Working Paper

THE ALLIANCE
FOR CHILD PROTECTION
IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION

Collaboration between the Peacekeeping Operations and Child Protection Actors for the Prevention of Child Recruitment, Identification, Release, and Reintegration of Children

Acknowledgments

Numerous individuals contributed their time and expertise in developing this Working Paper. Sandra Maignant (The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action CAAFAG Task Force Co-lead, on behalf of Plan International) and Katherine Cocco (UNICEF) led the development of this document in consultation with a reference group.

The reference group included:

- Jameela Idrees (Grow Strong Foundation)
- Simon Kangeta (Ajedi-Ka)
- Federica Sola (OSRSG CAAC)
- Raksha Sule (Independent Consultant)
- Yvonne Agengo (International Rescue Committee)
- Jérémie Kaomba Lugali (War Child Alliance)
- Samuel Sesay (UNICEF)
- Paola Belotti (Plan International)
- Elspeth Chapman (The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action)

We also would like to acknowledge the review of the Working Paper from additional colleagues, namely Abegail Schartz (War Child Alliance) and Kristine Anderson (Plan International).

This Working Paper builds on the results of key informant interviews with researchers, and representatives from governments, UN agencies, peacekeeping mission representatives, former CAAFAG, and national and international NGOs. Please note that for safety reasons, names of individuals will not be included in the acknowledgment section, as well as in the references in the footnotes.

Our deep appreciation goes to the following organisations who shared their lessons learnt and good practices: UNICEF, International Rescue Committee, War Child Alliance, Plan International, the Dallaire Institute, as well as Action Chrétienne pour l'Aide et le Développement (ACAD), Ajedi-Ka, Association des Femmes pour la Promotion de l'Entreprenariat (AFPE), Integrated Humanitarian Aid, MINUSCA, MONUSCO, ONG EPHPHATHA, ONG Esperance, Programme Alimentaire Droit et Développement (PADD), Programme d'Appui à la Lutte contre la Misère (PAMI), Solidarité Féminine pour la Paix et le Développement Intégral (SOFEPADI), UMOJA Africa, Union pour la Paix et la Promotion des Droits de l'Enfant au Congo) (UPDECO asbl), and UNMISS.

This publication was made possible through support provided by Global Affairs Canada.

Suggested Citation: The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, Working Paper on the collaboration between peacekeeping missions and child protection actors (2026).

Cover Photo Credit: © UNICEF/UNI284219/Willemot (South Sudan)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Working Paper examines the collaboration between UN peacekeeping missions with a protection mandate and child protection actors in the prevention of child recruitment, identification and release, and reintegration of children associated with armed forces and armed groups (CAAFAG). The Working Paper is based on the findings of a study carried out in three countries, the Central African Republic (CAR), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and South Sudan. This project is funded by Global Affairs Canada and led by the CAAFAG Task Force of the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (CPHA) with leadership from Plan International and UNICEF.

Grounded in the Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers, the study underscores peacekeeping missions' crucial role in preventing child recruitment and use, supporting Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) processes, and enabling accountability. Findings are drawn from key informant interviews conducted in 2025 with community leaders, former CAAFAG (young women and men), national and international NGOs, UNICEF, and peacekeeping mission representatives.

Lessons Learned and Good Practices

Across all three contexts, the research highlights promising practices that demonstrate how effective collaboration between the peacekeeping missions and the other child protection actors can strengthen the protection of CAAFAG in conflict-affected settings.

Relevant Principles

3 **Early Warning**

5 **Doctrine, Training, and Education**

8 **Prevention**

Prevention works best when it is **institutionalised inside security and governance systems**, and when peacekeeping missions, UNICEF, governments, and NGOs use their comparative advantages in a coordinated way. Preventive measures that are embedded in routine practice, such as **joint age verification and screening** of new recruits in armed forces, help reduce child recruitment. **Action plans** linked to the UN Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC) listing process can create strong political leverage and sustained reforms. Examples include progress linked to **government commitment and delisting efforts**, and the anchoring of prevention in national structures (e.g. DDR frameworks). Prevention is strengthened through **multi-stakeholder platforms** (e.g. technical committees or working groups) that structure dialogue between UN and security actors, an enable the implementation of the action plans through focal point engagement. Effective prevention also relies on **early warning and community engagement**. Local actors can provide culturally sensitive messaging and safer access pathways, while peacekeepers' field presence can support real-time monitoring and reporting.

Relevant Principles

9 Detention

12 DDR

Release of children from armed forces and armes groups is more effective when implemented in a **coordinated manner**. Collaboration between peacekeeping child protection units, UNICEF, NGOs, governments, and communities supports safer access and mediation processes. The study highlights the value of **nimble, coordinated presence of children verification missions**, community mediation, child-sensitive engagement, and constructive work with security actors to create safe pathways for release. It also underscores that release should cover **both formal and informal exits**, which requires flexible operational approaches and linkages to case management.

Relevant Principles

12 DDR

14 Peace Processes

Reintegration succeeds when treated as a **long-term process** rooted in families and communities and supported by case management and multisector services. Community-based approaches, working through community networks and local organisations, can strengthen acceptance, reduce risks, and help mediate family and community tensions. Promising practices include **interim foster care,** structured coordination, and peacekeeping contributions that improve enabling conditions. For instance, support to interim care centres, funding to national NGOs, vocational centre rehabilitation, and quick-impact projects that rehabilitate schools, roads, or water pump can support reintegration processes. Reintegration is also stronger when anchored in **national frameworks** such as government-led DDR commissions or programmes, increasing legitimacy and coordination.

Relevant Principles

6 Monitoring and Reporting

The Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) on grave violations against children is a powerful engagement and accountability tool when it involves the **community** and contributes to strengthening the protection of conflict affected children. Establishing **community-level alert networks** improves coverage and speed, and repeated capacity building of local partners builds ownership and continuity when international access is restricted. Verified grave violations data informs dialogue with parties to conflict, underpins action plans, and informs Security Council deliberations.

