During the decade-long conflict in Nepal from 1996-2006, approximately 4,500 children were recruited to Maoist military forces. Apart from the danger that these children experienced — along with separation from their families and missed schooling - Nepali NGOs estimate that around 400 children were killed by the warring parties and more than 600 were injured.

This article explores the 'push' and 'pull' factors behind the enlistment of children in Maoist forces and examines the strengths and weaknesses of Nepal's national Reintegration Programme. The author argues that lack of longer-term provision, limited expertise in providing vocational training and income generation support, and the refusal of the Nepali government to take responsibility for reintegration are hindering the effectiveness of a programme which nonetheless has seen positive results from its community-based approach and strategy of addressing other vulnerable children, as well as former child soldiers, through its interventions.

**Keywords:** Nepal, Maoist, child soldiers, CAAFAG, enlistment, reintegration, community-based approach.

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Background

From 1996-2006, Nepal experienced a decade of armed conflict between the government and the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoists (hereafter the Maoists). During the conflict, children were deployed in various military activities, including as combatants, by the conflicting parties. Along with others, children were deeply affected by the conflict and their rights were comprehensively violated. Even after the peace deal, the effective release, return and reintegration of former child soldiers, often referred to as ‘children associated with armed forces and armed groups’ or CAAFAG, did not happen according to the provision outlined in the 2006 Comprehensive Peace Agreement\(^1\) and the Agreement on Monitoring of the Management of Arms and Armies\(^2\).

Since 2000, many child rights’ organizations, including the United Nations, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), have been working on the issue of child soldiers in Nepal. This chapter examines the reintegration of children associated with armed forces and armed groups in Nepal, in particular from 2005 to 2009. It explores how children were used during Nepal’s ten-year insurgency, and then analyses the strengths and weaknesses of Nepal’s child soldier reintegration programme, arguing that reintegration in Nepal must tackle the root causes of enrolment and offer viable livelihood alternatives. The chapter argues that a community-based approach to reintegration must be adopted in order to reduce the stigmatisation children face when returning home.

The Ten-Year Insurgency

From Constitutional Power to a People’s Revolution

The history of modern Nepal began in the mid-eighteenth century when the King of Gorkha, Prithivi Narayan Shah, unified tiny states to form the country of Nepal. In 1846, autocratic family rule imposed on the country by Jung Bahadur Rana shifted power from the King to the Prime Minister and made the position hereditary. The people’s revolution in 1950 brought an end to Rana family rule, and Nepal experienced


a multi-party democracy. Despite a period of autocratic government imposed by King Mahendra in 1962, multi-party democracy was re-introduced in 1990 and lasted until 1996. During this period of transition, Nepal experienced unrest within the population and an increasing level of corruption by politicians (Karki and Seddon 2003:14).

The Demands of the Maoists

The Maoists, a hard-line communist party whose aim was to establish a classless society and to replace Nepal’s constitutional monarchy with a republic, put forward a forty-point demand to the government on 4 February 1996, giving the government an ultimatum of thirteen days to fulfil their demands (Riaz and Basu 2007:133). Their demands included reform in the social, economic and political spheres ‘with the proclaimed aim of establishing a new democratic socio-economic system and state’ (Karki and Seddon 2003:22). The most sensitive demands of the Maoists related to the abolition of royal privileges, the declaration of Nepal as a secular state and the drafting of a new constitution for the country through a constituent assembly. On 13 February 1996, after blaming the government for not adhering to its demands, the Maoists began armed conflict against the government, which lasted for ten years until the conflict formally ended on 21 November 2006, with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) by the government of Nepal and the Maoists (Riaz and Basu 2007:133).

