup>36</sup> vignette of a woman's experience, women move from their home communities with their children by their side. The body maps portray female former combatants as closely connected with their children, even in the face of their communities' scorn.

#### Reunion with Family — "No Harmony"

The body maps depict former underage combatants' relationships with their families as complicated and unpredictable; some body maps present joyous family reunions, while others depict more fraught relationships. As mentioned above, the Walikale participants' female former underage combatant feels "glad" to be back together with her children and "lovely parents."

In contrast, the Uvira participants explained on the female side of their body map that, "There is no more harmony among people, among family members. Buildings and peace are broken from wars in which children were involved." These participants indicated that conflict experiences often created a rift between family members and the larger community.

34. Goma 1.

35. Walikale 1.

36. Goma 1.

37. Goma 1.





Uvira



Figure 11



Figure 12

community homecoming. Even on this body map, however, the participants also depicted a scenario where the community shuns a former underage combatant. (*Figure 10*) The Bambu participants depicted a former underage combatant being poorly welcomed back into his community due to suspicions about the harm he may have inflicted in the past.

While the male body maps document a general sense of isolation, one of the female body maps discusses rejection specifically because they had borne children while in armed groups.<sup>39</sup> The Goma body map<sup>40</sup> displays a vignette of a female former underage combatant's homecoming with her children:

Here is a girl that had children with a soldier after being raped. An 'X' is placed over the soldier to show that he is not around. There is also a line drawn from the girl with children to her family. You can see that many girls are rejected when they return home with children and no husband. (*Figure 11*)

The Mwenga participants' body map<sup>41</sup> reveals that these female former underage combatants felt rejected and that some even left their community due to their sense of alienation: "The portrait of children indicates that the family is overloaded. Houses and people show separation in the family due to war and violence. She leaves with her young children."

While former underage combatants endured rejection, distrust and fear from their communities during reintegration, these communities also struggled internally to heal after conflict. Fractures existed within society, beyond tensions between former combatants and the community members. The Uvira body map depicts this sense of rupture:

The image above the body is a school, a church, a hospital and accommodation houses, which are destroyed, resulting from the violence of child soldiers [men as well as women]. There is no more harmony among people and among family members. Buildings and peace are broken from wars in which children were involved. One man carrying a gun makes all the other people scared. They have nothing to do against him and no way to protect themselves. They lack safety. (*Figure 12*)

These data from the body maps emphasized the need for reconciliation among all members of a community, former combatants and civilians alike.

### Poverty and Employment — "Not Many Jobs"

The body maps repeatedly characterize former underage combatants as financially unstable and, therefore, perceived as potentially dangerous elements in the community. Although former combatants may have had some access to resources while in armed groups, many experienced intense poverty during reintegration. The Goma participants<sup>42</sup> describe the following: "One soldier has money on one side

41. Mwenga 2.

42. Goma 1.

of the paper and on the other side of the paper there is a child soldier without money to show the lack of financial resources available after being demobilized.” (Figures 13 and 14)

This was put in contrast to life in armed groups, where combatants could acquire goods through force, as described in the Uvira body map:

The fact that this plentiful harvest is in his hand shows that child soldiers have stolen from the community—all the goods go to soldiers rather than civilians. A gun firing from the child's shoulder onto the food illustrates the cycle between violence and access to food.

The Bambu participants portrayed the difficulty finding employment after demobilization: “Usually, there are very few jobs or trade choices for former soldiers and they receive incomplete reintegration kits. Promises made during demobilization were not kept and poverty at the level of the family and community is stark.” The financial despair of the former underage combatant was physically evident, as both Goma body maps depict former underage combatants with unkempt hair and ripped clothing.

Male body maps tended to focus more on the issue of poverty during reintegration than female body maps. The Uvira body map, however, reveals one particular challenge female former underage combatants faced in both their economic and social reintegration—a lack of knowledge about how to fulfill expected roles, such as farming:

Her hand carries a weapon and items that were stolen, instead of producing food to feed the family. She has less useful hands because they are used only to fire weapons and fight rather than doing traditional forms of income generation in the village. This is portrayed by lines on her shoulder and a ‘molded’ hand drawn on her side. (Figure 15)



Figure 13



Figure 14

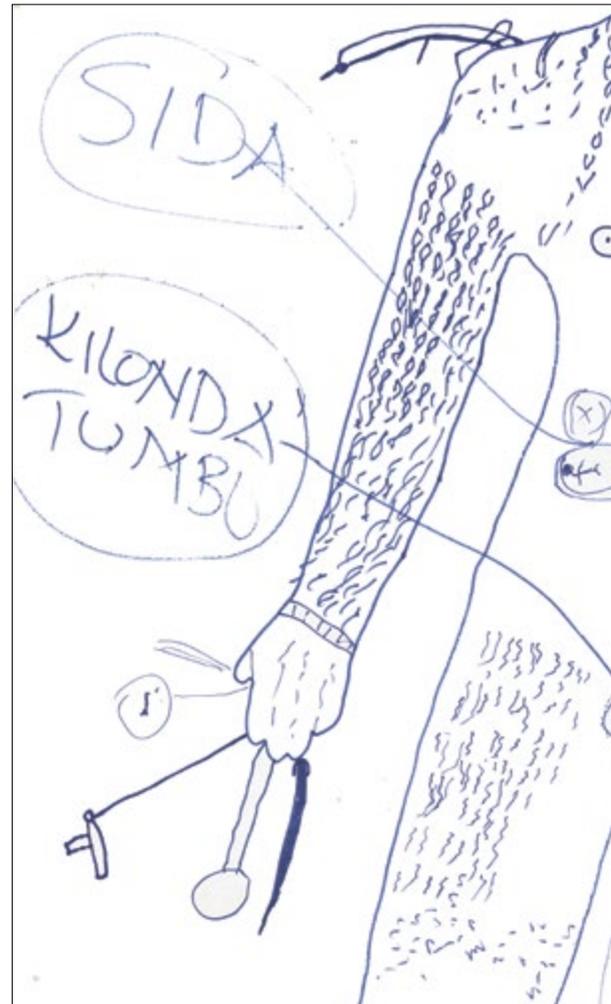


Figure 15

## Conclusion

This analysis examined three elements of conflict's effects on the human body: mental health issues, physical issues and social issues. While examining each topic helped to define different dimensions of former underage combatants' experiences, the body maps portray the interplay between the mental, physical and social worlds. For example, males explained how amputated limbs hindered marriage opportunities within the community. An inability to marry could in turn increase a sense of rejection and isolation, making it even harder to integrate socially. Aggressiveness, a common symptom of trauma, could further isolate these individuals, rendering it difficult for them to find and retain jobs and build social ties. This example illustrates the complex interplay between the internal and external lives of former underage combatants and how mental, physical and social capacities are linked. The body maps often depict social status and social interactions in the white space outside the body.<sup>43</sup> The inclusion of other figures on the body maps underlines the social effects of war.



Regional differences between the body maps emphasize each community's unique experience; some sites described a need for psychological resources, while others portrayed the physical impact of being in an armed group or the difficulties of reintegration. The Goma, Bambu and Uvira participants focused on the psychological distress and social fragmentation that occurred during conflict. In Goma, the body map notes detailed males' psychological trauma and difficulties reintegrating, emphasizing emotional stress that continued well after being in armed groups. The Goma body maps also repeatedly noted poor hygiene and torn clothing as indicators of poverty. In contrast, the Kalehe body map focuses predominantly on the experience of witnessing

violence through sight, smell and sound. In Uvira, both the male and female sides of the body map address sexual violence that occurred in armed groups, suggesting this was a common experience for both males (who were described as perpetrating violence) and females (who were described as experiencing it). In addition, both the male and female sides of the body map depict the difficulty that underage combatants have getting married, again indicating marriage as a key issue during reintegration in Uvira. The Mwenga body map does not address the psychological impacts of being an underage combatant, but does emphasize the cruelty of war, portraying a lack of food and hygiene coupled with significant physical and sexual violence. The Bambu body map explores both the emotional and physical consequences of conflict, portraying both emotional duress and lost limbs and other physical injuries.

43. Goma 2.

Despite differences between sites, there were also clear commonalities. All former underage combatants described being deeply affected by the experience of war and faced physical and psychological trauma. The data also suggested that the impact of being an underage combatant was highly gendered. Males noted experiencing more armed violence and psychological distress, which manifested itself in anxiety, depression and anti-social behavior. Females described enduring more sexual and interpersonal violence, and faced more social stigma that may have pressured them to relocate after reintegration.

The body maps depict male former underage combatants as struggling with psychological wounds which hinder their ability to reintegrate into the community. They were also less likely to access positive relationships that provided support. There was a strong focus on their inability to marry. Males

were also more likely than females to indicate a reliance on alcohol and other substances.

Female former underage combatants were more likely to express experiencing interpersonal violence, especially sexual violence. While male former underage combatants described isolation due to an inability to access job opportunities and marry, many female underage combatants with children faced stigma so powerful that they left their communities altogether.

While there were problems and vulnerabilities unique to male and female combatants, the Uvira body map, which merges both experiences by showing a half-male and half-female figure, provides an important lesson. The experiences of one group—male or female, civilian or former combatant—are still part of an integrated experience.



# Through Their Lens

## PhotoVoice Essays by Former Underage Combatants and Community Members

This PhotoVoice method allowed former underage combatants and community members to chronicle their own stories. Here, the narrators used photographs to express their hopes, problems and successes. Through the narrative arc of photographs and their captions, we learned about the lives of former underage combatants before, during and after life in armed groups. These photographs illustrate how these individuals processed their own experiences, which issues were most important to them and their sources of vulnerability and resilience.





Some of my siblings are happy with my coming but some rejected me. GO011

# Introduction

PhotoVoice is a methodology that uses photographs to show how a person experiences and understands social phenomena and disease. Like body mapping, PhotoVoice essays can express emotions and memories, as well as physical and psychological experiences. This approach allows individuals to express themselves in a visual format that requires no previous experience with a camera or research. Each person serves as the documentarian of their own story, with the power to define the issues most important to them. Former underage combatants and community members who participated in this part of the project shared stories about the relationships and opportunities they lost when they joined an armed group, the trauma they experienced as combatants and the obstacles they continued to face as they sought to reintegrate into civilian life.

Participants featured a wide range of subjects in their photographs and used both literal and metaphorical representations of their experiences. Former underage combatants re-enacted memorable moments from their lives, demonstrating the traumas they survived in the forest and the struggles they met when returning home. They also captured images of significant people in their lives, including family members and teachers from reintegration programs. The photographs also illustrate how objects take on new meaning as participants used them as metaphors for their experiences. This was exemplified by one male former underage combatant's caption:

This photograph shows the condition of this tree which is comparable to the lives of children who were associated with armed groups who are left without support, abandoned by their communities like this tree which is in the process of disappearing.<sup>44</sup>

When examined as a whole, each essay offers insight into how the individual who created it experienced combatant life and the transition back to civilian life. When analyzed collectively, these photographic essays speak to the common struggles of former underage combatants, while also examining gendered and geographic differences.



44. UV001.



I fell sick and was hospitalized. KA030



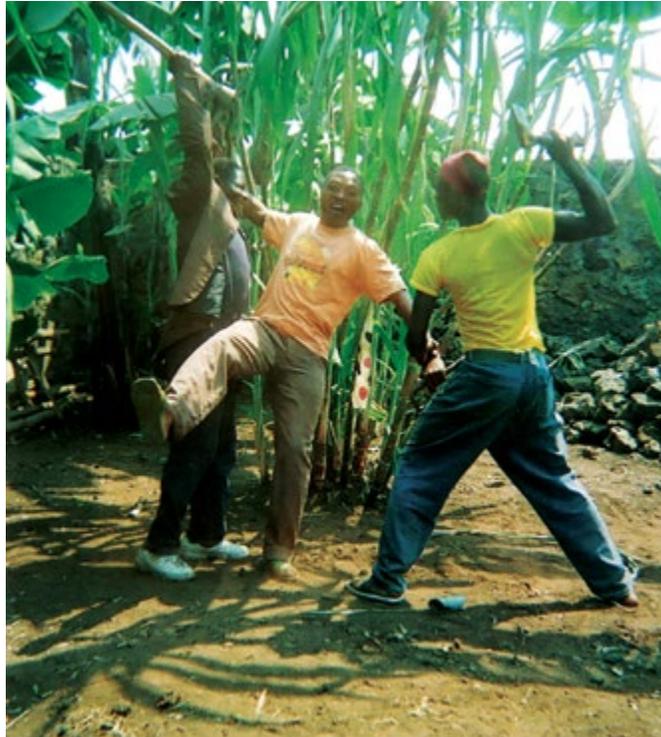
I went to fetch water and that is the time I got the opportunity to quickly shower because if I am caught I will be beaten badly. KA027



I want to show the world where I was hit in the left leg by a bullet. Wearing this prosthesis helps me get around, but not quickly. UV001



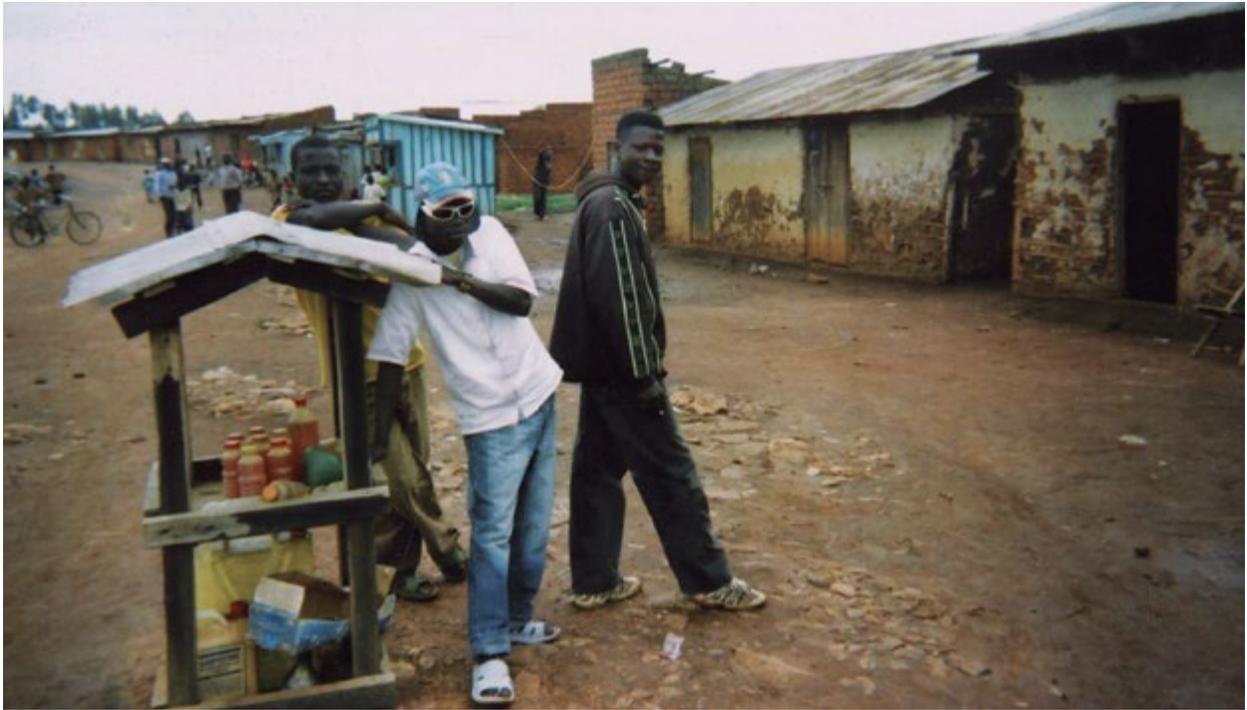
I showed my wife the scar left by the gun that I carried. MA033



They are beating me because they want to go with me in the rebel army in the bush. GO018



I reflect on what I am going to do in this world. MA033



Some of my friends finished their studies, others became rich, and me, I lost my time and my chance in the army. MA034



This photo reminds me of the great joy of the family members when the child came back to their family and their community. UV010



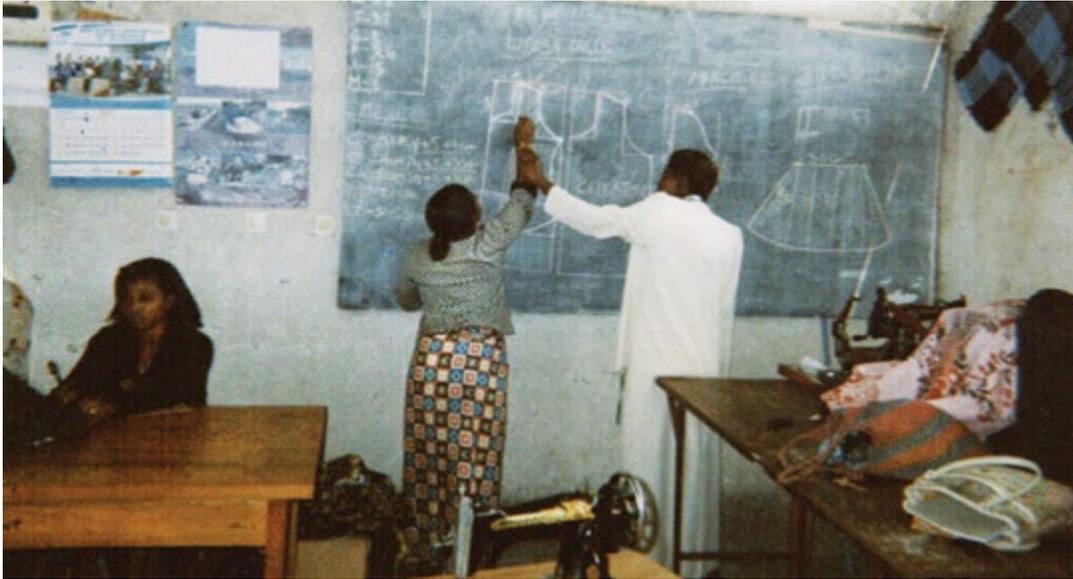
This photo shows how hard life is in my community where we live with ex-combatants who have not been included in the reintegration and reinsertion programming. This why my family makes alcohol to survive. UV010



This hole reminds me where we were hiding during combat and the pits where we buried the dead bodies on the battlefield. MA036



The child returned from the army and contributes to the work of the community. MA032



I am in school and the teacher is teaching me how to draw a blouse and a skirt on the blackboard. GO012



The two parents learned that their child has returned from the army and their smile symbolizes the joy and wish that he would reintegrate into the family. MA032



The members of the community manifest their discontent of supporting child soldiers (criminals, rapists, represented by this poison in this glass). MA040



This photo shows how many ex-combatants abandon the professional training they receive and prefer to cultivate their fields if they can. This is the activity many adopted. UV003

# Methodology

During the first project conference, the partner organizations discussed the merits of the PhotoVoice methodology and chose to employ this technique as part of the research process. Each local organization identified and invited male and female former underage combatants and community members to participate in the study. Between four and ten people from each community participated. A total of 50 PhotoVoice essays (916 photographs) were collected. To see a selection of photographs, see Appendix 2.

