

4

Strategies for prevention

SUMMARY

Any action to prevent the recruitment and use of children in fighting forces must be based on a sound understanding of the children's situation in the specific context in which recruitment is taking place. This chapter describes what agencies need to know and some practical approaches for preventing children's recruitment. It will be useful for people working where children are being actively recruited as well as for those working with boys and girls who have already been released or demobilised.

The chapter suggests key questions to guide an analysis of the children's situation. Turning to the prevention strategy itself, it stresses the importance of planning activities within a broader child protection framework, and of working closely with children and their communities while integrating local, national and international measures.

The chapter gives a number of examples of community-based approaches from around the world which document child recruitment, gather and share information and support communities' efforts to protect children. As well as working at the local level, agencies should lobby states and other authorities nationally and internationally to fulfil their responsibilities to children, establishing a dialogue with the military wherever possible.

4A. Understanding the situation

Understanding the causes of child recruitment and the ways to prevent it must form part of a broader analysis of the situation of all children in the country, how

they are affected by the conflict and who is most vulnerable. Because the causes of recruitment are rooted in the political and economic situation, the dynamics of the conflict, the specific characteristics of the armed groups and the immediate family, social and cultural setting of each child, the analysis conducted by agencies should cover all these areas.

Agencies also need to have a good understanding of the legal standards relating to the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict (see Chapter 2 and Appendix 1).

Questions to ask include the following:

- What are the current dynamics of the conflict? What are the characteristics of the different armed actors recruiting children? What opportunities are there for dialogue on child protection?
- How many children are being recruited and by whom? Where possible, numbers of children involved in fighting forces should be disaggregated by age and gender.
- What methods are used by fighting forces to recruit children? Are they recruited by force (eg, abducted, press-ganged)? What other forms of pressure are used (eg, quotas, threats of violence or retribution against families)?
- Which children are most at risk of recruitment? Are children being recruited from particular areas, or from particular ethnic/cultural groups? Are girls as well as boys being recruited? What are the family or living circumstances of boys and girls who have been recruited? Are children re-recruited? If so, why?
- What reasons do children give for joining fighting forces? This is important to know if children choose to join.
- What is the role and attitude of the family and community – do they accept and encourage, or try to stop, children's recruitment?
- What are the underlying social, cultural and economic factors making children vulnerable to recruitment? These will include the impact of the conflict on the household economy, and on the family's and community's ability to protect children.
- What strategies are used by children and communities to prevent recruitment, and how can children be better protected at local level? This will

include: identifying social norms for child protection; the attitudes of the family and the community to the involvement of boys and girls in fighting forces; children's own attitudes to such involvement.

- Which local organisations – women's, youth and other groups, community leaders, religious bodies – have an interest/role in child protection?
- What alternatives to recruitment can be offered?
- What is the legal and institutional framework for the protection of children in the country concerned? This will include the current position on minimum age of military recruitment.

More detailed questions are suggested in Appendix 2.

4B. Planning for prevention

As has been shown in Chapter 3, the reasons why children join fighting forces are deeply rooted in the circumstances of their lives, and any strategy to prevent their recruitment must respond to this fact. Key principles to consider when planning a prevention strategy include the following:

I. Prevention should be part of the child protection strategy

Since the risk of recruitment may be only one of several risks that children run during armed conflict, prevention measures must be part of a broader child protection strategy. In many cases, boys and girls are vulnerable to recruitment because their basic rights are denied: for example, if they have insufficient food to meet basic needs, have been separated from their family or displaced, or lack access to health and education. In practice, therefore, agencies (and donors) need to work together to develop a strategic approach to meeting these basic rights.

2. Greater emphasis on supporting communities is needed

A key element of the protection strategy should be to work closely with the children themselves, their families and the community. Communities have still not been given the practical support they need to help them protect their children – even though it is known broadly why children are vulnerable to recruitment.¹

One reason for this may be that not enough is yet known about how the various factors in children's lives – personal, family, cultural, social and economic – interact to make them vulnerable to recruitment, or indeed what helps them withstand it. At the same time, prevention strategies have mainly been concerned with advocating at the international level to end the recruitment of children under 18.