Relevant Principles

10 Conduct and Discipline

Conduct and discipline of UN peacekeepers is key, as credibility depends on strong safeguarding systems. Good practice includes survivor support mechanisms, such as the **UN Trust Fund in Support of Victims of SEA**, which has funded psychosocial, medical, education, and livelihood support for survivors, and enforced measures under **UN Conduct in Field Missions initiatives.** Community awareness raising on the prevention of sexual abuse and exploitation and the set-up of community led reporting mechanisms contributed to increase disclosure.

Relevant Principles

11 Contribution of Women

Girls are more safely reached when programmes deliberately combine **gender-sensitive staffing**, discreet community engagement, and tailored reintegration options. Community dialogues with women's associations, youth, and faith leaders can reduce stigma and help identify girls married to armed forces or armed groups members. The inclusion and continuity of **female staff** from verification through reintegration increases identification of girls, disclosure of sexual violence, and improves trust. Promising reintegration models include girls-focused education, counselling, vocational pathways, carefully selected foster care placements, and **relocation** when return is unsafe. Holistic packages should include dignity kits, baby kits, sexual and reproductive health, psychosocial support, and support for their children.

Relevant Principles

4 Child Protection Focal Points

5 Doctrine, Training, and Education

Coordination within peace keeping missions works best when Child Protection Units maintains **regular collaboration** across mission components (Human Rights, Civil Affairs, Protection of Civilian, Gender) with consistent information flow. Coordination with UNICEF, NGOs, and government for **joint missions to verify the presence of children** has enabled reach in remote areas. Technical working groups and coordination platforms have enabled monitoring of action plans, mapping of armed groups, and collective responses. Quick Impact Projects and other mission funding streams can empower national NGOs and enable service delivery.

Drawdowns that are **planned early**, phased, and inclusive lead to smoother transitions. In South Kivu (DRC), planning enabled partial transfer of responsibilities to UNICEF, including staff embedded for grave violations verification continuity. **Consultations** with communities and civil society, and workshops with national NGOs supported handover strategies. **Training of local actors** before withdrawal helped sustain monitoring, advocacy, and where feasible, engagement with armed groups. Aligning transitions with national DDR structures can enhance legitimacy and ownership.

Key Challenges

Despite these good practices, significant barriers undermine the protection of children in conflict zones and the collaboration with peacekeeping missions:

Prevention efforts are undermined **in the absence of political will**, or when peace agreements collapse, limiting engagement options. Across contexts, armed actor landscapes are increasingly **fragmented, mobile, and decentralised**, making access and negotiation hard and weakening compliance with commitments. Insecurity and logistics constraints (bad/no roads, ambush risks) restrict prevention outreach and monitoring in high-risk areas. **Stigma and fear of reprisals** can discourage communities

from reporting or engaging. Finally, prevention activities, especially training of security actors, can be **poorly coordinated**, creating duplication and wasted efforts.

Release processes face delays and bureaucracy, particularly around the verification of the presence of children, which can be highly harmful. Months-long timelines increase the risk of **children disappearing, being re-recruited, or being deliberately hidden**, especially girls presented as "wives" or domestic workers. Detention remains a recurring concern, including children captured during operations who may be detained before release pathways activate. A major cross-cutting constraint is **funding**, especially when release timing becomes dictated by reintegration resources. Lack of reintegration resources can erode trust with armed groups and complicate release negotiations.

Reintegration, across contexts, is most often undermined by **short project cycles and underfunding**, which interrupt training and apprenticeships, reduce follow-up, and damage credibility. This can sometimes increase re-recruitment risks. Insecurity and access constraints can affect delivery of start-up kits, including looting of kits and weak local markets. Poorly coordinated or narrowly targeted kits can create **unintended incentives**, and many programmes remain insufficiently tailored for **girls and children with specific needs** (missing dignity kits, sexual and reproductive health, childcare, and safe disclosure pathways).

Grave Violations Monitoring key constraints emerged, including gaps in **information-sharing** between coordination structures, and limited feedback loops to national partners contributing to data collection but not accessing trends analysis. **Gender norms** hinder the documentation of girls' recruitment, and reporting on **sexual violence** is often delayed or constrained because disclosures typically emerge during case management. **Data protection risks** and fear of reprisals can reduce reporting, especially on sensitive cases such as sexual violence, or State actor violations. Understaffing and funding volatility weaken partner capacity.

Conduct and Discipline: **Funding is insufficient** relative to needs. Compensation and support can be too small and short-term, particularly for survivors with children born of sexual abuse. Survivors can face barriers to **filing complaints**, and accountability often depends on Member States. When perpetrators leave the country, survivors may lose access to justice and information about proceedings. Enforcing standards is compounded by slow internal enforcement, turnover, and limited investigation capacity.

Girls remain systematically missed due to **invisibility and misrecognition**. Commanders may conceal girls as "wives" or domestic workers and exclude them from demobilisation lists. Some practitioners fail to classify child marriage with armed elements such as child recruitment and use. Stigma, especially for girls returning with their children, drives rejection and can deter girls from leaving armed groups. **Underfunding and generic packages** often fail to cover girls' multi-faceted needs such as childcare, sexual and reproductive health, and long-term psychosocial care, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation or re-recruitment.

Coordination is weakened by focal points carrying **multiple portfolios** (child protection, gender, safeguarding), reduced child protection visibility when merged with other sections, bureaucratic silos, and lack of knowledge of reporting criteria across internal databases. **High turnover of peacekeepers** (6–12 months) and inadequate training lead to confusion and underreporting. **UN 80 reform** discussions and budget pressures raise risks if child protection functions are considered only as programmatic without

recognising peace operations' unique roles in political engagement with parties to the conflict, training, and grave violations monitoring.

