

**DISARMAMENT, DEMOBILIZATION, AND REINTEGRATION IN STATE ACTORS:  
ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES OF CURBING CHILD SOLDIER RECRUITMENT  
IN AFGHANISTAN**

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**Abstract.** *The recruitment and use of child soldiers by state actors in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021 remained a pressing human rights concern despite international legal prohibitions.*

*This study critically examines the role of state-affiliated forces in child soldier recruitment.*

*It evaluates the effectiveness of Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programs in curbing this practice, analyzing key challenges such as weak enforcement of child protection laws, lack of accountability, and socio-economic pressures that drive recruitment. The protection and ban of underage combat provided under various international legal instruments in juxtaposition with the grim reality of gross violation of these rights. The main method used in the course of this research is doctrinal in nature as it delves into the text of prominent international conventions and other documents relating to the child soldiers. Moreover, a huge deal of current research on this and connected topics has pointed observed the consequence of the restriction of underage soldiers under international law more detailed under Afghan legal framework. It is discovered through this study that the implementation of rights of children under the international instruments is not effective. By assessing past DDR initiatives and their shortcomings, this study provides policy recommendations for strengthening child protection measures within state security forces, improving enforcement mechanisms, and enhancing reintegration programs through education, vocational training, and psychosocial support.*

*The findings underscore the need for a holistic, long-term approach to prevent future recruitment and ensure compliance with international child protection standards, contributing to sustainable peace and security in Afghanistan.*

**Keyword:** *Afghan Local Police, Afghan National Army, Afghan National Police, Child Soldiers, Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration, State Actors.*

### **РАЗОРУЖЕНИЕ, ДЕМОБИЛИЗАЦИЯ И РЕИНТЕГРАЦИЯ В ГОСУДАРСТВЕННЫХ СУБЪЕКТАХ: РЕШЕНИЕ ПРОБЛЕМ СДЕРЖИВАНИЯ ВЕРБОВКИ ДЕТЕЙ-СОЛДАТ В АФГАНИСТАНЕ**

**Аннотация.** *Вербовка и использование детей-солдат государственными субъектами в Афганистане с 2001 по 2021 год оставались насущной проблемой прав человека, несмотря на международные правовые запреты. В этом исследовании критически рассматривается роль связанных с государством сил в вербовке детей-солдат. В нем оценивается эффективность программ разоружения, демобилизации и реинтеграции (РДР) в сдерживании этой практики, анализируются ключевые проблемы, такие как слабое соблюдение законов о защите детей, отсутствие подотчетности и социально-экономическое давление, которое стимулирует вербовку. Защита и запрет на участие несовершеннолетних в боевых действиях, предусмотренные в различных международно-правовых документах, в сопоставлении с мрачной реальностью грубого нарушения этих прав. Основным методом, используемый в ходе этого исследования, носит доктринальный характер, поскольку он углубляется в текст известных международных конвенций и других документов, касающихся детей-солдат. Более того, огромное количество текущих исследований по этой и связанным с ней темам указали на наблюдаемые последствия ограничения несовершеннолетних солдат в соответствии с международным правом, более подробно изложенные в афганской правовой базе. В ходе этого исследования было обнаружено, что реализация прав детей в соответствии с международными документами неэффективна. Оценивая прошлые инициативы DDR и их недостатки, это исследование дает рекомендации по политике для усиления мер защиты детей в государственных силах безопасности, улучшения механизмов обеспечения соблюдения и улучшения программ реинтеграции посредством образования, профессиональной подготовки и психосоциальной поддержки. Результаты подчеркивают необходимость целостного, долгосрочного подхода для предотвращения будущей вербовки*

*и обеспечения соответствия международным стандартам защиты детей, способствуя устойчивому миру и безопасности в Афганистане.*

**Ключевые слова:** *Афганская местная полиция, Афганская национальная армия, Афганская национальная полиция, дети-солдаты, разоружение, демобилизация и реинтеграция, государственные деятели.*

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## **1. Introduction**

In the period between 1979 and 2001, there were no large-scale programs towards DDR of child combatants. The main reason for this was that such a measure had not been deemed necessary neither by the United Nations (UN) nor the armed forces operating in Afghanistan in this era (Zyck, 2011: 63-70; Rossi, 2006: 1-5). However, after 2001 internationally-recognized government of Afghanistan installed in Kabul, the UN and the Afghan officials quickly realized the need for removal of underage persons from the state actors (Kenneth, 2010: 7-10; Lucy, 2010: 9-18). One of the programs accepted and implemented by the Afghan government and the UN was DDR, of child combatants. Judging by the absence of child soldiers' cases within the armed forces of Afghanistan from 2003 to 2009, it can be said that the measure was relatively successful. During this period of six years slightly over 8,000 child combatants were disarmed, demobilized and at least partially reintegrated into civilian life (Odeh, 2004: 4; Sedra, 2006: 94-110).