The agreements on the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, the Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the recognition of the problem of child soldiers in Security Council resolutions are major achievements. However, despite the existence of international standards, under-age recruitment continues and may even be increasing. Changes in the law will not themselves stop it. The challenge now is to develop prevention strategies that are framed with reference to international standards, but which are relevant to the local circumstances of children's lives.²

Donors and agencies need to place much greater emphasis on providing support at the local level. Donors need to be persuaded that funding to prevent recruitment should include assistance to the community and a wider approach to protection. It is particularly important to provide funding for pilot projects and local initiatives that support communities' efforts to protect their own children. Equally important is the need to build research into programmes and to document and evaluate approaches used.

3. Prevention requires a multi-faceted approach

In practical terms, tackling recruitment needs a coherent strategy that integrates measures at local, national and international levels. The challenge for policy

makers and programme managers is to make sure that different interventions are co-ordinated, and that the overall policy is both coherent and flexible.

For example, a central objective may be to promote awareness of children's rights. At the local level this might include setting up children's clubs to enable boys and girls to play and interact together. At the same time, agencies may need to engage locally and nationally with non-state armed actors and government armed forces to try to stop their recruitment of children. This may also include persuading governments to adopt the Optional Protocol and working with them to implement it. Advocacy at international level could include campaigning jointly with other agencies and human rights organisations to control the supply of small arms.

4. Ensure good communication within and between agencies

Agencies are close to the day-to-day realities of communities, families and children directly affected by armed conflict and it is upon this knowledge that advocacy must be based. Two-way communication between country programmes and head office is therefore essential. Programmes also need to be kept informed about international developments.

Sharing knowledge and experience *between* agencies is also important (see also Chapter 12, section C). As well as improving overall understanding, this provides agencies with the basis on which to agree policies for child protection and advocacy positions, so that public statements and the lobbying of government can be consistent.

4c. Approaches

The following examples of approaches to prevention draw on accepted good practice and the experience of several programmes. The emphasis is on practical, community-based approaches involving both adults and children (sections 1-6).

Then follow examples of advocacy at the international level (sections 7–9).

I. Document and report on the recruitment of children

Information about how many children are being recruited, by whom and how is essential for advocacy to prevent recruitment and for the design of protection strategies. But getting this kind of information can be difficult.

Potential sources may include community networks, released or demobilised children and national and international agencies. As it is usually impossible to obtain accurate figures for the number of children involved, agencies should aim for a realistic estimate supported by qualitative information about children's experience. This can be obtained from interviews with children who have avoided recruitment, who have seen their friends join up or be forcibly recruited, or who have escaped or been released.

If fighting forces know that agencies are reporting on their activities to external authorities, this can pose a threat to children, communities and agency staff. Agencies should take this seriously and assess the likely risks.

Risks

“It is very difficult for us to monitor the situation ourselves because the armed groups fighting in our area don't like it if people start collecting evidence of what they are doing. We have programmes with communities, and our staff will be attacked if we start collecting data on recruitment. But we need to keep up to date on this issue, so have recently set up contacts with human rights NGOs who are better placed to monitor recruitment than we are.”³

It is often possible to pass information confidentially to national or international human rights organisations (such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International), or to other bodies responsible for monitoring children's rights (see Chapter 14, section F). In Uganda, for example, the Abducted Children Registration and Information System, maintained jointly by UNICEF and the Government of Uganda, records the number of abductions carried out.⁴

The global collection of information about the use of children in fighting forces is carried out by the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers which uses the information in international advocacy (see Appendix 3).

Other opportunities to report on recruitment trends may be offered by regional meetings on the use of children in war, such as those organised in Maputo, Berlin, Kathmandu, Montevideo and Amman. Declarations from such meetings can also be used to support local and national advocacy and prevention programmes (see Chapter 2, section D).