Drawdown leads to a **loss of secure access** and logistics (aviation, escorts, and bases), leaving NGOs and UNICEF exposed and reducing access to conflict affected areas. Institutional memory transfer can be slow and bureaucratic. Handover plans, especially to national organisations, may be unfunded. The departure can create a **political leverage vacuum**, and key informants reported spikes in recruitment after drawdown.

Recommendations

To address these gaps and strengthen collaboration, the paper proposes actionable recommendations:

Prevention: Maintain **agile engagement** with armed forces and armed groups through trusted intermediaries and local influencers where feasible; invest in **local capacity and longer-term, flexible funding** for national NGOs and community networks; and embed child protection in **national security policy**, including scalable **age verification and standard operating procedures (SOP)** for child encounters. Prevention packages should address the **drivers of recruitment** such as poverty, lack of education and livelihoods, family stressors, through multisector approaches. It should also make provisions for meaningful participation of affected adolescents and former CAAFAG where safe and desired.

Release: Implement **small, flexible, discreet teams** to verify the presence of children with one UN staff member, (and greater use of trained local partners when feasible) to accelerate timelines, reduce visibility, and increase protection and responsiveness; and establish procedures that reduce escort-related bottlenecks. **Delink grave violations verification from reintegration** processes so children who escape or self-release can nonetheless access services without waiting for verification of the violation. Ensure **gender-sensitive, survivor-centred identification and verification** of presence of children, including at least one woman on verification teams responsible for interviewing girls, and training on trauma-informed interview techniques and approaches, and confidentiality. Strengthen community mediation and expand advocacy for **release from detention**, including implementation or development of **handover protocols** and training of police, military, and judiciary on SOPs and do-no-harm.

Reintegration: Commit to **multi-year, better resourced reintegration**, protecting child protection priorities in funding cuts and ensuring peacekeeping missions maintain support to national actors where relevant. Promote **multisector contributions** (health, MHPSS, education, livelihoods, food security, peacebuilding, infrastructure access) and adopt flexible modalities in insecurity. Promote inclusive and gender-sensitive reintegration programmes that cater for the needs of all children, including children with disabilities, addictions, mental health disorders, girls with children, etc. Foster **community acceptance** through sustained sensitisation, dialogue, reconciliation, parenting support, and community ownership; prioritise foster family models where appropriate. Use **inclusive approaches** that support vulnerable children broadly (not only CAAFAG) to reduce resentment and address recruitment risk factors, while ensuring meaningful, safe participation of former CAAFAG where desired.

MRM: Phase and scale the use of secure tools like **MRMIMS+**, strengthen confidentiality and safe reporting channels, and streamline internal mission reporting through simple guidance products and continuous training. Improve coordinated access and triangulation across relevant databases for

managers to reduce duplication, and ensure **multi-year resourcing** for staffing, partner support, grave violations verification, logistics, and implementation of action plans.

Conduct and Discipline: Explicitly recognise and include the **use of children by peacekeepers** within conduct and discipline systems (with operational definitions, scenario-based training, and "dos and don'ts"). Strengthen **prevention of sexual abuse**, exploitation, and accountability through regular refreshers (including lightweight digital learning), enforce timelines and Member State accountability standards, align survivor assistance across actors, and keep complaint mechanisms available during and after drawdown. Add **Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS)** for peacekeepers (Vancouver Principle 13 alignment) to reduce stress-related risks and strengthen adherence to standards.

Girls: Undertake intersectional **gender analyses**, strengthen recognition of all forms of girls' association (including forced marriage and sexual exploitation), and contextualise existing technical guidance on girls. Build **deliberate identification strategies** using women's associations and GBV services as safe entry points; ensure **gender-disaggregated data** across monitoring; and implement survivor-centred identification approaches, such as including female staff and trauma-informed methods. Develop and expand **gender-sensitive reintegration** approaches that include dignity and baby kits, childcare, sexual and reproductive health, and multi-year psychosocial support, with relocation pathways when needed, alongside sustained community acceptance work.

Coordination: Strengthen inclusive and transparent coordination (while managing security risks), **reduce bottlenecks** through more direct communication channels, and institutionalise continuous training and SOP dissemination for all contingents. Protect **child protection visibility** through independent budget lines, access to senior decision-making, and safeguard child protection capacity during funding cuts and transitions.

Drawdown: Advocate for phased, sequenced transitions with **joint-planning workshops** and clear guidance on what can be transferred to whom; establish **clear protocols** for handover of databases and negotiation mandates; plan transfer of key logistics (vehicles, IT, equipment), and embed peacekeeping mission CAAC expertise in remaining UN entities to sustain grave violations documentation and engagement on action plans. Identify **focal points for dialogue** with armed actors under resident coordinators' leadership, invest early in national and community capacities (including negotiation skills where safe), and secure multi-year financing to bridge post-withdrawal gaps.

ACRONYMS

AoR: Area of Responsibility

CAAC: Children and Armed Conflict

CAAFAG: Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups

CAR: Central African Republic

CP: Child Protection

CTFMR: Country Task Force on Monitoring and Reporting

DDR: Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration

DRC: Democratic Republic of the Congo

FARDC: Forces armées de la République Démocratique du Congo

GTTC: Groupe de Travail Technique Conjoint (Joint Technical Working Group)

IMS: Information Management System

JOC: Joint Operation Centre

MARA: Monitoring, Analysis, and Reporting Arrangements

MINUSCA: Mission multidimensionnelle intégrée des Nations unies pour la stabilisation en Centrafrique (Integrated UN Multi Dimension Mission for the Stabilisation in Central Africa)

MONUSCO: Mission de l'Organisation des Nations unies pour la stabilisation en république démocratique du Congo (UN Stabilisation Mission in the DRC)

MRM: Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism

NGO: Non-Governmental Organisation

OCHA: Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

OHCHR: Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

OSRSG CAAC: Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict

PDDRCS: Programme de Désarmement, Démobilisation, Relèvement Communautaire et de Stabilisation (Disarmament, Demobilisation, Community Recovery, and Stabilisation Programme)