Another way, the recruitment and use of child soldiers have long been recognized as grave violations of human rights and International Humanitarian Law (IHL) (Qanet, 2019: 375-376). While the global discourse often focuses on state actors and their affiliated forces have also been implicated in the recruitment and use of child soldiers, particularly in conflict-affected regions like Afghanistan. Between 2001 and 2021, Afghanistan remained embroiled in persistent armed conflict, with state forces relying on underage combatants for various military roles (Qanet, 2020: 1-9; David, 2007: 300-301; Matthew, 2005: 6). Despite international legal frameworks prohibiting the use of child soldiers, including Additional Protocol I and II, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and its Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (OPAC), the Afghan National Army (ANA), the Afghan National Police (ANP), the Afghan Local Police (ALP), and pro-government militias, were frequently accused of recruiting and using children in combat and support functions (UN Secretary-General, 20 April, 2016: 5-7; Child Soldiers International, June 2015: 1-5; UN Assistance Mission, 15 July 2018: 3).

The recruitment of child soldiers by state-affiliated forces in Afghanistan was driven by several complex factors, including systemic governance failures, socio-economic vulnerabilities, and security imperatives. Many children were coerced or manipulated into joining government-aligned forces due to, lack of education, and the promise of financial incentives. Others were forcibly conscripted or recruited under the guise of protection, particularly in rural areas where government presence was weak and traditional law enforcement mechanisms were insufficient (Qanet, 2019: 45-46). In some cases, the ongoing insurgency and the increasing need for manpower led government forces and their affiliated militias to overlook or even facilitate the use of children in combat. Despite repeated commitments from the Afghan government and its international partners to eliminate the practice, enforcement of child protection laws remained inconsistent, and accountability measures were largely ineffective (Goebel, 2020: 117-144).

The DDR programs were introduced as a key strategy to address the issue of child soldier recruitment in Afghanistan. These programs aimed to remove child soldiers from military service, rehabilitate them through psychological and social support, and reintegrate them into civilian life through education and vocational training (Michael, 2008: 80-85). However, DDR initiatives faced numerous challenges, including political resistance, insufficient funding, and logistical difficulties in verifying the ages of recruits. Additionally, many children who were demobilized found themselves vulnerable to re-recruitment due to a lack of sustainable reintegration opportunities.

The weak implementation of DDR programs, coupled with the fragile security situation and the eventual withdrawal of international forces in 2021, further exacerbated the issue, leaving thousands of former child soldiers without adequate support systems (Michael, 2008: 80-85). This study critically examines the role of state actors in child soldier recruitment in Afghanistan, focusing on the effectiveness of DDR programs and the broader legal and institutional challenges that hindered their success.

Furthermore, this study explores the broader socio-political consequences of child soldier recruitment in state-affiliated forces. The continued involvement of children in armed conflict not only violates fundamental human rights but also perpetuates cycles of violence and instability, hindering long-term peacebuilding efforts (Muggah, 2012: 273-283). Former child soldiers often experience severe psychological trauma, social stigmatization, and economic marginalization, making reintegration efforts even more challenging. Without effective rehabilitation and reintegration mechanisms, these children remain at risk of being drawn back into armed conflict, either by state forces, or criminal organizations.

By analyzing the recruitment of child soldiers by state actors in Afghanistan and the effectiveness of DDR programs, this study seeks to contribute to the discourse on child protection, conflict resolution, and security sector reform. The findings underscore the urgent need for a holistic, multi-faceted approach that not only strengthens legal enforcement and accountability measures but also prioritizes education, economic opportunities, and mental health support for former child soldiers. Ultimately, the study aims to offer policy recommendations that can inform future efforts to prevent child soldier recruitment and ensure compliance with international child protection standards, fostering sustainable peace and security in Afghanistan (Goebel, 2020: 117-144; Michael, 2008: 80-85).

### **Research Questions:**

1. How effective are DDR programs in curbing the recruitment of child soldiers by state actors in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021?
2. What are the key challenges in enforcing child protection laws and preventing child soldier recruitment within state-affiliated forces?