Between 1996 and 2001, the Maoists carried out a series of attacks on government offices and infrastructure, including on financial institutions, in order to raise funds. They captured land from powerful landlords and distributed this to small peasants and landless people in the rural part of the country. They ran campaigns against gambling and against the production and consumption of alcohol to gain sympathy and increase support for the party. In 1998, early attempts to settle the conflict peacefully through peace talks had failed due to lack of consensus between the Maoists, other political parties and the King, over the agenda proposed by the Maoists. The failure of the talks further intensified the conflict, and insurgents instigated the worst violence and disruption that Nepal had experienced in its entire history (Muni 2003: 37). Within two to three years of the ‘People’s War’, the impact of the conflict was widespread throughout the country.

The End of the Monarchy?

On 1 February 2005, King Gyanendra assumed executive authority, citing the inability of the civilian government to resolve the conflict, and declared a state of emergency in Nepal. Many leaders of the major political parties were taken into custody and King Gyanendra imposed severe restrictions on civil liberties. Consequently, the conflict dynamics between the King, the political parties and the Maoists developed into a conflict of two parties: the political parties and the Maoists against the King. With support from the Maoists, an alliance of seven political parties led protests throughout Nepal against the monarchy and against the civil war. In April 2006, after nineteen days of intense protest, King Gyanendra was forced to relinquish direct rule. The alliance of the seven political parties assumed authority and voted unanimously to curtail the monarch’s political powers, effectively rendering him a ceremonial figure (Nepalnews 2006).
Later, on 21 November 2006, the government of Nepal (led by the alliance of seven parties) and the Maoists signed a peace agreement, which cited the conditions for merging and forming an interim government. Both the Maoists and the Nepalese Army agreed an arms pact and locked up their weapons with the United Nations acting as monitor (Zia-Zarifi 2007: 3).

Despite the end of ten years of armed conflict, many challenges still remained, including a plethora of economic, political and social issues. The damage caused by the violence in Nepal was unprecedented in the country’s history. Estimates suggest that some 13,000 Nepalese were killed in the conflict, 100,000 were displaced, and approximately 1,700 people ‘disappeared’ (Zia-Zarifi 2007:4).

**Children in the Conflict**

*Recruitment of Children by the Maoists*

The Maoists victimised children by targeting them as recruits, a practice that began to take place at such an alarming rate, that Nepal was one of seven countries nominated by UN Security Council Resolution 1612 to establish a monitoring and reporting mechanism for grave violations against children in armed conflict (Zia-Zarifi 2007:6). In areas under their control, the Maoists operated a ‘one family, one child’ programme whereby each family was forced to provide a child recruit or face severe punishment (STC 2007: 2). Once recruited, children were kept in the ranks through punishment or the fear of it; any children who wanted to escape had to consider the real possibility that the Maoists would exact reprisal upon their families (Zia-Zarifi 2007: 5). The Maoists used a variety of techniques for recruiting children: the kidnapping of individual children, the abduction of large groups of children often from schools, and the use of propaganda campaigns to attract children as ‘volunteers’. The Maoists frequently used compulsory educational sessions to recruit children as soldiers, sometimes simply by prohibiting the children from returning home.

It is estimated that at least 4,500 children were recruited by the Maoists, serving as porters, sentries, messengers, and medical assistants (Zia-Zafari 2007: 2). Most children served in local militias, but others held positions in the Maoists’ core military wing, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). The majority of children in Maoist ranks received military training and were given weapons, ranging from fully-fledged weapons in the PLA, to a single grenade or improvised ‘socket bombs’. Nepali NGOs estimated that over the past decade approximately 400 children were killed by the warring parties and more than 600 were injured. Nepali children also suffered the second highest global rate of injuries caused by landmines and unexploded ordinance left behind by the warring sides (CWIN 2007).

The experience of child soldiers in Nepal differs from other armed conflicts. For example, unlike many of the conflicts in West Africa, children who were deployed by the Maoists were not subjected to mass rape or mutilation and forced to kill their families. However, the seriousness of the crimes against Nepali children should not be underestimated or brushed aside in comparison. All children used in armed conflict are placed in positions of danger, fear and isolation; they are separated from their
families and miss schooling; ‘For many children in the Maoists, their time with the armed group has been difficult, arduous, unpleasant and dangerous’ (UNICEF 2008: 27).