2. Support the community's capacity to protect children

Although armed conflict puts communities under severe strain, the right kind of support can greatly increase people's ability to protect their children. Partnership with communities – including children, their parents and other relatives, and community-based groups – should be central to any initiative to prevent recruitment and protect children at risk.

When children and adults become aware of their rights and succeed in developing their own means of protection, recruitment can be reduced or even stopped. In El Salvador, for instance:

Protesting for children's rights

National human rights and civil society organisations protested, often at great risk, against numerous cases of forcibly recruited youth. The organisations most involved were the non-governmental Human Rights Commission of El Salvador, the Catholic Church, and women's associations representing the disappeared. The action most often taken by these groups was to approach the military officials of a barracks and demand, often successfully, the release of children.

The women's associations also organised demonstrations in the capital and made an appeal to parliament. Bishops and other Church officials spoke publicly to promote humanitarian and human rights principles and admonish the involvement of children in the conflict.⁵

There are many examples of local initiatives to prevent recruitment, and agencies should seek to understand and support such initiatives where they are working.

It is important to consult with local people to find out where the problem lies and what their suggestions are for protecting children. In Colombia, for example, the national Coalition against recruitment of children to fighting forces organises workshops for youth leaders, teachers, human rights activists and others to develop ways of protecting children from recruitment. These are complemented by workshops on conflict prevention and peace building. One NGO has focused on promoting awareness of children's rights in schools:

Workshops

The Andean Service Committee works in Putumayo and Meta in the south and south-eastern parts of Colombia, where there are high rates of forced recruitment of children by paramilitaries and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrillas. Together with other local NGOs and the Roman Catholic Church, which has responsibility for 183 primary and secondary schools, they organised workshops for teachers, supervisors and administrators to discuss the problem of children's use in the armed conflict.

This was part of a broader consultation process that led to the design of a programme focused on schools. The next steps will be to incorporate teaching of child rights into the school curriculum and to develop contingency plans for children's protection if the situation deteriorates. At the same time, proposals to meet children's other educational, health and recreational needs will be developed.⁶

Another approach has been to support local groups and networks specifically concerned with child protection. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), for example, community-based, child protection networks in Mayi Mayi-controlled territory have, with the support of Save the Children, had some success in preventing the recruitment of children. The agency's long-standing presence, its close relationship with community groups and the trust that has grown up as a result have all been important for the success of the networks.

Child protection networks

In the DRC, despite the problems of communications, resources and security, civil society has continued to function and international agencies have been able to find local partners.

Over the past five years, Save the Children has built up a network of local partnerships which now carries out family tracing and follows up reunified children. These networks also tackle a range of other child protection tasks, including the prevention of recruitment, the demobilisation and reintegration of child soldiers and the prevention of domestic child abuse. In addition, Save the Children and its partners have been able to hold discussions with Mayi-Mayi leaders about the protection and demobilisation of children.

“Our impression is that they understand and support the project,” said one staff member. “Proof of this is that no reintegrated child has been re-recruited into Mayi-Mayi groups, even in areas where they have a strong presence.” There have been cases of local commanders releasing child soldiers directly to local networks.

These networks offer several advantages:

- They are far more likely than international organisations to be able to influence local armed groups.
- As officially recognised bodies, local networks are also well placed to negotiate with local army commanders.
- With training, local networks can help to prepare the community for the return of former child soldiers, as well as undertaking family tracing and following up children after reunification.
- Since they are made up of representatives from all levels of the community, the networks are relatively resistant to co-option by partisan or personal interests.
- The networks can provide an appropriate structure to link child protection and peace building.

However, they also have limitations:

- Setting up and supporting community networks is expensive and time-consuming. Also, it is by no means certain that they will be sustainable in the long term.