### **Research Objective**

The primary objective of this research is to analyze the role of DDR programs in state actors and their effectiveness in curbing child soldier recruitment in Afghanistan. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Examine the factors contributing to child soldier recruitment by state-affiliated armed forces in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021, including political, economic, and social influences.
2. Assess the implementation and impact of DDR programs in Afghanistan, focusing on their successes, limitations, and challenges in addressing the recruitment and reintegration of former child soldiers.
3. Evaluate the role of state actors in enforcing international and national legal frameworks designed to prevent child soldier recruitment and ensure their commitment to sustainable DDR initiatives.
4. Identify gaps and challenges in DDR policies and practices that hinder the effective prevention and reintegration of child soldiers, including issues related to governance, security, funding, and community acceptance.
5. Propose policy recommendations and strategic measures to strengthen DDR programs and improve state-led efforts in preventing the recruitment and re-recruitment of child soldiers in Afghanistan.

By addressing these objectives, this research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the effectiveness of DDR efforts and provide insights into how state actors can enhance their role in protecting children from armed conflict and promoting sustainable reintegration into society.

**The Importance Research:** The recruitment and use of child soldiers by state actors in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021 represent a critical human rights violation and a significant barrier to sustainable peace and security. While much of the discourse on child soldiering focuses on non-state armed groups, this study highlights the often-overlooked role of state-affiliated forces.

Investigating the effectiveness of DDR programs in addressing this issue is essential for understanding the gaps in child protection efforts and informing future policies.

This research is important for several reasons. First, it contributes to the broader field of human rights and international law by analyzing the extent to which Afghanistan complied with international legal frameworks such as the Additional Protocol I and II, CRC and its OPAC. By assessing the weaknesses in legal enforcement and accountability mechanisms, the study sheds light on the challenges of implementing child protection measures in conflict-affected states.

Second, this research has significant implications for security sector reform and peacebuilding. The recruitment of child soldiers by state forces not only violates human rights but also weakens institutional integrity and prolongs cycles of violence. Without effective DDR programs and reintegration strategies, demobilized child soldiers remain at risk of re-recruitment, either by government forces, insurgent groups, or criminal organizations. This study aims to provide insights into how DDR initiatives can be strengthened to ensure sustainable reintegration and prevent future recruitment.

Third, the study is relevant to policymakers, international organizations, and humanitarian agencies working in post-conflict settings. By examining the shortcomings of past DDR initiatives in Afghanistan, this research offers practical recommendations for improving the design and implementation of future child protection programs. Lessons learned from Afghanistan can also be applied to other conflict-affected regions where state actors have been implicated in child soldier recruitment.

Finally, this research highlights the socio-economic dimensions of child soldiering, emphasizing the need for comprehensive rehabilitation programs that address education, vocational training, and mental health support.



The long-term consequences of child soldier recruitment extend beyond the battlefield, affecting societal stability, economic development, and intergenerational trauma. A deeper understanding of these challenges is essential for developing policies that not only demobilize child soldiers but also provide them with meaningful alternatives to armed conflict. In sum, this study is crucial in advancing knowledge on the intersection of child rights, conflict resolution, and state responsibility. By identifying policy gaps and proposing concrete solutions, the research contributes to the global effort to eradicate the use of child soldiers and promote a more just and secure future for affected communities in Afghanistan and beyond.

**Research Method:** This study adopts a doctrinal research methodology, which involves an in-depth analysis of Afghan legal frameworks, international treaties, and policy documents related to the recruitment of child soldiers by state actors in Afghanistan. Doctrinal research is particularly useful for examining the extent to which Afghanistan complied with international legal obligations and how DDR programs were implemented to curb child soldier recruitment.

Moreover, the study uses qualitative content analysis to examine and interpret legal texts, policy reports, and academic literature. By systematically analyzing these documents, the research identifies patterns, gaps, and inconsistencies in Afghanistan's legal and policy framework concerning child soldiers. Comparative analysis is also conducted to contrast Afghanistan's approach with international best practices in DDR programming.

### **The Concept of Child Soldiers under International Law**

Nearby, understanding and examination of international law discloses that it offers clear provisions for the safety of juvenile fighters through the ban of their conscription and use in battle (David, 2007: 300-301). This noticeable fortification and exclusion of the enlistment and use of underage fighters has been found in international law specifically, IHL and International Human Rights Law (IHRL). The Article 77 Additional Protocol I, considers only persons younger than fifteen as child fighters (Rachel, 2002: 9-10; Ilona, 2007: 111-112; Additional Protocol I, Article 77; Volker, 2002: 272). Additionally, Article 4 (3) Additional Protocol II, provided that: "(c) children who have not attained the age of fifteen years shall neither be recruited in the armed forces or groups nor allowed to take part in hostilities...(d) the special protection provided by this Article to children who have not attained the age of fifteen years shall remain applicable to them if they take a direct part in hostilities despite the provisions of sub-paragraph;(c) and are captured (Additional Protocol II, Article 4(3));" The Article 4(3) forbids the recruitment of children under fifteen, (Jean, 1987: 1377; Additional Protocol II, Article 4 (3). and mentions the suitable steps

towards unification of children and their relations, or elimination of adolescents from armed conflict areas with the agreement of their parents or protectors (Lilian, 2005: 5). Two features of these views vis-à-vis the explanation of child soldiers affect to the fact that the use of underage fighters below the age of fifteen is forbidden (Trevor, 2010: 391-393).