RECOPE: Réseaux Communautaires de Protection de l'Enfance (Community Child Protection Network)

SAGE: Situational Awareness Geospatial Enterprise

SOP: Standard Operating Procedures

SPLM-IO: Sudan People's Liberation Movement-in-Opposition

SSPDF: South Sudan People's Liberation Army

STC: State Technical Committee

UN: United Nations

UNICEF: United Nations Children's Funds

UNMISS: United Nations Mission in South Sudan

WFP: World Food Programme

WHO: World Health Organisation

INTRODUCTION

This Working Paper presents findings from a study funded by Global Affairs Canada, led by the CAAFAG Task Force of the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, with leadership from Plan International and UNICEF, and carried out in three countries: the Central African Republic (CAR), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and South Sudan. The study was conducted through the CAAFAG Task Force and explores how peacekeeping missions with a protection mandate and child protection actors (including government ministries with CP responsibilities, e.g. ministries of social welfare, of justice, of the Interior, CBOs, national and international NGOs, UNICEF) collaborate in preventing child recruitment, enabling the identification, release, and reintegration of children associated with armed forces and armed groups.


© UNICEF/UNI334914/Ryeng (South Sudan)

The recruitment and use of children in armed conflict remain among the most urgent child protection concerns worldwide. According to the 2025 Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict[1], 7,402 cases of recruitment and use were verified in 2024 alone (5,541 boys, 1,854 girls, and 7 unknown sex), although this number does not reflect all cases due to the complexity of the verification process. Peacekeeping missions play a central role, though also complex in supporting prevention, facilitating the release and reintegration of children, as well as monitoring and reporting on grave violations against children, working in close partnership with other child protection actors.

Within this document the term “children” is used as an all-encompassing term that captures all children, in their uniqueness and diversity. This includes:

- Children of all ages, including infants/early childhood (under age 5), middle childhood (ages 5-12, or school aged), and all stages of adolescence;
- Children of all sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions; children with diverse abilities and disabilities; and
- Children with other diversity factors, which include, but are not limited to, different racial and ethnic identities; different social, cultural, religious, and economic backgrounds; and children of any minority group.

This paper is grounded in the Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers and its implementation guidance**,** which provide an essential normative and operational framework. The Vancouver Principles call for child protection to be prioritised in peacekeeping missions’ mandates, to integrate prevention strategies at all levels of mission planning

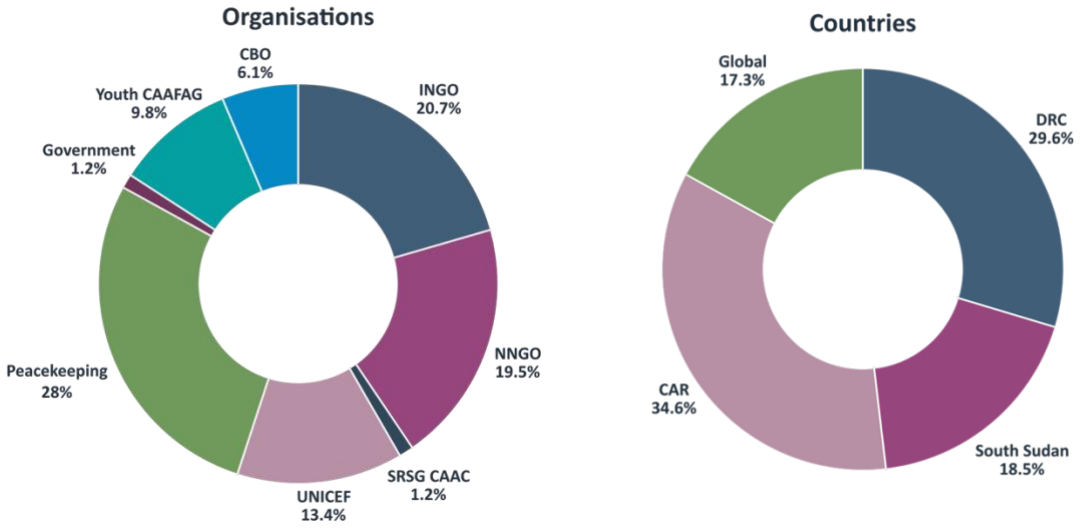
[1] United Nations (2025). Children and armed conflict. Report of the secretary general.

and operations, and to work hand in hand with child protection actors to address both the immediate and structural drivers of child recruitment.

The paper highlights how the Vancouver Principles are being applied in practice in the three settings examined and where further progress is needed, based on the field evidence collected. It synthesises lessons learned, good practices, and ongoing challenges, and proposes actionable recommendations to strengthen collaboration between peacekeeping missions and child protection actors in preventing and responding to the recruitment and use of children, based on the Vancouver Principles.

Methodology

The research underpinning this Working Paper is based on 81 key informant interviews conducted in May and June 2025, with a diverse range of stakeholders, including national NGOs (16), international NGOs (17), UNICEF staff (11), peacekeeping personnel (23), the Office of the SRSG for Children and Armed Conflict (1), community-based actors (5), and former CAAFAG (8). Respondents were drawn from CAR (28), the DRC (24), South Sudan (15), and global headquarters (14). Women represented 38% of all interviewees. While most interviews were conducted remotely, 22 in-person key informant interviews were carried out in CAR in June 2025 by Sandra Maignant, co-lead of the CAAFAG Task Force.



The data collection tools and methodology were reviewed and validated by the reference group as well as Plan International Ethic Review Board. A risk assessment was developed, and risk mitigation measures have been put in place, particularly for the interviews of former CAAFAG.

A qualitative thematic analysis was employed to identify cross-cutting patterns as well as country-specific dynamics. The findings have been validated by the participating countries through three online workshops (one in each country) gathering a total of 31 key informants; and a comprehensive review was conducted by the research reference group. To safeguard the confidentiality of respondents, all direct quotations have been anonymised and attributed by country.

