

The invisible children

Child protection in a DDR¹ process in Colombia: a critical analysis

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Abstract

The following article intends to describe a worrying phenomenon of the demobilization of child soldiers in Colombia within the general framework of the DDR process of the paramilitary group known as AUC³. It will address the following questions: 1. the level of protection of the demobilized and reintegrated children of the AUC in Colombia; 2. the concepts, sometimes blurry, surrounding the DDR processes of children at war; 3. how the conceptual void regarding such phenomenon derives in a lack of certitude on the who, when, where and how, children demobilize.

Introduction

The recruitment and use of children by armed forces and armed groups has been a focus of international attention and has been widely condemned, yet children continue to be involved

in adult wars and to become disabled or die in such conflicts. Despite gains in awareness and better understanding of practical policies that can help reduce the use of children in war, the practice persists in at least twenty countries, and globally, the number of child soldiers—about 300.000—is believed to have remained fairly constant.⁴

The number of child soldiers in Colombia is estimated to be between 7.000 and 15.000⁵, of which approximately 5.000 are associated to AUC. These figures may not seem to be as alarming as the ones of other countries, like Liberia with 21.000⁶ or The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) counting 30.000⁷ child soldiers.⁸ Even if the total numbers of child soldiers in Colombia are apparently lower than in other post-conflict countries, the proportion of child soldiers in relation to the total number of combatants in the Colombian armed conflict is alarming high: In Liberia, around 40% of the illegal combatants are children, followed by 20% in DRC. The estimated number in Colombia is

¹ Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration.

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³ Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia-United Self-defense of Colombia. The AUC is the major paramilitary group, including at least ten different groups. This alliance was founded in 1997 and began demobilizations in November of 2003 which ended in May of 2006.

⁴ Human Rights Watch, World Report 2004. *Children as Weapons for War*. <http://hrw.org/wr2k4/11.htm>, Last consulted January 2007.

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⁵ Universidad Nacional de Colombia Sede Bogotá, U.N. Observatorio Sobre Infancia et al (2006). *Colombia: En deuda con su infancia*. Informe Complementario al Informe de Estado Colombiano al Comité de Derechos del niño 1998-2003, Bogotá, p. 38.

⁶ 21.000 child combatants out of an estimated number of 53.000 combatants (~40% child soldiers).

⁷ 30.000 child combatants out of an estimated number of 150.000 combatants (~20% child soldiers).

⁸ Coalición Internacional para acabar con la utilización de niños soldados (2005) (a). *Niños y Niñas Soldado*. Informe Global 2004. London, pp. 15-17.

between 16% and 34%. This proportion indicates that the situation of child recruitment in Colombia more than critical.

In June 2006, the Colombian Procurator General's Office⁹ denounced severely various irregularities and gaps related to child protection issues within the demobilization process of the paramilitary group AUC. According to report of the Procurator General, in application of the demobilization Law 975 of 2005, the so-called «Justice and Peace Law», more than 30.000¹⁰ individuals have demobilized, counting not more than 101¹¹ children. The Procurator General condemned the lack of transparency and indicated that former child soldiers have become invisible within the DDR process.

Due to these facts, some very important and challenging research questions might be raised: *Where are the children?* Where are the child soldiers that were part of the paramilitary groups which have already demobilized? In which conditions did they abandon the armed group? What happened to them? What efforts does the Colombian state make to protect them and to provide them with the benefits of the DDR programs?

I. A theoretical approach to DDR processes

Successful peace processes related to armed conflicts should pass through a final stage in which, once agreements have been signed, the illegal combatants give up their weapons and reintegrate into civil life. This complex stage is known as DDR, which stands for Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration.¹² The main objective of formal DDR processes is the formal and controlled discharge of active combatants from armed forces or other armed groups.

According to the definitions of the United Nations, *Disarmament* is the collection, control and disposal of small arms, ammunition, explosives and light and heavy weapons of combatants and often also of the civilian population. It includes the development of responsible arms management programs. *Demobilization* is the process by which armed forces either downsize or completely disband, as part of a broader transformation from war to peace. Typically, demobilization involves the assembly, quartering, disarmament, administration and discharge of former combatants, who may receive some form of compensation and other assistance to encourage their transition to civilian life. *Reintegration programs* are assistance measures provided to former combatants that would increase the potential for their and their families», economic and social reintegration into civil society. Reintegration programs could include cash assistance or compensation in kind, as well as vocational training and income-generating activities.¹³ Child Reintegration is the specific process through which children transition into civil society and enter meaningful roles and identities as civilians who are accepted by their families and communities in a context of local and national reconciliation. This process aims to ensure that children can access their rights, including formal and non-formal education, family unity, dignified livelihoods and safety from harm.¹⁴

Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programs for former combatants are complex processes that involve political, military, security, humanitarian and socioeconomic factors. Their setting tends to be post-conflict contexts, with the result that everything that this characteristic implies, a factor that is often associated with institutional weakness, political transition, democratic fragility, problems of security, destruction of infrastructures and economic dependence on international cooperation. In the Colombian case, there is an additional situation: the

⁹ The Colombian Procurator General's Office is the main control state agency.

¹⁰ See Appendix 1, p. 25.

¹¹ Procuraduría General de la Nación (2006). Seguimiento a Políticas Públicas en Materia de Desmovilización y Reinserción. Tomo 2. 2006, p. 390. The ICBF (Colombian Institute of Family Welfare) indicates a number of 212 demobilized minors within the DDR process.

¹² Fisas, Vicenç (et al) (2006). *Analysis of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programs existing in the world during 2005*. Barcelona: Escola de cultura de Pau, p. 5.

¹³ United Nations, Department of Peacekeeping Operations, Lessons Learned Unit. 2000. *Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration of Ex-Combatants in a Peacekeeping Environment: Principles and Guidelines*. New York: United Nations, p. 23.

¹⁴ *Paris Principles 2007, Principles and Guidelines on children associated with armed forces or armed groups*, <http://www.unicef.org.uk/publications/pdf/parisprin.pdf>, Last consulted February 2007.

on going armed struggle. Whatever the case, the DDR represents an opportunity for building security and is thus one of the most important ingredients for achieving stability and building peace. In addition, the very nature of these programs can transform the former combatants into active participants in economic and social development. Although the great majority of programs focus their attention on former combatants, the ultimate goal is to achieve the development of the whole community.¹⁵ But without political will and adequate financial resources, the process will fail. The international community is called to provide leadership by brokering peace agreements and putting pressure on the belligerents to honour their commitments.¹⁶

Regarding the protection of children, by late 2003, special DDR programs for former child soldiers were operating in half a dozen countries, including Colombia, the DRC, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, and Uganda, and new programs were beginning in Afghanistan, Burundi, Liberia, and Sri Lanka. However, with few exceptions, these programs were available to only a small percentage of the children who needed them, and in some countries, including Myanmar, Nepal, and the Philippines, such programs were practically nonexistent.¹⁷

Even though DDR programs exist for children, armed groups seldom acknowledge the presence of child soldiers in their ranks since the international community frowns upon child recruitment. The consequence is that substantial numbers of child soldiers do not demobilize through official DDR channels. Around 30% of all child combatants do not enter formal DDR processes. This high number is also due to the requirement that combatants usually need to hand in a weapon to be registered as an ex-combatant.¹⁸ Other aggravating circumstances are insecurity and uncertainty which often discourage children from demobilizing of their own

and their commanders from releasing them.¹⁹ Overlooked and without support, they may be forced to remain with their captors, ostracized from their societies, or pushed into prostitution. They are often left without psychosocial and medical care critical to their recovery.²⁰ Consequently, all peace agreements should include specific measures to demobilize and reintegrate child soldiers into society. There is an urgent need for the international community to support programs, including advocacy and social services programs, for the demobilization and reintegration of child soldiers into the community. Such measures must address the family's economic security and include educational, life-skills and vocational opportunities.²¹

As the phenomenon of child recruitment is a characteristic of armed conflicts globally, in which illegal armed actors use children as a human resource for the armed group with certain goals, child protection before, during and after war becomes a crucial issue.