Moreover, the treaties of IHL, numerous treaties from IHRL protects the issue of underage soldiers. For example, Article 38 (2) of the CRC, forbids conscription and use in direct hostilities of all children under-age of fifteen (Timothy, (2007: 237-239). Moreover, Article 2 of the OPAC, prohibits enforced conscription and use in combat of persons younger than eighteen (Jean, 2018: 10-11). This convention clearly makes an important effort towards clarifying the position of the international law on the conscription of adolescents by explicitly lifting the conscription age from fifteen to eighteen years (Leonie, 2017: 8). Here, the signatory states are required to apply firm rules so as to avoid persons below the age of eighteen enter the army service. Furthermore, non-state actors are forbidden by the same document from enlisting those younger than eighteen for any type of combat activities (Lilian, 2005: 241-242).

### **The Concept of Child Soldiers under Afghan Legal Framework**

Moving from the international legal to the Afghan laws, from 1979 to 2014, there have been only provisions about the age limit for conscription of persons into state actors in the Military Act, and the age limit was always eighteen or higher. In 2014 the Afghan Government approved the Law on Prohibition of Juveniles Recruitment in Military Units (LPJRMU). Article 2(1) of this law describes the child as any person below the age of eighteen. Furthermore, this is the first law in Afghanistan precisely using the term ‘child soldier’. Article 4 of the LPJRMU provided that: “...recommends criminal prosecution and a sentence not less than three months and not exceeding one year of any military officer involved in recruiting children into the armed forces of the country.” Moreover, Article 5 of the LPJRMU, “which states that any person who resorts to forgery of documents, such as birth certificates and other similar proofs of age is to be prosecuted under the relevant provisions of the law.” Furthermore, Article 6 (1) of the LPJRMU, “which states that whoever among the responsible military officers abets in recruitment of children into armed forces shall be punished up to 6 months. Thus, in view of the continuous problem of large number of child soldiers in Afghanistan, these unreasonably low penalties are unlikely to deter potential recruiters.” of this law delivers for the penalties of persons found responsible for the conscription of children.



The difficulties demobilization and reintegration has examined underage persons in Afghanistan in a wider outlook by looking into the reasons of this unlawful exercise and social threat together with complications, challenges, and anxieties (Chrobok, 2005: 6-22). Additional vigorous matter of the research has been the general achievement and plans that surround the application of numerous rules aimed at supporting the underage soldiers in demobilization and reintegration. One of the starting points in this debate is a reply that previously several national and international demobilization and reintegration rules have unsuccessful due to many aspects. In the first a large figure of beneficiaries, i.e. the demobilized juvenile soldiers gap back into military lifetime as soon as the programmed aid finishes owing to the nonattendance of reintegration chances for them in civilian sphere. Such a disappointment of rules exposes the lack of long-term preparation and sustainability of these plans.

Next, obstacle in the well-organized implementation of DDR programs has the fact that they usually comprise a minor sample of beneficiaries, whereby common of underage soldiers neither involved nor conscious of the being of such plans (Sesay, 2009: 4-30). Meanwhile, these strategies almost wholly emphasis on ex-child fighters without any approach for those adolescents and childhood who might fall prey and be mistreated by a figure of conscripting groups that offer them enticements to join battle (Child Soldiers International, 2021). Simultaneously, DDR have been more often than not, intended and implemented autonomously from the general procedure of rebuilding of the country affected by international or non-international armed conflict; at times, these programs will be considered for a country and region and then hurriedly corrected to suit another country and cultural context without correct investigation of the peculiarities of the new country and culture.

Related to this, astonishingly, even the study findings and references from earlier armed conflicts and previously unsuccessful efforts at demobilization and reintegration are automatically shadowed as if there was an absence of concern about their relevance and effectiveness in the new background (Chrobok, 2005: 6-22). In additional to these plans, designed without consultation with non-governmental organization have not been accepted well on the crushed and exerted only a limited effect. Similar and clumsy work has caused in unwholesome distrust and competition that precipitated the failure of reintegration programs (Chrobok, 2005: 6-22). Finally, the incapability to grasp all the applicable causes of recruitment and use of juvenile soldiering and to foresee the issues that could stop it taught the initiators a hard lesson and left a complete negative

impression on the minds of potential beneficiaries for future policies of similar intents (Chrobok, 2005: 6-22). The details of DDR will be elaborated in the following sections of this study.