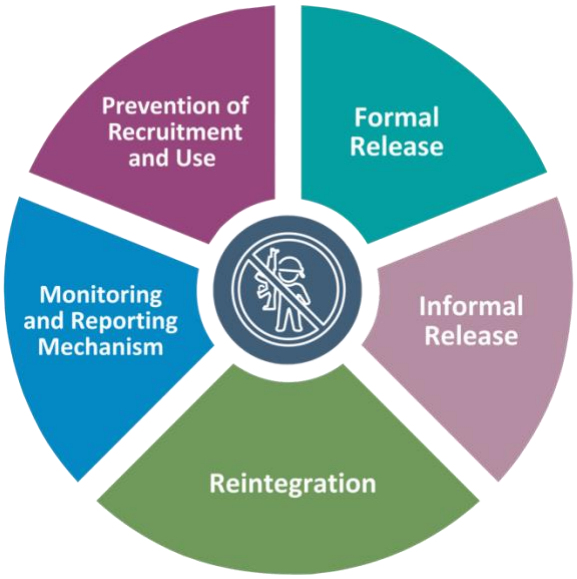
While the key informant interviews provide valuable and contextually grounded insights, the study is not without limitations. Sensitive issues, particularly those related to rape and other forms of sexual violence,

may be underreported due to the stigma surrounding such topics and the inherent challenges of disclosure in conflict-affected settings. The need for translation of interviews with some former CAAFAG, the limited number of governments representatives (only one) and the difficulties in interviewing peacekeeping missions remotely will also have an impact on the findings. Furthermore, the perspectives of women and girls remain limited within the dataset, as only 38% of the key informants were women, and only three girls formerly associated with armed groups were interviewed out of eight CAAFAG. This is mainly because girls are less likely to be identified as CAAFAG than boys. These constraints should be considered when interpreting the findings.

Working Paper Structure

This Working Paper is structured around eight sections, focusing on the key elements of programming for CAAFAG, namely Prevention, Identification and Release, and Reintegration of CAAFAG, as well as the Monitoring and reporting on grave violations against children in situations of armed conflict. It also includes a focus on Conduct and Discipline of peacekeepers, the specific experiences of girls associated with armed forces and armed groups, Coordination, and the Drawdown of peacekeeping missions.

The diagram below summarises key areas of interventions for CAAFAG:



Prevention of recruitment and use of children seeks to address identified risk factors at multiple levels and capitalise on existing community-level structures.[2] Successful prevention programmes will address the underlying causes of recruitment, and promote the ratification and implementation of international treaties, the adoption and enforcement of national laws which criminalise recruitment and use of children. It requires a collaborative set of actors, including peacekeeping missions, to apply international humanitarian law.[3] This includes negotiation with armed forces and armed groups and signature of commitments to not recruit children, and screening of new recruits. Prevention strategies also include

[2] United Nations University (2018) Cradle by conflict. Child involvement with armed groups in contemporary conflict
[3] The Paris Principles (2007) Principles and guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups. Article 6.

addressing the risk factors for the recruitment and use of children such as poverty, lack of education or economic opportunities, family separation, targeting marginalised minority groups, etc. Prevention strategies should be based on a gender and age analysis, recognising that girls and boys of different ages and social statuses across contexts face different risk factors.

Identification and release refer to the process of formal and controlled disarmament and release of children from an armed force or armed group, as well as the informal ways in which children leave by escaping, being captured, or by any other means. It implies a disassociation from the armed force or armed group and the beginning of the transition from military to civilian life.[4] Identification can be done before the formal release when children are still in the ranks of armed groups or armed forces; or after the release when children have exited the armed group or armed force informally and are back in their communities.

Reintegration is the 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.[5] Reintegration is a complex and ongoing process rather than a single event, usually taking place over years rather than months. It represents a period of adjustment and transition from the CAAFAG experience and identity, towards a new civilian life within a family and community.[6]

Monitoring and reporting of recruitment and use of children is part of the six grave violations of the CAAC mandate. The purpose of the mandate is to document accurate, timely, objective, and verified information on the six grave violations committed against children in situations of armed conflict.

Summary of the Vancouver Principles

The Vancouver Principles, adopted in 2017, are a set of political commitments by Member States to prevent the recruitment and use of child soldiers in peacekeeping contexts. They aim to integrate child protection into all aspects of peacekeeping operations, from mandates' negotiation and training to monitoring of grave violations and accountability.[7]

1. **Mandates:** Include child protection provisions, especially prevention of child recruitment and use, in all peacekeeping mandates.
2. **Planning:** Prioritise the prevention of child recruitment and use in peacekeeping strategic and operational planning.
3. **Early Warning:** Support monitoring and reporting of early signs of child recruitment and use, which can be a precursor of other war crimes.
4. **Child Protection Focal Points:** Appoint focal points within military and police command structures for coordination with child protection actors.

[4] The Paris Principles (2007) Principles and guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups
[5] The Paris Principles (2007) Principles and guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups
[6] The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (2022) CAAFAG Programme Development Toolkit Guidelines. New York
[7] Government of Canada. *Vancouver Principles on peacekeeping and the prevention of the recruitment and use of child soldiers*, 2019 Vancouver, Canada

5. **Training:** Ensure all peacekeepers receive standardised training on child protection and interactions with children.
6. **Monitoring and Reporting:** Require peacekeepers to report grave violations against children to the UN child protection advisers.
7. **Protection and Care of Children:** Ensure children in contact with peacekeepers are protected according to international law and their needs are addressed.
8. **Prevention:** Act effectively to protect children at risk of recruitment and use or other grave violations, within mandate and rules of engagement.
9. **Detention:** Treat detained children according to international norms, using detention only as a last resort, and hand them over promptly to child protection actors.
10. **Conduct and Discipline:** Enforce high standards of conduct and prosecute or cooperate in investigating any abuse of children by peacekeepers.
11. **Contribution of Women:** Promote women's participation in peacekeeping and recognise their role in child protection.
12. **Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR):** Make CAAFAG a priority in DDR programs, considering gender, age, and identity factors.
13. **Mental Health:** Support research and provide mental health preparation and assistance to personnel engaging with CAAFAG.
14. **Peace Processes:** Include child protection provisions in peace agreements and post-conflict recovery efforts.
15. **Sanctions:** Support adding child recruitment and use as a criterion in UN sanctions regimes.
16. **Best Practices:** Share lessons learned and best practices on preventing child recruitment and use in peacekeeping.
17. **Further Guidance:** Support the development of operational guidance for implementing the Vancouver Principles.