II. Contextualization - The AUC in the Colombian armed conflict

Colombia has experienced more than fifty-seven years of war, making it the longest-running twentieth-century internal armed conflict that has endured into the twenty-first century.²² Besides the attribute of time, the conflict can also be described in terms of complexity.

Signs of complexity of the Colombian armed conflict can be traced in some of its characteristics:

1. Protraction: It has lasted a significant number of decades; protracted armed conflicts have proven to be extremely difficult to bring to an end;

¹⁵ Fisas, Vicenç (et al) (2006). *Analysis of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programs existing in the world during 2005*. Barcelona: Escola de cultura de Pau, p. 5.

¹⁶ McConnan, Isobel and Sarah Uppard (2001). *Children - Not Soldiers: Guidelines for working with child soldiers and children associated with fighting forces*. Save the Children Fund. London, p. 10.

¹⁷ Human Rights Watch (2004). *World Report 2004: Children as Weapons for War*. <http://www.hrw.org/wr2k4/11.htm>, Last consulted January 2007.

¹⁸ Nilsson, Anders (2005). *Reintegrating Ex-Combatants in Post-Conflict Societies*. Sida, p. 75.

¹⁹ McConnan, Isobel and Sarah Uppard (2001). *Children - Not Soldiers: Guidelines for working with child soldiers and children associated with fighting forces*. Save the Children Fund. London, p. 10.

²⁰ United Nations 2006 (a): *World Youth Report 2005*. Young people today, and in 2015, p. 160.

<http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/documents/wyr05book.pdf>, Last consulted January 2007.

²¹ Machel, Graça (1996). *Children and armed conflict*. Report of the Secretary-General, p. 14. <http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/{65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9}/CAC%20S200572.pdf>, Last consulted July 2006.

²² Chernick, Mark (2005). *Economic Resources and Internal Armed Conflict: Lessons from the Colombian Case*. *Rethinking the economics of War*, Arnson, Zartman (ed.), Woodrow Wilson Center, Johns Hopkins University Press, Washington DC, Baltimore, pp. 178-205.

2. Expansion: It has reached high levels of expansion and escalation of hostilities during diverse periods of its long, lasting irregularity;
3. Behavior of armed actors: It shows diverse dyads of confronted armed actors who, besides infrequently combating between them, attack civilians as part of their war campaign. These actors, at the same time present non-linear control structures, and thus their behavior is highly unpredictable.
4. Power structures: Armed actors have reached important levels of power and control over territory in areas where they act as quasi-states; control over the civil population, over the economy of whole regions and over politics on regional and even on national level, as it was demonstrated recently.

The first decade of the conflict, from 1948 to 1958, a period simply known as «La Violencia», was the bloodiest phase. By the 1990s, the violence had escalated again to levels not seen since the 1950s. The unexpected expansion of the war coincided with the insertion of the Andean region in the world economy as an exporter of illicit narcotics, principally coca paste and cocaine. The drug export boom radically transformed Colombia's deep rooted and long standing armed conflict: It provided resources to the Colombian guerrillas that lead to a steady increase in recruitment, armed actions, geographic mobility, military capacity and technological prowess. The burgeoning drug trade also created a new class of economic elites and rural landowners as drug money was laundered through investments in the countryside. Finally, it drew the major regional power, the United States, which was eager to provide military assistance to repress the northward flow of drugs.²³

V. Fisas describes the case of the DDR process of AUC within the complexity and dynamics of the Colombian armed conflict as an exceptional process, in which the current collective DDR is done exclusively with one of the armed groups in struggle, in this case the AUC, while in all other countries, demobilization of paramilitary groups has been realized parallel to the demobilization of militias, guerrillas and the armed forces.²⁴

The roots of Colombia's armed conflict are multiple, complex and deep. The conflict started as a political struggle between the two principal parties, Conservatives and Liberals, in the late 1940s. After the formal termination of this conflict with the National Front agreements in 1958, offshoots of radical liberals and other leftist groups started guerrilla operations in the 1960s. In response, the state declared permanent martial law and brought parts of the country under de facto military administration. In the 1980s: martial law was lifted and peace negotiations with various guerrilla groups, who accepted to abandon the armed struggle in exchange for amnesty, were successful. Especially during the 1990s, as it was mentioned before, the expansion of the illicit drug economy and the appearance of drug-linked criminal organizations offered a new set of means and motives for the illegal armed actors in the conflict. Especially the FARC and the paramilitary groups used control over coca and cocaine producing areas and active involvement in the drug trade to access substantial amounts of money to fund military and logistic capacity.

The AUC, a paramilitary alliance grouped in 1997, was a reaction of local and regional landowners and businessmen to guerrilla actions seeking territorial control. The paramilitary leaders themselves claimed and still claim that they acted to fill the void that was created by a neglectful central government. However, many sources indicate that the paramilitary were from the outset closely connected to the drug sector. Drug interests and wealth acquired with drug money was protected and drug money was used to finance the equipment of the paramilitary units. As a result, the AUC rapidly expanded across the Colombian territory. Their activities were supposedly aimed at impeding the guerrilla, but in practice, the civilian population was the main target and victim of paramilitary violence. In the course of the 1990s, the paramilitary started to enhance their political profile. AUC considered itself as a legitimate political stakeholder and, indeed, an armed actor willing to engage in a peace process. The readiness of the paramilitary leaders was further stimulated by their international ostracism, or more precisely, their inclusion on international lists

²³ Ib.

²⁴ Fisas, Vicenç (et al) (2006). *Analysis of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programs existing in the world during 2005*. Barcelona: Escola de cultura de Pau, p. 10.

of criminal terrorist organizations and the increasing US pressure for extradition of drug traffickers, including paramilitary and guerrilla commanders. To be part of a peace settlement may, in the perspective of some paramilitary leaders, serve as a guarantee against extradition or international criminal prosecution.²⁵

In this context, by December 2002, the majority of Colombian's paramilitaries, including the most of the dominant group, the AUC, had announced a unilateral cease-fire and agreed to an formal process of negotiation with the government. This development altered the structural dynamics of the Colombian peace process in that it granted the paramilitaries the status of political actor, a development long pursued by the paramilitaries» cofounder, Carlos Castaño, but resisted by the Colombian government.²⁶

III. Children – a vulnerable group in the context of armed conflicts

One of the characteristics of armed conflicts today, is the increase of civilian casualties. The civil population becomes not only victims, but a special target of war strategies of the different parties involved in the armed struggle. As in the I. WW around 17% of the casualties were civilians, in our time it has raised to 90%. Children, in the situation of armed conflicts in general, as well as in the specific case of the Colombian armed conflict, are one of the most vulnerable and affected civil groups. In the last decade about 2 millions of children died, 6 millions have been injured and various millions have been forced to join armed groups.²⁷ Therefore, children require a high-priority and a special protection. The violations of their rights before, during and after their involvement in the armed conflict are various: Violation of the

right of life, the right of personal, physical and psychological integrity, the right of freedom, the right of a name and a family and the right of education. In situations of armed conflict children do not only lose their childhood and opportunities for education and development—in different ways they also suffer from physical injuries, psychological trauma, sexual abuse, economic exploitation, displacement and separation from their family.²⁸

According to the most recent investigation of the Procurator General's Office related to the vulnerability of children involved in armed conflict, around 41,5% of the population in Colombia is under 18 years old, 50% of them have basic unsatisfied needs and they represent the population fraction which is most affected by poverty. Further on, the investigation states that 50% of the direct victims of the Colombian armed conflict are below 18 and that the situation of violations of the rights of the children is generalized, systematic and increasing. Furthermore, 527 children were killed by antipersonnel mines between 1990 and 2006; in the last ten years 2.429 have been kidnapped; and in 2005, 14.000 were internally displaced.²⁹ Hence, it cannot be denied that the armed conflict continues to attack children.

As the previous director of the Colombian Institute of Family Welfare (ICBF) indicates, it is urgent to admit that the policies related to childhood in Colombia and the programs for the protection of children neither have been real policies nor were they directed in an efficient way at the children. The programs are nothing more than a superficial and selective assistance.³⁰

Perhaps one of the most dramatic dimensions of the lack of child protection and the violation of the rights of the child is the

²⁵ Koonings, Kees and Kjell-Ake Nordquist (2005). *Proceso de paz case al fuego, desarme, desmovilización y reintegración —CDDR— paramilitar y (apoyo internacional a la) Misión de Apoyo al Proceso de Paz de la OEA —MAPP/OEA— en Colombia*. Uppsala/Utrecht, pp. 27-28.