After selecting interested individuals, each organization hosted a training session for participants that covered the purpose of the study, how to use the cameras and elements of visual storytelling. The session moderator explained that every photograph should represent something about each person's life and experiences. As part of the training session, participants practiced composing photographs that told a specific story, using a piece of cardboard with a viewfinder cut out. Participants were also trained to use a script to obtain consent from individuals included in their photographs, prior to taking the photograph. At the beginning of the process, each person created a list of photographs they wanted to take, but were told that they could change their plan as they wished. Cameras were distributed at the conclusion of the training session.

Participants were given two days to complete their photographic essays before returning their cameras to the project staff, who then developed the film. Data were de-identified

using codes. Each local organization hosted a follow-up session with participants the day after the film was developed. During this session, participants captioned each of their photographs. Moderators were available during the session to help participants write their captions. After participants completed this process, each person presented their photographic essay to the group. The moderator then facilitated a group discussion about similarities, differences and major themes that appeared in the photographs.

Members of the research team who are native to eastern DRC translated the captions from Swahili and French to English. Three team members independently generated lists of themes found in the data after looking at both the photos and their captions. Through triangulation, the research team then created a codebook of defined categories and sub-categories. Using this codebook, the captions were coded independently by two people using NVivo 8 (QSR International, Cambridge, Mass.).

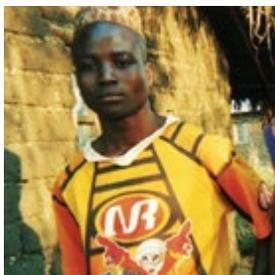




Figure 1: I am thinking about my life before and now and my trouble and then they rape me again. KA027

# Results

This section presents an analysis of the photographs and captions created by former underage combatants and members of their communities. The data are divided into two distinct periods that emerged: “life in armed groups” and “returning and rebuilding.”

## Life as a Combatant

### Life Before Conscription— “I Am Thinking about My Life Before”

While less than half of the participants took photographs depicting their lives before conscription,<sup>45</sup> those participants who did address the topic focused mainly on livelihoods and education. Females took two-thirds of the photographs depicting life prior to combatant life, portraying their abduction or reflecting on their previous lives.<sup>46</sup> One female from Kalehe captioned a photograph: “I was coming from fetching water from the spring and the soldiers took me on my way back.”<sup>47</sup> Another female from Kalehe discussed how her experiences as an underage combatant have tainted her memories of her life before soldiering: “I am thinking about my life before and now, and my trouble, and [so] they rape me again.”<sup>48</sup> (*Figure 1*) More than a third of the photographs that address this theme were taken by female former underage combatants in Kalehe. This group’s photographs almost exclusively link life before conscription with violence of some kind, including abduction, rape or attack.

Males generally linked life before enrollment with descriptions of being students.<sup>49</sup> One male former underage combatant described how he often thought back to his

life before conscription, saying: “I remember when I was in a soldier’s life, I thought a lot about how I used to be in school.”<sup>50</sup> Another male former underage combatant wrote: “I am reading and doing home assignment when I was a student.”<sup>51</sup> Many photographs of life before recruitment illustrate reenactments of the experiences described in the captions, rendering participants as both directors of, and subjects in, the resulting images.

### Life in the Militia—“The Bad Suffering We Passed Through”

Both male and female former underage combatants portrayed their lives in armed groups as one characterized by inhuman living conditions and conflict-related abuse.<sup>52</sup> Males and females both discussed violence and looting, while females mentioned poor living conditions, including hunger, and gender-based violence more often than males. Former underage combatants of both genders placed a particular focus on hunger and harsh working conditions.<sup>53</sup>

Higher-ranking members in armed groups controlled the scarce food that was available in the bush, leaving many underage combatants with little or nothing to eat. A female former underage combatant from Kalehe said: “Soldiers were making us cook for them, but were not giving us food

45. Twenty-three of the 50 photographic essays included at least one reference to life before conscription.

46. Half of the captions from female former child soldiers discussed life before conscription in relation to joining or being in an armed group.

47. KA031.

48. KA027.

49. Men from Bambu, Goma, Mahagi, Mwenga, Uvira and Walikale included photographs about life before conscription.

50. WA007.

51. GO015.

52. Thirty-nine out of 50 photographic essays include photographs on the topic of life in the militia. This resulted in 327 photographs. Life in the militia was of particular importance to the participants in Kalehe and Walikale, all of whom included at least one image on this topic.

53. Poor conditions were discussed in 27 of the 50 photographic essays (102 photographs). Hunger, specifically, was discussed in 18 photographic essays (30 photographs).

in turn.”<sup>54</sup> A female former underage combatant from Mwenga wrote: “Where we were at in the forest, we didn’t have food, we got just a little, we cooked it.”<sup>55</sup> Some former underage combatants expressed concern about the quality of the food they received. A male former underage combatant from Walikale captioned one photo: “This picture shows me the bad suffering we passed through when we were eating on bad dishes.”<sup>56</sup> A male participant from Mwenga took a photograph of several women sitting and standing around pots and plates with food on them; he captioned the photograph: “These are Mai Mai and they mix this food with bad food.”<sup>57</sup>

Many former underage combatants—both males and females—depicted attempts to find food on their own to combat undernourishment. This sometimes resulted in punishment if caught. A female former underage combatant from Kalehe explained: “One day I was very hungry and climbed a fruit tree to get some so that I can eat, but when they saw me I was beaten a lot.”<sup>58</sup> When food was not readily available, some underage combatants resorted to theft. A male underage combatant from Goma simply said that he was “looting for survival.”<sup>59</sup>

Former underage combatants were also forced to do labor-intensive work during their time in armed groups, compounding the difficulty of surviving on poor nutrition. Females illustrated many types of work they did in armed groups, including farming; cooking food; fetching water and firewood; cleaning dishes, clothing and shelter areas; and carrying heavy items on their heads. One female former underage combatant from Uvira said: “These are memories of the hard and heavy work that we did with this friend when we were still in the armed group.”<sup>60</sup> (*Figure 2*) A female former underage combatant from Kalehe captioned one photograph: “Here I am cleaning the house of the commander and

if I didn’t clean it properly, they would beat me very badly.”<sup>61</sup> One female former underage combatant from Kalehe said she was threatened with death if she stopped working because of fatigue, explaining: “When I said I was tired, they said they would cut my throat.”<sup>62</sup>

In contrast, males did not list specific tasks, but used their essays to reflect on their general combat experiences. One male former underage combatant from Uvira captioned one photograph: “To remind me of the place where I was injured during the period of sad memories... in other words, the armed conflict.”<sup>63</sup> (*Figure 3*) A male participant from Mahagi wrote: “This photograph symbolizes there where we lived in the army, but also the place where I hid myself during combat.”<sup>64</sup>

Almost half of all participants included at least one photograph related to their health while living with armed groups.<sup>65</sup> Photographs depicted a range of topics, from the life-long injuries they sustained while in armed groups, to general comments on illness. Male former underage combatants contributed more than two-thirds of the photographs on this topic.<sup>66</sup> For both males and females, the majority of photographs related to health referenced the medical care they received, either during their time in an armed group or after they left.<sup>67</sup>

Almost one-third of the health-related photographs reference injuries sustained during conflict and the lasting implications these injuries have on former combatants’ new civilian lives. One male former underage combatant from Uvira included eight photographs about losing his leg and how this disability affected his social reintegration into his community. Some of his captions included:<sup>68</sup>

54. KA030.

55. MW021.

56. WA046.

57. MW023.

58. KA026.

59. GO018.

60. UV008.

61. KA027.

62. KA030.

63. UV001.

64. MA034.

65. Twenty-three participants included photographs about health. They came from six communities: Mwenga, Walikale, Goma, Bambu, Uvira and Kalehe.

66. There are 58 photographs on health. Forty-one of them were taken by male former underage combatants.

67. Twenty-five photographs are about medical care.

68. UV001.



Figure 2: These are memories of the hard and heavy work that we did with this friend when we were still in the armed group. UV008



Figure 3: To remind me of the place where I was injured during the period of sad memories . . . in other words, the armed conflict. UV001

“I want to show the world how I lost my entire leg because of the war.”

“This girl was sad to see me with a disability—she is thinking about how she can accept to be married to a man with only one leg.”

“This photo shows my disability, which is a limitation for me because I cannot ride a bike as my friends do.”

Male former underage combatants also included photographs of their wounds; one participant from Uvira wrote: “This photograph shows the scars I received on my arms and legs because of a grenade thrown on us during a battle when I was in an armed group.”<sup>69</sup>

Many former underage combatants used their photographs to illustrate violent experiences—both acts they were subjected to and those they perpetrated.<sup>70 71</sup> A female former underage combatant from Kalehe wrote: “I was just reading their book when one of them noticed that I was reading, I was beaten a lot.”<sup>72</sup> A male former underage combatant from Mwenga explained: “This shows us the scar of a Mai Mai who was enrolled by force and was beaten very much.”<sup>73</sup> Others were more specific about the violence they survived, with some taking photographs of their own scars or wounds. A male former underage combatant from Mahagi wrote: “This scar shows the harmful effects of the war on civilians.”<sup>74</sup>

Former underage combatants also showed how non-combatants were affected by the conflict.<sup>75</sup> A male former underage

combatant from Bambu captioned one photograph: “Regret: The Ugandan military had killed five brothers and buried them in the same ditch.”<sup>76</sup> While some of these photographs focused on individuals who were injured, a few participants took photographs showing the population-level impact. One male from Mahagi explained: “The combatants come to rob and pillage the livestock of the population.”<sup>77</sup> A female from Mahagi captioned one photograph: “This image represents how many military groups ambushed the people to pillage the population, the white stones represent money.”<sup>78</sup>

Former underage combatants also described perpetrating abuses, though in far fewer numbers.<sup>79</sup> The most common form of abuse depicted was harassing and looting civilians. A male former underage combatant from Goma wrote: “Here I have joined their group and have become a full rebel disturbing those using the road.”<sup>80</sup> A female former underage combatant from Walikale captioned one photograph: “This photograph is a boutique; it reminds me how we would pillage things of people.”<sup>81</sup> Only two photographs discussed the experience of killing a person, one by a male former underage combatant and one by a female former underage combatant. A male from Uvira wrote: “This photo shows the place under the tree where I killed a person for the first time when I was a child soldier.”<sup>82</sup> A female from Mahagi echoed a similar experience: “This knife reminds of a sad memory how we killed innocent people with knives.”<sup>83</sup>

Sexual violence was also featured in photographs, most of which were taken by female former underage combatants.<sup>84</sup> These photographs convey how combatants experienced

68. UV001.

69. UV002.

70. General violence was discussed in 27 photographic essays (73 captions).

71. Thirty-seven photographs were about former underage combatants experiencing violence. These came from eight photographic essays by male former underage combatants and nine by female former underage combatants. These came from Kalehe, Mahagi, Walikale, Uvira, Mwenga and Goma.

72. KA026.

73. MW022.

74. MA034.

75. Eighteen photographs are about abuse committed against and experienced by non-combatants. These were not about abuses committed by the former underage combatants against civilians. These photographs came from Uvira, Mahagi, Mwenga, Bambu and Walikale.

76. BA044.

77. MA039.

78. MA040.

79. Perpetration of violence is present in seven photographic essays; three from male former underage combatants and four from female former underage combatants. They came from Walikale, Mahagi, Goma and Uvira.

80. GO018.

81. WA048.

82. UV001.

83. MA036.



Figure 4: I am coming out of the garden and meet the Interahamwe and they rape me on the road, then they tied me up and carried me and my hoe that I used for cultivating. KA027

and witnessed this abuse. More than one-third of these photographs show the individual participant's experience of being raped by members of armed groups, though it was not always clear if the incidents happened before or during their time associated with an armed group.<sup>85</sup> One female former underage combatant from Kalehe wrote: "This is the photo of how I was raped by the Interahamwe on the way home from the market."<sup>86</sup> Another female former underage combatant from Kalehe captioned a photograph: "I am coming out of the garden and I meet the Interahamwe and they rape me on the road—then they tied me up and carried me and my hoe that I used for cultivating."<sup>87</sup> (Figure 4) A female from Mahagi explained: "These flowers make me reflect on God, who created them, because it is He who is my father.

My birth father chased me away with my two kids, who also do not have a father, because of the rape that we were submitted to during our participation in armed groups."<sup>88</sup> This photograph by a female former underage combatant was the only one that mentioned children born of rape. About half of the photographs featured others who had experienced sexual violence, some of whom were family members of the participants. A male former underage combatant from Mahagi—the only male to include photographs about sexual violence—said: "This red flower symbolizes the blood that flowed from these raped women."<sup>89</sup>

Only one image depicts how a participant may have been compelled to assist in perpetrating sexual violence while in

84. Sexual violence was present in ten photographic essays (15 photographs). Only one male former underage combatant included photographs about sexual violence (MA031). They came from Kalehe, Mahagi, Uvira and Walikale.

85. Five photographs discuss an individual's experience with rape. Two came from KA027, three from KA028 and one from MA036.

86. KA028.

87. KA027.

88. MA036.

89. MA031.

an armed group. A female former underage combatant from Walikale explained: “It reminds me how we were searching for our chiefs to give us girls who were virgins. Also this photo reminds me how I came into being a soldier.”

### Leaving the Armed Group—“I Am Running Away”

Most participants said they had to escape in secret in order to leave an armed group; a few noted that community members assisted in their departure. Escaping was presented in 12 photographic essays, more than half of which were produced by female former underage combatants in Kalehe.<sup>90</sup> Former underage combatants presented two opportunities to flee: during unsupervised work and during active combat. A female former underage combatant from Goma wrote: “I am running away/escaping after fetching water.”<sup>91</sup> A female former underage combatant from Kalehe explained it was difficult to escape because she was watched by other soldiers: “I am cultivating with a soldier behind me to make sure I don’t run away.”<sup>92</sup>

Four photographs depict successful escapes, three of which reference how others helped the underage combatants exit armed groups. A male former underage combatant from Mwenga explained: “This mama saw me in the forest where I was hiding and she took me to her home.”<sup>93</sup> A male former underage combatant from Uvira captioned one photograph: “Here are the people who facilitated my exit from the armed group and who welcomed me into their group of friends.”<sup>94</sup>

## Returning and Rebuilding

### Social Reintegration

Nineteen photographers from Uvira, Goma, Mahagi and Mwenga took photos about the issue of rejection during reintegration and 27 photographers from Uvira, Goma,

Mahagi, Mwenga, Walikale and Bambu took photos about acceptance during reintegration.<sup>95</sup> Former underage combatants represented acceptance through photographs of family members celebrating their return through feasts or gatherings, offering them advice and expressing joy at being reunited. A female former underage combatant from Walikale explained: “It reminds me how our parents welcomed us when we came out of the forest.”<sup>96</sup> A male former underage combatant from Goma wrote: “One of my uncles did not believe that I have come back, thus came home to visit and was happy with my return.”<sup>97</sup>

Community members, such as teachers, NGO staff and religious leaders, were described as largely positive forces in a former underage combatant’s reintegration. These people were described as offering advice, emotional support and, occasionally, material goods as they worked to adjust to civilian life. A female from Uvira captioned one photograph:

This photo shows how when the girls left the armed groups, we gave them advice at home under a tree with other Mamas from the village. We gave them advice on their behavior and advised them to maintain good behavior whatever difficulties they faced in their daily lives.<sup>98</sup>

A male former underage combatant from Mahagi wrote: “This one here is my counselor and assists me often because I don’t have a job.”<sup>99</sup> A male former underage combatant from Mwenga wrote: “This man is an elder in the church and he prays for me.”<sup>100</sup>

Participants also portrayed fellow former combatants as positive influences, particularly for learning new professional skills. A male former underage combatant from Uvira said that he helped other former underage combatants learn how to sew: “I took this photo to show the state of the house where I trained four ex-combatants in tailoring on one

90. Twelve photographic essays include photographs on escaping or fleeing from an armed group (28 photographs). Eight are from female former underage combatants (23 photographs); four are from male former underage combatants (five photographs). Nineteen of these photographs are from Kalehe. The rest are from Goma, Uvira, Mahagi, Mwenga and Walikale.