PREVENTION OF CHILD RECRUITMENT AND USE

Relevant Principles: 3. Early Warning, 5. Doctrine, Training, and Education, and 8. Prevention

Preventing the recruitment and use of children is central to the effectiveness of peacekeeping missions. This involves, under **Principle 3**, identifying risk factors and collecting information on early warning signs of child recruitment and use.[8] **Principle 5** further underscores the importance of training, requiring both pre-deployment and ongoing sessions to equip peacekeepers with the knowledge to prevent child recruitment and use. Such training must include context-specific briefings on recruitment and use pathways, with attention to gender dynamics. [9] In line with **Principle 8**, peacekeepers working closely with child protection focal points are expected to help limit the capacity of armed forces and groups to recruit children, monitor and safeguard areas of known or suspected recruitment and use of children, and support community engagement and other outreach efforts. [10]

Good Practices and Lessons Learnt

Action plans negotiated following the listing of parties to conflict in annexes to the Secretary General annual report on CAAC have played a foundational role in driving prevention of child recruitment and use.

In the DRC, the government demonstrated sustained commitment to ending and preventing the recruitment and use of children by signing an action plan in 2012 with the United Nations, focusing to end and prevent child recruitment and use and sexual violence by security and defence forces and fight against impunity. Following several years of collaborative efforts, the FARDC were officially delisted for the recruitment and use of children from the Secretary-General's report on children and armed conflict.[11] The establishment of the Programme for Disarmament, Demobilisation, Community Recovery, and Stabilisation (PDDCRS), placed under the direct authority of the President, further reflects high-level political will to enhance national security, and support the reintegration of former combatants, including children. To prevent the recruitment and use of children, joint age verification missions are regularly conducted by the peacekeeping mission and UNICEF to screen new recruits entering the regular armed forces. This approach proactively reduced the risk of new cases of the recruitment and use of children and demonstrated the value of embedding preventive safeguards within military procedures.


© UNICEF/UNI686508/Mazinge (DRC)

Beyond legislation, the creation of **multi-stakeholder coordination platforms** such as the Joint Technical Working Group (GTTC) in the DRC and the State Technical Committee (STC) in South Sudan helped

[8] Government of Canada (2019) Implementation Guidance for the Vancouver Principles (Chapter 3 Early warning).
[9] Government of Canada (2019) Implementation Guidance for the Vancouver Principles (Chapter 5 Doctrine, Training and Education)
[10] Government of Canada (2019) Implementation Guidance for the Vancouver Principles (Chapter 8 Prevention)
[11] However, the FARDC remain listed for sexual violence.

structure and institutionalise prevention efforts within armed forces. These platforms brought together government agencies (Ministry of Defence or Interior, Justice, and Social Welfare), UNICEF, and the peacekeeping mission to coordinate responses and oversee implementation of action plans. Such forums enable the monitoring and prevention of violations at the government level, as well as by armed groups, and facilitate the coordination of response. In South Sudan, the military focal points who sit on these committees prove to be an effective way to convey information on the prevention of grave violations against children to their commanders. As a key informant observed *"They (focal points) ease the tension, they are part of the solution. Otherwise, they feel we are accusing them, and they will deny it."*

United Nations peacekeeping missions, as well as other UN entities, have the mandate to **negotiate with armed groups and armed forces** based on reports of grave violations against children trends and patterns, including on the recruitment and use of children. The engagement with armed forces and armed groups is one of the tools to address the main risk factor for child recruitment and use: the presence of an armed force or armed group recruiting children. In the three countries (CAR, DRC, and South Sudan), the peacekeeping missions have trained armed forces and armed groups on international and national legal framework and negotiated commitment. The collaboration with national NGOs and community-based organisations offers avenues for culturally sensitive prevention approaches to communicate with armed groups, particularly those who are community-based.

Peacekeepers have also contributed to the reinforcement of **early warning systems**. Their presence in the field allows for real-time monitoring of early warning indicators, conflict dynamics, and rapid reporting of child protection concerns. This, in turn, can be used to inform coordinated responses and prevention strategies.

Strengthening the capacity of national and international security forces through targeted training on child protection has proven to be a critical component in preventing the recruitment and use of children and strengthening institutional accountability. In all three countries, child protection actors, primarily through support from the United Nations, delivered tailored training sessions for military and police personnel including the six grave violations and the national and international legal frameworks.

These included modules on international legal standards, child rights, sexual exploitation and abuse, adapting international juvenile justice standards, and practical procedures such as age verification and referral mechanisms for children encountered during operations.

Organisations like Save the Children and the Dallaire Institute designed interactive modules for military and police personnel, as well as pre-deployment training for UN peacekeepers that simulated real-life encounters with children in armed contexts. These scenarios allowed participants to reflect on the complexity of such situations and practice appropriate responses in a controlled environment and contribute to the identification and release of children. This training has been done through centres of excellence such as CAPAZ in Colombia, Peace Academy in Rwanda, or through the African Union Commission. In some instances, these efforts contributed directly to the development and dissemination of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) on engaging with children's survivors of rape and other forms of sexual violence, and the development of guidelines for handing child victims and witness of grave violations**.**

Peacekeeping personnel participating in missions such as MINUSCA, MONUSCO, and UNMISS also benefit from child protection training sessions organised by the in-house CP units. These sessions equip peacekeepers with the tools to act as responsible intermediaries and to identify early warning signs of recruitment and use of children during patrols and community engagement. Peacekeepers are expected to know UN mechanisms, international legal frameworks, and child rights but frequently, child protection is only considered by peacekeepers as a small issue among many others. Through these trainings, they learn about the importance of child protection and the respect of protocols to ensure no harm.