- Child protection agencies in the DRC and elsewhere have little experience of working in this way and their staff would need training.
- Communities may feel that child protection is only a wartime measure, a poor substitute for economic development.
- Government may lack the capacity or political will to push forward on community-level child protection work.⁷

In situations where it is difficult to tackle issues of recruitment directly, it is still possible to undertake initiatives which help to raise awareness of children's rights in a general sense. In Sri Lanka, this has led to the creation of local committees and has reduced the harassment of children at checkpoints:

Raising awareness

Save the Children in Sri Lanka has been supporting institutional structures to monitor the implementation of the UNCRC in at least four districts, including Jaffna. As a result Jaffna established a district committee, 15 divisional committees and 315 village committees. Children make up 40 per cent of the membership of the divisional and village committees and there are five young people on the district committee.

At the same time, awareness-raising in schools has led to the formation by students of a number of school action groups that meet regularly with teachers. The UNCRC and Graça Machel's 1996 report on Children in Armed Conflict were translated into Tamil and Sinhalese and made widely available. Outcomes include 16 school committees deciding to ban caning in their schools, and a number of village committees agreeing to ask video outlets to stop children's access to pornography.

ICRC and UNHCR discussions with the army to stop harassment of children at checkpoints have resulted in agreement that girls should be searched only by female officers and that barbed wire barriers should be replaced with rope.⁸

The translation of international legal instruments into national and local languages can also help to create an awareness of human rights:

Translating rights

In Rwanda, Save the Children Fund-US, Haguruka (a local NGO) and UNICEF supported the development of an official Kinyarwanda version of the UNCRC. This version has been adopted into Rwandan law and popularised through radio, drama and print materials.⁹

However, when there are serious abuses and violations of people's rights during armed conflict, international standards can appear irrelevant. One example is the international law on the minimum age of recruitment. According to the UNCRC, a child becomes an adult at the age of 18. But in many cultures the transition from childhood to adulthood takes place earlier than this, and does not depend upon the child achieving a specific age.

Conflict can bring additional responsibilities to adolescents who are considered to have reached maturity. If parents or other older relatives have been killed or are otherwise absent, an adolescent may have to become head of household and provide for the family. Adolescents may also be expected to fight to defend the community or to defend a cause – and, indeed, may take pride in their role.

In such circumstances, age may not seem particularly important to people when they have other concerns about how to protect themselves and survive. But families and communities often prefer their young people not to fight, and would like to be able to offer them alternatives. Agencies must discuss with people what they normally do to protect children. Some issues to discuss might include:

- Whom they regard as a child, and when a child becomes an adult.
- Who is allowed to fight, at what age and under what circumstances.
- What their attitudes are to the involvement of children in fighting forces.
- Whether it is acceptable for girls to fight.

By finding out about the social norms and values relating to children, and how these are affected during armed conflict, it becomes possible to explore links between these and the UNCRC. People may, as a result, want to agree an age below which children should not be recruited, and practical steps to protect them.

3. Prevent family separations and reunify separated children with their families

Children are much more vulnerable to recruitment when they have been separated from their families. Military recruiters often target separated children who are either displaced from their home communities or are refugees, and children who are living on the street.

Separation from the family may occur as a direct consequence of conflict or, indirectly, because families have made a choice to split up or send children away as a way of coping with the conflict – for their survival or to find work for example. Agencies need to work with communities both to increase their own understanding of these dynamics and to bring to people's attention any possible negative effects of their decisions which may leave children more vulnerable.

During and after conflicts, early intervention is essential to identify separated children and reunify them with their families, and to prevent further separations. Agencies should adopt a co-ordinated approach and should ensure that sufficient funds are available to support emergency family tracing programmes.¹⁰

In some situations, temporary institutional care may be the only way to protect children. In Colombia, for example, parents anxious to get their children out of danger either send them to stay with relatives in another region, or get them accepted into residential homes. If children are released from fighting forces during conflict, returning home may be dangerous for them and they may have no other option but to stay in temporary care. If residential care is the only option, measures should be put in place to ensure family contact is maintained and to facilitate family reunification at the earliest possible opportunity (see Chapter 9, which explores residential care in greater detail).