²⁶ Arnsón, Cynthia, Whitfield, Teresa (2005). *Third Parties and Intractable Conflicts. The Case of Colombia. Grasping the Nettle. Analyzing Cases of Intractable Conflict*, Crocker, C., Osler, F. & Aall, (eds.), USIP Press, Washington D.C., 2005, pp. 231-268.

²⁷ Fisas, Vincenç (2004 (1998)). *Cultura de paz y gestión de conflictos*, Icaria-Antrazyt, UNESCO, Barcelona, pp. 60-62.

²⁸ Knudsen, Christine et al (2006). *Child Protection in Emergencies*. Save the Children Sweden and The International Save the Children Alliance. Stockholm, p.8.

²⁹ «El conflicto armado impide que la niñez crezca». En Hechos del Callejón, Número 15, 2006, p. 2. <http://www.acnur.org/pais/docs/1439.pdf>, Last consulted August 2006.

³⁰ Urrutia, Juan Manuel (2002). Una política pública que reconozca la real problemática de la infancia. *Niñez y conflicto armado en Colombia*., Bogotá, pp. 20-35. Translated by the author.

recruitment of children into illegal armed groups —the child soldiers.

The introduction of children to the ranks of fighters in Colombia is a relatively new phenomenon. In the 1950s, children may have accompanied families who escaped attacks and lived in rebel encampments. But they rarely fought themselves. This changed in the 1990s, as guerrillas and paramilitaries began recruiting drives. In 1996, the Colombian Ombudsman Office released one of the first reports chronicling this development. The report concluded that up to 13% of some guerrilla units were made up of children. In urban militias, the majority of recruits, namely 85%, were believed to be below than eighteen. In addition to recruitment drives, the increase in the use of child combatants in the Colombian armed conflict might also be explained by the worsening living conditions for many of Colombia's children and the desperation that this has provoked among children old enough to wonder about their future.³¹

There is no unanimous estimation of the number of child soldiers in Colombia³²: UNICEF handles a number of some 7.000 children; the Coalition to stop the use of child soldiers calculates a total number of child soldiers conscripted by paramilitaries and armed opposition groups of around 14.000.³³ The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights estimated in 2002 that some 7.000 children were associated with the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia/ Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), ELN (Ejército de Liberación Nacional/ National Liberation Army), and paramilitaries and a further 7.000 were linked to urban militias. According to a research of Human Rights Watch in 2004 the figure is about 11.000 children.³⁴ The Colombian Institute for Family Welfare (ICBF) indicates that there might be between 7.000 and 15.000 child soldiers enlisted to the differ-

ent illegal armed groups.³⁵ Hence, the number of child soldiers in relation to the total number of illegal combatants is between 16% and 34%.

Focusing on children enlisted with the AUC, it is also difficult to find clear figures. The AUC has not released any data regarding the number of children in its ranks. On the contrary, article 9 of the AUC's statute, which sets out the organization's requirements, states that aspirants must be over eighteen years of age, of good repute, and have no record of «undesirable or antisocial conduct». But the reality is different. Some groups affiliated to the AUC, made aggressive campaigns of conscription that included forced recruitment. According to the research of Human Rights Watch, in cities across Colombia, paramilitary groups recruited youngsters hardened by years of service for the drug cartels as their shock troops in an effort to drive out the guerrilla militias from the slums that they previously controlled. It was reported, that in recruitment drives in the past, some groups of the AUC distributed leaflets calling up young men for «compulsory military service». The same groups have been responsible for abducting young women for sexual purposes. Based on the same investigation, it is calculated that around 20% of AUC forces, including the urban militias, are below eighteen.³⁶

As the DDR process of the AUC has been concluded, the real scale of the paramilitary forces has been manifested. According to the most recent figures of the National Government, more than 30.000 ex-combatants have demobilized up till now. If the calculation that about 20% of the paramilitaries were under eighteen, is used with this statistic, there would exist a total number of 6.000 child soldiers associated with the AUC. However, following the official reports of the National Government, only 1.020³⁷ children, associated to guerrilla and paramilitary groups, have

³¹ Human Rights Watch (2003). *You'll learn not to cry. Child combatants in Colombia*. New York, p. 19-20.

³² Although there is an estimated number, it is impossible to produce an accurate global figure of the numbers of children currently engaged as soldiers. Numbers fluctuate, as conflicts begin or end, or as offensives wax or wane. Child recruitment is often informal and, therefore, the number of children in any armed group can change radically.

³³ Coalición Internacional para acabar con la utilización de niños soldados (2005) (a). *Niños y Niñas Soldado*. Informe Global 2004. Edición abreviada en español, Londres, p. 67.

³⁴ Human Rights Watch (2003). *You'll learn not to cry. Child combatants in Colombia*. New York, p. 21.

³⁵ Universidad Nacional de Colombia Sede Bogotá, U.N. Observatorio Sobre Infancia et al (2006). *Colombia: En deuda con su infancia*. Informe Complementario al Informe de Estado Colombiano al Comité de Derechos del niño 1998-2003, Bogotá, p. 38.

³⁶ Id., p. 28.

³⁷ ICBF-OIM, *Estadísticas Programa de Atención a Niños, Niñas y Adolescentes desvinculados de los Grupos Armados Irregulares*, August 2006.

demobilized and have been registered by the CODA (Operative Committee for the Abandonment of the Weapon) since 1999 and no more than 101³⁸ of them have demobilized within the DDR process with AUC in application of the law 975 of 2005.

Children become associated with illegal armed groups for numerous reasons. Many are forcibly recruited as victims of *direct violence*; others «volunteer» because of their circumstances. While war itself is a major determinant, children may view enlistment as their best option for survival for themselves, their families or communities in contexts of extreme poverty, violence, social inequality or injustice. Gender inequalities, discrimination and violence are frequently exacerbated in times of armed conflict.³⁹

Considering the motivation and the causes of joining the paramilitary forces, most of the former paramilitary child soldiers said that they joined primarily for the money, even though the attitude was frowned on by paramilitary leaders. Contrary to the guerrilla groups, the AUC pay child recruits a wage monthly or every three months, ranging between \$900.00 and \$1.200.000 pesos (approximately U.S. \$300 to \$400), with bonuses for special missions. Others entered the AUC in the company of friends or already had contacts within the group.⁴⁰

At this point, it is important to make clear that the division between the so called «voluntary recruitment» and the «forced recruitment» is not as obvious as it might seem. The circumstances and the motivations of the conscription are complex and diverse: surroundings, like poverty, the lack of economic and social alternatives, the lack of access to education, forced displacement, as well as widespread violence, whether inside the family or generalized in the region, can have a direct and indirect effect on the decision to join an armed group.

These conditions can be explained with the theoretical concept of *structural violence* of J. Galtung, who defines structural

violence as the «cause of the gap between the potential and the real.»⁴¹ Structural violence is violence that does not hurt or kill through fists or guns, but through social structures that produce poverty, death and enormous suffering. It may be political, repressive, economic and exploitative, and occurs when the social order directly or indirectly causes human suffering. In Colombia, structural violence can be detected in the lack of political responsibility and, as a consequence, the absence of public policies concerning child protection.

A third concept can be introduced: *cultural violence* or *culture of violence*. According to Galtung, cultural violence makes direct and structural violence look right, or at least not wrong. Somehow, there is legitimation of the use of violence.⁴² V. Fisas indicates that the militarization of society, as a consequence of the conflicts' protraction, creates a culture of violence and an economy of war. Millions of children have been born and grown up within this context without having the opportunity to experience peace —a fact that can explain the violent and anti-social behavior as well as the perception of joining armed groups and exercising violence as normal and legitimate.

Some authors call these dynamics the «vicious circle of direct violence —structural violence— cultural violence», which represents the spectrum of root causes of child recruitment and their interaction.⁴³

One could try to interpret the phenomenon of involvement of children in armed actors as the result of a rational choice by persons who opt for belonging to the group as a way of living, by the fact that they are threatened to do so, or by the condition of being a resource for the armed factions with certain goals. One could not presume that conditions of children being enrolled in armed groups belongs to a personal option for a certain ideology, but that they are forced into one: that of the illegal, violent actor.