The DRC offers a strong example of effective **collaboration between the peacekeeping mission and national child protection actors**. In areas where MONUSCO has limited access, national NGOs have taken the lead in identifying armed groups' presence and sharing critical information with the mission. Based on this information, MONUSCO developed formal commitment documents in which armed group leaders pledge to end the recruitment and use of children. These documents were translated into Swahili by national partners to ensure understanding by local actors. The signature process was led by MONUSCO through direct negotiations with armed groups, while the ongoing monitoring of compliance was carried out jointly by both the peacekeeping mission and national NGOs, fostering shared ownership of the prevention effort. The training of armed groups leaders on child protection and CAAC further supported the prevention of child recruitment and use.

In the Central African Republic, efforts to engage armed actors were frequently conducted through joint initiatives involving MINUSCA and local civil society partners. These joint missions enabled outreach to remote or high-risk areas and helped foster dialogue with commanders who may otherwise have been resistant to external interference. In some instances, these engagements included tailored training sessions for armed group commanders on international legal standards and the protection of children. As a result, some commanders designated internal focal points tasked with enabling compliance among their ranks.

© Plan International / Maignant (CAR)

A strong, **localised response** has consistently emerged as a key enabler of effective child recruitment and use prevention. Local actors' contextual knowledge, linguistic fluency, and trust from the community allow national actors to detect early warning signs and intervene where international actors may face access or trust barriers.

In CAR, RECOPEs and community child protection committees played a frontline role in identifying children vulnerable to recruitment and use. These networks, often composed of local leaders, women's groups, teachers, youth and religious authorities, monitored high-risk zones and shared critical information on ongoing or emerging threats.

In the DRC, national NGOs led efforts to engage directly with both communities and armed groups. They provided training to community leaders on child rights and the long-term impact of recruitment and use, building grassroots advocacy for prevention.

Challenges

Despite the good practices reported by key informants, some significant challenges in the prevention of child recruitment and use remain.

The success of CAAC prevention strategies can be correlated to **political will** and is facilitated by the presence of peace agreements, although it is not prerequisite. Limited government engagement and presence in some areas, lack of financial and human resources, and politicised security actors also impede the rollout of prevention strategies.

One of the most persistent challenges to preventing child recruitment and use lies in the increasingly **complex landscape of armed actors**. In many contexts, armed groups are not easily identifiable. They are often highly mobile, internally fragmented with a lack of clear or centralised chain of command, and dispersed across hard-to-reach territories, which significantly complicates access, negotiation, and monitoring efforts by child protection actors and peacekeeping missions.

In the DRC, for instance, while notable progress has been made, many armed groups have not engaged in any formal dialogue framework. These non-signatory groups are often smaller factions or opportunistic armed groups operating in remote areas which makes it difficult to identify reliable entry points for engagement or to ensure adherence to commitments.

The challenge is further compounded in areas where insecurity and/or logistical constraints make physical access difficult. In parts of eastern DRC, poor road conditions, the risk of armed ambushes, or the presence of explosive remnants of war limit the ability of UN peacekeeping missions, agencies and offices, and NGOs to reach communities where children are at high risk of recruitment and use. In these inaccessible zones impacted by armed conflict, efforts to monitor child rights' violations, or conduct awareness-raising are severely hindered.

Stigma and fear continue to be significant barriers to the effective prevention and response to child recruitment and use, particularly in contexts marked by fragile social cohesion and chronic insecurity. In several settings, community actors expressed deep concern about the risks of being perceived as collaborators with international actors or government forces if they engaged in prevention efforts or reported cases of child recruitment and use.

© UNICEF/UN0390917/LeMoyne (DRC)

Child protection actors have had to adapt their strategies, opting for discreet or indirect methods of engagement. For example, in some awareness activities in CAR, child protection messages on the prevention of recruitment and use of children were integrated into broader community development discussions or delivered through trusted interlocutors such as women's groups, or faith leaders, again emphasising the importance of local actors.

In several contexts, child protection actors noted that prevention activities such as training of security actors were poorly coordinated, creating overlaps and the risk of duplicated efforts.

Recommendations

Key informants recommended some actions points to address these challenges targeting:

Peacekeeping missions UNICEF NGO (national and international)

Member States

Continue Agile Engagement with Armed Forces and Armed Groups

Despite risks, structured engagement with armed groups should continue through trusted intermediaries. The use of local influencers and peace facilitators as intermediaries with armed groups should be expanded when feasible. Support for confidence-building and child protection focal points training within armed groups ranks remains essential.

Invest in Local Capacity and Long-Term Funding

Longer-term, flexible funding for national NGOs, support to RECOPEs, and community-based initiatives is critical. Local actors are frequently the only ones with access and legitimacy. Core funding should support staffing and capacity strengthening in negotiation with armed groups when feasible and safe.

Integrate Child Protection in National Security Frameworks

National policies should embed child protection in military and police doctrine. Age verification protocols and SOPs for child encounters should be scaled up. National focal points and trainers within the army and police should be supported and retained.

Expand Peacekeeping and Child Protection Synergies

Peacekeeping missions should ensure systematic collaboration with child protection actors and coordination of prevention strategies, such as training of security actors on national and international legal framework to prevent duplication.

Improve Legal and Policy Implementation

Support governments to enforce child protection legislation, including penalties for recruitment and use, birth registration, and screening protocols. Monitoring platforms like GTTC (DRC) or STC (South Sudan) should be resourced and expanded to other countries.