4. Provide economic alternatives to joining fighting forces

Poverty is a major factor in the recruitment of children: money, food and clothes offered by military recruiters can represent the best available option. If children and families are to resist recruitment, they must be offered concrete alternatives

which meet their needs. This is particularly important for adolescents, if they are expected to contribute to the household economy, and for their families, who may be driven by economic hardship to encourage their children to enlist.

However, developing sustainable economic alternatives for children, their families and communities is a long-term undertaking that requires considerable commitment from the agencies involved. It must be part of a broader strategy to tackle poverty and should be based on an analysis of the constraints and opportunities that exist for children in the districts where recruitment is taking place.

The Household Economy Approach (HEA) provides a framework for such analysis, making it possible to identify realistic economic alternatives for vulnerable households (see Appendix 4). As well as informing strategies to prevent recruitment, this can be very useful at the reintegration stage and can be used to inform any release or demobilisation strategy. This is equally true of programmes that aim to bring young people back into their original communities and those that aim to support them in independent living (see also Chapter 10).

5. Provide children with educational alternatives

Children often run a greater risk of recruitment if they cannot attend school. However, for many children formal schooling may be absent or may be inaccessible because of cost or insecurity.

The school environment itself can also drive children away: “Education systems in war-torn communities often reflect the dynamics of the conflict and the injustices that take place outside of the class room.”¹¹

In some countries, recruiters target schools because they represent an easy way of getting hold of children. The military presence in some schools in Colombia has undermined the quality of education and encouraged militarisation:

Militarisation of schools

Three years ago, soldiers from the government forces were the teachers [in Altos de Cauca]. One of the schools has been run by the police all the time. The policy of the government is to promote the presence of ... police officers

as teachers ... in this area. The fact that they ... are legally considered as civilians in Colombia does not change the fact that they are dressed in uniform, often carry arms and in conflict areas are considered by the armed groups as military targets. Not only does this produce a low level of education and the influence of a militarised culture in the schools, but even more severe, the presence of the police or military in the school changes it from a civilian institution into a military object.¹²

Military schools (there are 32 in Colombia) are often the only educational institution available to poor families. They give children aged 12–14 military training and although their pupils are exempt from military service, these schools effectively encourage recruitment. Since they receive counter-insurgency training, children in military schools are also a potential target for guerrilla forces.

Agencies can play a key role in advocating for, and helping to provide, education for children during conflict. They may also lobby government to change its policy on the militarisation of schools or the use of military schools, or they may work with government on broader educational policy (see Chapter 10).

Although schools are sometimes targeted, education can in most situations help to protect children, whether through formal schooling or through informal alternatives such as children's clubs. Education that is relevant to children's lives can offer them options for the future and give them a new way of seeing the world.

Creating safe places where children can play and learn – for example, through clubs, non-formal education and other activities – helps their development and reduces their vulnerability to recruitment. The same places can also be a 'positive catalyst to promote social justice and human rights'. In Colombia, NGOs have developed innovative approaches to education, helping children to acquire the life skills which will enable them to deal with violence and find a productive role in society:

Life projects

In Medellín, urban armed groups, gangs and militias in many areas of the city control infrastructure and resources, operating as a 'state within a state'. Their

scope of control includes the justice system, security, the local economy, planning and development. High levels of violence are a routine feature of daily life. Children are born into the gangs, beginning at seven or eight years of age as informers, and progressing into more active roles as they grow up. With the failure of the formal school system, children receive their education on the streets and in the gangs.

Working in the heart of the areas controlled by the gangs, the NGO CEDESIS has developed formal and non-formal alternatives that give boys and girls a chance to define their own 'life project'. Starting by promoting non-aggression agreements with youth, and developing contacts with the armed groups, the alternative education project has thrived and now includes three schools for 4,500 young people in areas of the city with high levels of violence. Based on a Cuban model of social and productive education, activities are centred on culture, leisure and environmentally-friendly agriculture. Work is also carried out with parents.