91. GO012.

92. KA027.

93. MW023.

94. UV002.

95. Fifty-seven photographs regarding acceptance came from male former underage combatants (19 photographic essays) and 12 photographs came from female former underage combatants (eight photographic essays). These photographs came from Mahagi, Walikale, Uvira, Mwenga, Goma and Bambu. For rejection, 21 photographs came from male former underage combatants (nine photographic essays) and 12 photographs came from female former underage combatants (ten photographic essays). These photographs came from Mahagi, Uvira, Mwenga and Goma.

96. WA048.

97. GO014.

98. UV005.

99. MA033.

100. MW023.

machine.”<sup>101</sup> A female former underage combatant from Uvira said that she was trained to bake bread by another former underage combatant; she captioned her photograph: “This photo shows how a boy ex-combatant helped me a lot—he helped me learn how to make bread after I had been trained in making doughnuts . . .”<sup>102</sup>

While roughly two-thirds of the photographs about reintegration depict acceptance and positive experiences, roughly one-third portray stigma and social rejection. This is illustrated through photographs of former underage combatants being chased out of their homes by family members; being isolated and ostracized by other people in their community; and sometimes even being attacked by community members unhappy with their return. A male former underage combatant from Mwenga wrote: “When I left the forest this man hit me and poured water on me without forgiveness.”<sup>103</sup> Another female former underage combatant from Mahagi said: “The members of the community manifest their discontent of supporting child soldiers (criminals, rapists) represented by this poison in this glass.”<sup>104</sup> Former underage combatants described feeling sad and afraid in reaction to being rejected and stigmatized by family and community members. A female former underage combatant said: “I am sad because I was not welcomed by one of my sisters.”<sup>105</sup> A male former underage combatant took a photograph of a gnarled tree, which he said symbolizes the fate of abandoned underage combatants. He wrote:

This photo shows the condition of this tree which is comparable to the lives of children who were associated with armed groups, who are left without support, abandoned by their communities like this tree which is in the process of disappearing.<sup>106</sup>  
(*Figure 5*)

Social reintegration was not always depicted as an entirely

positive or negative experience. Some photographs portray a mixture of both acceptance and rejection, highlighting the complicated and sometimes contradictory landscapes that former underage combatants must navigate upon reintegration. A female former underage combatant from Goma captioned one photograph: “Some of my siblings are happy with my coming, but some rejected me.”<sup>107</sup> A male participant from Goma had a similar experience, writing: “Some of my siblings are happy with my return, but some are not (especially my younger brother).”<sup>108</sup> A male from Goma explained how his family helped him gain acceptance within the community, which initially feared him: “My brother brings me clothes and tells me to go and take bath and wear good clothes, because children are scared of me.”<sup>109</sup> Rejection was more often described as perpetrated by siblings and community members, while parents were almost universally depicted as accepting of their children.<sup>110</sup>

### Job Training and Formal Education— “They Teach Each Other Income-Generating Skills”

Education and job skills training were discussed by more than half of all participants and made up roughly one-fifth of all photographs.<sup>111</sup> Almost three-quarters of photographs about skills training and education were taken by male former underage combatants.<sup>112</sup> This could reflect the fact that men are often seen as the income earner in families and that having a job is seen as a vital part of being able to reintegrate, marry and build a family. Males focused on limited access to education; inadequate training kits and reintegration programming; interactions with the DDR-NGO network; and the types of skills they learned. In contrast, female former underage combatants took photographs of the step-by-step process of learning a new skill; being punished for poor behavior during training; and interaction between former underage combatants and other demobilized combatants

101. UV003.

102. UV007.

103. MW023.

104. MA040.

105. GO013.

106. UV001.

107. GO011.

108. GO014.

109. GO012.

110. There are 16 photographs about a former underage combatant being rejected. Three of them show a parent rejecting the returning child and 13 show a sibling or community member rejecting the returning child.

111. Education and job training are discussed in 31 photographic essays and 169 photographs.

112. There are a total of 170 photographs about skills training. One-hundred-nineteen of these photographs were taken by male former underage combatants; 51 were taken by female former underage combatants. They came from Bambu, Goma, Kalehe, Mwenga, Uvira, Walikale and Mahagi.



Figure 5: This photo shows the condition of this tree which is comparable to the lives of children who were associated with armed groups who are left without support, abandoned by their communities like this tree which is in the process of disappearing. UV001

and the community during the training process. Most of the photographs on this topic came from participants in Goma, followed by Uvira and Bambu.<sup>113</sup>

Former underage combatants experienced multiple challenges when trying to resume formal education or undertake skills training. One of the most common difficulties related to conforming to the rules of the training programs and, more broadly, to society. Participants said that they struggled to arrive at class on time, which resulted in punishment. A male former underage combatant from Mwenga wrote: “The difficulty we have in the training is the long journey on foot to reach there. People arrive late.”<sup>114</sup> A female participant from Uvira said: “This girl ex-child soldier often arrived late to training—she did not respect the schedule and that is why there is a clock behind her.”<sup>115</sup> A female former underage combatant from Goma captioned one photograph: “Was late for the class and thus punished: I have to make the

firewood.”<sup>116</sup> Former underage combatants also showed that they were isolated and stigmatized by other students because they did not conform to expectations. A female former underage combatant from Goma, who included 12 photographs about education, captioned one of her photographs: “I am punished because of bad behavior and smoking.”<sup>117</sup> She captioned another one of her photographs: “Counseling session: how to live with others in school and family. These are the school counselors telling me about behavior change.” A male participant from Uvira included a similar caption about receiving advice: “After their professional training, the young people agree to work together once again according to the advice of their mentor.”<sup>118</sup>

Former underage combatants were forced to share tools and kits in part because of the scarce resources made available to them for their education and training. Participants expressed frustration with how these limited resources affected their

113. Seven participants from Goma contributed 72 photographs on education and skills training. Four participants from Bambu contributed 36 photographs and nine participants from Uvira contributed 37 photographs.

114. MW020.

115. UV007.

116. GO013.

117. GO012.

118. UV004.

ability to learn. A female former underage combatant from Goma said: “I am practicing on the machine but I am being rushed and pushed by my colleagues who also want to practice.”<sup>119</sup> A male former underage combatant from Mwenga captioned a photograph: “We have a small difficulty to get materials to learn.”<sup>120</sup> A male participant from Uvira captioned one photograph: “This photo shows the inadequacies of the reintegration and reinsertion kit for tailoring—these three young people are in a dispute regarding a sewing machine included in a reinsertion kit.”<sup>121</sup>

Another obstacle for former underage combatants, specifically those in Uvira, was the inability to afford school fees. A female participant captioned one of her photographs:

This photograph shows the school where my daughter studied before she re-joined the armed group. After my daughter left the armed group, she did not go back to school because she was older and also we didn't have enough money to pay the school fees and other necessities for her re-entry into education.<sup>122</sup>

A male former underage combatant from Uvira said: “My children were sent home from school because I did not have enough money to pay their school fees.”<sup>123</sup> Another male former underage combatant from Uvira wrote: “This photo shows that due to lack of money, I was sent away from school. We recommend to both local and international NGOs that the lack of financial resources is the biggest barrier to long-term educational reintegration.”<sup>124</sup>

Even for those who could afford school fees, participants showed how the conflict damaged the education system's infrastructure, making attendance difficult regardless of financial means. One male former underage combatant in Bambu included six photographs in his photographic essay about

the need to rebuild schools. He captioned one photograph: “Schools were destroyed and therefore need to be rehabilitated.”<sup>125</sup> A male former underage combatant in Uvira wrote: “I took this photo to show how the doors of one school were forced closed as a result of the war between the Mai Mai and the FARDC.”<sup>126</sup> A male participant from Mahagi said: “The war causes people to flee their villages, the children don't study and no one works.”<sup>127</sup>

Former underage combatants took more photographs depicting the challenges, rather than accomplishments, they experienced during training.<sup>128</sup> There were, however, participants from Goma, Uvira and Mwenga who illustrated how they successfully learned a new skill. A female former underage combatant from Goma said: “I am showing the teacher the blouse I have been able to make and I am very happy to see how I am able to make a cloth that one can wear.”<sup>129</sup> A male former underage combatant from Mwenga wrote: “After finishing school, this is the first chair that I finished to make.”<sup>130</sup> In Uvira, specifically, former underage combatants saw their success in skills translate to success in overall reintegration. A female participant said: “The results of the girl ex-combatants after their training and the utensils that they use to prepare doughnuts. To the side there is a community member who is congratulating them on the work they have achieved.”<sup>131</sup> Another female participant captioned one of her photographs: “This picture shows how girl ex-combatants are meeting together and associating together in order that they teach each other income-generating skills.”<sup>132</sup> A male former underage combatant wrote, “These photos show the school which has played a big role in my educational reintegration.”<sup>133</sup>

Former underage combatants viewed the ability to financially support themselves as crucial to their reintegration into

119. GO012.

120. MW020.

121. UV003.

122. UV005.

123. UV010.

124. UV002.

125. BA044.

126. UV003.

127. MA034.

128. There are 54 photographs of training-related challenges. There are 16 photographs of training-related accomplishments.

129. GO012.

130. MW020.

131. UV007.



Figure 6: This picture shows the community field that was given to the ex-combatants as part of their economic reinsertion kit when they left the armed group. This field was meant to help them occupy themselves with hard work and forget about their lives with the militia. UV005

the community and civilian life. As with the discussion of education and skills training, male former underage combatants took more photographs related to livelihoods and economic reintegration than their female counterparts.<sup>134</sup> Male former underage combatants took photographs illustrating their desire to improve their economic situation and frustration that the lack of job opportunities, community support and context-appropriate reintegration forced them into undesirable work. In comparison, female former underage combatants were more likely to include photographs illustrating the economic support they received. Both sexes included captions about the different types of work they did and the financial needs of their families.

Being able to independently earn income was highlighted

as key upon returning to civilian life. Female participants showed a more limited range of income-generating activities, including farming and selling food or goods.<sup>135</sup> In contrast, male participants depicted a wider range of potential jobs they could engage in, possibly reflecting differences in the ways men and women seek income. A male former underage combatant in Uvira said: “These are the cows that I look after in the fields and the cows I milk in order to earn some money to see to other vital needs.”<sup>136</sup> Males, like females, talked about agriculture and selling goods, but also discussed starting businesses and seeking more formal job opportunities. A participant from Uvira wrote that he was able to save money from one job to start his own business: “Here, the little money that I had when I began to train ex-combatants allowed me to start another income generating activity in the village

132. UV009.

133. UV002.

134. Twenty-nine of the 128 photographs on livelihoods and economic reintegration were taken by female former underage combatants. Photographs came from Bambu, Goma, Kalehe, Mwenga, Uvira, Walikale and Mahagi.

135. KA028 and KA030.

136. UV002.

(a restaurant).<sup>137</sup> One male former underage combatant from Goma included six photographs to show the process he went through applying for a job.<sup>138</sup> He wrote:

“Reflecting: how to get a job.”

“Writing an application letter for a job (resolution to my thought).”

“Keeping myself busy as I wait for the results of my letter from the director.”

Former underage combatants linked their economic stability with how successfully DDR training programs empowered them to support themselves. Female former underage combatants were generally more positive about the impact of what they received for reintegration. A female participant from Uvira captioned one photograph: “This photograph shows the child who received his income-generating activity in the form of a reinsertion kit within his community. This income-generating activity is helping him in his life.”<sup>139</sup> Another female from Uvira captioned one photograph:

This photograph shows the community field that was given to the ex-combatants as part of their economic reinsertion kit when they left the armed group. This field was meant to help them occupy themselves with hard work and forget about their lives with the militia.<sup>140</sup> (*Figure 6*)

Male participants, particularly those from Uvira, viewed the support they received and the NGOs that provided this support as ineffective. One male former underage combatant wrote: “This photograph shows how NGOs use an inadequate kit to ‘reintegrate and reinsert’ young ex-combatants (one goat instead of three).”<sup>141</sup> Three male participants depicted selling their reinsertion kits for money. A participant from Goma wrote: “We have sold the kit so that we get some money.”<sup>142</sup> Another male participant from Uvira, explained: “Ex-child soldiers who were not reintegrated because they sold their reinsertion kits and these kits weren’t enough for two people.”<sup>143</sup> (*Figure 7*)

When reintegration programs failed, both male and female participants spoke about turning to hard labor to survive. A female former underage combatant from Uvira wrote: “This shows the difficulty of life in my community because of lack of support. I am obliged to do very intensive physical labour, for example, making bricks.”<sup>144</sup> A male participant from Bambu captioned one photograph: “It is not good for the ex-combatants to rely on artisanal mining of gold as their main activity.”<sup>145</sup>

137. UV003.

138. GO015.

139. UV009.

140. UV005.

141. UV003.

142. GO018.

143. UV004.

144. UV006.

145. BA041.



Figure 7: Ex-child soldiers who were not reintegrated because they sold their reinsertion kits and these kits weren't enough for two people. UV004



## Conclusion

In this analysis, participants presented their experiences in two distinct phases—life leading up to demobilization and life after demobilization. Former underage combatants described their experiences in armed groups as traumatic, a time characterized by a loss of control and self-agency. Every aspect of their lives was dictated by higher ranking soldiers, from what they ate to when they bathed to what happened to their bodies. Resulting health problems—malnutrition, poor hygiene, injuries—were worsened by limited, or no, access to medical care.

The second phase of life described by the participants, reintegration, was portrayed as both joyful and conflict-ridden. Former underage combatants' reintegration experiences were shaped by the reception they received at home. Parents were depicted as largely accepting of their returning children, while siblings and community members responded with a mixture of rejection and acceptance. Reintegration training programs offered new skills to demobilized combatants as they sought to become financially stable and independent. The participants, however, presented their struggles to participate in programs that did not always fit their needs.

We also examined gendered differences in how male and female participants presented their experiences as underage combatants. Female former underage combatants placed more emphasis on the experience of being a combatant than their male counterparts, contributing more photographs on conscription, poor living conditions and escape attempts. The issue of sexual violence was mentioned almost exclusively by females. Ten female former underage combatants described witnessing or experiencing such abuse, while only one male participant described this issue. In contrast, the presentation of life after demobilization was dominated by male former underage combatants, in regards to the reception they received upon returning home,

their perspectives on the training they underwent and their professional aspirations.

Differences in how communities prioritized issues also emerged. The experience of being a combatant was of particular importance to the participants in Kalehe and Walikale, all of whom included at least one photograph on this topic. Participants from these two communities, as well as Uvira, were the only ones to include photographs on sexual violence. Former underage combatants from Goma contributed almost half of all photographs about education and training during reintegration; this topic was also discussed at length by participants from Bambu and Uvira. Participants from Mahagi, Uvira, Mwenga and Goma showed family and community members rejecting demobilized underage combatants, while participants from all communities included photographs about being accepted by family and community members.

# Voices of Communities

## Focus Group Findings

Focus group discussions allow participants to describe their opinions and experiences in an interactive setting. These collective conversations highlighted realities that former underage combatants faced during the process of leaving armed groups and returning to civilian life. Discussions were carried out with former underage combatants, their families and community leaders. Findings from the focus groups highlight the complicated nature of reintegration programming in a context defined by decades-long conflict.



# Introduction

Focus group discussions are a qualitative research tool to provide narrative data about people's experiences and opinions. Individuals' responses, as well as the interactions among members of the group, become a source of information. Areas of agreement as well as dissension serve to emphasize the commonalities and differences in experiences and perceptions between groups of participants.



Open-ended questions were used to prompt conversations about different aspects of being a combatant and subsequently returning to civilian life. Focus group participants detailed their experiences with formal DDR programming and the social issues former underage combatants confronted as they sought to regain a place within their families and communities. Many participants expressed frustration with false promises and inadequate support during the process of DDR. Others indicated the need for NGOs to take a long-term, community-based approach to sustained reintegration assistance.

Participants cited stigmatization, isolation and lack of access to education and employment as significant barriers to reintegration. They also emphasized the major physical and mental health issues former underage combatants faced and the impact these had on their ability to successfully adapt to civilian life.

While problems and challenges were manifold, participants also identified ways to improve reintegration programming related to underage combatants in eastern DRC. Involving communities in the design and decision-making around DDR programming was cited as paramount. Participants also stressed the importance of providing training in job skills that were appropriate to each community's context and economic situation. Finally, participants described how undertaking holistic programming to address the needs not only of the reintegrating combatant, but also, their family and community was critical.

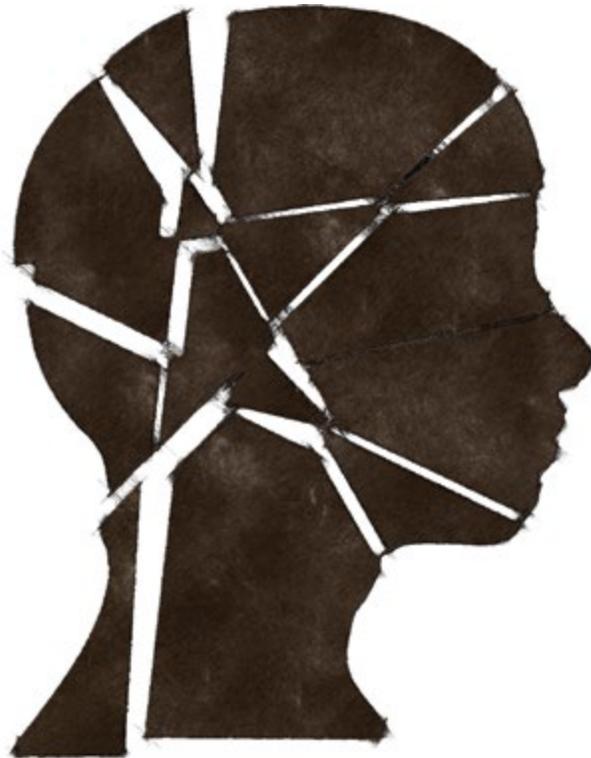
# Methodology

A total of 17 focus groups were conducted. At least one moderator and one note-taker attended each focus group session. All discussions were audio recorded with the permission of the participants. Discussions lasted between 90 and 120 minutes, and consisted of between four and 12 participants. Focus groups were conducted in the language of comfort for the participants. Languages used in the focus groups included French, Kiswahili and Mashi.

