



Prevention of Recruitment, and Release & Reintegration of Children and Youth in "new contexts": What can we learn from other disciplines?

Robust Findings, Points of Consensus, and New Approaches
from the Social Sciences, Criminology and Marketing Fields

A Concept Note for an IAWG and PPSG Webinar

Wednesday, 11 October 2017

This webinar will examine three research briefs published by United Nations University (UNU) that draw upon perspectives, expertise, and experience that, while relevant, have not traditionally have not been included in UN policy and programmatic discussions in this area. The three briefs include the following:

1. ***Insights from Social Science on Child and Youth Trajectories Into and Out of Non-State Armed Groups;***
2. ***Insights from Criminology on Child and Youth Trajectories Into and Out of Non-State Armed Groups;***
and
3. ***Viewing Non-State Armed Groups from a Brand Marketing Lens: A Case Study of Islamic State.***

The briefs grew out of expert workshops that UNU hosted at the end of 2016 and early 2017. The first was in support of the social science brief brought scholars from anthropology; sociology; political science; and developmental, social, and clinical psychology, to discuss how their own research and that of their fields more broadly could be brought to bear to better explicate child association and disengagement with contemporary non-state armed groups (NSAGs). The second workshop included criminologists, sociologists, and practitioners to discuss how research on, and experiences with, delinquency, crime prevention and desistance, and gang prevention and disengagement might be applied to research on, and programming for, children associated with contemporary NSAGs. The third workshop brought together a diverse group comprised of academics and practitioners in communications and psychology; brand creation, marketing, and cause campaigns; social media experts and practitioners; entertainment content creators; and experts on NSAGs, to discuss how applying a brand marketing lens to analysing contemporary NSAGs like Islamic State (IS) provided additional leverage for armed group recruitment typologies, messaging, and intergroup competition for market share.

The briefs are dense with interesting research findings and points of consensus both within and across disciplines that may be relevant for understanding child trajectories into and out of NSAGs (as well as those of adults in some cases). This concept note outlines a few of the key findings of each brief:

▪ ***Insights from Social Science on Child Trajectories Into and Out of Non-State Armed Groups***

In discussing state of knowledge on why children and youth join armed groups, the brief focuses on several bodies of research around the need to belong, the quest for significance, the influence of peer networks, impulsive behaviour, the urge to buck authority, and risk accumulation. Once inside an armed group, there are processes that influence how children and youth sees the world, her/his co-members, those deemed the "enemy", and, potentially, the utility of and justification for violence. A topic that receives significant attention is that of radicalization - a concept about which there is very little consensus in the academic community. In thinking through how children and youth can reintegrate into civilian life after NSAG association, the brief discusses mental health interventions, expresses concern for the potential to do harm with "deradicalization" programmes, and warns about the challenges children face when they are reintegrated into contexts where stressors remain. The brief concludes by examining some potential implications for programming, to include: the potential to harness peer networks; involving children in the DDR process; and prejudice reduction; amongst others.

▪ ***Insights from Criminology on Child Trajectories Into and Out of Non-State Armed Groups***

This brief examines the century of scholarship on criminal groups and street gangs to try to identify lessons learned that might apply to other types of violent groups. Even though there are important differences between gangs and armed groups, there are some key similarities, especially with the group processes that emerge inside both types of organizations. Like the previous brief, the work on criminology examines the concept of risk accumulation for identifying children and youth at risk for gang association. In thinking about disengagement from armed groups, the research on gang desistance may be especially useful. Rarely is disengagement from a gang or desistance from crime a sudden event, more often it is a gradual process full of fits and starts.

There is evidence that for children and youth in some contexts, exit from an armed group may be a similar process. The rest of the brief examines gang and crime interventions that may have relevance for thinking about prevention and release and reintegration (DDR) programmes for children and youth. Some of the strategies analysed include risk assessment and in-school prevention programmes; gang suppression approaches; and comprehensive and public health approaches. Of the potential implications for programming that are discussed, one is of particular note: there is some evidence that family-based interventions for youth at risk of gang affiliation can be effective even when a family member is gang affiliated. This finding is extremely interesting in light of the number of children who become associated with armed groups in some current conflicts because their family or whole community aligns (e.g. Mali).

▪ ***Viewing Non-State Armed Groups from a Brand Marketing Lens: A Case Study of Islamic State***

This brief views NSAG communications from a brand marketing lens to better understand their messaging and appeal. Just like corporations and nation-states, NSAGs engage in branding to differentiate them from their peers and to attract supporters. The brief traces the history of NSAG brand marketing, but ultimately focuses on Islamic State's (IS) efforts to establish a unique and powerful brand. Like other brands, IS' brand strives to be distinctive and clear, trustworthy, authentic, and relevant, as well as cultivate legacy customers. The brief discusses the particular challenges of marketing to youth and the reasons why IS has been successful to date.

One of the key component of the group's success is its willingness to relinquish some control over its image to allow for a marketing with (as opposed to, marketing to) approach. This approach plays particularly well with young people who are sceptical of top-down marketing and who are able to have a voice in the development of the IS' brand. While a brand marketing lens can help practitioners better understand recruitment typologies and propaganda aimed at children and youth, it would be a mistake to take such a narrow view of a NSAG's strategic communications, of which the former are only a part. In thinking through the policy and communications implications of this research and experience for the international community, the brief highlights a few possible ways forward with regard to countering NSAG marketing, to include: being proactive, not just reactive; forgetting myth busting; being conscious of the reality gap and unmet needs of users.

There is a need to ensure that reintegration guidance is drafted with awareness of the aforementioned research findings. Some key questions to guide the webinar discussion will include:

- How does Release and Reintegration/DDR programming take into account the particular developmental needs of children and youth as they disengage from armed groups (e.g. need for significance, group identity, impulsivity and bucking authority, importance of peer networks)?
- How do Release and Reintegration/DDR programmes address the social norms and dehumanization of other groups that were promoted within a NSAG?
- How do Release and Reintegration/DDR programmes currently engage children in their design and implementation?
- How do Release and Reintegration/DDR programmes currently model disengagement? Is there flexibility built in to accommodate a disengagement process that may have stops and starts?
- What particular lessons learned from criminal groups or models from gang desistance are particularly relevant to Release and Reintegration/DDR in situations of armed conflict or post-

conflict situations?

- How does understanding the brand appeal of a group like IS help us better design prevention - and reintegration - programmes?
- How can organizations like the UN and its various bodies, agencies, and funds, and CP agencies, proactively engage in strategic communications that help undermine the appeal of violent organizations like IS?
- What is the communications groundwork that needs to be done with communities and the public at large to lay the groundwork for the reintegration of children formerly associated with armed groups?
- How can Prevention of Recruitment, Release and Reintegration/DDR incorporate social media into their programmes and/or follow up?
- What lessons can we draw from other disciplines to inform both Prevention of Recruitment, and Release and Reintegration/DDR programming?