³⁸ *Ib.*

³⁹ *Paris Principles 2007, Principles and Guidelines on children associated with armed forces or armed groups*, <http://www.unicef.org.uk/publications/pdf/parisprin.pdf>. Last consulted February 2007.

⁴⁰ Human Rights Watch (2003). *You'll learn not to cry. Child combatants in Colombia*. New York, p. 41.

⁴¹ Galtung, Johan (1995). *Violencia, paz e investigación sobre la paz. Investigaciones teóricas – Sociedad y cultura contemporáneas*, Tecnos, Madrid, p. 313.

⁴² Galtung, Johan (1990). *Cultural Violence. Journal Of Peace Research*, vol. 27, no. 3, p. 292.

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0022-3433%28199008%2927%3A3%3C291%3ACV%3E2.0.CO%3B2-6>, Last consulted February 2007.

⁴³ Arellano, Marcela (2004). *Los Niños Soldado, Reto de un nuevo modelo de seguridad. Convergencia*, enero-abril, vol. 11, número 34. Universidad Autónoma del Estado de México, p. 128-145.

<http://redalyc.uaemex.mx/redalyc/src/inicio/ArtPdfRed.jsp?iCve=10503405>, Last consulted February 2007.

At the same time, it can be plausible to presume that a certain spiral of violence, related with the traditional levels described by Galtung⁴⁴ can be somehow applied to the phenomenon. In what Kriesberg⁴⁵ and Rubin⁴⁶ define as a growing spiral of actions and threats, violence in general becomes pervasive, and thus affects irremediably environments where children suffer and exercise violence, are immersed into conditions of structural violence, and somehow it becomes justified (on a cultural and local level) that their option of making a living is acting in a war they do not belong to.

As it is seen, levels of explanation of the phenomenon can be traced in various directions: that of the objective conditions for children to belong to the groups, that of the context they belong to, and that of the diverse subjectivities implied in a situation of armed conflict.

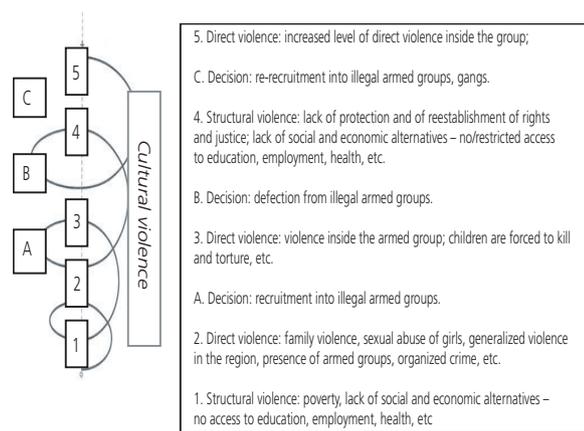


Figure 1

Spiral-model of direct, structural and cultural violence

IV. The Colombian case: Children in the AUC's DDR process

As it was pointed out before, the number of child soldiers involved in the Colombian armed conflict is not precise. Another dimension that requires exactness is the definition of children enrolled in the armed conflict. Children emerge and their needs are determined by various moments in the armed conflict. These conditions consequently require a differentiated theoretical framework.

Theoretical Concepts

According to A. Nilsson, there is a lack of definitions for the term of ex-combatant.⁴⁷ Hence, the definitions of the concepts of children involved in armed conflict are even more deficient. Due to this fact, it is important to define and develop the different concepts of children during and after their recruitment.

Child soldier

This term is frequently used in the literature, but it does neither appear in official instruments of international nor national law. The author refers to the definitions of the «Cape Town Principles»⁴⁸, that came up from the attempt of UNICEF and several non-governmental organizations to specify the concept of child soldier since it was not systematized in the Convention of the Rights of the Child of 1989, and the «Paris Principles»⁴⁹ adopted ten years later, in 2007, as an actualized and improved version. According to these instruments a «child soldier» is «any person below 18 years of age who is or has been recruited or used by any armed forces or any armed group, in any capacity, including

⁴⁴ See, Galtung, Johan (1990). Cultural Violence. *Journal Of Peace Research*, vol. 27, no. 3, pp. 291-305.

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0022-3433%28199008%2927%3A3%3C291%3ACV%3E2.0.CO%3B2-6>, Last consulted February 2007.

⁴⁵ See, Kriesberg, Louis (2003). *Constructive Conflicts: From Escalation to Resolution*. Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, p. 159-189.

⁴⁶ See, Rubin, Jeffrey (et al) (1994). *Stalemate and De-escalation. Social Conflict: Escalation, Stalemate, and Settlement, 2nd Edition*. New York: McGraw Hill College Division.

⁴⁷ Nilsson, Anders (2005). *Reintegrating Ex-Combatans in Post-Conflict Societies*. Sida, pp. 30-31.

⁴⁸ *Cape Town Principles and Best Practices on the Recruitment of Children into the Armed Forces and on Demobilization and Social Reintegration of Child Soldiers in Africa 1997*,

[http://www.unicef.org/emerg/files/Cape_Town_Principles\(1\).pdf](http://www.unicef.org/emerg/files/Cape_Town_Principles(1).pdf), Last consulted January 2007..

⁴⁹ *Paris Principles 2007, Principles and Guidelines on children associated with armed forces or armed groups*, <http://www.unicef.org.uk/publications/pdf/parisprin.pdf>, Last consulted February 2007.

but not limited to children used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes»⁵⁰. The definition also includes the recruitment of girls with sexual purposes and in forced marriages. Therefore it does not only consider children carrying a weapon. The Coalition to stop the use of child soldiers as well as the Procurator General's Office and other governmental and non-governmental entities, adopt this definition and/or realize some small changes. The Coalition for example extends the definition with respect to the existence of child soldiers in times of armed conflict and in peace times.

Demobilized child

In Colombia, a demobilized child is considered to be a former illegal child soldier who abandoned the armed group. The ICBF (The Colombian Institute of Family Welfare), the responsible state entity for the protection of minors enrolled in the armed conflict, defines this concept as following: «A demobilized child is a person below eighteen, who has taken part in actions of war within an irregular armed group, counting actions of intelligence, logistics or direct combat, and who has abandoned the armed group voluntarily, was captured by military forces or was handed over by the armed group to the State».⁵¹ This type of demobilization is considered a formal or official demobilization⁵². It is worthy to stress at this point that the definition of a demobilized child, as applied in Colombia, can be considered an achievement notifying that there is no limitation to direct participation in combats and handing in a weapon in the demobilization process. It reminds of the character of the Cape Town Principles and Paris Principles. As a deficiency of the definition should be mentioned the exclusion of children who were part of the armed groups, but have not demobilized formally. Apparently, a main part of child soldiers has demobilized informally, meaning that they have not

passed through the mechanisms of the DDR process, and as a consequence do not appear in the official reports, which implies the deprivation of any benefits of the DDR programs. According to A. Nilsson, apart from not being entitled to reintegration assistance, this fact is also very problematic since non-official ex-combatants tend to pose a serious threat, as they are often recruited by armed actors who have not demobilized, as it can be observed in the case like Sri Lanka, Burundi or Mozambique.⁵³

Reintegrated child

Another important concept is the one of the «reincorporated» or «reintegrated child». In general, a «reintegrated person» in Colombia is legally defined as «a person who has demobilized and was registered by the CODA and furthermore continues in the process of reincorporation into civil life»⁵⁴. As the NGO «SOS Children's Villages» pointed out, this definition is a very pragmatic and limited one, since the reintegration is a long process, which can last even several years and, in consequence, cannot be understood as a simple administrative act.⁵⁵

In the specific case of children, reintegration programs are offered to formally demobilized children, after leaving the programs of the ICBF, which offers assistance and protection until the minor reaches the adult age. In the moment of reaching 18 years, the grown-up can proceed to the Program of Reincorporation to Civil Life of the State Department of Inner Affairs and Justice. Whereas the ICBF offers major institutional support, protection and specialized attention, the Program of Rehabilitation provides more independence and more economic support to the children, in case they have defected voluntarily from the armed group. Very problematic is the fact that the right to proceed to these reintegration programs and to have access to economic benefits is not ensured for all demobilized children and it is restricted temporally.