A permanent dialogue is maintained with the armed groups who control the three areas where the schools are situated, and during the six years in which they have been operating, none has had to close. The boys and girls coming to the schools are the children, sisters or brothers and neighbours of the gang members and bosses, who do not, it seems, want these children to take the same path in life that they did.

The project is currently establishing links with the Medellín Chamber of Commerce to train 200 boys and girls to become bus mechanics.¹³

Children's clubs, such as those set up in Jaffna, Sri Lanka, are another way of giving children the space to play and to develop non-violent, problem-solving techniques and social skills:

Children's clubs in Sri Lanka

The clubs provide a sense of normality for children, who also have a say in the activities provided. These include drama, music and sport both for boys and girls, as well as yoga. Staff have developed participatory techniques that can be used with children to find out what they want, using time lines, village

histories, daily routine diagrams and village mapping. Mobile children's clubs linked to the permanent ones have been developed for displaced communities; these include, for example, a library in a suitcase that can be taken around the different displaced settlements by bicycle. In a culture where educational attainment is very important, the clubs also help support education and school work for children who have been displaced

Children have been directly involved in activities to reduce the risks of mine injuries. This has been done through peer-to-peer, mines-awareness activities which include mine victims as animators. These activities help children develop self-protection skills and also give them a sense of their own rights.¹⁴

However, an incident in one south-east Asian country suggests that armed groups may also target organised children's clubs. The boy who led one network of clubs was kidnapped by the group fighting the government, and when he reappeared a week later he had clearly been influenced by his captors, as he tried to persuade other children to join him against the government. The children resisted and agreed to remove him from his leadership position.

6. Provide children with birth certificates and ID

If children can prove their age, this can help them to resist recruitment or re-recruitment. In Sri Lanka, the birth certificate is a particularly important document: losing it – or not having one in the first place – can lead to a succession of problems for children:

Providing documents

Many displaced children lose key identity documents when they are forced to flee: only 47.5 per cent of 1,250 children interviewed in Jaffna district in 1998 had their birth certificates, and almost all of them had lost them during their displacement.¹⁵ Parents themselves may never have had birth certificates, and unmarried parents from different ethnic backgrounds may be deterred from getting their children registered.

Without their birth certificate, displaced children are unable to gain full access to education and the all-important national identity card. Every Sri Lankan over the age of 18 must have an identity card: it must be presented at every checkpoint. Young people under 18 without identity papers are repeatedly harassed by the army and are more likely to be receptive to opposition propaganda and recruitment drives in schools.

Save the Children UK is helping children to get replacement birth certificates. This started with raising the awareness of families, and working through the government registrar and child protection authority to issue the relevant documentation. Mobile registration facilities were established in some areas and, in Jaffna, sociology students and the Rotary Club organised marriage days so that parents without formal documentation of marriage could get their own and their children's documentation.¹⁶

In some countries, however, the introduction of birth registration is likely to prove a long-term undertaking, requiring work with government as well as communities to persuade them of the certificate's usefulness.

When children have already been involved in fighting forces, ID or demobilisation documents are essential in helping them to avoid re-recruitment. In the DRC, the most important piece of paper for demobilised children is the formal demobilisation letter:

Demobilisation letters

Signed by the demobilisation authority and the Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD), the letter is recognised by soldiers of the RCD and gives the child some protection within the community. Children who have left the forces or run away and who have not been issued with their letters want to get them quickly, as this gives them a sense of security. The downside, though, is that opposing forces have victimised children holding RCD letters as traitors.¹⁷

In Sierra Leone as well, demobilised children prized their official demobilisation card, which offered them protection and proved to the community that they were officially released from the fighting forces.

7. Advocate with government or other relevant authorities to improve child protection

Agencies should aim to combine their work at local level with lobbying governments (or other relevant authorities) nationally and internationally to fulfil their responsibility to protect children. Agencies also need to convey to the authorities the message that they should regard the prevention of recruitment of children into fighting forces as a humanitarian rather than a political or military issue.