**Why Did Children Enlist?**

Despite Maoist recruitment tactics, a study commissioned by Save the Children (STC) of a group of 914 former child soldiers revealed that sixty per cent of these children did not feel they had been forced to enlist (STC 2008: 9). Nepal’s conflict is not only unique for its lack of aggressive violence towards children, but also because many children voluntarily joined the forces. Most children recruited by the Maoists came from far and mid-western districts such as Rolpa, Rukum, and Jarjakot, where anti-state sentiment and underdevelopment was especially pernicious (Housden 2009: 2).

According to the STC study, many children joined due to peer pressure and the appeal of cultural programmes. Other reasons included ‘to earn money, poverty, interest in ideology, family member’s involvement, abduction and revenge’ (Ibid: 9). The study cites poverty, discrimination and a poor family/community environment as ‘push’ factors. With children’s basic needs unmet, antipathy towards the state was exacerbated by the structural discrimination endemic in many rural communities particularly towards girls, marginalized ethnic minorities, and lower caste, or Dalit children. A report commissioned by the Transcultural Psychosocial Organization of Nepal showed that twenty-four per cent of children said they joined due to poverty, with fifteen per cent joining from the belief that change within society (such as eliminating discrimination) was possible through the Maoists. Children also said they joined due to family problems, and because of the lack of opportunities in their communities. Girls emphasized that they joined to escape abusive marriages or to avoid being forced into arranged marriages (Kort 2007: 14).

**‘Pull’ Factors in Recruitment**

‘Pull’ factors included peer pressure, family involvement with the party and, as the conflict progressed, vengeance. The murder of a father or the rape of a mother or sister by the Royal Nepalese Army strengthened motivation to join the Maoists (Housden 2009: 3). Personal advancement and personal interest was stated as a pull factor for twenty-four per cent of children who were later returned to their communities; they explained that they joined in the belief that they would be given opportunities to become leaders, politicians or army commanders. Other pull factors listed included interest in the party philosophy (ten per cent), and revenge on security forces (five per cent) (Kort 2007: 15).

The Maoists were successful in recruiting children because they implemented a strategy that tapped into their grievances. To give children a political voice and an outlet for their creativity, they organised cultural programmes of song and dance that were popular with children and contained clear messages expressing Maoist political ideology. The STC study showed that seventy-two per cent of people interviewed believed that cultural and political indoctrination activities carried out by the Maoists were the main attraction for children (STC 2008: 6). Community members often
described this recruitment as a *lahailahai* (children following one after the other). Recruits were also promised a guaranteed wage that often exceeded the average income. However, Housden argues that it was the status and sense of empowerment gained by joining the Maoists that was particularly attractive. Maoist ideology was deeply rooted in equality and egalitarianism which struck a chord with girls, lower castes and ethnic minorities (Housden 2009:3).

The inter-agency child protection database\(^3\) reported that sixty-nine per cent of former child soldiers involved in the reintegration process considered that their enlistment with the Maoists was voluntary, while thirty-one per cent claimed that they were forced to join. This statistical outcome should be qualified: respondents might have been indoctrinated to believe they were not forced even if they were, and different people might define ‘force’ differently. A scenario where immense pressure is exerted might not be seen as force, yet such a situation might not present the child in question with any other options but to enlist.

**Key Motivation for Joining**

The wide range of motivations behind why children enlisted are presented in the table below. The Maoists used child soldiers to recruit new children, and schools were the main recruitment sites. The power that the child soldiers appeared to possess and would demonstrate in schools and communities, and the entertainment they enjoyed through the cultural programmes were key attractions for children who joined the Maoists. Of these range of motivations, it is worth highlighting that for both boys and girls the prime stimulus came from friends persuading them to join (CAAFAG WG 2006:7). Thus, the peer aspect was the main factor that contributed to the high recruitment of children to the Maoist movement.