⁵⁰ *Ib.*

⁵¹ ICBF (Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar) 2006: «Programa de atención a jóvenes desvinculados y amenazados por el conflicto armado». <http://www.icbf.gov.co/espanol/accionesint16.asp>, Last consulted January 2007.

⁵² See Appendix 2, p. 25.

⁵³ Nilsson, Anders (2005). *Reintegrating Ex-Combatants in Post-Conflict Societies*. Sida, pp. 30-31.

⁵⁴ Programa de Atención Complementaria a la Población Reincorporada con presencia en Bogotá, D.C. (2006). *Ciudadanos Excombatientes. Un Desafío de Reconciliación e inclusión para Bogotá. Caracterización de la población desmovilizada y acompañamiento civilista al proceso de reintegración*. <http://www.lawg.org/docs/excombatientes.pdf>, Last consulted January 2007.

⁵⁵ Interview with María Cristina Rojas, SOS Children's Villages, July 2006.

«Invisible» child

In the revision of the literature and in the research regarding child recruitment, there could not be found any definition for children who have demobilized informally and, as a consequence, do not appear —are not visible— in official registration and attention data. This fact suggests calling this concept «invisible child», although it is necessary to search for a more adequate term.

As there is a lack of definition of this concept, two questions arise: What do we mean by «invisible children»? and Why is this concept important?

As it was mentioned before, demobilization can be realized in a formal or an informal way. The fact that former child soldiers do not demobilize and register officially within the DDR process means that these children are invisible in their special condition of victims, to the State as well as to the society.⁵⁶ They do not receive any protection measures or any social, emotional and economic support. In one word, their rights are not reestablished but they are violated once again. A. Nilsson indicates that this type of demobilization, the so called self-demobilization, must not necessarily be a negative phenomenon. One solution can be to make sure that the former combatants have a guaranteed access to a retroactive DDR process, especially to the benefits⁵⁷. Another one, pointed out by the Paris Principles, is developing new strategies of informal DDR meeting the needs and protecting those who do not go through any kind of official process but leave armed groups.⁵⁸

From theory to practice – the reality of child protection

The existence of a high number of former child soldiers and the demand of their visibilization require the implementation of certain mechanisms in order to reestablish their rights and to pro-

vide them with real alternatives to make the transition to civil life. The responsibility to protect and to provide these conditions is split between the state, the family, and the society. Also, humanitarian actors must give preference to the protection of this highly vulnerable group.

Hence, the child protection issue within the DDR process must be considered from the beginnings of all peace negotiation processes. As Graça Machel postulates, all peace agreements should include specific measures to demobilize and reintegrate child soldiers into society because of their special needs.⁵⁹ The release, protection as well as the reintegration of child soldiers must therefore be sought at all times and without any condition.

In the demobilization process of the AUC, it is possible to observe the following: Releases of child soldiers started before the collective demobilization as acts of good will from some paramilitary groups. In the declaration of ceasefire at the end of 2002, the AUC promised to hand over to UNICEF children who were remaining in their ranks. This document, titled the «*Declaration for the peace of Colombia*», says literally with regard to child soldiers: «We want to invite the representative of UNICEF for Colombia, to take an active part in this event, to receive the child soldiers who, having being liberated from the guerrilla forces by the AUC, still remain in our ranks. In the future, we aspire to continue the collaboration with UNICEF in the shared effort to improve the quality of life of the children of Colombia.»⁶⁰ So, there was definitely the offer and the handover of child soldiers, but they indicate explicitly that those children were child soldiers liberated from the guerrilla groups. This can be interpreted as a strategy of protection of the group against penal sanctions, since, as indicates A. Nilsson, the international community frowns upon child recruitment.⁶¹

The Bloque Central Bolívar⁶² of the AUC, for instance, delivered 13 children, in Santander in December 2002 and 40 in

⁵⁶ Hernández, Esperanza (2003). *Inocencia silenciada... Niñez afectada por el conflicto armado en Santander*. Editorial Códice, Bogotá, p. 137.

⁵⁷ Nilsson, Anders (2005). *Reintegrating Ex-Combatants in Post-Conflict Societies*. Sida, p. 17.

⁵⁸ *Paris Principles 2007, Principles and Guidelines on children associated with armed forces or armed groups*, <http://www.unicef.org.uk/publications/pdf/parisprin.pdf>, Last consulted February 2007.

⁵⁹ Machel, Graca (2001). *The Impact of War on Children*. UNICEF. London, p. 17.

⁶⁰ «Declaración por la Paz de Colombia», http://www.altocomisiona-doparalopez.gov.co/hechos_paz/nov_29_02.htm, Last consulted January 2007.

⁶¹ Nilsson, Anders (2005). *Reintegrating Ex-Combatants in Post-Conflict Societies*. Sida, p. 75.

⁶² See Appendix 3, pp. 25-26.

June 2003. Later, 48 children were released in the demobilization of the Bloque Cacique Nutibara in Antioquia. According to the Colombian Defense Department, a total number of 110 children were demobilized between January and June 2003.

Even though the paramilitary promised to release all child soldiers in their ranks, the majority of them continue to be invisible. According to the Coalition to stop the use of child soldiers, the demobilizations have been more useful to make an impact on public opinion than to deal with the problem of child soldiers and to reestablish the rights of these children. Thousands remain linked to the AUC, others have been demobilized informally, or have been recruited simply to be demobilized and to be part of a fake disarmament. An example for this practice is the case of Medellín. Days before the collective demobilization, members of the Bloque Central Bolívar called young men of depressed and marginalized sectors of the city, offering that, in exchange for being passed as members of this group, they would receive the benefits provided by the Government.⁶³

In order to accelerate and ensure the demobilization of the AUC, a legal instrument was implemented in June 2005: Law 975, the so called «Justice and Peace» Law. According to the office of the Procurator General, one of the most significant failures of this instrument, relative to former child soldiers, is the omission of any direct protection measures for children. The only mention within the law is the postulation of the hand over of child soldiers. One of the conditions of eligibility for former combatants, mentioned in article 10, numeral 3, is to release all child soldiers. Even if there is such a condition for ex-combatants who want to benefit from this demobilization law, the indirect protection of children can only be guaranteed if there are mechanisms implemented that can verify the acts.

In these situations, where provisions have been made to release children from armed groups pursuant to the conclusion of

peace or cease-fire agreements, the Paris Principles underline the importance to establish mechanisms to ensure that the agreements are respected, that children are immediately released and that no further unlawful recruitment or re-recruitment of children occurs.⁶⁴

Another deficiency of this legal instrument, denounced by the Procurator General's Office, is the contradictions to the international legal standards for child protection, adopted by the Colombian government. Instead of persecuting the protagonists of the illegal recruitment of children, the law provides a safeguard, by protecting and ensuring legal benefits to these actors.⁶⁵

To monitor the effective fulfillment of the norm-condition of handing over the totality of recruited children, the condition should comply with the following characteristics: First, a previous investigation to establish the number of children enrolled with this armed group is required. Second, there can be no selective release. And third, the handing over must imply the implementation of special programs to ensure and to provide the reestablishment of the rights of the children.⁶⁶

In reality, there neither exist adequate reports nor precise and satisfactory information about the figures of the total number of children associated with the AUC. Hence, the verification of the total release, which is the duty of the Colombian State, expressly specified in the law, cannot be realized in an accurate way.

The High Commissioner of the United Nations for Human Rights also expressed reservations about the information which is handled by the Government concerning the number of detected child soldiers within the paramilitary forces.⁶⁷ In response to this critique, the Colombian Government assured in an official communiqué that there exist clear reports about the number of demobilized child soldiers, whom were protected with all legal

⁶³ Coalición contra la vinculación de niños, niñas y jóvenes al conflicto armado en Colombia 2005 (b): *Informe Alternativo al Comité de los Derechos del Niño*. <http://www.coalico.org/archivo/InformeAlternativo.pdf>, Last consulted January 2007.