At the **national level** agencies can:

- Lobby the government to give physical protection to children and communities during armed conflict. In northern Uganda, where the Lord's Resistance Army targets children, parents' groups, national and international agencies and other governments put pressure on the Ugandan government to improve protection in camps for internally displaced people by, for example, increasing the numbers of soldiers stationed at the camps and patrolling the border between Uganda and Sudan more effectively.
- Monitor military recruitment of children and raise concerns directly with the authorities. In Afghanistan for example, UNHCR monitored implementation of a 1997 amnesty under which refugees returning home, including children, were exempted from military recruitment; they raised concerns with the authorities when under-age recruitment occurred.
- Work with government departments to develop social welfare and educational policies, for example, registration of births or the provision of education to poorly served areas. Although there will be limits to what can be achieved during conflict, partnership with government in these areas is crucial (see also Chapter 13, section C).
- Lobby the government to ratify and incorporate into domestic law the Optional Protocol to the UNCRC on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (see Chapter 1).
- Encourage relevant government ministers, opposition parties, government advisers, civil servants and senior members of the armed forces to speak to

children used as soldiers and their families, and, if possible, to visit areas where they have been used as soldiers. This is a ‘reality check’ for those in powerful positions.

- Invite the UN Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children in Armed Conflict to visit the country and meet with appropriate members of the government and military and non-state actors. Ensure that they come up with clear statements and plans for action which are followed up.
- Start a local campaign by working with community leaders, religious groups, teachers and others, and organise a petition to show the strength of civilian support for clearly stated objectives to bring an end to children’s recruitment.
- Work with local/national radio and press to ensure that the voices of children and their families are heard. Focus on the experiences of individuals and families before moving to issues of international law.
- Try to find a few well-respected military, government or civilian spokespeople who will support the case for prevention of children’s military recruitment. The spokespeople can be retired. They can be asked to approach others on the agency’s behalf. This helps to build credibility for the agency’s work, and wider support.
- Organise campaigns such as that by the United States Coalition which sent letters signed by the leaders of over forty religious, human rights, veterans’, children’s and other groups to the President and Senate Foreign Relations Committee urging US ratification of the Optional Protocol.
- Join the local Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers or set one up, if possible (see Appendix 3).

The Coalition in Colombia

In the first year after Colombia’s Coalition against the recruitment of children into armed forces was set up, the group of national and international NGOs succeeded in persuading the government to sign up to the Optional Protocol.

The next steps will be to lobby for changes in the legislation on children involved in the conflict, and to press for a debate in Congress on the issue. The group has also contributed to research into the recruitment of

children and organised workshops in five cities for children and local organisations to discuss how recruitment might be prevented. The Coalition draws on its members' extensive experience in working with displaced children and ex-combatant children, human rights training and conscientious objection.¹⁸

At the **international level**, pressure can be put on governments in a number of ways:

- The Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights can be asked to use its influence to persuade states to ratify and implement the Optional Protocol and to become parties to the International Labour Organization (ILO) Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention and the Rome Statute of the ICC.
- Donors can be asked to use their influence with governments to bring about better protection for children and to address specific abuses such as the recruitment or abduction of children for use in fighting forces.
- International agencies should lobby their own governments to make sure that protection stays on the agenda of the UN Security Council, and that the Council is involved in monitoring agreements to stop the use of children in hostilities.
- Other governments can apply pressure on warring parties (including non-state armed actors – see the next section) by cutting off or limiting their sources of support such as, by imposing sanctions on the trading of natural resources which come from conflict areas, cutting off economic support from diaspora communities, restricting the travel or foreign financial holdings of violators and denying recognition to individuals and groups who have committed crimes against children if they subsequently ascend to power.¹⁹ Whenever sanctions are applied there should be careful assessment of any potential impacts on children.

Agencies engaged in advocacy must have a sound and up-to-date understanding of international law and the law of the country concerned. They also need to know how decision-making works, who the people with influence are and how to contact them.