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\(^3\) Inter agency child protection information system is managed by CAAFAG reintegration implementing organizations in Nepal that includes Save the Children, World Education and UNICEF. This IMS system is a case management tool for CAAFAG reintegration program. UNICEF centrally hosts it. Till the end of December 2009 the information of 8,297 former child soldiers have been entered into the database.

\(^4\) This confirms the findings of the rapid assessment: ‘...the children have been convinced by or have followed their friends and/or their family members.’ (CAAFAG 2006: 6)
The Children Left Behind

Children left behind in their communities also suffered. In many places, schools closed down due to the destruction of premises, the lack of teachers, military operations and threats by the Maoists. In some areas during the conflict, children received less than one hundred days’ schooling a year because of strikes called by the Maoists and compulsory participation in activities run by them. Other children were kept at home for fear of abduction or were displaced to ‘safer’ areas - a tendency that caused severe overcrowding in urban schools.

Reintegration of Children After the Conflict

The Response of NGOs

Until 2002, when the Maoists began recruiting children on a significant scale, the issue of child soldiers had not been considered a major problem and therefore was not a key issue for the child protection agencies in Nepal. Most agencies accommodated the issue within their ongoing development programmes, whose objectives were to mitigate the impact of armed conflict on children and to establish services for children, particularly in education and health. However, after 2002, the use of children in armed activities increased and became a cause for alarm. As a consequence of this, child protection agencies began direct interventions aimed at the reintegration of children who had been used by the security forces and the Maoists.

After 2002, several international and national agencies began addressing the protection issues of child soldiers through individual initiatives according to their own organizational mandates. Several had at least one programme for child soldiers, which fell into one of the following three categories: advocacy for the release and reintegration of children; monitoring and reporting of violations of children’s rights particularly by the conflicting parties; and awareness raising, community capacity building, and providing reintegration support to CAAFAG.

Joint Efforts for Advocacy

In 2003, STC and its local partner organizations initiated an advocacy campaign which later emerged as a national coalition called the ‘National Coalition for Children as Zones of Peace’ (CZOP)\(^5\). This coalition of thirty-six child rights organizations, including UNICEF, initiated a range of advocacy measures jointly conducted at the national level.

Several organizations which were involved in CZOP also provided support to children and communities affected by conflict in areas such as education, income generation and livelihood support, psychosocial care, and capacity building in child protection. At the same time, STC and its local partners were also monitoring grave violations of children’s rights, such as the recruitment and abduction of children by conflicting parties, attacks on schools, and the use of schools for armed activities.

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\(^5\) Children as Zones of Peace is a national campaign as a joint efforts of 36 NGOs, INGOs and UN bodies working for promoting and protecting the rights of the children affected by armed conflict. During conflict time, the coalition effectively advocated against the use of children in armed activities.
STC, in partnership with SAHARA (a local NGO with child protection experience), established two transit centres - temporary shelters for children who had escaped from the Maoists - for forty-eight children, equipping staff with basic skills to provide the services required for reunification and reintegration. During a discussion with the author, Shiva Paudel, an STC programme officer stated, ‘Forty-eight children who sheltered in those transit centres for about three to six months reintegrated into their families successfully’. Services also involved facilitating communication between children and their families prior to family reunion, carrying out assessments of the family and neighbourhood environment, and creating a ‘safety net’ of several individuals in the neighbourhood. Families were also given support to build sustainable livelihoods based on their skills. However, Paudel also noted:

Despite good preparation of family and children before reuniting, providing support to families for sustainable livelihood and linking children with school in their community, STC and its local partner could not conduct regular follow up of reunited children for at least two years in order to ensure their successful reintegration, which was lacking in the programme.

In reality, preparing the family, the neighbourhood and the children themselves is as important as providing reintegration packages such as educational, livelihood and psychosocial support to children for their successful reintegration.