## **2. Challenges for Child Soldiers and Implementation of the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration in Afghanistan**

In order to break the cycle of violence and attempt to put a society back on the tracks of peace and normalcy and prevent the occurrence of the phenomena ‘lost generation’, which means the inability of demobilized persons to assume civilian duties and ‘conflict trap’ denoting recurring armed conflict in the same area, it is vital to dissolve the armed groups and provide opportunities to ex-combatants (Banholzer, 2014: 6). One of the ways to realize this desired goal is through a series of interrelated measures called DDR of combatants (Rossi, 2006: 1; Munive, 2015: 4-7).

This process is easier to carry out when it involves adult soldiers than juvenile ones due to the impact of armed conflict-induced trauma on underage combatants (Rossi, 2006: 1). It is also argued that disarmament and demobilization is achievable in cases where the armed conflict has been relatively short and where the main incentive for joining the armed group was financial. The armed conflict in Afghanistan, however, has been very long and far more complicated than many other armed conflicts worldwide so that the expectations from the successful models of disarmament and demobilization elsewhere in the world may be pessimistic if applied on the Afghan case. The long period of almost four decades of armed conflict in Afghanistan has created a situation where majority of combatants do not have any memory of peaceful society (Odeh, 2004: 2).

This is one hurdle in the path towards viable DDR of Afghan combatants. Another problem comes from the existence of armed forces whose cohesive force is derived from ethnic and ideological factors rather than financial ones. The strategic position of the country and the apparent interference of myriad states is yet another factor that stands in the way bringing about peace to the country and DDR to its armed citizens (Michael, 2008: 80-85). One of the conditions of a viable DDR program is a halt in armed hostilities and establishment of peace, and this is yet to be realized in the protracted Afghan armed conflict. However, since the country does have areas where there is relative peace, it is felt that the DDR program involving child soldiers should be implemented in as wide area as possible (Dobbins, 2020). As the previous sections of this study indicate, the large number of child soldiers in Afghanistan requires concerted effort of a carefully designed DDR program where UN bodies and possibly other international and regional

organizations need to assist the Afghan authorities to remove children from armed conflict and provide opportunities for them (Odeh, 2004: 2-4).

Although it was recommended by the UN Security Council resolution of 28 March 2002 together with the establishment of UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and under its auspices, the DDR program in Afghanistan did not commence until February 2003 when the Afghanistan's New Beginnings Programme (ANBP) was formed (Chrobok, 2005: 23). The ANBP was created through a joint effort involving the authorities of the Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan, the governments of Canada and Japan, as well as UNAMA and UNDP. Its primary mission was to implement and oversee the DDR program in Afghanistan (Rossi, 2006: 5). The ANBP was intended to collaborate closely with the Ministry of Defence. One of the key accomplishments of the international community was setting a cap on the number of ex-combatants eligible for demobilization. Originally set at 100,000, this limit was later reduced to 60,000, thereby restricting militia commanders from exploiting the demobilization and reintegration process for personal gain and political influence (Rossi, 2006: 5). The ANBP was to supervise the demobilization and reintegration of adult soldiers whereas a subprogram led by United National International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) was formed within the ANBP to oversee the demobilization and reintegration of juvenile combatants (Chrobok, 2005: 26). According to some sources the DDR program in Afghanistan was expected to encompass at least 8,000 child soldiers (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2003: 43) and tens of thousands of adult soldiers. The program was also expected to cover about 45,000 light and heavy weapons used by planned demobilized personnel (Zenkevicius, 2007: 46).

From the very outset, the DDR program in Afghanistan was marred by several obstacles concerning its definition, scope and applicability in the Afghan context. As aforesaid, the DDR usually get underway upon the conclusion of peace accord. This condition had not been fully met by February 2003 when the program started to be implemented (Özerdem, 2002: 962). Thus, the first step in the whole program, namely the disarmament did not proceed as planned due to the overall lack of confidence and trust on the part of armed Afghans to lay down their arms and thus proceed to the stages of demobilization and reintegration into the society as civilians (Thruelsen, 2006: 15-16). In fact, one of the goals of the ANBP was to remobilize the armed persons that had been affiliated with a host of armed groups into the newly-formed Afghan national security forces.