Advocacy checklist

- What are the problems of child recruitment in the country you are representing? What is the evidence and what are the main indicators?
- What is the political lobbying and decision-making process in your country with respect to military recruitment?
- Who are the people, interest groups or organisations that influence government? Which departments of government and which individuals in these departments are the most important?
- Can you get direct access to these people?
- Does government have an interest in keeping the minimum age for recruitment below 18? What benefits would there be to government in raising it?
- What evidence is there from other countries close to your own that have agreed to change the age limit?

8. Engage with non-state armed actors

Agencies should aim to combine their support of child protection by communities with dialogue with the armed forces recruiting children. These are often non-state actors, who require a different approach from that used with government armed forces.

Whether engagement with non-state armed actors is possible depends upon how agencies and their partners assess the situation they are operating in. Agencies should be aware that advocacy which is not carefully thought through, or that draws public attention to the recruitment of children, could drive such recruitment underground. If commanders anticipate a political or military backlash, they may deny the existence of children in their ranks or falsify their numbers. (This question is also discussed in Chapter 6).

When agencies engage with non-state armed actors they should:

- Demonstrate a transparently humanitarian agenda and clarity of objectives.
- Persuade groups that the recruitment of children is a humanitarian rather than a military issue.

- Identify ways in which non-state armed groups can support the law, for example, through individual statements supporting the ICC or the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict. Compliance could be monitored by asking groups to submit reports.
- Learn from the experience of other bodies working with non-state actors, such as the Non-state Armed Actors Working Group, which is concerned with ending the use of landmines (see Chapter 6, section G).
- Document all contacts with armed actors over recruitment and the release of children and any agreements made.
- Document and follow up all commitments made by armed actors.
- Share experiences with other agencies in contact with armed groups.

One matter that may create difficulties in the future is the implementation of the Optional Protocol to the UNCRC on Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict as it applies to non-state armed actors. Even if it is ratified in the country where agencies are working, the Optional Protocol will have no impact on non-state groups, as they cannot be a party to it. There is at present no way of enforcing the Protocol's provisions as they apply to these groups, even though it sets a higher standard for non-state groups than it does for states (See Chapter 2, section C).

Non-state armed actors are, however, subject to the jurisdiction of the ICC – but until there is a concerted effort to prosecute those who perpetrate abuses, the deterrent effect of the ICC will not be known. A further problem is that there is no clear system for monitoring and reporting abuses (see also Chapter 1, section B).

Despite the many difficulties, there have been some important achievements. For example, on the Thai-Burma border, armed groups of the Shan ethnic minority pledged to stop the recruitment of children under 18:

Resolution on recruitment

A gathering of representatives of the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS) and Shan State Army at Loi Taileng unanimously passed a resolution that the draft age would henceforth be 18–45 in place of 16–40 as practised

earlier. “It is to demonstrate to the people of the world that the people of Shan State defer to their wishes,” said Sai Aung Mart, Vice-President of the RCSS.²⁰

9. Campaign to control the supply of small arms

“I did learn some things when I was with the rebels. I learnt how to shoot, how to lay anti-personnel mines and how to live on the run. I especially know how to use an AK-47 twelve-inch, which I could dismantle in less than one minute. When I turned 12 they gave me an RPG because I had proved myself in battle.” Abducted 19-year-old soldier, Palaro District, northern Uganda.²¹

Reducing arms proliferation is vitally important. Codes of conduct to stem the flow of arms at regional level are currently being developed by the Council of Europe, ECOWAS, the OSCE, the OAS, SADC and the EU.²²

Agencies can contribute directly to international efforts to reduce arms through the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA):

Small arms

IANSA provides a framework within which organisations working to tackle different aspects of gun proliferation and misuse can support and learn from each other. It helps co-ordinate activities and campaigning by bringing together human rights organisations, foreign policy think tanks, gun control groups, development and humanitarian relief agencies, victim support groups and local community and public health groups. IANSA pursues a range of approaches which seek to tackle the factors which drive both the supply of and demand for small arms.²³