⁶⁴ *Paris Principles 2007, Principles and Guidelines on children associated with armed forces or armed groups*, <http://www.unicef.org.uk/publications/pdf/parisprin.pdf>, Last consulted February 2007.

⁶⁵ Procuraduría General de la Nación (2006). *Seguimiento a Políticas Públicas en Materia de Desmovilización y Reinserción*. Tomo 2. Junio de 2006, p. 381.

⁶⁶ *Id.*, p. 383.

⁶⁷ Naciones Unidas 2006: Comisión de Derechos Humanos. *Informe de la Alta Comisionada de las Naciones Unidas para los Derechos Humanos sobre la situación de los Derechos Humanos en Colombia*, p. 72.

http://www.pacocol.org/es/Inicio/Archivo_de_noticias/Informe2005_UNU.doc, Last consulted January 2007.

measures and were assisted by special attention programs for minors. The Colombian Government could provide clear and verified information about these demobilized children, even classified by sex, age, release or capture, and by the group he or she belonged to.⁶⁸

Having analyzed the periodic reports of the DDR Process published by the High Commissioner for Peace, it can be said that there is indeed a variety of detailed information about the demobilized paramilitary groups. Specifically the names, both of the structure and of the representatives of the AUC, the zone of temporary location, the date of demobilization, the total number of demobilized individuals, the armament delivered, and even the location of the deposit of the armament, can be found out.⁶⁹ What does not appear is the number of child soldiers handed over by the armed group. The Procurator General's Office as well denounced this specific fact, indicating that «in the demobilization processes, there is given a clear priority to the delivery of weapons by the AUC, informing the international community about the quantity and quality of the armament, but the information is deficient referring to the demobilization and the release of child soldiers».⁷⁰ This lack of transparency and data in the official records is causing a severe problem: former child soldiers are still invisible.

Examples of failures and achievements

When handling figures of children in the DDR process in Colombia, as it was mentioned before, it is difficult to find coherent data. The first difficulty is to have access to the reports of the different institutions, as there are the Department of Defense, the Department of Inner Affairs and Justice, the ICBF and the High Commissioner for Peace. Even having access, the information given is not always consistent and does not coincide. And third, the figures given by the different entities are calculated according

to diverse concepts and time frames. The Department of Defense, for instance, is handling the figures of released children; the Office of the High Commissioner for Peace is handling official numbers of demobilized children within the demobilization process of the AUC, and the ICBF instead, offers numbers of demobilized children assisted in their programs since their implementation. Hence, to present a valid comparison as well as to make a clear calculation of the total numbers of demobilized children is almost impossible.

One can illustrate this problematic situation with an example of incoherence of figures:

While the Procurator General's Office indicates that, since the implementation of the Justice and Peace law, only 101⁷¹ children have demobilized, the ICBF handles a number of 212⁷² and reports that in this time period 185 former child soldiers were taken care in the Special Attention Programs. Even numbers within the same institution vary: In two reports of the ICBF, the figures of former child soldiers of the AUC do not coincide. In one report, the entity presents a total number of 2.940 children were given support since the implementation of their Attention and Protection Program, and the other one only 2.279 children.

Besides data incoherence other general failures are deficiency of public policy and State attention. C. Mariño points out that, in general, social policy must guarantee the rights of the child, so that in the case of a lack of protection, provoked by exceptional situations like an armed conflict, special measures of protection should be implemented. Otherwise, if there is no integral protection provided by social policies, all special actions would be limited to superficial and non adequate assistance. Evaluating the Colombian case, she concludes that there is a generalized lack of protection produced by insufficient social policy and, as a consequence, the attention for former child soldiers provided by the ICBF is symbolic.⁷³

⁶⁸ República de Colombia: *Consideraciones del Estado Colombiano al Informe de la Alta Comisionada de las Naciones Unidas para los Derechos Humanos 2005*, p. 10. http://www.derechoshumanos.gov.co/descargas/consideracionesNU06_1.doc, Last consulted January 2007.

⁶⁹ República de Colombia: *Proceso de paz con las Autodefensas*. Informe Ejecutivo. Presidencia de la República. Oficina Alto Comisionado para la Paz. <http://www.altocomisionadoparalapaz.gov.co/libro/librofinal.pdf>, Last consulted January 2007.

⁷⁰ Procuraduría General de la Nación (2006). *Seguimiento a Políticas Públicas en Materia de Desmovilización y Reinserción*. Tomo 2. Junio de 2006, pp. 384-385.

⁷¹ *Ib.*, p. 390.

⁷² Defensoría del Pueblo, UNICEF (2006). *Caracterización de los niños, niñas y adolescentes desvinculados de los grupos armados ilegales: inserción social y productiva desde un enfoque de derechos humanos*, p. 30. http://www.defensoria.org.co/pdf/informe_enero16/capt_tres.pdf, Last consulted February 2007.

⁷³ Mariño R., Cielo (2005). *Niñez víctima del conflicto armado. Consideraciones sobre las políticas de desvinculación*. Universidad Externado de Colombia. Bogotá, p. 134.

As V. Fisas indicates, the idea of the reintegration phase is to attempt to provide former combatants with sustainable means for living, as well as health, social, economic, educational and occupational assistance.⁷⁴ In the case of child combatants, as it is high lightened by G. Machel, education is a key factor that should be a high priority, because it represents more than a route to employment, it also helps to normalize life and to develop an identity separate from that of the soldier.⁷⁵ The Special Programs for Attention of demobilized children of the ICBF try to contribute to the reconstruction of life and the reintegration into society outside the armed conflict. The attention is divided into five main components, including legal, familiar, pedagogical, health and psychological assistance. Although the reintegration into the family and the community of the demobilized children is one of the specific objectives of the program, actually only a few percentages of children are reunified with their families due to the ongoing armed struggles and the lack of security in their regions of origin. Hence, the majority of the children are assisted in Transitional Homes, Special Attention Centers or flat-sharing communes in the capital or in other regions of the country.

As soon as they reach the adult age, some of these children can move on to the Reintegration Programs run by the Department for Inner Affairs and Justice, depending on how long they have stayed in the programs for minors. If less than two years have passed since their formal demobilization, they have access to these programs and to the related benefits. As it was mentioned before, the time limitation is a severe discriminating and excluding factor for many former child soldiers and is contrary to the objectives of DDR programs and to the requirements of an effective reintegration into society.

Another crucial issue to have in mind is the re-recruitment of children by paramilitary forces, urban militias or street gangs,

which is a severe and actual problem in the Colombian context. As it was shown in the model of direct, structural and cultural violence, the spiral must be broken by providing real alternatives for children, who have been enrolled to the armed conflict. Re-recruitment is a particular danger for children who have been released from armed groups during armed conflict and those who have remained with their communities while being part of an armed group.⁷⁶

The Procurator General of the Nation stated the urgent need of implementing a serious and responsible process for social rehabilitation. Apart from the formal reintegration programs for adults he pointed out the need of providing security to children who have been associated to armed groups and taking measures to prevent re-recruitment or the creation of gangs. He referred to the phenomenon of juvenile gangs, the so called «Maras», created in some countries in Central America due to the exclusion of the issues of child protection in the peace processes.⁷⁷

In spite of the existence of considerable lacks and irregularities in the DDR process in Colombia, especially regarding the protection of former child soldiers, it is also necessary to emphasize some achievements. As comparative studies of DDR programs implemented and executed in different post-conflict countries demonstrate, the initiation of special DDR programs for child combatants are often subordinated to the projects realized by UNICEF.⁷⁸ Hence, the fact that in Colombia special mechanisms for the formal demobilization of child soldiers as well as for the attention and the reintegration of the former child combatants are implemented and that programs are executed mostly by governmental institutions, makes evident the effort of the Colombian State to provide and guarantee the reestablishment of the rights of the children.

⁷⁴ Fisas, Vicenç (et al) (2006). *Analysis of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programs existing in the world during 2005*. Barcelona: Escola de cultura de Pau, p. 23.

⁷⁵ Machel, Graça (2001). *The Impact of War on Children*. UNICEF. London, p. 13.

⁷⁶ *Paris Principles 2007, Principles and Guidelines on children associated with armed forces or armed groups*, <http://www.unicef.org.uk/publications/pdf/parisprin.pdf>, Last consulted February 2007.