The peculiarities of the armed conflict in Afghanistan and the urgency for the establishment of loyal and well-trained armed forces largely contradicted the very definition and purpose of DDR program as it had been known until then (Thruelsen, 2006: 13-14).

Another challenge was the applicability of DDR parameters to the Afghan child soldiers. In order to grasp the extent of this challenge it is instructive to analyse the apparent dichotomy in the definition of the child in international law and Afghan law on the one hand and perception of childhood-adulthood roles within Afghan culture and society on the other hand (Qanet, 2019: 375-376; Qanet, 2020: 45-46; Jens, 2010: 79-80; UNAMA, 2015: 18; Achvarina, 2006: 127-129; Leonie, 2017: 5-9). This analysis should not be seen as an attack on the definition of the child in international law, rather it ought to be viewed in the context of the split in operation of the ANBP and UNICEF in Afghanistan. As some sources have noted, the definition of the child under the CRC and Cape Town Principles does not have to be utilized when one decides whether a fifteen or sixteen-year-old Afghan soldier could perform the duties of an adult upon demobilization or not (Zyck, 2011: 163).

Within the Afghan cultural context, ten to twelve-year-old in most cases ceases to be seen as a child but as someone who can fully provide for the family, get married and perform other duties associated with adulthood (Dupree, 1980: 194). Therefore, creating a special program that would treat Afghan child soldiers as juveniles following strictly a model formalized on the notion of childhood in western societies may not be accepted, practical nor economical in a situation where every available means is too valuable to be wasted (Zyck, 2011: 63; Specht, 2010).

## **2.1 Disarmament and Demobilization of Child Combatants**

Disarmament and demobilization are two successive measures that are implemented following the cessation of hostilities and establishment of peace. Disarmament is defined as: disarmament involves the gathering, recording, regulation, and elimination of small arms, ammunition, explosives, and both light and heavy weaponry from combatants, and in many cases, from civilians as well. Additionally, it encompasses the establishment of effective arms management programs to ensure responsible oversight and control (Secretary-general, 2005). and Demobilization refers to the organized and systematic release of active combatants from military forces or armed groups. The process typically occurs in two stages. The first stage involves registering and processing individuals at designated locations, such as temporary centers, cantonment sites, encampments, assembly zones, or military barracks. The second stage, known as reinsertion, focuses on providing essential support to demobilized individuals to facilitate their transition back into civilian life (Secretary-general, 2005).

The immediate benefit of disarmament is reducing the number of weapons and armed personnel in a community while in the longer term this measure hampers the possibility of arms sales and smuggling into neighboring regions and countries. Probably the best way does away with the collected weapons is to destroy them in public to demonstrate the end to armed conflict and the beginning of peace (Knight, 2004: 503-504; Banholzer, 2014: 10). Once disarmament is performed, the process of demobilization of ex-combatants begins. This stage comprises two measures. The first one is discharge of active soldiers from armed group or regular formation that is usually done in specially designated areas such as encampments or military barracks. The second step is called reinsertion which involves handing in a package of immediate support to the ex-combatants. This type of aid may consist of financial allowances, food, clothing, medical supplies, tools for work or crafts, and short-term education and employment to the demobilized persons and their immediate family.

After 2001, when an internationally recognized government was established in Kabul, the UN and Afghan officials swiftly recognized the importance of removing underage individuals from state security forces, the most of the child soldiers associated and returned to their homes (Gossman, 2009: 1-4). According to Sedra, these child combatants did not benefit directly nor much from the DDR program for demobilization and reintegration of children associated with armed conflict organized by the UNICEF from May, 2002 (Sedra, 2003: 1-22). Although the ANBP and UNICEF expressed their intention to accord special attention to demobilized underage combatants, the extent to which this plan was implemented is unclear as most of the child soldiers returned to their homes and communities without subsequent contact with these two organizations (Sedra, 2003: 1-22). The proposed aid to the demobilized child soldiers comprised education, healthcare facilities and protection against possible punitive measures from the armed groups (Matsumoto, 2008: 65-78). The initial figure of 8,000 planned demobilizations by ANBP and UNICEF intended to cover the whole country, the number was later reduced by half and implemented only in 15 districts (Bhandari, 2012: 41). The main benefactors and donors of the DDR program in Afghanistan were UN and UNICEF, the United States, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands and Sweden (U.S. Department of Labor, 2008: 28).