Addressing the Issue on a Wider Scale

There is no doubt that individual efforts by organizations addressed the needs of conflict-affected children and contributed to bringing hope to their lives. Nonetheless, as the conflict escalated these efforts became insufficient to accommodate the increasing number of children affected, in part because efforts were confined within existing programmatic areas, but also because available resources (both human and financial) were inadequate to cover all the geographical areas involved. The realization that joint working through the Children as Zone of Peace (CZOP) coalition had a more effective impact that any individual organizational efforts, prompted coalition agencies to explore working together under one ‘umbrella’ to ensure the successful reintegration of child soldiers in Nepal.

The Joint Initiative - Nepal’s Reintegration Programme

The reintegration of former child soldiers is considered the responsibility of government. However, since 2006, in the absence of a Nepalese government body accepting responsibility, UNICEF and partners, including the UN Mission in Nepal, two UN agencies, six INGOs, three national NGOs and the CZOP coalition have implemented a programme for former child soldiers, aimed at their release and reintegration into civilian life.

The programme aims to support children who were used by armed groups and forces in Nepal in the decade-long armed conflict, in roles which included combatants, informers, cooks, porters, and members of the cultural artist wing of the Maoists. The

6 Shiva Prasad Paudel, Save the Children’s Office, Kathmandu, 22 June 2010
7 Ibid
programme targets both CAAFAG, and other vulnerable and ‘at risk’ children, aiming to identify, trace and reunify them with their communities, to reintegrate them within their families and communities, and to strengthen social cohesion and community harmony among children and their communities through local peacebuilding initiatives. A further objective was to strengthen the child protection system at the nation, district and community level. All of these activities should promote the participation of children and youth in the process of building sustainable peace.

These organizations involved in the programme used to meet regularly as the CAAFAG Working Group, whose mandate was to provide:

[A] forum to discuss, to analyse protection issues, to elaborate and to coordinate comprehensive and harmonized responses for the release, return and reintegration of CAAFAG, as well as to design common advocacy strategies with relevant stakeholders (Housden 2009: 5).

**Practical Support and Advocacy**

The Working Group operated in thirty-four districts in Nepal, working at a practical level to facilitate the release and reintegration of children and to prevent the recruitment of children (UNICEF 2008:3). It also provided immediate care, family tracing, reunification services and psychosocial training, as well as advocating at national and international levels for CAAFAG, and supporting families and communities to provide protection to returning former child soldiers, as well as building the child protection capacity of NGO partners and local communities.

The children involved in the programme included those who were in the cantonments (the Maoists’ military camps), children who were ‘self-released’, including those who escaped from the Maoists during the conflict, children who might have been asked to leave the cantonment sites informally by the Maoists, and other vulnerable children, such as Dalit and children discriminated against on the basis of their ethnicity. Estimates suggest that this totals well over 11,000 children. However, since no party to the conflict has admitted recruiting children or has released numbers of how many left their ranks, the true number involved is unknown. UNICEF estimated the numbers based on children visually identified at cantonments, whereas the true number will be substantially higher, as calculations would not have accounted for those children already back in their communities, those in village-based militias and those absent from cantonments on the days the children were counted. In December 2009, the Working Group was providing cross-community support to 8,297 children and young people across fifty-eight districts.

**Was the Reintegration Programme a Success?**

UNICEF’s report (2008) argued that the main strength of the reintegration programme is the fact that it exists at all:

[T]hat it creates space to address child protection concerns in a context where child protection has not been at the top of any agenda and introduces the concepts and practice of child protection and child participation into the mainstream’ (UNICEF, 2008: 32).
The fact that it existed is laudable, but this is certainly not enough alone to ensure the programme is a success. Positive feedback from children involved in the programme is a much stronger indication, and as evidenced in the two reports cited earlier, children feel the community-based nature of reintegration is the greatest strength of the programme.