A team of translators from eastern DRC transcribed recordings of the focus groups. The same team then translated these transcriptions into English. Those areas of text that remained unclear were revisited by the research team with a translator for clarification.

Two researchers undertook close readings of the English transcripts of the focus groups. Each researcher identified key themes and sub-themes in the data independently, and then refined a final code book with input from two additional members of the team. Data were then coded using NVivo 9 (QSR International, Cambridge, Mass.).





## They come with a destroyed head

“You see the child is a soldier, he has a military thinking and he is like foolish . . . They come with a destroyed head. They are like foolish people. They are out of their minds.”

—Community member, Uvira

# Results

While formal DDR processes were mentioned in every community,<sup>146</sup> many of these references were either cursory or specific to only a part of the process. While such sparse information rendered it difficult to draw conclusions about general experiences with the DDR process, the fact that few participants were familiar with the DDR process was a finding in itself, suggesting that DDR efforts varied greatly over geographic areas and were unevenly implemented.

## Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Programming

### Disarmament and Demobilization— “We Did Not Want Military Life Anymore”

Descriptions specific to the disarmament portion of DDR programming were almost entirely absent from the focus group discussions—male participants in Uvira made a brief reference to it, and only female participants and parents in Nizi discussed the process. Participants who described DDR processes had generally negative perceptions. Male and female participants stated that they were either forcibly disarmed or given false promises of receiving incentives for turning in their weapons. A female participant in Nizi described her frustration with the process and her doubts about whether it was worth leaving the armed group, saying: “Now as we are still waiting for them to bring to us what they promised, we are waiting and there is nothing. Now we are thinking, ‘If we did not return our weapons our lives could be better.’” Parents from Nizi echoed the mistrust that former underage combatants expressed, saying: “The whites misled them; that if they returned the weapons one was going to give them money in exchange.”

One female former underage combatant from Nizi described having her weapon taken involuntarily:

The French soldiers started to collect weapons from citizens. . . They talk with our officer, they start taking photographs and video of the place and of us. I was just there at the gate with my gun. I positioned myself well in my uniform, beer and hemp in my hands. I sit down. Thirty minutes after the departure of the interpreter, French soldiers come to take us saying: put your weapons down. I run at home, there is no way to hide my gun. I think of hiding it under my mattress, but I fear that they will still come to discover it. I just put my gun on the shoulder. They then came to collect our weapons and go with us, veiled our faces and tied our hands. They took us to their headquarters.

The sole mention of disarmament outside of Nizi was from a male participant in Uvira, who briefly spoke about his experience with DDR:

Furthermore, when we were still there, we heard the DDRR [sic] program was set up. At that time we were up the mountains. We heard that they would

146. DDR processes were mentioned in the following focus groups: Kalehe male former underage combatants, Nizi female former underage combatants, Nizi parents, Uvira community leaders, Uvira male former underage combatants, Goma community leaders, Goma male former underage combatants, Mahagi female former underage combatants and Walikale community leaders.

like to take children under the age of 18 out of military service. We said that we did not want military life anymore. So, some of us decided to escape and so we did without informing officers. When we reached DDRR [sic] section, they welcomed us because we came with guns and military uniforms.

A parent from Nizi explained that disarmament resulted in tension between combatants who disarmed and those who did not, saying: “Those who had returned the weapons first had become automatically enemies of those who kept theirs. [The combatants who returned their weapons first] were not seen by the latter any more, otherwise it was their death.”

In contrast to disarmament, demobilization programs were mentioned more often in focus groups, although only two participants mentioned step-by-step experiences of demobilization.<sup>147</sup> One male participant from Kalehe described:

After exiting the army, we went to BVES<sup>148</sup> center, after BVES took us from the center to GAV<sup>149</sup> where we got some help. For instance they could give us two pairs of trousers, a pair of shoes and a bag. Then they take you home, saying [to] you that they will be back and then they bring you more help.

Other participants<sup>150</sup> discussed the role MONUSCO<sup>151</sup> and NGOs played in demobilizing underage combatants, saying these organizations sought out underage combatants, assisted in the demobilization process and then relocated the underage combatants. One male participant from Uvira explained:

If we left armed troops it is because we realized that we were still teenagers under 18. In the reinsertion programs, there came groups whose aims were to remove us from armed troops and to take us home. . . Thus during sensitizations<sup>152</sup>, people were telling us to leave military life and start living at home with parents and have the same rights as other children.

Parents and community leaders’ echoed these explanations of how underage combatants left armed groups: through direct NGO negotiations with armed groups for the specific release of combatants under 18. Participants in four focus groups<sup>153</sup> drew connections between their return to their families and the efforts of NGOs, describing the role of the International Committee of the Red Cross and UNICEF<sup>154</sup> in the process.

In two focus groups, participants described a choice that came with DDR programming: either become a civilian or join the FARDC. Ostensibly, only those combatants older than 18 could join the FARDC, though some cases of underage combatants integrating into the national military have been documented (Human Rights Watch, 2010). One female participant from Mahagi explained:

They show that little children were not allowed to work in the army. They also wanted to see rebellion ending. So their desire was to see all soldiers to come out of the bush. They wanted all the soldiers to come to transit centers so that the one who likes military services can be sent for training in order to serve in the government army. Those who could not meet the requirements were to be sent back home.

### Reintegration Programming — “There Is No Follow-up”

The majority of conversations about DDR programming focused on the final step—reintegration. Participants discussed the training they received, which included subjects such as woodworking, baking and fishing. Largely, however, participants and community members from all sites expressed dissatisfaction with the reintegration programming provided to former underage combatants. Many found the support inadequate and were frustrated by NGO promises that went unfulfilled. A number of participants felt that former underage combatants would be better served if NGOs approached reintegration programming with a long-term perspective that included local community input. Distributed supplies

147. This was mentioned by male former underage combatants in Goma and Kalehe.

148. BVES stands for the Bureau pour le Volontariat au Service de l’Enfance et de la Santé or Voluntary Force at the Service of Childhood and Health. For more information, please see: <http://www.bves-rdc.org/DefaultEn.htm>.

149. GAV stands for Groupe d’Appui aux enfants Vulnérable, which is funded by International Labour Organization to provide vulnerable children with training in vocational skills and essential assistance.

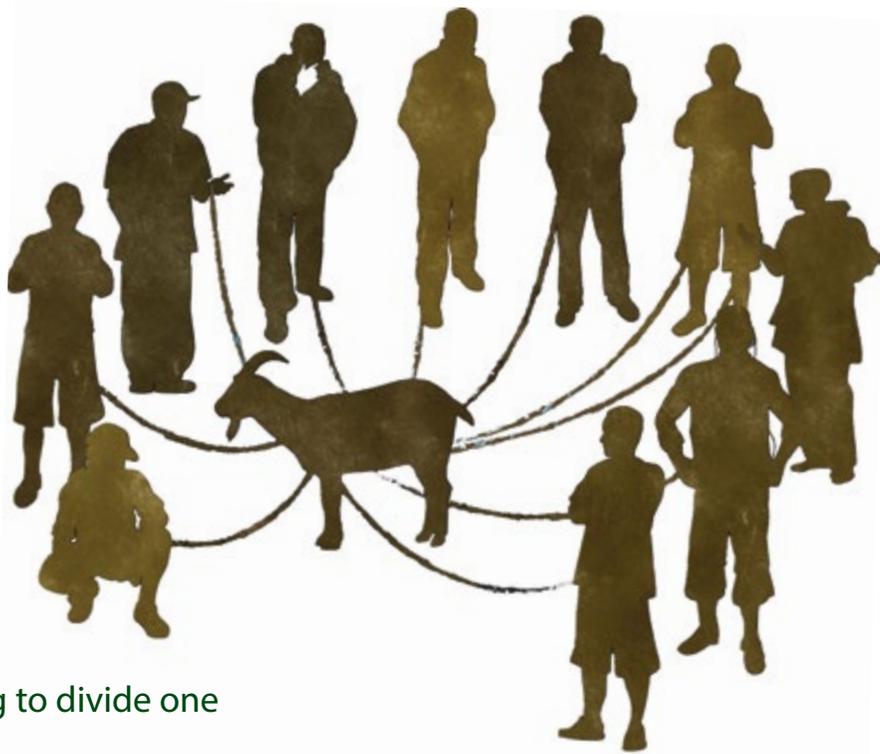
150. This was mentioned by Uvira community leaders, Uvira male former underage combatants and Goma male former underage combatants.

151. MONUSCO is the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

152. “Sensitizations” are trainings that raise awareness about a given issue.

153. This was mentioned by Kalehe male former underage combatants, Mahagi female former underage combatants, Uvira male former underage combatants and Goma male former underage combatants.

154. UNICEF is the United Nations Children’s Fund.



## How are they going to divide one goat per ten boys?

“You could see that they give one goat for ten persons, how are they going to divide one goat per ten boys? It is quite impossible.”

—Community member, Uvira

were described as often inappropriate to the context, broken or inadequate for the need. Participants felt this could have been avoided by consulting with communities before designing programs.

Focus group discussions described how limited resources for reintegration could create tensions in the community. In Kalehe, for instance, male and female participants described how there were not enough supplies to go around. In Uvira, skills training programs were full, creating tension between those enrolled and those waiting to enroll.

A common theme was that of aid being given to a group of former underage combatants who were then expected to work together to manage that aid. This system often failed because the group had difficulty cooperating and solving problems. Instead, they noted that one person could spoil the scheme by stealing the goods or by not participating. Community members in Uvira explained how group dynamics, coupled with inadequate aid, were damaging:

Interviewee 2: And goats, there are those who received goats, but they sold them . . . You could see that they give one goat for ten persons, how will they going to divide one goat per ten boys? It is quite impossible.

Interviewee 3: You could see they are giving one goat to ten persons. They tell them that when that goat give birth, you give that young baby to another one up until each of the ten people will have his own goat. It is never done in such a way.

Multiple interviewees: How long will you be waiting for the ten people to finish? And how will you divide it? When will it give birth? And later on, they quarrel and decide to sell it. Okay, suppose that they quarrel and you have not got yet your part, what shall you do?

Fraud and corruption related to reintegration programming were also described in Goma and Nizi. A community leader

in Goma said that some people who were not former underage combatants were able to get aid, while those who were former underage combatants did not:

Perhaps the real child soldiers there are twenty or thirty, others are called child soldiers whereas it is false, they perhaps go to our government which has got some problems, they find certificates certifying that they were child soldiers whereas it is false, they write for him so that he can be trained. Therefore, sometimes the real beneficiaries are not beneficiaries of the training; then the aid is given to persons who don't deserve.

Most participants<sup>155</sup> said that the dispersed aid was frequently insufficient. Items like clothing, shoes and pots were viewed as useful, but were ultimately short-term responses to complex problems. In some cases, former underage combatants sold these items because they needed money to buy basic essentials, such as food. A Mahagi community leader said: "Those who got little jobs were helped, but the other ones that got clothes, bicycles and so on were not helped because they sold those objects as soon as they received them. These actually have nothing."

Distribution of money received mixed reviews as some participants saw it disappear quickly, with no lasting impact. One male participant from Mahagi said:

I got that one hundred dollars, but it got finished because money is like the wind. Our desire is that they should come back and help us with other things. You see, when somebody comes from the forest from the war, when you give him one hundred dollars; he is going to consume it by buying food. This money will get finished in two days.

Others, however, still said that they would like to receive money for both immediate needs and business development. A parent in Nizi explained that: "Others, having received the amount of money that they gave them, they began trade

and today they have kiosks."

Participants also emphasized the importance not only of giving material support, but also providing training that would last over time.<sup>156</sup> A Mahagi community leader explained:

Let me say how a French saying stipulates that instead of giving me fish, you would better teach me how to fish. . . [A] lasting, long job for them that would sound the best than giving clothes and so on would be to train them in manual works . . . Those who went through apprenticeship of practical work are far better in life.

For this reason, participants expressed frustration towards the organizations providing support because of their short-term presence in the communities. Some<sup>157</sup> said that NGOs failed to follow-up on their promises or, more bluntly, lied about what they would provide. A male participant from Kalehe said:

They were telling us lies that they will come back with much help. We have been waiting and waiting until today without any help. Whoever comes here tell us to wait until they come back. Time moves on without the promised help.

Community leaders and female participants also described how some NGO programs were irrelevant or inappropriate to the context. They suggested that NGOs incorporate community members and former underage combatants during the planning phases of a project to avoid these failures in the future.<sup>158</sup> A female participant from Mahagi explained how the aid she received was inappropriate to her context:

When CRENA<sup>159</sup> was taking care of us, they gave us watering cans, and hoes for farming. They gave these to the parent who was taking care of me. They also gave me personal tools. These tools were of great help to my parent because she was already a farmer. However, I could not use my tools because I was not

155. This was mentioned by Kalehe male former underage combatants, Mahagi male former underage combatants, Mahagi community leaders, Mahagi female former underage combatants, Uvira male former underage combatants, Uvira community leaders, Walikale male former underage combatants, Goma male former underage combatants, Goma female former underage combatants, Nizi female former underage combatants and Nizi parents.

156. This was mentioned by Mahagi community leaders, Mahagi male former underage combatants, Uvira community leaders, Walikale male former underage combatants and Goma male former underage combatants.

157. This was mentioned by Kalehe male former underage combatants, Mahagi community leaders, Uvira community leaders, Walikale community leaders, Nizi female former underage combatants and Nizi parents.

158. This was mentioned by Kalehe community leaders, Mahagi female former underage combatants, Uvira community leaders, Goma community leaders, Walikale community leaders and Nizi female former underage combatants.

159. CRENA is the Centre de Recuperation des Enfants Non Accompagnes, which is a NGO based in Bunia and Mahagi. It partners with other organizations to support unaccompanied children in Ituri district.

a farmer and I did not have a farm. Up to now they have not yet helped me.

In Kalehe and Uvira, community leaders described programs that did not match community needs or realities, resulting in ineffective projects such as training people for jobs that did not exist in their communities. One community leader in Uvira explained:

It is not enough for helping someone and it is not adequate to the present reality. You distribute electric machines and an engine in remote quarters such as Luvunge and the like where there is no fuel . . . Do you see, many reinsertion programs failed their mission? This is a great failure on non-governmental organizations' behalf. . . [I]f you look clearly, you will see that the impact of their activities is very low and negligible.

In the worst cases, former underage combatants were presented with goods that were damaged, broken or useless in their context, an issue that was mentioned in all communities except Goma. A female participant from Nizi said:

I am not even a tailor but they give me a sewing machine. A broken machine. . . [I]t is a broken iron box. There are no scissors. . . That broken sewing machine is just staying there doing nothing. I see this as a useless thing.

A male participant from Uvira noted another problem with distribution of supplies, saying: "Sometimes they give one sewing machine to a group of five persons. You are obliged to sell it and share money. The problem is lack of jobs." A female participant in Mahagi said she asked for the job she wanted but was given another option instead:

I had my favorite work. I asked them to give me a sewing machine. But they told me to take a mill. I insisted, asking them to give me a sewing machine, but in vain. I was obliged to take that mill. And now that mill broke down. It is kept in the house doing nothing.

Much emphasis was placed on the need to give former underage combatants options in terms of professional training. Participants felt that this would foster success among beneficiaries, as it would insure that beneficiaries are interested

in, and committed to, their job training. In many cases, however, former underage combatants were trained to do something they did not like or were unable to do, either because of physical or educational requirements. A female participant from Mahagi said:

I can say that what they gave us was not enough. As this was not sufficient, they can bring other projects so that everyone can choose what they are able to manage; which can help them. This is because for the previous project, though I chose a sewing machine, some of us were obliged to take sewing machines. They were not given freedom to make their choice.

While discussions focused on the need to improve reintegration programs, participants mentioned successes as well. One female participant from Kalehe said that the sewing machine she was given allowed her to generate the income needed to survive. A male participant from Walikale explained that the combination of receiving training to be a tailor and getting a sewing machine was helpful for reestablishing himself in the community. Another male participant from Walikale said that he was given a goat, which was useful because he was able to raise it and sell the offspring. In Uvira, community leaders said that a co-op-style arrangement established between an NGO and former underage combatants benefited everyone, including members of the community who were able to purchase what the co-op produced. One community leader explained: "The cultivator gains, the non-governmental organization gains and the worker of the office benefits, and us who did not cultivate, we benefit by purchasing as well."

## Social Reintegration: Stigma and Acceptance

### Stigma—"Child Soldiers . . . Are Considered as Time Bombs"

Former underage combatants and community members both acknowledged that former combatants faced stigma upon their return to civilian life. Each group, however, described and interpreted this issue in different ways. Community members emphasized behavioral and psychological

changes that former underage combatants experienced, portraying those who returned to communities as fundamentally changed. Reintegrating combatants were often seen as triggering a breakdown in morality and contributing to an increase in crime. Community members drew the connection between poor discipline in armed groups and combatants' behavior after reintegration, noting that former combatants may bring the poor conduct they learned in armed groups back to their communities. They described negative behaviors, such as increased drug and alcohol abuse, rape and sexual promiscuity, exploitation, crime and disrespect for the morals and rules that guide social life.