The process of demobilization of child combatants in Afghanistan commenced with establishment of Local Demobilization and Reintegration Committees (LDRC). The main role of the committee was to inform and clarify the demobilization process to the community so as to make them receptive and supportive to the ex-child soldiers (Chrobok, 2005: 33). For this purpose

it had to include village elders and families to clarify the minutes of the program. The committees also identified the commanders of the units where child soldiers had served and interviewed both the commanders and child soldiers about their capacity and role they had performed while serving in the armed group. This measure was a prelude to the determination of the potential beneficiaries of the program and the details of reinsertion and reintegration available to them (Chrobok, 2005: 33). Once again it is unclear from the sources available to the researcher whether either of these two target figures were met in the early stages of the DDR program in 2002 and 2003 (Bhandari, 2012: 41).

## **2.2 Reintegration of Afghan's ex-Child Soldiers into Civilian Life**

Following relatively shorter stages of disarmament and demobilization the third and much longer and more complicated stage of the DDR, namely the reintegration can start to be implemented (Pietz, 2004: 15-19). Reintegration is defined as: "Reintegration is the process by which ex-combatants acquire civilian status and gain sustainable employment and income.

Reintegration is essentially a social and economic process with an open time-frame, primarily taking place in communities at the local level. It is part of the general development of a country and a national responsibility, and often necessitates long-term external assistance." (Secretary-general, May 2005). Reintegration includes providing long-term support to ex-combatants so as to assist them in their transition to civilian life (Kilroy, 2009: 2). This process ordinarily does not have short deadlines as is the case with disarmament and demobilization. It also depends on far more variables than the other two requiring a concerted effort on the national level with demands that may exceed the capability of a state thus requiring international attention and assistance. This was the case in Afghanistan where the need for reintegration of tens of thousands adult and child combatants had exceeded the means available to the newly-established state in 2002 and 2003 (Kilroy, 2009: 2). In the beginning, assistance to Afghan ex-child soldiers comprised elementary educational and vocational training and practical elements such as information on drug abuse and mine dangers. Practical training programs were organized for agriculture, trades and crafts like carpentry and tailoring. To mitigate the psychological effects of combat on young soldiers, there were a variety of sports and art-related activities (Chrobok, 2005: 36; WFP, 2006).

All of the above activities under the program of reintegration of child soldiers supervised by UNICEF were expanded to cover the youth who had not taken part in armed conflict as there were many households where breadwinners were underage persons, illiterate minors and those in



employment (Rufer, 2005: 53-55). The inclusion of civilian children in the program primarily meant for child soldiers was justified by establishing social ties between the combatants and soldiers with the aim of providing better psycho-social reintegration for both (Chrobok, 2005: 59).

However, this decision meant a dramatic increase in the number of beneficiary children and the resultant strain on the funds. By June 2007, 5,042 child soldiers and 7,548 civilian war-affected youth received aid under the UNICEF and DDR program (Child Soldiers International, 20 May 2008).

Some commentators and researchers have criticized the inequality in the distribution of aid to combatants by Afghanistan's New Beginnings Programme, which organized reintegration of adult soldiers, and the one run by UNICEF, which was addressed to child soldiers and other war-affected youth (Thruelsen, 2006: 29). The difference in methods applied by ANBP and UNICEF deprived the underage soldiers of substantial means and put them in inferior position compared to the adult combatants. The main objection was because of the fact that adult soldiers received cash allowance of US\$ 700 whereas child soldiers did not get this sum (Zyck, 2009: 111-131). The rationale behind unequal treatment of adult and child combatants has been viewed as untenable and it has been suggested that allowance should have been given to underage soldiers as it was to their adult peers. The justification for such a view is rooted in the fact that most of the child soldiers served adult roles in Afghan society - they were breadwinners and laborers in addition to being capable for micro-business initiatives in no lesser extent than the demobilized adults (Zyck, 2011: 168; Zyck, 2006). For these reason stemming from the peculiarities of the Afghan society where most adolescents carry out the duties of adults, it is argued that strict application of the child soldier label in the divided ANBP and UNICEF methodologies should have better been waived and these two categories of ex-combatants merged into one group at least during reintegration stage of the DDR.

### **3. Conclusion**

Between 2001 and 2021, Afghanistan faced persistent challenges in preventing the recruitment and use of child soldiers, despite national and international efforts aimed at DDR. The country's prolonged armed conflict, political instability, and weak governance structures allowed the continued recruitment of children by state actors. While DDR programs sought to address this issue, their success was hindered by ongoing violence, lack of enforcement mechanisms, and insufficient resources.