⁷⁷ Procuraduría General de la Nación 2006 (b): Palabras del Señor Procurador General de la Nación, Doctor Edgardo José Maya Villazón. Pre-

sentación de los resultados de la primera fase del proyecto «Seguimiento y control preventivo a las políticas públicas en materia de desmovilización y reinserción», p. 8. http://www.procuraduria.gov.co/descargas/eventos/discurso_06152006_reinsercion_corta.doc, Last consulted January 2007.

⁷⁸ Fisas, Vicenç (et al) (2006). *Analysis of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programs existing in the world during 2005*. Barcelona: Escola de cultura de Pau, p. 16.

Another attainment is the legal framework on child protection issues in Colombia. The totality of relevant legal instruments on the Rights of the Child and International Humanitarian Law, recommended by the Paris Principles, are ratified. Nevertheless, these standards are not reflected in national law in a consistent way and the coherent application is weakening.

Conclusions

Within the Colombian armed conflict, that has been lasting for more than 40 years now, a negotiated peace and DDR process has started with the AUC. For some people this process represents a step forward to end the armed struggle and to achieve durable peace, for others it is nothing else than a war strategy of the Colombian government that fails to grasp the meaning of justice and peace. The polarized debate of justice versus peace is not only harmful for reaching «just peace» in a foreseeable future, it also ignores the real complications and trade-offs that are inevitable in any negotiated peace process or political transition.⁷⁹ To avoid polarization and a premature judgment, some figures, shall illustrate the level of protection of children in the context of the armed conflict:

The estimated number of child soldiers in Colombia is between 7.000 and 15.000, 5.000 to 7.000 of them is calculated to be in the ranks of the AUC. Within the DDR process 30.151 combatants have demobilized until May 2006, date of the official end of the demobilization process with AUC. Only 1.020 of them were children. In application of the «Justice and Peace» Law only 101 were registered. Between 2.279 and 2.940 children —neither the number is exact nor does it be clear how many of them were assisted exclusively in the DDR process— have received benefits from the Attention and Protection Program in the last seven years.⁸⁰

These numbers demonstrate evidence that the level of child protection in the AUC's DDR process is alarmingly low and lead to question whether justice or peace have been reached for the former child soldiers.

Hence, some proposals could be made to the *Colombian State*, as the primary actor responsible for the protection:

1. The Colombian government is called to develop a comprehensive prevention plan through the creation and implementation of effective public policies. These actions should include all practical measures to improve children's safety, programming that addresses factors that may encourage the involvement of children in armed groups, broadly focused social mobilization to make the use of children in conflict culturally and morally unacceptable and any other locally relevant measures. Viable alternatives to joining armed groups should be available for children, including adolescents. This will include educational and vocational programs, income generating activities, and access to livelihood opportunities. Child protection mechanisms must be in place, including raising awareness on children's rights of the unlawful recruitment. These actions address the problem in two ways: to prevent the recruitment and the re-recruitment of child soldiers into illegal armed groups and to break the vicious spiral of direct, structural and cultural violence.
2. A systematic monitoring and reporting of unlawful recruitment and release of children should be a constant exercise by the Colombian State as an essential protection measure that serves as the basis for actions to pressure armed groups to respect fundamental humanitarian and human rights norms as well as peace agreements and national laws.
3. To avoid the lack of transparency and accurate data, a creation of inter-institution information management systems, on national as well as on international level, including databases, should be considered. Communication, cooperation, coordination and information sharing transparency among all actors involved are essential at all times, as it is recommended by the Paris Principles.⁸¹
4. As the analysis of the AUC's DDR process showed, most of the child soldiers associated to this group, apparently, did not demobilize through a formal DDR process. To guarantee their protection, the Colombian State should develop

⁷⁹ *Ib.*, p. 68.

⁸⁰ ICBF-OIM, *Estadísticas Programa de Atención a Niños, Niñas y Adolescentes desvinculados de los Grupos Armados Irregulares*, August 2006 and Procuraduría General de la Nación (2006). *Seguimiento a Políticas Públicas en Materia de Desmovilización y Reinserción*. Tomo 2. Junio de 2006.

⁸¹ *Principles 2007, Principles and Guidelines on children associated with armed forces or armed groups*, <http://www.unicef.org.uk/publications/pdf/parisprin.pdf>, Last consulted February 2007.

- strategies to recognize the status of «non-formally» demobilized children and provide attention program's benefits.
5. Within the formal DDR process, the procedures of release, registration and attention should be accelerated and be more effective so that the security, integrity and welfare of demobilized children can be guaranteed and reestablished in the shortest time possible.
 6. To keep away from superficial and short-term assistance, monitoring and follow-up of children are essential to ensure long-term reintegration, the protection and upholding of rights and benefits, to prevent re-recruitment, and to identify and respond appropriately to children who experience serious difficulties with reintegration. Local capacity of the places of origin of the children and their family should be supported or developed to provide ongoing monitoring, support and intervention if children are felt to be at significant risk.

Beside the Colombian government, other agents like the *Colombian Society*, the *International Community* and *Academia*, are called to take action and to play a constructive role in the context of child protection in armed conflict:

The *Colombian Society* is called to raise awareness about the shared responsibility in the issue of child protection and unlawful recruitment. For this reason, advocacy should take place especially in the communities from where the children were recruited and/or to where they will be released or eventually integrated.

A vital role in advocacy and control can also play the *regional* and *international bodies* such as the Organization of American States (OAS), the European Union (EU) and the United Nations Organization (UNO). The International Community ought to use all means of communication to assert that using children to participate in armed conflict is not acceptable. To strengthen the structural conditions for an integral child protection and a successful DDR process of minors, they also should be informed of the provisions and available support to enable them to conduct monitoring, verification and reporting. One illustration of inter-

national support is the verification mission of OAS within the general DDR process with the AUC. The Mission of Support to the Peace Process (Misión de Apoyo al Proceso de Paz - MAPP/OAS), that has assumed a special role since February 2004, has been active to verify and support the peace process in Colombia with its special mandate to cover verification, monitoring, and support to peace initiatives from both, the government as well as locally.⁸² One could suggest that this mission should extend its mandate to the protection of former child soldiers with a specific focus on the verification of their total release from AUC ranks.

As it was demonstrated, there is a lack of definitions and theoretical framework regarding the phenomenon of child soldiers. Due to this fact, it is necessary that *Academia*, on national as well as on international level, take part in the development of valid and precise theoretical concepts and models to represent and explain the actual problematic of children at war. Consequently, the realization of case studies, comparative studies and deep analysis of child DDR processes is essential.

This work has tried to approach a problem that belongs to a series of complex phenomena related to the cycle of an armed conflict. It is recognizable that such conflict, being protracted, deep-rooted and even intractable, has suffered constant changes in its intensity so that it has fluctuated between periods of destructive escalation and the constant presence of hostilities. It has also proven its pervasiveness, since it is clear that, geographically and mentally, the conflict occupies the daily life and minds of those combating and those suffering its violent consequences.

This conflict complex⁸³ is the scenario in which it is possible to understand the concept of child soldiers. In fact, this article has referred to non adult combatants belonging to a group not considered by almost anyone as political actors, though they influence politics and they fight against political actors.⁸⁴ Their original mercenary nature and their involvement in drug trade transform them in a simply violent organization that, nonetheless, participates actively in hostilities belonging to a protracted armed

⁸² Koonings, Kees and Kjell-Ake Nordquist (2005). *Proceso de paz cese al fuego, desarme, desmovilización y reintegración —CDDR— paramilitar y (apoyo internacional a la) Misión de Apoyo al Proceso de Paz de la OEA —MAPP/OEA— en Colombia*. Uppsala/Utrecht, p. 13.

⁸³ See, Wallensteen, Peter (2007), *Understanding Conflict Resolution*, Sage, London, pp. 57 and 193.

⁸⁴ It has been recently proved how from 2001 at least, prior to the current negotiation process, paramilitaries of the AUC and relevant politicians had signed secret political statements and projects tending to rebuild a Colombian nation.

confrontation. Such contradictory difficulty constitutes a conceptual problem: as organization, they act with goals, some vaguely political, most of them clearly greed-based. At the same time, they violate basic principles of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) by recruiting child soldiers. What type of actors are, then these non-adults? It seems that there has not been a clear answer to this from all parts implicated in the context of the Colombian armed conflict, though certainly they are all protected by IHL. Are they victims? Are they actors of a conflict, even if they were forced to enlist and the group they belong to is not clearly political?