In contrast, former underage combatants spoke about feeling blamed for everything that went wrong in communities, noting that if a crime occurred, they were the first to be accused. They described sadness that relatives and friends had moved on without them while they were away, and in many cases were assumed to have died. Many former underage combatants described coming back to find their family members dead or in deep poverty. While some described joy at being welcomed home, more participants talked about facing mistrust within their immediate family and in the wider community. They spoke about facing multiple forms of stigma, expressed through being gossiped about, insulted or socially excluded.

A community leader in Kalehe spoke about this dynamic:

If they got good training like a soldier for instance, they would have a good conduct. But that was not the case. . . [C]hildren are involved in worthless things. When they arrive in the community, life is hard to them over here; they bring disorder in the community.

A community leader in Goma elaborated on this sentiment, saying:

What I can say concerning children soldiers is that they are considered as time bombs. They leave there because war is like a job. When they are integrated in the society, they see that they have no job, they are obliged to do something else. As they know to manipulate a gun, they create a gang, and therefore, there is a great rate of hooliganism downtown, there also street children who are now numerous in the

city, then everybody, those who were in military life and those who were not, are altogether in insecurity. The rate of insecurity is increased.

A male participant in Kalehe summed up the situation, saying: "We were considered as thieves, stupid, drunkards, hemp smokers, etc. We found ourselves much demoralized."

Former underage combatants were described as arrogant, impolite and disrespectful towards authority figures such as parents, teachers and respected community members, a finding that also emerged in the body mapping section. These attitudes were cited as a reason this group became further isolated. While community members described how former underage combatants return with different behaviors and attitudes, they made it clear that these changes resulted from deeper changes in the "spirit" or "mind." In Kalehe, community leaders noted that former underage combatants came back "with a different mind," while in Goma, they described children as coming back "with the spirit of a bandit," and they noted in Walikale that the minds of former underage combatants are "spoiled."

Female former underage combatants in Goma described how they are "different from other people" and cited the war-related trauma they underwent as the cause, again emphasizing that poor behavior is an indicator of much deeper issues. Community leaders in Mahagi drew a connection between bad behavior and the trauma that the underage combatants underwent, saying: "They are insulting us as they are also beating and insulting their own parents. We do not know how they can get healed from trauma that they got while they were working in armed groups." Goma community leaders discussed how the phenomenon of children being associated with armed groups was a detriment to the country as a whole, saying:

We know that here in Africa, a child is richness and a child is the future of the family in the society. When they enroll those children in military service it is to say the future of those children and that of the whole society is in danger because nobody will work. When those children join the army, they are weakened and receive another philosophy and commerce will not exist... I think that is a consequence of the phenomenon [of] children soldiers.

Changes at both the behavioral and psychological level resulted in deep mistrust of former underage combatants. This was described by all participants in the research. Soldiers were seen as “killers,” “thieves” and “bandits.” There was a widespread perception in communities that former underage combatants still “take the easy way”<sup>160</sup> by bringing exploitative behaviors and feelings of entitlement from armed groups back to their communities. Community leaders in Goma drew the connection between the behaviors former combatants exhibited in armed groups and how they behaved in communities, saying: “When they leave the army where they were having everything easily, if [a former combatant] meets you on the street with a gun, he tells you give me a given amount of money. . . [I]t increases insecurity.” Another participant from the same group added: “They no longer have morality, no respect towards other people, they become careless.”

Walikale community leaders described how former underage combatants continue to simply take what they want, echoing a sentiment expressed in all communities except Nizi:<sup>161</sup>

Also other consequence those children can be bandit, gangster and he will become a thief because he will steal everywhere and everything he finds, he will steal in his house, in his neighborhood. He will not want to work because he got everything for free, he eats for free, he drinks for free and a major problem is if he does not want to work like others.

A male participant in Kalehe talked further about the assumptions people have:

Here they consider us like ‘the lion does not save, when it catches game, it eats it all at the same time.’ We are considered like people without any plan. Everything that we get and we spend all at the same time. . . They say that as you have been a soldier, though you exit the military service, you are still a soldier.

A female participant in Uvira described:

When we were returning here, people were afraid

of us because we still had that military thinking according to which we could invade in their houses and kill them. They could not associate with us. They were standing apart, thinking that we will kill them and so on.

Such mistrust led many reintegrating combatants to feel they were held responsible for all of the negative things that occurred in the community. A male participant in Uvira said:

In the neighborhood, we had a negative reputation, if you live somewhere and they know that you returned from armed troops and if a hen gets lost in the neighborhood, they simply conclude that as there is a former child soldier in the neighborhood, he is the one who took it.

Similar stories were told in all communities, except Nizi. A male participant from Goma said: “If something gets lost in the neighborhood it’s on my head and [people] come to look for me to see if I’m the one who stole it. . .”

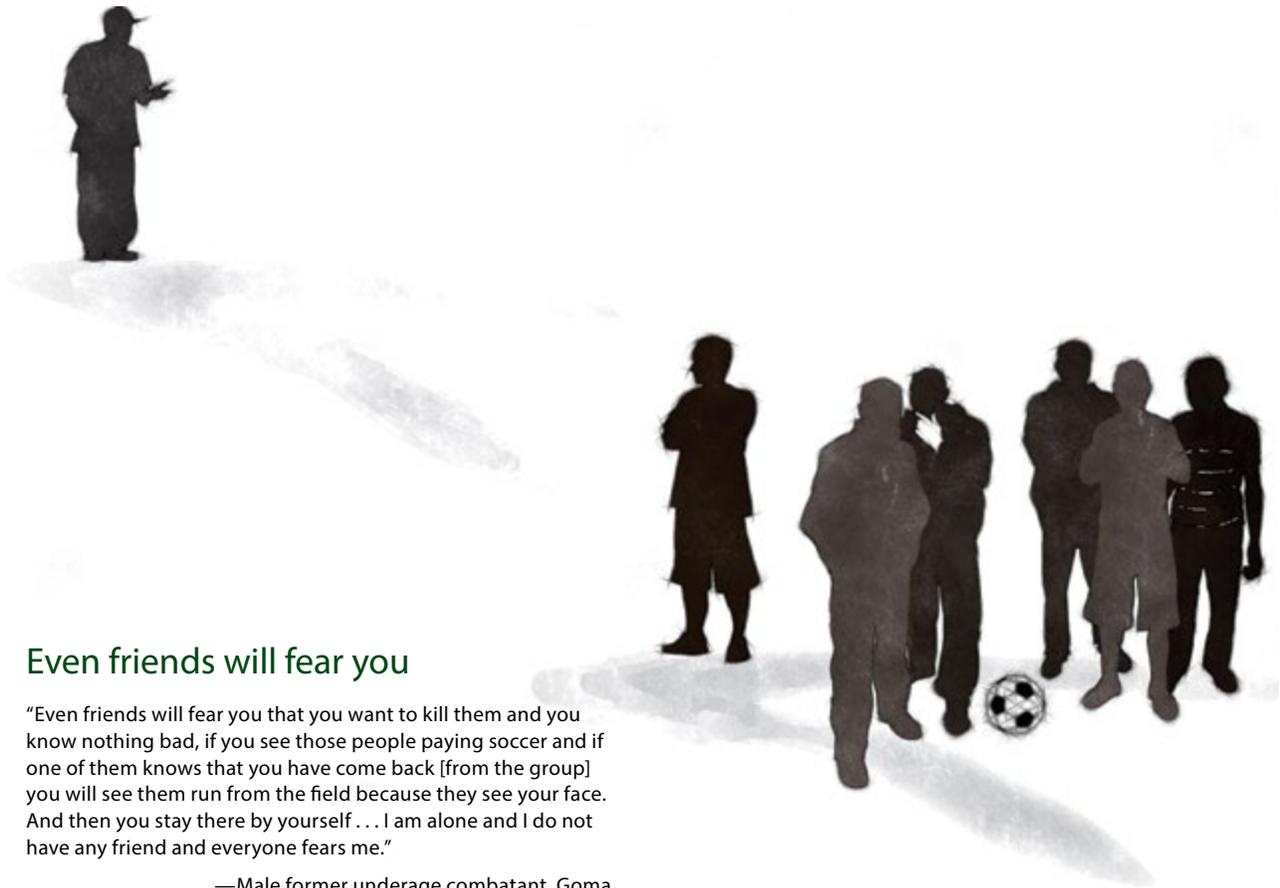
In all project sites, participants described former underage combatants’ drug use and cited it as a reason that their behavior was so altered. Drugs, acting “foolish” and destructive habits were seen as related, as described by a Uvira community leader:

You see the child is a soldier, he has a military thinking and he is foolish. (Interviewee 1: He cannot understand you.) He comes here, the day on which he smoked cigarette that we call . . . I mean ganja. Even the mother who gave birth to him is nothing in front of him. Now, these young boys who came from armed troops, they often say that to kill you for him does not require time or any effort. They come with a destroyed head. They are like foolish people. They are out of their minds. . . [H]is whole [being] is destroyed, he does not consider human dignity; he can kill you even with a knife.

Mahagi community leaders drew the direct connection between violence, exploitation and drug use, noting: “Their minds are full of stealing techniques because over there,

160. This was mentioned by Uvira community leaders.

161. This was mentioned by Mahagi male former underage combatants, Mahagi female former underage combatants, Walikale male former underage combatants, Walikale female former underage combatants, Walikale community leaders, Goma male former underage combatants, Goma community leaders, Uvira female former underage combatants and Kalehe community leaders.



## Even friends will fear you

“Even friends will fear you that you want to kill them and you know nothing bad, if you see those people paying soccer and if one of them knows that you have come back [from the group] you will see them run from the field because they see your face. And then you stay there by yourself . . . I am alone and I do not have any friend and everyone fears me.”

—Male former underage combatant, Goma

in the forest, they used to send them to loot. Before going to loot, they had to drink marijuana or hemp. They have lost self control.” They went on to note that: “Over there, many children return smokers of ganja. This ganja is now everywhere in the community. In former times, ganja was not popular, but nowadays it has become popularized.” In Kalehe, Goma and Walikale, as in Mahagi, people described how drug use was now common in their communities, as a result of former underage combatants bringing this behavior back from the armed groups.

The perception that former underage combatants were fundamentally changed—mentally and morally—contributed to stigma against this population. Both community members

and former underage combatants described the many ways this stigma could be expressed and enacted. Often, former underage combatants said people insulted them or gossiped about them. In many cases, stigma was expressed through social exclusion—people refusing to interact or share goods with former underage combatants. Issues of social exclusion were expressed in all communities, except Nizi; the topic, however, was far more salient in the discussions among male and female participants than in the conversations with community leaders and parents.<sup>162</sup> In one case, a male participant from Uvira suggested that social exclusion made him consider returning to life as a combatant:

The first negative consequence is that when you are

162. Social exclusion was specifically discussed by Mahagi male former underage combatants, Mahagi female former underage combatants, Walikale male former underage combatants, Goma male former underage combatants, Goma female former underage combatants, Uvira male former underage combatants, Uvira community leaders and Kalehe female former underage combatants.

passing in the avenue, people point at you saying that this one was a soldier. You have no more peace. Wherever you pass they simply say that you were a soldier. One should be accustomed to their way of considering us as former child soldiers. That is a consequence and this can push you to go back to military life.

A female participant from Mahagi described the negative attitudes people had towards her, saying: “We are considered as dangerous people in the community. Sometimes people point at us saying, ‘Those are thieves. You should be careful’ . . . We are not living at peace in the community.” A female participant in Uvira also described this kind of behavior, saying:

People feared us. They were saying that they cannot befriend us. These people lived in wild conditions; they cannot live with normal people anymore. These are not good ways that they went in. We are killers . . . They will be invading in our houses because they are bandits.

Social exclusion was often expressed as people not sharing food, not talking to or not wanting to walk on the same road with former underage combatants, or excluding them from communal activities like sports. Both male and female former underage combatants described how the friends they had before joining an armed group were reluctant to associate with them after they returned. A male participant from Goma described being excluded from playing soccer in his village:

Even friends will fear you that you want to kill them and you know nothing bad, if you see those people paying soccer and if one of them knows that you have come back [from the armed group] you will see them run from the field because they see your face. And then you stay there by yourself . . . I am alone and I do not have any friend and everyone fears me.

Stigma existed not only in the community and from former friends and acquaintances, but also within families. Former underage combatants in all sites described how they felt marginalized and were feared by relatives. A female participant from Kalehe said: “We can say problems which we underwent; the main problem is that we were rejected by

the family and in the community and in the society.” While outright rejection was seldom described in focus groups, former underage combatants discussed more subtle forms of exclusion. This was expressed through poor relationships with siblings, parents’ refusal to pay medical or school fees and a general sense of being mistrusted in the home. As in the community at large, former underage combatants said if something went missing in the house, they were the first to be accused of stealing it. A female participant from Goma described the experience of many former underage combatants reintegrating into the family:

First of all, arriving home, even if the parent cannot reject his own son, this parent will be unhappy. He can even fear [the former underage combatant], and in the family it is the same younger or elder brothers who refuse to sleep in the same bed with him supposing that he can kill them at night. He cannot be happy. . . [H]e is disregarded, rejected, he will not feel happy.

Uvira community leaders further described how difficult family dynamics could become and noted that stigma directed at the former underage combatant may then be applied to his whole family:

[Former underage combatants] arrive in their families; automatically, complicated phenomena start occurring. The family is unable to socialize with other families. That boy becomes intolerable, impolite, rude in the family. . . [H]e wants to facilitate things by taking easy ways. He steals domestic things and go to sell them. . . In the community, you parent or you relatives, you have no peace in the neighborhood because you are supposed to be the ones who have brought a robber into the neighborhood.

#### Stigma against Women—“We Are of No Value”

Female former underage combatants described facing particularly pronounced stigma, explaining that they faced the same challenges as their male counterparts, in addition to burdens unique to women. In civilian life, sexual exclusivity and membership to a defined family was described as essential for women looking to fit into society. Females returning from armed groups described how they could not live up to those expectations and instead were perceived as

promiscuous, the mothers of troublesome, “fatherless” children, and likely infected with sexually transmitted infections. The implications of this were manifold and profound. Female participants stated that they had trouble finding acceptance from their parents, that men treated them with disrespect and that it was difficult or impossible for them to get married—one pathway to regaining a sense of place and identity in their communities.

Female former underage combatants stated that people feared them not only because they were involved in armed groups, but also because they were seen as “tainted” as a result of having been subjected to sexual violence. One female participant from Kalehe said: “They expel you from the family saying you have become a soldier, you have been raped.” Another female from the same group talked about the perception of female former combatants as diseased, noting: “They started rejecting us, they did say ‘let’s take these people to hospital as they return with many diseases.’ They did not take us there. We don’t have anyone who could help us with medical care...”

Returning with children from the armed group could present a significant obstacle to women and girls looking to reintegrate into civilian life. Whether the children were born of consensual or non-consensual relationships, no female participants described having paternal support raising their child. Both former underage combatants and community members discussed children born in armed groups as being “fatherless” or having a father who is “unknown.” While in some cases female participants said they were not rejected outright, they and their children still faced underlying mistrust.

Participants described a widely held belief among communities that children born in armed groups would exhibit the same traits as their “unknown” fathers—a propensity to be violent or “evil.” This stigma was expressed in a number of ways; children might be called “snakes”—a common epithet for children born of rape—or “children of the enemy.” They were told to “go back to where they came from” or to “go look for your father.” The assumption that children would be like their fathers had concrete ramifications on female former underage combatants’ ability to return to communities. At its most extreme, people counseled the families of these mothers to kill the children born in armed groups, or

at least to expel them from the community. A female participant from Kalehe recounted the difficulties she underwent:

And another problem, the community could welcome us. But when they see that you went to the bush alone. You come back with children it becomes a problem. . . . When the family sees the children, they say if we bring up these children, the way their fathers’ trouble it is the same way these children will trouble us. You may see some neighbors coming to pay a visit to our parents, giving them some pieces of advice, saying, ‘How do you find these children? How come you keep snakes at home? We think that it could be better to kill these children. For they have no benefit. And if you bring up them here, they will copy their fathers’ malicious behavior. It is better, instead of leaving them here, kill them or expel their mums so that they can to look for another place where they stay with their children.’ If the parent had an idea of welcoming you in the family and reintegrating you as a child among others... the parent is disappointed.

#### Acceptance — “Treat Him as a Human Being”

Despite the manifold challenges of returning to one’s community, some participants talked about feeling accepted and welcomed back into their communities. Narratives about being welcomed were particularly common in Walikale and Uvira. Acceptance into the community could be expressed in a number of ways: a family’s joy at learning of their child’s return, community members expressing gratitude for the protection of the armed groups or former underage combatants being welcomed by friends and given the opportunity to study or find work.

Former underage combatants in all sites discussed some form of feeling accepted. In Nizi and Mahagi, participants talked about how their families rejoiced at their return. A female participant in Mahagi described the following:

When we got the ability to come back, we came back with empty hands. We came back in the village just like little children. We were given a warm welcome and a place to stay. Villagers started taking care of us. They even looked for ways to take us back to our

parents or relatives who might be available in the village; just to make sure we are back in our homes. Unfortunately, things became bad once [we were] in our homes for some of [the] others. For others, things were good. To leave the army was not easy. It was just through determination.

Even in this narrative, however, the female participant talked about how not all reunions with one's family were smooth, a finding echoed by others in Nizi. As one female from that group said: "There was no rejection. They will welcome you nicely. But they had fear. There is fear. They feared you for the bad things you were doing as a soldier."

Having friends and sharing with others was an important source of feeling assimilated and cared for. The importance of being accepted both by family and friends was mentioned in Goma and Uvira. A male participant from Goma talked about the importance of having people to talk to about his experience, saying:

Even though I'm not recovered but when I sit down and we talk; I can see that I have friends and can talk about things . . . I can sit down and talk with friends and I can go with some people and ask for water to drink and they give it to me. I have people I can go with together and talk as I talk to you here. . .