**Community-Based Support for Reintegration**

The reintegration programme was targeted not only at child soldiers in the cantonments, but also more broadly at children affected by the conflict and other vulnerable children in the community. It included development interventions, such as building community capacity in child protection and encouraging the participation of children in such initiatives, and the programme was designed to be community-based. Given that a large number of Nepali children joined the Maoists voluntarily, the community-based approach helped to avoid the perception of the community that child soldiers were being ‘rewarded’ by the programme; other vulnerable and conflict-affected children were also entitled to reintegration packages such as educational, livelihood and psychosocial support. By treating all vulnerable children, including CAAFAG, within the broader concept of ‘children at risk’, this helped to avoid labelling specific children as ‘CAAFAG’. It was demonstrated that stigmatization, discrimination and fragmentation were reduced when services such as education and health also benefited other children in the community. However, Sarita, a former child soldier, admitted in a discussion with the author that she had faced discrimination both at school and in the community.

Building community capacity in child protection, as well as ensuring the wider engagement of children and community in the programme and bridging the gap between service providers and needy children in the community has helped to reduce the fear of re-recruitment. Many of the children interviewed during the mid-term evaluation of the programme expressed concern that without the continuation of the peace deal and increased community support, they would fear being re-abducted by the Maoists (CAAFAG 2006:6). Increasing awareness in the community of how recruiting children into armed activity violates their rights helps to reduce the chances of the Maoists abducting children, and consequently increases the safety and security of children.

The programme was indeed effective in increasing awareness of child rights, and also of the roles played by elderly people and the community in protecting the rights of children affected by armed conflict (STC 2007: 40). Children’s clubs and drama productions offered through the programme not only raised awareness, but also allowed children an outlet for their creative talents - something that was sorely missing during the conflict and a contributing factor to why Maoist cultural programmes held such an appeal for Nepali children. Club activities included quiz contests, peace rallies, school sanitation programmes, village fairs, sports activities, peace initiatives, child protection awareness programmes and anti-discrimination campaigns (Ibid: 49). The

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8 Sangita, Surkhet, 12 June 2010 (Name changed to maintain confidentiality)
children’s clubs had a positive impact on their communities, many of whose members reached out to former child soldiers and encouraged them to return to school.

Empowering Children and Providing Psychosocial Care and Support

A significant component of the programme was the focus on child empowerment, and the recognition that young people can contribute productively to peace-building:

[Y]outh returning from armed conflict of any political complexion often arrive home with skills, greater leadership potential and a sense of the imperative for peace. The UNICEF programme, therefore, offers an opportunity to focus on these youth as potential peace-builders (UNICEF 2008: 19).

Psychosocial care was found to be a strong component of the programme in evaluations carried out by STC and UNICEF. During various psychosocial interventions, children disclosed problems such as nightmares, fears of re-attack, re-recruitment and re-kidnapping, guilt and regret through association with the party, the fear of losing face if they rejoined school and had to study with younger children, as well as restlessness, aggression, difficulty in concentration, loss of appetite and irritation. Such sharing helped children to vent their feelings and encouraged many of them to attend individual counselling sessions. The children acknowledged that they felt relaxed after articulating these deep emotions. After psychosocial support, positive changes were observed, such as the ability to integrate into the community, a sense of release from negative thoughts, increasing self-confidence, and a sense of being accepted by the community (Kort 2007: 4).

The provision of educational support to CAAFAG and other vulnerable children has been acknowledged as one of the most important components of the programme. Children receiving education support are universally positive, acknowledging that this has helped them to enrol in school or remain at school. The support helped children to gain confidence; many children were able to start a new life. Positive reintegration can also be seen in the engagement of many children in a variety of school-based activities. Educational support has reduced the likelihood of early marriage, as reported by some children (UNICEF 2008; STC 2008). One former child soldier noted:

I sometimes felt like committing suicide. After getting reintegration support, I am now studying as well as creating environment for acceptance of girl CAAFAG. I now really feel better and content (UNICEF 2008:19).