The UCDP⁸⁵ (2006) has not considered the AUC as an actor of the Colombian conflict for, up to now, their political intention has not been declared. Nonetheless, the recent evidence should change that, not because one must assign political status to a mercenary group, but to explain in a deeper nature a dynamics of armed violence. Additionally, the UCDP provides a new concept, certainly of use to describe an aspect of this dynamics. «*One-sided violence* is the use of armed force by the government of a state or by a formally organized group against civilians which results in at least 25 deaths. Extrajudicial killings in custody are excluded»⁸⁶. This concept is introduced in the conclusions of this work as explicative: actors causing such type of violence, such as the AUC, being part of a complex conflict, have children in their ranks to exercise this variation of violence. But the interpretation must have a double standard: a) as victims of recruitment, children (civilians) are affected by the action of recruitment of an illegal organization that, certainly, has driven them to death in a number superior to 25. It conceptually might not stick to the definition but, b) child soldiers involved with the AUC become agents of such type of violence. What is their status, then?

If problem was interpretation, a definition would be enough, not only to answer where the DDR children are, but also to define the status of former child soldiers. But it is not. Beyond concepts, reality does not admit interpretation without dedicating precious time to it. A precious time that can be certainly used

to act against, firstly, the problem itself of minors recruited and, secondly, to finding out where the DDR children are.

The above leads to the question of the definition of action in time, so used and defended in the systemic approach to conflict resolution, peace construction and reconciliation, stated long ago by Lederach⁸⁷. Violence occurs in time, and it changes time. Nothing remains the same after the act of violence has occurred⁸⁸. Thus, in terms of policy design, a dramatic situation such as that of the involvement of children in illegal organization and in armed conflict must be addressed in a periodical fashion. This could probably give more elements of visibility of what has been called *invisible children*:

1. Before violence: policies of prevention of recruitment can be designed from the dramatic experience of the children who, being objects of DDR processes, suddenly seem not to be present or are not taken into account. If the phenomenon of non traced child combatants is a fact, towards the future it is plausibly assumable that a policy of complete truth might be used in order to avoid the evident lack and hiding of information by armed actors involved in negotiation processes.
2. During violence: specialist and field officers should carry on campaigns, with the monitoring, protection and sponsoring of international organizations, to avoid as much as possible that children combat. Non-violence strategies might be suggested, along with strong lobby strategies so that public commitments are made both by violent actors, politicians and policy designers.
3. After violence: the question of the *invisible children* certainly implies a serious thought about the future, specifically of what the reconciliation process means. If a peace negotiated agreement is signed, and it is based on the recognition of certain truths, the question of the children disappearance is a mandatory component of the truth sought. Otherwise, no process of peace after war is neither complete, nor even worth of trust.

⁸⁵ Uppsala Conflict Data Project.

⁸⁶ Harbom, Lotta (2006) (ed.), *States in Armed Conflict 2005*, Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University, Uppsala, p. 193.

⁸⁷ Lederach, John Paul, *Un marco englobador de la transformación de conflictos sociales crónicos*, (1994) in <http://www.gernikagoraturuz.org/documento2.pdf>, Last consulted January 2007.

⁸⁸ Salamanca, Manuel and Daniel Castillo (2005), *Complejidad y conflicto armado*, Fundación Seguridad y Democracia, Bogotá, p. 43-48.

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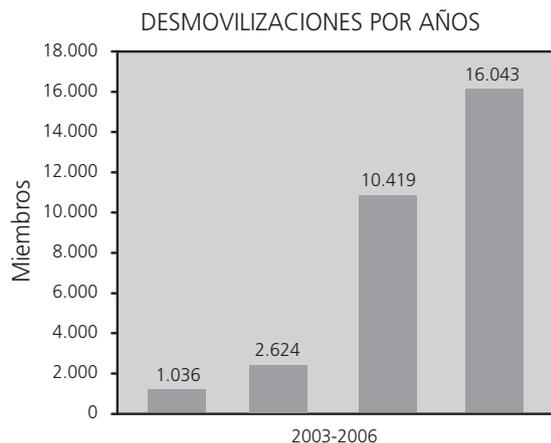
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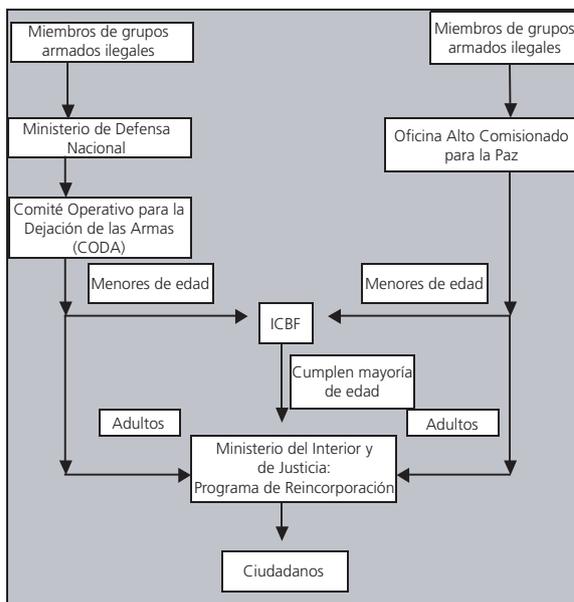
- 1) Altos de Cazucá (South district of Bogotá) with SOS Children's Villages.
- 2) Barrio Bellavista (South district of Bogotá) with Benposta.

Appendix 1: Statistics of demobilizations of AUC 2003-2006



Source: High Commissioner for Peace 2006

Appendix 2: Institutional structure of the formal AUC's DDR process



Source: High Commissioner for Peace 2006

Appendix 3: Demobilizations of AUC Units 2003-2006

Año	Nombre del bloque de las autodefensas	Fecha	Número de desmovilizados
2003	Bloque cacique nutibara	Nov-25	873
	Autodefensas de ortega	Dic-07	168
2004	Bloque bananero	Nov-25	453
	Autidefensas del sur del magdalena e isla de san fernando	Dic-04	47
	Autidefensas de cundinamarca	Dic-09	147
	Bloque catatumbo	Dic-10	1437
	Bloque calima	Dic-18	564

Año	Nombre del bloque de las autodefensas	Fecha	Número de desmovilizados
2005	Autodefensas de córdoba	Ene-18	925
	Bloque suroeste antioqueño	Ene-30	127
	Frente mojana	Feb-02	109
	Frente héroes de tolová	Jun-15	464
	Bloque montes de maría	Jul-14	594
	Bloque libertadores del sur	Jul-30	689
	Bloque héroes de granada	Ag0-01	2033
	Autodefensas de meta y vichada	Ago-06	209
	Bloque pacífico	Ago-23	358
	Bloque centauros	Sep-03	1135
	Bloque noroccidente antioqueño de las auc	Sep-11	222
	Frente vichada del bcb	Sep-24	325
	Bloque tolima	Oct-22	207
	Frentes nordeste antioqueño, bajo cauca y magdalena medio del bcb	Dic-12	1922
	Frente héroes y mártires de guática del bcb	Dic-15	552
Bloque vencedores de arauca	Dic-23	548	
2006	Bloque mineros	Ene-20	2790
	Autodefensas campesinas de puerto boyacá	Ene-28	742
	Bloque central bolivar – sur de bolivar	Ene-31	2523
	Bloque resistencia tayrona	Feb-03	1166
	Autodefensas campesinas de magdalena medio	Feb-07	990
	Frentes próceres del caguán, héroes de los andaquies, héroes de florencia (bcb)	Feb-15	552
	Frente sur del putumayo del bloque central bolivar	Mar-01	504
	Frente julio peinado becerra	Marc-04	251
	Bloque norte (el copey – chimila)	Marc-08	2215
Bloque norte (la mesa – valledupar)	Marc-10	2545	
Frentes héroes del llano y héroes del guaviare	Abr-11	1765	
Total			30.151

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