Acceptance, however, was often combined with negative attitudes. A male participant in Mahagi showed the conflicted and sometimes contradictory nature of acceptance; he described how some people were grateful for former underage combatants' military service, while others disapproved:

It is only our parents who welcomed us. But neighbors did not consider us as human beings. They looked askance at us... Other people are happy when they see us. They often recognize good deeds that we did for them. They sometimes say that if it were not for you, I would have died. If you had not been there, they would have looted all my belongings. When you hear this comforting speech, you endure hardships. These last are people who help us to live in the communities.

When speaking about how to promote acceptance of former underage combatants in communities, a female participant

in Kalehe explained the importance of community members spreading messages of acceptance: "In order for someone to think of themselves like other people, it requires many sensitization sessions. And for people to consider us like normal people, it is through efforts from other people."

Community leaders in Goma spoke about the challenges of losing children to the conflict and the hope they had for these children's futures:

When a child goes to military life here in Africa, it means you have lost him, because we consider military life as a place of hooligans...but when he comes back home, you try to treat him as a human being. He can be a man in future.

### Making Up for Lost Time—“Left Behind”

While former combatants recognized stigma as a significant challenge, they also discussed their frustration and disappointment at realizing how many opportunities they lost as a result of leaving their communities. One of the greatest challenges participants described was feeling “left behind.” Many expressed feeling alienated from their previous lives, describing how their material possessions were gone and they returned to find their families impoverished and unable—or unwilling—to support them. Often, former underage combatants spoke about coming out of the armed group and being forced to build a life from scratch, while their peers became educated, found jobs and built homes and families. A female participant in Goma described the following:

All these years that I spent in military life, I do not see any advantage that I got. But, my former mates with whom I studied are now [doing] well in the neighborhood. If I had not gone to military troops and, as my parents were paying school fees for me, I could have had the same life standards as these ones. . .

A male participant from Kalehe noted: “We found that our friends of our age group who did not join the army were materially further [along] than us.”

A number of former underage combatants also described being “given up for dead” when they joined the army. They returned to find their possessions gone and their

inheritances given away, and had trouble regaining a place in their family and peer networks. This dynamic was particularly pronounced in Kalehe, where both male and female participants described significant problems returning after being associated with an armed group, related to both social stigma and the loss of material wealth. One male participant recounted the problems he experienced upon his return:

When you join the military service, the family cancels you among the children. They think you have already died. You no longer live. When you return you find that your elder brothers have shared all of the inheritance and there is piece of land that was kept for you . . . It becomes conflict and hatred between you who exit the army and the people you meet home. They no longer consider you like children among us. This is a problem that we are undergoing in our family. Your elder brother will tell you: ‘Why don’t you go back to military service instead of bothering us here?’

Despite feeling disadvantaged, participants discussed two potential ways to rebuild one’s life and find a role in society: education and employment. Both were seen as promising advancement while at the same time presenting significant challenges.

#### Education upon Return—“Studying and at the Same Time Looking for Money Is Not Easy”

While former underage combatants and community members discussed the merits of education, participants described significant challenges to successfully returning to school. Problems fell into three broad categories: a lack of means to receive education, discrimination against former combatants in the educational system due to real or perceived behavioral problems and the inability to make up for time missed while in armed groups.

The first challenge—lack of means to receive education—referred to both lack of money to pay school fees and other basic necessities, as well as the lack of family and community support for those seeking to return to, or stay in, school. In Goma, participants described being so poor that they were unable to get food and appropriate clothing, prerequisites to

attending school. A participant from the same group said: “[Y]ou cannot go to school, you are hungry and you have no shoes to put on.” Participants in Mahagi, Kalehe, Goma and Nizi spoke about the importance of family, specifically parents, in assisting with school fee payments. Participants, however, also noted that families impoverished by war were incapable of paying school fees. Unable to pay the school fees themselves, and without family support, many gave up on seeking education. A community leader in Mahagi described the situation in his community:

Among these children, some have already obtained their high school diplomas and others are still studying. Others would like to go to school, but they do not have school fees. They are regretting why they went to armed troops in the forests. Some of them have found their parents already dead; since they spent many years there fighting for useless and selfish gains. Now if he wishes to go to school, there is no way to pay school fees because the parents are not alive anymore.

Families with the ability to pay school fees did not often give priority to former underage combatants, who were seen as unruly and too old to return to school. As a female participant in Walikale explained: “A relative who has ten children to provide education for will prefer to start with those who are still small.”

School fees were described as one of the greatest barriers to seeking education. A female participant in Nizi explained: “There is no more help. I decided to leave school. Studying and at the same time looking for money is not easy.”

Female participants described the additional challenge of having to support their children, some of whom were also old enough to go to school. Mothers thus had to choose between paying school fees for themselves or for their children. A female participant from Mahagi explained that she prioritized her son’s education over her own:

I personally, I was at the level of Form One<sup>163</sup> when I joined military services. Now when I left that work I came back with a child. I found it difficult to go back to school. I chose to only pay the school fees of the child. This is because the child has no father.

163. Form One refers to the first year of secondary school.

## Children will laugh . . . ‘Look at this old woman studying in primary school’



“If I would . . . go back to school, I will have to resume in class five. Many children will laugh at me saying, ‘Look at this old woman studying in primary school.’”

—Female former underage combatant, Mahagi

The child and I were rejected at our place. I decided to buy a small piece of land where I will build a house in order to take care of my child right there. I am now taking care of him. In order to go back to school, I will have to maximize food production, living facilities and also even gather school fees. This is not easy. I have seen that the best I can do for the time being is to take care of the child: feeding him and paying his school fees. This is the reason why I left school.

Beyond lack of financial means, former underage combatants and community members<sup>164</sup> also described the shame of returning to school after having been absent for so long. Returning to classes with young children made many female former underage combatants give up on education.

Former underage combatants described social stigma as

preventing them from resuming studies. In some cases, the stigma was associated with the age difference in those trying to return to lower classes, while in other cases former underage combatants were perceived as violent, lazy and unable to learn because their minds were “spoiled” by war.

Female participants discussed being made fun of if they and other former underage combatants returned to school as an adult. A female participant from Mahagi described this:

When we joined armed forces we were still on primary school level . . . Like me here, I have grown up and have given birth to a baby. If I would like to go back to school, I will have to resume in class five. Many children will laugh at saying, ‘Look at this old woman studying in primary school. Her place is no more in class five.’

164. This was mentioned in Goma, Mahagi, Walikale and Nizi.

Others described feeling like an outsider because they were made fun of and excluded from social interactions. This was described in all sites, except Nizi. Participants said the problem was so pronounced that they stopped going to school. Participants described being both feared and made to feel inferior by other students. A female participant in Kalehe expressed these challenges, explaining how students, teachers and principals could be part of the problem:

You are much neglected in the classroom. When the teacher asks a question, in order to get the floor to answer the question, it is a headache . . . unless the headmaster comes from his office to intervene on your behalf. And sometimes, he also refuses saying that you have no right to answer in the classroom, you have no answer to provide, you are not intelligent and you only think about life in the bush. A soldier has nothing to say in the classroom.

The fact that many former underage combatants did return with changed behavior and psychological problems exacerbated this problem. All communities, except Walikale, discussed the change in returnees' behaviors as an obstacle to reintegrating into schools. As with the body mapping results, male participants discussed trauma and psychological problems, while female participants did not bring these up. Male participants discussed their psychological problems as expressed through aggression, problems concentrating and "hearing the crackle of the gun" in one's head. Male participants also discussed having serious problems with authority and in multiple cases talked about how they could not accept "taking orders" from fellow students or teachers. One male participant in Mahagi described:

It is difficult to return to classes because we have got used to forest life. Forest life is quite different from civilian life. It is not easy to be friends with civilian people. We cannot study in the same classes. It is not easy to study with them. Look! If we are taught by a civilian teacher, once you are mistaken, he hits you. I cannot tolerate that phenomenon. Nobody is allowed to hit me. This is what pushes us not to think about returning to school.

Despite the manifold challenges of returning to school,

communities<sup>165</sup> discussed success stories and the positive impact of education for returnees. A Nizi parent talked about convincing his brother to pay school fees for his son, who returned from an armed group:

In my family, the child of my young brother, when we had got him back, we had treated gently and gradually. Today he has got a five-years degree. My young brother had declared that he did not have means to make him able to provide education for this child. I had said to him, 'Shut your mouth! If we give up on him, he will become again gangster and you should know how many people he is going to kill. Let's make our efforts to see to which level he can reach. . . .' Today, he is graduated. He obtained his State diploma, he had just defended his three-year degree and he continues with the graduate studies. . . . [T]omorrow he will be a man among us.

Despite occasional success seeking education, many participants said that seeking employment was a more common way for former underage combatants to reestablish themselves in their communities.

#### Employment upon Return—"What Can We Do?"

The lack of jobs and unemployment was a pressing issue. Participants in Goma and Mahagi particularly emphasized this as a problem. A female participant in Mahagi explained:

Presently there is no work. Now we are thinking: "What can we do? What can we do so that life can be better tomorrow?" . . . What can we do so that tomorrow our lives can be better at the same level with others in the community?

Focus group discussions in four communities revealed how negative preconceptions of former underage combatants played into problems with underemployment or unemployment.<sup>166</sup> Former underage combatants were seen as "lazy," "unmotivated," "thieves" and "drunkards," and as a result were less likely to be trusted with employment. As a male participant in Mahagi noted: "We are now living in the community doing nothing. People consider us useless persons, yet, we are able to perform something . . . You come to see how we are living. Some of us are sitting at home doing

165. This was mentioned in Walikale, Nizi and Mahagi.

166. This was mentioned in Kalehe, Goma, Walikale and Mahagi.

167. This was mentioned in Nizi, Uvira, Walikale and Kalehe.

nothing.”

Participants who found no employment or who had to work in exploitative industries thought that returning to armed groups might offer a better life. In four communities, participants described male former underage combatants as having to seek dangerous work, such as artisanal mining, as a result of this lack of trust.<sup>167</sup> A male participant from Kalehe drew the connection between lack of other employment opportunities, lack of family support and mining, saying:

Many of us are in ‘T20’ [mine]. They are working in mines because they don’t have other work to do. T20 is a mine on the way to Nyabibwe. They spend days and nights there. Simply, they have no place at home. They dig the cassiterite [mines] so that they can get minerals and decide to stay there like it has become their home. They miss military service and home.

Focus group discussions in all sites stressed the significance of community collaboration and development, whether through developing stronger trainings, making trainings publicly accessible or expanding projects and materials for former underage combatants. This was commonly discussed in terms of buying land collectively and developing cooperatives for farming. Beyond discussions of wider community support, there also appeared to be some deep-rooted camaraderie between former underage combatants when it came to employment in the reintegration process. Male and female participants from Mahagi, Nizi, Uvira, Kalehe and Goma discussed the essential need to support one another in finding and maintaining work.

## Long-Term Health Consequences

### Health — “Some Were Sick, Some Were Disabled and Some Were Traumatized”

Participants at every site talked about the long-term health impacts of being a combatant. Both community members and former underage combatants noted that those who spent time in an armed group generally had “deteriorated” health and sometimes physical handicaps that diminished their quality of life. As a female participant in Mahagi said:

“We have no strength. The military service has made us sick. And those diseases have made us weak.” Participants spoke about a number of health issues that affect former underage combatants, from generalized weakness to tuberculosis, physical handicaps and hypertension. In particular, participants spoke about the fact that former underage combatants may be infected with HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections, and that the perception that they have these infections contributed significantly to their stigmatization and inability to reintegrate into their communities.

Kalehe community leaders spoke about the general health issues former underage combatants had: “Some were sick, some were disabled and some were traumatized due to the life they lived over there.” Female participants in Goma described how difficult it is for those with permanent physical injuries, saying:

Some join military life and they become lame or handicapped, after getting physical handicaps, they return home. And they become useless in the army and in the society. [A handicapped person] is kicked out of the army; he cannot work anymore.

While there was little discussion of how best to address these issues, some participants mentioned issues related to care-seeking. As mentioned in the section about stigma, a number of participants said that family members refused to pay their medical fees as a result of social stigma. Perhaps because of the costs associated with care-seeking, a female participant in Kalehe discussed the potential for distributing vouchers for medical care as a part of the reintegration process, saying:

Yes, about medical treatment there was first CODILUSI-Bukavu<sup>168</sup> that came to intervene with drugs. They used to come and give us medical voucher and we go to hospital for treatment. Then CAMPS<sup>169</sup> came also and helped us with some drugs.

The problem of former underage combatants returning with HIV/AIDS or other sexually transmitted infections was discussed extensively in Walikale and Uvira, and mentioned in Mahagi. Community members in Uvira discussed this as a significant problem that contributed to negative perceptions

168. CODILUSI stands for Comité Diocésain de Lutte contre le Sida. It is a program of the Catholic bureau that is in charge of health in Bukavu.

169. CAMPS stands for Centre d’Assistance Médico-Psychosociale. It is an NGO that works with victims of war trauma with the goal of preventing sexual violence against women, youth and children in eastern DRC.

of former underage combatants, saying:

There is another difficulty if [the underage combatant] comes with HIV/AIDS as they said for example, HIV never gets cured, it is a burden to the family up to the day of his death, or tuberculosis caused by strong cigarettes, intensive cough, to spoil the wealth of the family for example by selling hens, goats. As a girl who comes with a pregnancy for which the husband is unknown.

Community leaders in Walikale noted that even very young former combatants could be HIV-positive and drew the link between sexual violence and HIV/AIDS, saying:

Another thing which is shown concerning health, very often when they left the bush to go to organize plundering, they will rape a woman who is a HIV/AIDS carrier. While going for medical check-up, they would find that, although he is still a child, he is already contaminated by the AIDS.

Another community leader from Uvira spoke about how having HIV/AIDS contributed to stigma against women. People may perceive female combatants as having acted as prostitutes during their time in armed groups and assumed they have HIV/AIDS. Upon returning to communities, these female former combatants faced significant stigma, particularly in regards to getting married. Unable to find a husband and start a family, these women may be forced to turn to transactional sex after reintegration, further increasing their risk for contracting HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections.

Mahagi community leaders also drew the connection between a woman's time in armed groups and HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted infections, although they explained this was a result of sexual violence rather than prostitution:

They were even raped right there. The fact of being raped resulted in many negative consequences. Other girls got pregnancies and gave birth to undesired children . . . They are suffering from different diseases that they got through while in the army through sexual abuses like sexually transmitted diseases.

Female participants in Walikale and Mahagi further

elaborated on this cycle of stigma. A participant in Mahagi explained: "The civilian cannot marry women who formerly were wives of the soldiers. Our husbands died and left us with diseases, if he was suffering from gonorrhea, we do not know. We do not give birth any more."

In many cases, participants drew clear connections between physical and mental health, as illustrated by this quote from a female participant in Mahagi:

There is no good health. For instance I, since I left that group, I have remained sickly: ribs, head pains due to the noise of bullet shootings as they were ringing on my head. There were too much and have left me with too much pain in my head. Regarding my health problems, marks that I came with from there can be seen on my body. This troubles me so much in my mind. There are also other people with the same problems.

A number of female participants in Mahagi discussed high blood pressure and its links to mental health issues, such as anxiety. One female participant drew connections between her physical and psychological health and how it was affected by the stigma she faced in her community, describing how:

[T]he thoughts about my experience in the army have left me with health problems in my heart—blood pressure. For, I am always anxious. . . [P]eople [in our community] do not want to forgive us. This makes us to be always anxious. It makes us sick all the time. Our worries do not come to an end.

Another female from the same group described a similar problem, noting that the way she and her fellow female former underage combatants were treated contributed to her high blood pressure. Focus group discussions not only highlighted the close connections between physical and mental health, but also centered explicitly on the experience of trauma and its impact on former underage combatants.

#### Mental Health during Reintegration— "The Problems . . . Are Hidden in Their Heart"

Participants used a number of metaphors to describe the mental health problems returning former underage

## The noise of bullet shootings as they were ringing in my head

“There is no good health. For instance I, since I left that group I have remained sickly: ribs, head, head pains due to the noise of bullet shootings as they were ringing on my head. There were too much and have left me with too much pain in my head.”

—Female former underage combatant, Mahagi



combatants faced, including: “wandering,” being “foolish,” hearing the “crackle of bullets” long after combat and having “evil thoughts.” These metaphors were used in communities in widely varying geographic areas, suggesting a common language used to conceptualize trauma resulting from combat. Participants also discussed recovering from trauma and mental health issues. Healing was most often mentioned in terms of successfully undertaking a profession, returning to school or, though less often, in connection with finding social support from one’s family. Finding a role in the community – through work, school or vocational training – was described as being of primary importance. Work was the first and most important factor that fostered acceptance and success, possibly because one could find one’s place in the community through work.

Metaphors of “wandering” were frequently used to describe the experiences of former underage combatants who had difficulty fitting back into civilian life because of trauma. All communities referenced this metaphor, which described failed attempts to assimilate into communities or build a new life. Community leaders in particular used this expression to describe how former underage combatants lacked constancy, a capacity to work regularly and were unable

to find roles in existing social networks. Former underage combatants themselves also used this language to describe mental illness and a sense of losing place and purpose.

Participants equated “wandering” with being isolated and dissolute. One community leader in Kalehe described this phenomenon, closing with a description of how “wandering” equated to profound changes in one’s self:

When they came back, the children were wandering too much. You will see him; the life condition when he went is no longer the same when he returns. When he was at home, maybe he was doing his best to do some manual work. But when he comes back, you will realize that he has become a thief, spending the time wandering. It means that in order to get something, he must use force; that is the life he was used to. And others, you will see them, they are full of trauma. The child, you will find him every time having worry, anxiety. You look at him and say, ‘Is this the child I know or not?’ . . . He has become lazy. . . . It means they have changed their behaviors.