State actors, who were expected to uphold child protection laws, often struggled with internal accountability, further complicating efforts to curb this practice. Disarmament and demobilization efforts faced substantial obstacles due to the volatile security environment and the inability to effectively monitor compliance with international legal frameworks. While some progress was made in securing commitments from the Afghan government to end child recruitment, enforcement remained inconsistent. Many children who were removed from armed groups faced the risk of re-recruitment due to a lack of alternative opportunities, inadequate protection, and persistent insecurity.

Reintegration proved to be one of the most challenging aspects of DDR programs during this period. Former child soldiers often encountered social stigma, psychological trauma, and economic hardships that prevented them from successfully reintegrating into civilian life. The lack of sufficient educational and vocational training programs, combined with weak social support structures, further exacerbated the problem. Community acceptance played a crucial role in determining the success of reintegration efforts, but in many cases, former child soldiers struggled to regain a sense of normalcy. The international community, along with Afghan authorities, recognized the urgency of addressing child soldier recruitment, yet efforts were often constrained by political instability and limited funding. The withdrawal of international forces in 2021 further complicated DDR efforts, as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan altered the political landscape and raised concerns about the future of child protection measures in Afghanistan. Without sustained commitment from both national and international stakeholders, the progress made in reducing child recruitment risks being undone.

Moving forward, any future DDR initiatives must adopt a more holistic and sustainable approach that not only focuses on removing children from armed groups but also ensures their long-term reintegration into society. Strengthening legal frameworks, improving enforcement mechanisms, and investing in education, vocational training, and psychosocial support will be critical to breaking the cycle of child soldier recruitment. Additionally, fostering community engagement and promoting reconciliation will help create a more supportive environment for reintegrated children. Ultimately, addressing the issue of child soldier recruitment in Afghanistan requires a long-term, multi-dimensional strategy that prioritizes child protection, strengthens institutional capacities, and tackles the root causes of child recruitment, such as poverty, insecurity, and lack of educational opportunities.

While the past two decades have seen both progress and setbacks, a concerted and sustained effort will be necessary to ensure that Afghan children are no longer victims of armed conflict but instead have the opportunity to build a peaceful and stable future.

### **Suggestions**

To effectively address the challenges of curbing child soldier recruitment in Afghanistan through DDR programs, the following suggestions are proposed:

1. **Strengthening Legal and Institutional Frameworks:** The Afghan government should fully implement and enforce international treaties such as the Additional Protocols, CRC and OPAC. Establish clear legal consequences for state actors involved in child recruitment, ensuring strict penalties and accountability measures. Strengthen monitoring and reporting mechanisms to track and prevent child recruitment by state actors.

2. **Enhancing the Effectiveness of DDR Programs:** DDR programs should prioritize child-specific interventions, ensuring that former child soldiers receive tailored rehabilitation, education, and psychological support. Extend DDR efforts beyond immediate disarmament and demobilization by focusing on long-term reintegration, preventing children from rejoining armed groups due to economic hardship or social isolation. Ensure that DDR programs are holistically integrated with national development plans, promoting sustainable peace and security.

3. **Improving Reintegration Support for Former Child Soldiers:** Develop community-based reintegration programs that involve local leaders, educators, and religious figures to foster social acceptance and prevent stigmatization. Provide psychosocial counseling and trauma recovery services to help former child soldiers heal from the emotional and psychological effects of war. Invest in education and vocational training programs, ensuring that former child soldiers have access to opportunities that promote economic self-sufficiency.

4. **Strengthening Government and International Collaboration:** Improve coordination between Afghan state actors, international organizations, and NGOs to ensure a cohesive approach to DDR implementation. Secure long-term financial and technical support from international donors and agencies to sustain DDR programs beyond short-term interventions. Encourage cross-border collaboration with neighboring countries to prevent child recruitment by armed forces operating across Afghanistan's borders.

5. **Addressing Root Causes of Child Recruitment:** Implement economic support programs for vulnerable families, reducing financial pressures that push children into armed forces. Expand access to free and compulsory education, especially in rural and conflict-affected regions, to reduce

the risk of child recruitment. Launch awareness campaigns to educate families and communities about the consequences of child soldier recruitment and the legal protections available.

6. Preventing Re-Recruitment and Ensuring Long-Term Protection: Establish early warning systems to identify and respond to signs of child recruitment in high-risk areas.

Strengthen security measures to prevent re-recruitment by armed forces, including better monitoring of former combatants. Provide alternative livelihood opportunities for at-risk youth to ensure they do not return to armed conflict due to economic hardship.

By implementing these suggestions, Afghanistan can strengthen its DDR framework, prevent child soldier recruitment, and build a more stable and peaceful future. Ensuring a child-centered, long-term approach will be critical to breaking the cycle of violence and protecting vulnerable children from the horrors of war.

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