Schools receiving this support have also shared their positive experiences of children returning to education and appreciate that the support offered also helps other vulnerable children (ibid).

What More Could Be Done?

There was a provision in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement that children would be released promptly from Maoist military camps. Hence, the reintegration programme was designed with the expectation that children would be discharged formally in huge numbers from the camps at once. It was expected that around 11,000 children
would have to return to their communities and would need longer-term reintegration, creating the urgent need to prepare communities with poor infrastructure and economic capacity to receive thousands of children, possibly over a short time-scale (UNICEF 2008: 18). Consequently, agencies involved invested huge resources in order to prepare for the majority of children who would be leaving the cantonment. However, in the event, child soldiers had to stay for more than three years in the cantonments and were released individually or in small groups, spread over more than two years. In the meantime, child protection agencies had no access to the child soldiers who were living in the cantonments and hence little was known to the agencies about the conditions within the cantonments, and the needs of the children. This resulted in a waste of resources on two fronts; firstly, in preparing for a formal and large-scale release of children and secondly, because the programme failed to take account of the children left behind in their communities, who also needed reintegration support. Unfortunately, the programme had failed to consider the scenario and consequences of a more gradual and protracted release of children from the cantonment.

Moreover, in focusing solely on formal release from the cantonments, the programme missed the opportunity to provide community-based reintegration support to children who self-released, or who had escaped from the cantonments. Nonetheless, during the second phase of the programme, this situation was rectified and efforts were adapted to ensure sufficient support was offered to children already back in the community.

**Compensation for Former Child Soldiers**

Contrary to international standards and good practice, the Maoists negotiated a fixed amount to be paid to their former soldiers, both adults and children, for the time they spent in cantonments. Both categories of former soldiers received NR 27,000 (around 400 USD) for the period of time they spent in the cantonments. This is a vast sum of money in a country where a month’s school fees are around NR 35 and the average annual salary is approximately NR 12,000 (UNICEF 2008: 29). This made it difficult to reduce the distinction between returning children and other conflict-affected children in the community, and went against the principles of the community-based approach. Furthermore, it was difficult to monitor how children in particular spent the money they were given. Moreover, it was almost impossible for UNICEF and the other actors involved in Nepal’s reintegration programme to ensure that children who received the stipends would give serious consideration to returning to school.

**Vocational Training and Income Generation**

The intention of the programme with regard to investing in the children’s future was positive: to provide older children with an alternative to education if they were reluctant to attend school, if they were experiencing pressure at home to begin earning, or if they were not comfortable at school for various reasons. The goal was to provide intensive, skills-based training for the children that would enable them to find work or to start their own business in the community. In particular for girls, the idea was that such skills would enable them to be independent if they had to leave their family or community; economic independence would additionally make it less likely for the girls to be married at an early age.
However, the Working Group lacked experience and expertise to implement the vocational education and income generation component of the programme, and the programme exhibited several weaknesses in this area. Some children were incorrectly selected for particular vocational education and income generation support; other children were offered training in specific areas without sufficient analysis of the likelihood of the availability of future, relevant job opportunities. The programme raised expectations among children about what jobs they would find, or what entrepreneurial opportunities would be available, whilst support was inadequate to ensure that the children were indeed able to find the jobs they sought.

An additional problem was that what children wanted to do took precedence over realistic, sustainably targeted training:

For instance, many boys stated that they wanted to become drivers and so they received a month’s training. Many are now disappointed as they were either too young to obtain a driver’s licence or are unable to obtain work that involves driving because they live far away from roads or cars. For girls, most accepted the offer of tailoring training, although again they are too young to set up their own business (in some cases too young to work) (UNICEF 2008: 41).

One of the most profound problems with Nepal’s child soldier reintegration programme was that a large number of children remained in cantonments for three years after the signing of the CPA, due to the lack of political will by the Maoists to release the children.