Former underage combatants and community members described one kind of trauma as acting “foolish”—a phrase

that was used in Kalehe, Goma and Uvira.<sup>170</sup> Those who used this expression drew a direct connection with combat experiences, “military thinking” and experiencing psychological problems. In many instances, people attributed this state to having heard or experienced “shooting guns”—shorthand for having taken part in combat. Female participants in Goma said: “Others can get foolish because of gun shootings. [The] head can be troubled and lead to foolishness.”

Being “foolish” was specifically described as acting anti-social or exhibiting culturally inappropriate behaviors. References to being “foolish” included taking drugs, threatening civilians and engaging in other criminal behaviors. A community leader in Uvira explained:

You see the child is a soldier, he has a military thinking and he is like foolish. . . He comes here, the day on which he smoked cigarette that we call . . . I mean ganja. Even the mother who gave birth to him is nothing in front of him. Now, these young boys who came from armed troops, they often say that to kill you. For him, it does not require time or any effort. They come with a destroyed head. They are like foolish people. They are out of their minds.

Many participants, particularly females in Kalehe, Mahagi and Nizi who struggled with social exclusion, spoke of experiencing general anxiety as a result of deep suffering. A female participant from Kalehe described how: “[People’s] thoughts have changed. People have been traumatized due to difficulties they underwent... [T]hrough difficulties that they underwent, the intellect changed.”

In Mahagi and Nizi, participants used metaphors of “evil” to describe the changes that underage combatants went through. A Mahagi community leader said: “It is as if when some other children go there, they come in contact with some devilish powers, which make them angry.”

Participants frequently mentioned drugs and alcohol in connection with psychological problems. Participants described how the drugs and alcohol they used as combatants could be a cause of mental health problems and how current drug use could help numb psychological pain. A community leader from Walikale described:

Concerning morals, we have even a sample of those child soldiers who spent nights on the road and got the madness because of this situation of war. . . You find that they are not idiots normally, but perhaps by excess of drugs or the consequences of the magic which they used during their military trainings and after a given period of time . . . they become insane while they did not deserve it.

Former underage combatants described a number of experiences that fit within definitions of post-traumatic stress disorder, including difficulty sleeping, experiencing general anxiety and having nightmares and flashbacks. A number of participants used the metaphor of former underage combatants who “hear guns crackle” even long after combat. A female participant from Mahagi described how she had:

[H]ead pains due to the noise of bullet shootings as they were ringing on my head. There were too much and have left me with too much pain in my head. . . This troubles me so much in my mind. There are also other people with the same problems.

Some participants talked about recovering from mental health issues and returning to a sense of normalcy; the majority of these conversations were with former underage combatants in Walikale. Those who mentioned psychological healing all drew close connections with education or successful job training. Participants described feeling happy when they succeeded at new tasks associated with civilian life. One male participant from Walikale stated:

I feel very happy first and the family feels happy too to see how children have left a risky life and they are back home. . . Here, first I have joy I am studying and I am free and I have no longer those bad problems in my heart. . .

Participants also mentioned, though less often, acceptance from one’s family as important for happiness. Additionally, social acceptance was described as achieved in part by finding a meaningful role in the community. For this reason, participants saw finding a vocation as a pathway to improved social relations and stability. One male participant from Walikale described this saying: “Me? I am happy; I am

170. This was mentioned in the group discussions with Kalehe male former underage combatants, Goma female former underage combatants and Uvira community leaders.

studying. I have chosen mechanics—that will help me with my children and my wife.” Others described how helping former underage combatants find a social role can act as a powerful mental health intervention. Mahagi community leaders described:

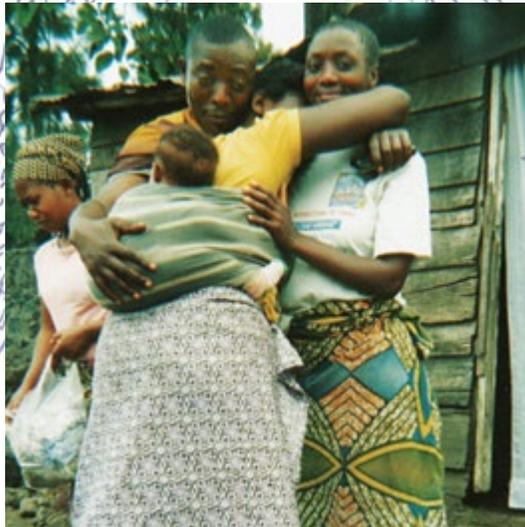
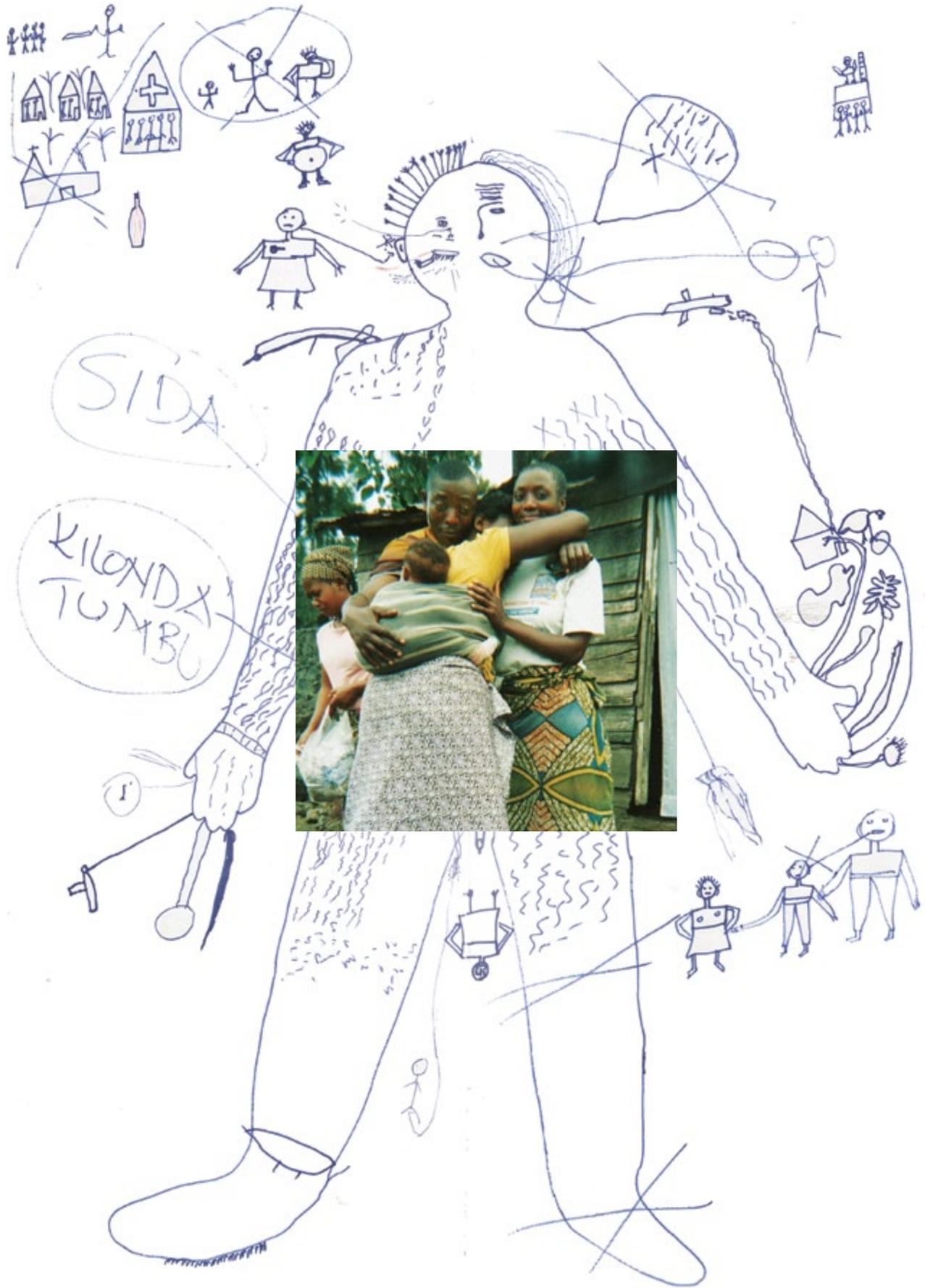
[Job training] can help them to forget the bad things that they lived in and be calm. This is what I think can help them. Even other teachers can create classes to teach them or to supervise them in one context or another. It may push them to feel at ease and their psychology can cool down a bit. Try to give them occupations if possible.

Community leaders in Mahagi and Goma emphasized the importance of transferring other skills in addition to job training. Both groups stated the importance of helping former underage combatants develop social skills to resolve conflict and learn to function within society. In Mahagi, one community leader explained:

The [former underage combatants] were mistreated and the problems they underwent are hidden in their heart until now. They are unable to cooperate with other community members because they have gone through various problems. Now they are trying, little by little, to cooperate with society members, but it is coming little by little.

# Conclusion and Recommendations





# Conclusion

This project highlights the manifold and far-reaching consequences of association with armed groups on the well-being of children, their families, their communities and the wider society. Looking across the body mapping, PhotoVoice and focus group results allowed us to triangulate issues that were most important to stakeholders in this process. The participatory methods used in this project engaged community organizations and local NGOs in reaching out to communities to hear their experiences with conflict, reintegration and rebuilding.

Former underage combatants and their families, community members, community leaders and service providers all shared their expertise and suggestions for improving reintegration processes. There was notable synergy and convergence of messages that emerged across the methods used in this project, despite the fact that body maps, photographs and focus groups engaged different participants in different areas. The lessons learned from previous DDR programming can be used to improve current and future efforts.

This report captures those lessons by amplifying the voices of former underage combatants to share their experiences throughout the arc of conflict—from recruitment to life in armed groups to demobilization and the task of rebuilding their lives as civilians. This project used a participatory action approach to foster collaborative research between local partners and academic institutions, creating knowledge that is owned and used by and for the stakeholders. The results of this work highlight concrete interventions that can address problems associated with former underage combatants at every step of the process, from preventing recruitment to fostering successful reintegration.

Community members and former underage combatants spoke of the importance of building participatory and context-appropriate reintegration programs. These programs should provide not only training and marketable

professional skills, but should also impart basic communication, stress coping and conflict-resolution skills to both former combatants and their families. Reintegration is a long-term process that must fully engage former combatants, their families and their communities in the design and implementation of programs. At its best, this process can be seen as an opportunity to help communities collectively heal and critically examine the ways they choose to rebuild.

**Hardships associated with war contributed directly to youth enrollment in armed groups. Recruitment can take many different forms, indicating the need for programs that better identify children and adolescents at risk for enrollment into armed groups.** Former underage combatants spoke in detail about the factors leading to their recruitment and abduction. **Males and females both described being abducted by armed groups, but with gendered differences in their experiences.** For males, abduction often occurred in the course of daily activities, such as playing or going to school. Females instead described risk factors for abduction, which included being orphaned, separated from their family or having to walk to remote places to perform daily chores, such as working in the field or fetching water.

**While abduction for forced labor was one of the most commonly cited ways that boys and girls became underage combatants, there were also other reasons that youth**

became associated with armed groups. Understanding and addressing these reasons through educational programming, and providing opportunities for alternate activities is critical. Former underage combatants described joining to avoid exploitation by armed groups; to protect or avenge family members affected by the war; or because they felt that, in the face of grinding poverty and few educational or employment opportunities, joining an armed group was the best of the available options. Some former underage combatants even sought out military life in order to access a surrogate family structure.

**Once in armed groups, underage combatants were relegated to the lowest rank—that of *kadogo*, or “little ones.” In this role, they were last in line for goods or material comforts. At this rank, they also faced severe physical punishment and abuse.** The results were poor health and high mortality. Faced with chronic malnutrition and inadequate access to food, nearly all former underage combatants who participated in the research described their time in the militia as one of near starvation and physical misery. They spoke of a feeling of deep dehumanization and described being treated as slaves or animals.

**Girls and young women said they were forced to fulfill dual roles as both combatants and sex slaves.** In addition to the abuse, neglect and intimidation common to all underage combatants, female underage combatants also experienced sexual abuse and cited unintended pregnancies in the forest as one of the greatest dangers they faced. If women survived childbirth, they faced the distress of not knowing the father of their children and were left with no social support structure and no husband to help provide for them.

**Widely varying exposure to, and experiences with, reintegration programming suggested that efforts varied greatly throughout eastern DRC and were unevenly implemented.** Those who did participate in DDR programs articulated frustration with false promises and inadequate support. Both former underage combatants and community members recognized that combatants undergo behavior changes and psychological trauma during their time in armed groups. **Community members expressed a mix of sympathy for, and distrust of, former underage combatants, noting that they could act as a destabilizing force in civilian contexts.** Civilians often regarded former underage combatants as volatile and believed they brought antisocial

behavior into already fragile communities. Community members stated that former underage combatants need psychological services as well as material assistance in order to be able to fully reintegrate.

Former underage combatants were aware of the mistrust they faced from community members, and noted that one of the greatest obstacles to reintegration was the social stigma they encountered. These individuals described how, once returned, they were seen as criminals and blamed for all the wrongdoing in their neighborhoods. Former underage combatants also spoke about the injustice of having “missed out” on the civilian lives they left when they entered armed groups. During reintegration, former underage combatants described seeing their peers with jobs, families and an education, and felt that they had no avenues for pursuing the same opportunities. **Becoming a participating member of the community—either through employment or education—was listed as critical. Finding a functioning role in society had both practical importance and also served as a way to rebuild a sense of dignity, agency and social belonging.**

Association with armed groups has profound and long-term mental health consequences. Former underage combatants described suffering from a range of mental health symptoms and noted that they often lacked the communication and social skills to seek the social support they need. Successful reintegration requires an ability to negotiate job prospects and consistently pursue education opportunities that will ultimately lead to sustainable income. Former underage combatants, who generally had no decision-making power and no experience of working cooperatively, were not able to reintegrate seamlessly into communities. **Reintegration programs must not only provide material assistance but also impart basic skills related to conflict negotiation, communication and stress reduction.**



# Recommendations

- 1. Provide Comprehensive Reintegration Programming:** Programming for the reintegration of former underage combatants should be holistic and include professional skills training, literacy and education opportunities, mental health and/or psychosocial support mechanisms and community engagement throughout the process. Referral structures should be in place so that organizations with different areas of expertise can coordinate their efforts. Careful case management of individual beneficiaries is vital to ensuring each former underage combatant is able to access necessary services as effectively as possible.
- 2. Improve Access to Mental Health Services:** Upon reintegration, former underage combatants confront the severe psychological effects of their experiences while seeking to re-establish themselves in their communities. Due to the short-term nature of funding and limited human resources, mental health services and psychosocial programming were limited or non-existent. International funders with expertise in mental health should invest in the training of capable local organizations to undertake basic mental health care.
- 3. Promote Community and Family Involvement in Reintegration:** Communities and families play an essential role in ensuring successful reintegration. Programming should engage community leaders, religious leaders and educators in the dissemination of professionally developed information that shares how experiences in an armed group psychologically affect former combatants and how family, friends and others in the community can contribute to reintegration and reconciliation efforts. Reintegration programming also needs to engage with communities to offer practical assistance to former underage combatants. This can take the form of business owners providing internships or vocational training, educators providing tutoring or religious leaders offering guidance. Counseling and mediation services are often needed to help estranged family members reestablish healthy relationships. Families have the potential to positively influence former underage combatants and ease their transition to civilian life. Conversely, families that are not brought into reintegration programming as stakeholders can act as stressors on former combatants.
- 4. Build Capacity of Local Organizations:** The quality of services provided by local organizations was often compromised for the sake of quantity because local organizations are frequently contracted to implement short-term reintegration programming and required to reintegrate a specific number of former underage combatants in a restricted time period. Local organizations did not always have access to the professional skills required for technical interventions, such as mental health or vocational training. International funders should invest in building the technical capacity of these organizations to implement more

complex, long-term programming. Investing in the professional capacity of Congolese institutions, such as universities, to provide expertise to local organizations would increase the potential for sustainable, prevention-based programs that serve at-risk youth.

5. **Coordinate Funding Mechanisms:** Former underage combatants' widely varied exposure to reintegration programs reveals the disconnects in reintegration programming. The large range of reintegration programs and "packages" created conflict between community members and beneficiaries as well as among beneficiaries. The difficulties coordinating government actors, international funders and international and national implementers were noted as a barrier to effective reintegration. Working in concert and adhering to a universal strategy agreed upon by all stakeholders that incorporates measurable success metrics would improve the efficacy of interventions and allow for better measurement of impact and best practices.
6. **Determine Successful Programmatic Models Through Monitoring and Evaluation:** Monitoring and evaluation were described as among the weakest areas of reintegration programming. Objectives and specific indicators were not identified or agreed upon by stakeholders, and funding structures did not allow for long-term follow up of beneficiaries. These factors make it almost impossible to establish the long-term impact of programs. The focus on a "quickly demobilize and transfer" strategy without adequate attention to tracking social impact resulted in interventions that could not be evaluated over the long term. Reintegration programming should not be designed as a short-term intervention, but instead as a long-term investment, with strong case management and established metrics that can be used to measure success.
7. **Undertake Security Sector Reform:** The continued proliferation of armed groups in eastern DRC poses a significant risk to communities. At the time of the publication of this report, communities noted that recruitment of underage combatants into non-state armed groups was active and on-going, particularly as a result of clashes between M23, Raia Mutomboko and FARDC. The DRC government should prioritize reform of its security sector to ensure police, military and judicial systems are sufficiently organized, resourced and trained to respond to security threats. Such systems are critical to long-term reintegration success. Security sector reform would provide the local and regional security through which the country's other development challenges could be addressed. International support for security sector reform should be considered a priority for donor countries, and coordinated through an agreed upon framework.
8. **Focus on Prevention:** Programming for youth at risk of joining armed groups is critical. As noted above, ongoing insecurity and hardships associated with conflict and poverty contribute directly to underage enrollment in armed groups. Professional skills training that is relevant to the needs of local markets and buttressed with education opportunities will help address the underlying factors which make children and youth vulnerable to recruitment and abduction into armed groups. International funders should build the lasting capacity of local Congolese organizations to invest in these at-risk populations. A longer-term view of the risk factors associated with underage combatants will ensure that programming is preventative, instead of reactionary.

# Appendices and Bibliography

Appendix 1: Map of Project Sites,  
Democratic Republic of the Congo

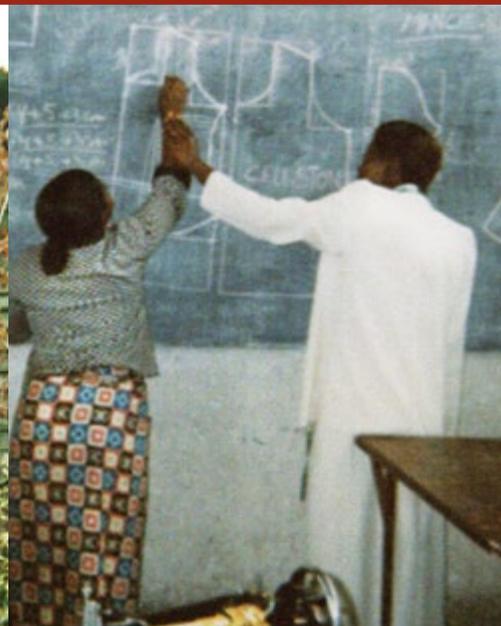
Appendix 2: Index of Photographs

Appendix 3: Overview of Body Mapping  
Sites and Participants

Appendix 4: Overview of PhotoVoice  
Sites and Participants

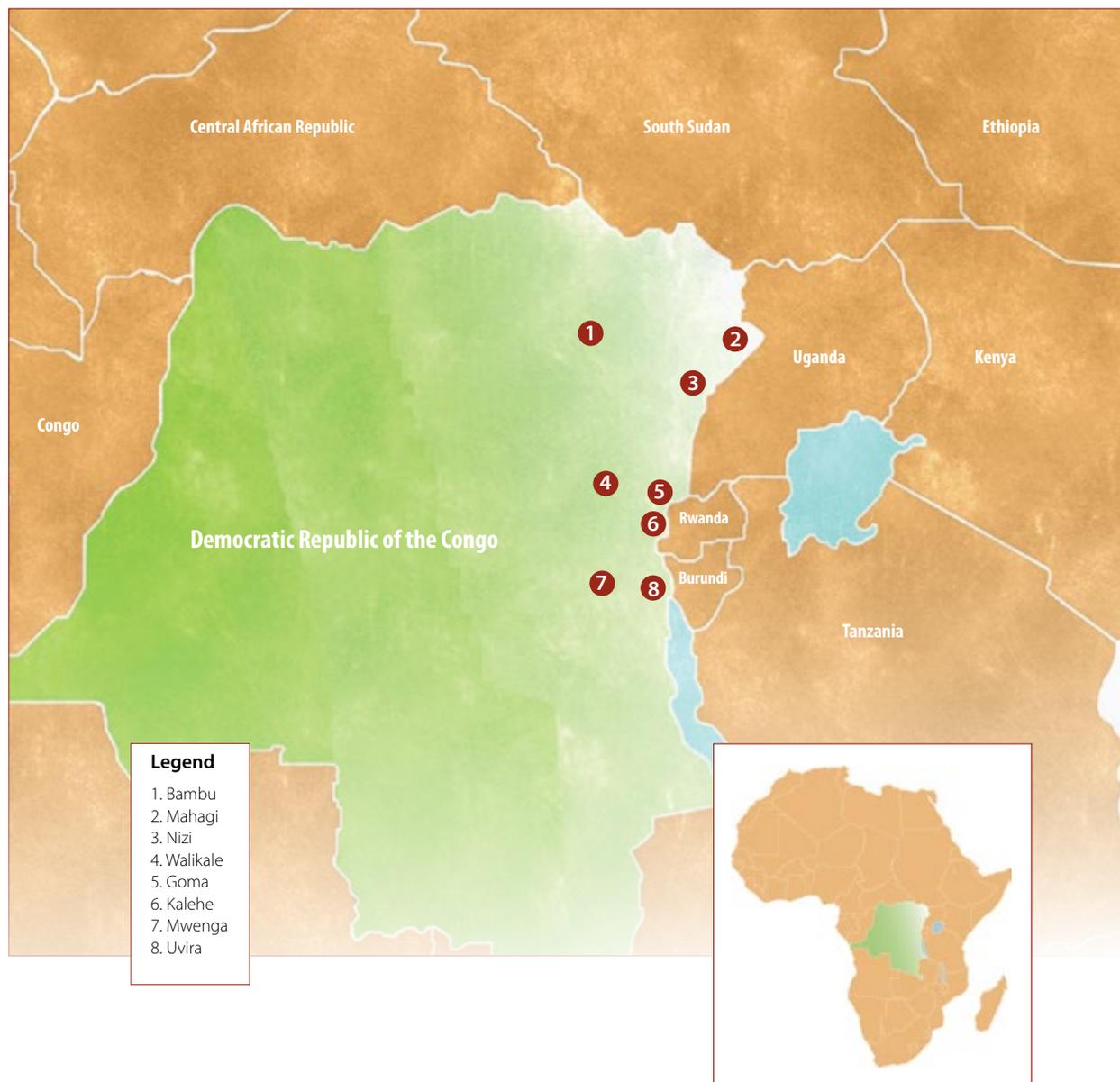
Appendix 5: Overview of Focus Group  
Sites and Participants

Bibliography



## Appendix 1: Map of Project Sites, Democratic Republic of the Congo

The former underage combatants and community members who participated in this study came from eight communities—Bambu, Goma, Kalehe, Mahagi, Mwenga, Nizi, Walikale and Uvira—located in the eastern region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, an area which borders the countries of South Sudan, Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi.



## Appendix 2: Index of Photographs

PhotoVoice is a methodology that uses photographs to show how a person experiences and understands social phenomena and disease. This approach enables individuals to express themselves visually, and requires no previous experience with research or a camera. Here, former underage combatants shared stories about their experiences in armed groups. This Appendix presents a selection of photographs collected during this research alongside their captions. The full photo database is available online at [wecameback.org](http://wecameback.org).



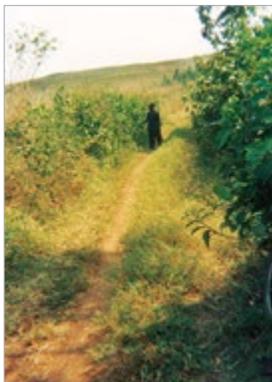
*I want to show the world where I was hit in the left leg by a bullet. Wearing this prosthesis helps me get around, but not quickly.*  
UV001



*To remind me of the place where I was injured during the period of sad memories . . . in other words, the armed conflict.*  
UV001



*This photo shows the condition of this tree which is comparable to the lives of children who were associated with armed groups who are left without support, abandoned by their communities like this tree which is in the process of disappearing.*  
UV001



*This photo shows how many ex-combatants abandon the professional training they receive and prefer to cultivate their fields if they can. This is the activity many adopted.*  
UV003



*Ex-child soldiers who were not reintegrated because they sold their reinsertion kits and these kits weren't enough for two people.*  
UV004



*This picture shows the community field that was given to the ex-combatants as part of their economic reinsertion kit when they left the armed group. This field was meant to help them occupy themselves with hard work and forget about their lives with the militia.*  
UV005



*This photo shows the river where the ex-child soldiers come and draw water while preparing food.*  
UV006



*These are memories of the hard and heavy work that we did with this friend when we were still in the armed group.*  
UV008



*This friend who was a child soldier, lost both her parents. She was integrated into the Mai Mai and then was raped by her commander.*  
UV008



*This photo reminds me of the great joy of the family members when the child came back to their family and their community.*  
UV010



*This photo shows how hard life is in my community, where we live with ex-combatants who have not been included in the reintegration and reinsertion programming. This is why my family makes alcohol to survive.*  
UV010



*This photo shows the hard work of fishing that young ex-combatants are carrying out to meet the needs of their families.*  
UV010



*Some of my siblings are happy with my coming but some rejected me.*  
GO011



*I am in the bush being escorted to fetch water.*  
GO012



*I am in school and the teacher is teaching me how to pedal and put the cloth on the sewing machine.*  
GO012



*I am in school and the teacher is teaching me how to draw a blouse and a skirt on the blackboard.*  
GO012



*I am sad because I was not welcomed by one of my sisters.*  
GO013



*Reflecting: How to get a job.*  
GO015



*They are beating me because they want to go with me in the rebel army in the bush.*  
GO018



*The war makes people cross in a canoe to go into the forest.*  
MW24



*Here they are making me carry a basket—they made me go find firewood in the forest and if I don't do it, I will have problems.*  
KA025



*I was taken away when we were in refuge. They had me fetch water for them.*  
KA026



*When in the bush I was working very hard.*  
KA026



*I went to fetch water and that is the time I got the opportunity to quickly take a shower because if I am caught I will be beaten badly.*  
KA026



*I used to go and look for firewood.*  
KA026



*I am thinking about my life before and now and my trouble and they rape me again.*  
KA027



*This photo reminds me of the suffering I had and it makes me want to run and hide.*  
KA027



*I am coming out of the garden and I meet the Interahamwe and they rape me on the road, then they tied me up and carried me and my hoe that I used for cultivating.*  
KA027



*This picture shows us as we leave the forest.*  
KA028



*This photo shows me cleaning the dishes.*  
KA028



*Here are the people who guarded the yard.*  
KA029



*I fell sick and was hospitalized.*  
KA030



*I was hiding away from them because I was tired of being beaten.*  
KA030



*I felt really sorry for my life when I was in the bush.*  
KA030



*The two parents learned that their child has returned from the army and their smile symbolizes the joy and wish that he would reintegrate into the family.*  
MA032



*The child returned from the army and contributes to the work of the community.*  
MA032



*I showed my wife the scar left by the gun that I carried.*  
MA033



*I reflect on what I am going to do in this world.*  
MA033



*Some of my friends finished their studies, others became rich, and me, I lost my time and my chance in the army.*  
MA034



*This hole reminds me where we were hiding during combat and the pits where we buried the dead bodies on the battlefield.*  
MA036



*The members of the community manifest their discontent of supporting child soldiers (criminals, rapists, represented by this poison in this glass).*  
MA040



*Green banana tree: hope in life.*  
BA042



*A 95-year-old widow living in her misery.*

BA043



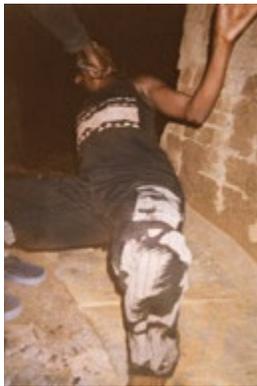
*My grandpa who helps me with beans.*

WA046



*When I was building, they put grass on top of the roof.*

WA049



*Here I am taken by enemy and he wants to put a knife in me.*

WA049



*When I arrived they said they would give me assistance of raising goats.*

WA049



*I would think a lot when I was the guard.*

WA049

## Appendix 3: Overview of Body Mapping Sites and Participants

Site	Type of Participant
Bambu	Parents of former underage combatants, former underage combatants, service providers
Goma 1	NGO programmers who work with underage combatants
Goma 2	Former underage combatants
Kalehe	Female former underage combatants
Mahagi	Male former underage combatants
Mwenga 1	Parents of former underage combatants, service providers
Mwenga 2	Parents of former underage combatants, former underage combatants, service providers
Walikale 1	Formers underage combatants
Walikale 2	Former underage combatants, service providers
Uvira	Parents of former underage combatants

## Appendix 4: Overview of PhotoVoice Sites and Participants

Site	PhotoVoice Code	Sub-Site	Participant's Gender	Participant's Affiliation	Moderating NGO	# Photos
Uvira	UV001	Runingu	Male	Former Underage Combatant	AJEDI-Ka	22
	UV002	Runingu	Male	Former Underage Combatant	AJEDI-Ka	19
	UV003	Katogota	Male	Former Underage Combatant	AJEDI-Ka	19
	UV004	Katogota	Male	Former Underage Combatant	AJEDI-Ka	5
	UV005	Kasenga	Female	Parent of Former Underage Combatant	AJEDI-Ka	21
	UV006	Uvira-Centre	Female	Parent of Former Underage Combatant	AJEDI-Ka	21
	UV007	Ake	Female	Former Underage Combatant	AJEDI-Ka	10
	UV008	Mboko	Female	Former Underage Combatant	AJEDI-Ka	16
	UV009	Mboko	Female	Former Underage Combatant	AJEDI-Ka	6
	UV010	Uvira-Centre	Male	Parent of Former Underage Combatant	AJEDI-Ka	13
Goma	GO011	Goma	Female	Former Underage Combatant	ETN	17
	GO012	Goma	Female	Former Underage Combatant	ETN	16
	GO013	Goma	Female	Former Underage Combatant	ETN	15
	GO014	Goma	Male	Former Underage Combatant	ETN	21
	GO015	Goma	Male	Former Underage Combatant	ETN	16
	GO016	Goma	Male	Former Underage Combatant	ETN	26
	GO017	Goma	Male	Former Underage Combatant	ETN	24
	GO018	Goma	Male	Former Underage Combatant	ETN	24
Mwenga	MW019	Mwenga	Male	Former Underage Combatant	PREV	18
	MW020	Mwenga	Male	Former Underage Combatant	PREV	19
	MW021	Mwenga	Female	Former Underage Combatant	PREV	12
	MW022	Mwenga	Male	Former Underage Combatant	PREV	17
	MW023	Mwenga	Male	Former Underage Combatant	PREV	24
	MW024	Mwenga	Female	Former Underage Combatant	PREV	22

Site	PhotoVoice Code	Sub-Site	Participant's Gender	Participant's Affiliation	Moderating NGO	# Photos
Kalehe	KA025	Bushushu	Female	Former Underage Combatant	PREV	24
	KA026	Bushushu	Female	Former Underage Combatant	PREV	27
	KA027	Bushushu	Female	Former Underage Combatant	PREV	25
	KA028	Bushushu	Female	Former Underage Combatant	PREV	25
	KA029	Bushushu	Female	Former Underage Combatant	PREV	24
	KA030	Bushushu	Female	Former Underage Combatant	PREV	27
Mahagi	MA031	Chele-wang'	Male	Former Underage Combatant	ACIAR	10
	MA032	Chele-wang'	Male	Former Underage Combatant	ACIAR	6
	MA033	Chele-wang'	Male	Former Underage Combatant	ACIAR	22
	MA034	Chele-wang'	Male	Former Underage Combatant	ACIAR	13
	MA035	Chele-wang'	Male	Former Underage Combatant	ACIAR	10
	MA036	Mahagi	Female	Former Underage Combatant	ACIAR	14
	MA037	Mahagi	Female	Former Underage Combatant	ACIAR	17
	MA038	Mahagi	Female	Former Underage Combatant	ACIAR	21
	MA039	Mahagi	Male	Village Chief	ACIAR	16
	MA040	Mahagi	Female	Former Underage Combatant	ACIAR	17
Bambu	BA041	Bambu	Male	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Instructor of Technical Skills to Ex-EAFGA</li> <li>• Grand Leader of local ex-combatant group</li> </ul>	Caritas	25
	BA042	Bambu	Male	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Instructor of Technical Skills to former underage combatants</li> </ul>	Caritas	21
	BA043	Bambu	Male	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Instructor of Technical Skills to Ex-EAFGA</li> <li>• Secretary of local ex-combatant group</li> </ul>	Caritas	19
	BA044	Bambu	Male	Vice President of local ex-combatant group	Caritas	29
Walikale	WA045	Walikale-Centre	Male	Former Underage Combatant	Graade	11
	WA046	Walikale-Centre	Male	Former Underage Combatant	Graade	19
	WA047	Walikale-Centre	Female	Former Underage Combatant	Graade	15
	WA048	Walikale-Centre	Female	Former Underage Combatant	Graade	21
	WA049	Walikale-Centre	Male	Former Underage Combatant	Graade	18
	WA050	Walikale-Centre	Male	Former Underage Combatant	Graade	17

## Appendix 5: Overview of Focus Group Sites and Participants

Site	Constituency	Gender	Number of Participants	Partner Organization
Goma	Former underage combatant	Female	10	ETN
	Former underage combatant	Male	10	ETN
	Community leaders	Male + Female	9	ETN
Kalehe	Former underage combatant	Male	9	PREV
	Former underage combatant	Female	12	PREV
	Community leaders	Male + Female	6	PREV
Mahagi	Former underage combatant	Male	4	ACIAR
	Former underage combatant	Female	6	ACIAR
	Community leaders	Male + Female	5	ACIAR
Nizi	Former underage combatant	Female	9	CARITAS
	Community leaders and parents of former underage combatants	Male + Female	11	CARITAS
Uvira	Former underage combatant	Male	9	AJEDIKA
	Former underage combatant	Female	4	AJEDIKA
	Community leaders	Male + Female	7	AJEDIKA
Walikale	Former underage combatant	Female	7	GRAADE
	Former underage combatant	Male	8	GRAADE
	Community leaders	Male	6	GRAADE

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