Reasons for this appear to be a combination of treating the children as an insurance against renewed conflict, using them as a negotiating tool for wider security system reform issues (the integration of Maoists cadres into the national security forces) and a belief that, once the elections have taken place, these children can be used to cement community allegiances to the Maoists through the Young Communist League or otherwise (UNICEF 2008: 28).

There was no evidence that the children were being subjected to violence or neglect while in the camps that were controlled by the Maoists. However UNICEF and other NGOs could not be sure of this, as they were denied access to the children. It was difficult to ensure these children had received information about the reintegration programme, or to understand what the children might needed or want when they were released. This violated the Paris Principle of unhindered access to CAAFAG (UNICEF 2008: 28). Finally, the lack of urgency about the children’s situation in the cantonments was alarming; the older the children become, the more reluctant they might become to restart their schooling, and certainly the harder it becomes for them to return to their communities without stigmatization (ibid: 28).

**Lack of Involvement by the Nepali Government**

A major factor adversely affecting the programme was that the government of Nepal did not accept primary responsibility for the reintegration of child soldiers, and did not accept the financial burden of the programme. Consequently, there was concern that the longer-term dimensions of reintegration may be unsupported, particularly for
children who left cantonments at a later date. If this were so, the programme would be more about ‘re-entry or reinsertion’ than reintegration, and so would miss crucial ways of ensuring that children were not simply returned to their impoverished communities (UNICEF 2008: 31).

One of the biggest challenges for the CAAFAG programme is the short-term funding. During the various discussions in Nepal, concerns regarding limited and short-term funding were voiced by NGOs, CPC groups and the children themselves. All of the above emphasized the need for long-term programming in order to effectively reintegrate CAAFAG into their community. A one-year programme does not allow enough time to train, identify and implement programmes to support these children (MacVeigh 2007: 38).

Conclusion

Although there is no concrete evidence about the exact number of children, various reports of child/human rights organizations estimate that around 11,000 children were involved in the armed conflict in Nepal in different capacities.

Examining the efforts of the reintegration programme in Nepal, it is clear that successful reintegration requires an understanding of, and capacity to address the underlying issues that fuel the conflict, such as caste/gender discrimination, poverty, and equitable access to services. Creating education, training and employment opportunities in the post-conflict setting is crucial, especially since many children joined the Maoists voluntarily from grievances such as poverty and discrimination. The sense of self-worth of many children will increase if they are able to enter education or a livelihoods programme, moreover children whose families benefited from an income generation programme felt as though they were no longer a disgrace to their family. From this it is clear that providing children with a sense of self-worth and productivity is a key to successful reintegration. Interaction within the community also plays a role in ensuring the children feel safe from re-abduction and from discrimination. Finally, children’s clubs have become a key aspect of NGO programmes due to their ability to engage children within their community, and their capacity to raise awareness and foster positive communication.

Improving the vocational training (livelihood) component, ensuring the involvement of government with its major role in the entire reintegration process, and increasing the involvement of children in the re-design of the ongoing reintegration programme are some of the other important, immediate challenges that still need to be addressed. Since the programme’s Working Group members have accepted that they do not have enough expertise in creating livelihood opportunities for children and their families, it would be logical to team up with other organizations with expertise in this field such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), World Bank, vocational training institutions and research-based organizations. Similarly, close collaboration with the Ministry for Women, Children and Social Welfare (MWCSW) and the Central Child Welfare Board (CCWB) must be initiated to ensure governmental involvement in the reintegration of CAAFAG.
Finally, it is of course important to provide reintegration packages such as educational, livelihood and psychosocial support to children. However, more efforts must be made to prepare the family, the neighbourhood and the children themselves for reintegration, something which is only possible if the provision of longer-term support is available. Hence, it will be critically important to redesign the reintegration programme to include community-based interventions and longer–term funding (three to five years) with the provision of follow-up support for a further two years, especially for children only recently released. This would contribute significantly to ensure the programme can effectively and sustainably support the reintegration of child soldiers in Nepal.
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