Address Risk Factors of Recruitment and Use

Economic vulnerability, lack of education opportunities, family separation, or domestic violence and insecurity fuel recruitment and use. Prevention strategies should address risk factors of recruitment and use and include livelihoods, vocational training, or access to education opportunities for vulnerable children, as well as sport and civic engagement. Prevention strategies should be based on a strong gender and age analysis, identifying actions to address differential risks faced by girls and boys of different ages and social statuses. Girls and boys need safe alternatives to armed group affiliation. The mission, through

its various units, should strengthen their contribution such as support to the government in providing vocational training opportunities or school building repair.

Ensure Meaningful Participation of CAAFAG

Prevention programmes should intentionally foster the meaningful participation of CAAFAG throughout design, implementation, and evaluation processes–recognising them not only as active agents in their own recovery, but also as lived-experience experts who bring nuanced perspectives and ideas that can strengthen peace and well-being within their communities.

Involve former CAAFAG (when possible, safe, and only when they wish to do so), to share experience with young people from the community through participatory methods, including drama plays and discussions to prevent child recruitment and use. Former CAAFAG emphasised the need to communicate to other youth, so they are not tricked and know what to expect if they decide to join (recommendation from CAAFAG).

Conclusion

Prevention of child recruitment and use is most effective when anchored in early warning, strong legal frameworks, addressing intersecting drivers at individual, family, and community levels, and context-specific training for peacekeepers and national forces. Good practices from the DRC, CAR, and South Sudan show that political will, community engagement, and collaboration between peacekeeping missions, governments, and NGOs can yield tangible results. At the same time, insecurity and fragmented armed groups continue to undermine prevention efforts and restrict access to at-risk children. Sustained investment in local capacity at the community level, and the integration of child protection into national security frameworks are essential.

IDENTIFICATION AND RELEASE FROM ARMED FORCES AND ARMED GROUPS

Relevant Principles: 9. Detention and 12. DDR

The step of identification and release is included in Principle 9 on detention, as well as Principle 12 on DDR. Under **Principle 9**, peacekeeping missions are expected to identify the conditions for how children can be detained by the mission's forces, establish procedures for the transfer of children to child protection actors, and train peacekeepers on detention and transfer of children.[12] Under **Principle 12**, the release element is embedded into disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration programmes. Peacekeepers should be educated on DDR processes

[12] Government of Canada (2019) Implementation Guidance for the Vancouver Principles (Chapter 9 Detention)

and missions should support and fund long-term DDR efforts for children.[13]

Good Practices and Lessons Learnt

Across all three contexts, CAR, the DRC and South Sudan, the interviews reveal several lessons and promising practices that have emerged in the identification and release of children associated with armed forces and armed groups. It is worth noting that although the Vancouver Principles use the term "demobilisation", the terminology of "release" is preferred as it includes both formal and informal release processes.

The effective collaboration across various actors emerged as having a strong impact on securing the release of children. In every country, the coordination among the mission, UNICEF, national authorities, and child protection organisations contributed to effective identification and release. In CAR, joint verification missions to verify the presence of children brought together MINUSCA, and/or UNICEF, the Ministry of Social Affairs, and national and international NGOs, ensuring that verifications followed international criteria and were properly documented. Similarly, in the DRC, the national DDR programme (PDDRCS) provided an anchor for joint verification and release, with participation from the army (FRDC), UNICEF, MONUSCO, government social affairs officers, and community structures. In South Sudan, joint verification missions included the DDR Commission, SPLM-IO, SSPDF, UNMISS and/or UNICEF, and NGOs and offered a comparable model for coordinated screening and release.

© UNICEF/UNI334921/Ryeng

The value of **community-based approaches and mediation** has also been highlighted. In several cases, the release of children was facilitated through local actors trusted by both communities and armed groups. In CAR, community leaders successfully persuaded commanders to release children, supported by a national NGO. In the DRC, networks such as RECOPE mobilised communities to identify children in armed groups and pass on reliable information to NGOs and coordination clusters. These discreet community-level interventions by NGOs proved more effective than highly visible, formal mechanisms.

The interviews also highlight the importance of **child-sensitive and empathetic practices** during the verification of the presence of children and release process. In CAR, some child protection officers from MINUSCA created a safe and supportive environment for children during verification missions. They use child-centred approaches and when available, women were present to conduct interviews with girls. Similar attention to children's perspectives emerged in South Sudan, where community para-social workers and NGOs ensured that children's voices were heard during screening and that they were quickly linked to psychosocial and vocational services.

The findings underscore the value of **collaboration between humanitarian and national and international security actors**. In the DRC, MONUSCO's direct engagement with armed group leaders not only secured the release of children but also created protective space for local NGOs to advocate without

[13] Ibid. (Chapter 12 Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration)

fear of reprisals. The UN peacekeeping bases served as refuge for boys and girls who escaped armed groups. These cases suggest that, despite the risks, military and peacekeeping actors can play a key role in the release process when properly guided by humanitarian protocols and do no harm principle.

Some good practices have emerged in addressing the situation of **children in detention**. In the DRC and CAR, MONUSCO or MINUSCA and UNICEF worked alongside military authorities to monitor prisons, advocate for the recognition of detained children as victims, and secure their release, while also training civil society and community leaders to identify and refer such cases. These approaches, grounded in advocacy and collaboration, helped shift practices towards recognising children associated with armed groups as victims of conflict rather than perpetrators.

Challenges

Although significant achievements have been made in releasing children, some challenges persist.

One of the most persistent challenges in releasing children from armed groups is **access and insecurity**. In many contexts, the areas where children are held are "red zones" or territories controlled by armed actors where humanitarian access is either impossible or extremely risky. In CAR, for example, release operations in some locations were severely hampered by insecurity and children were reluctant to leave armed groups out of fear of retaliation. Humanitarian personnel faced the risk of being targeted simply for engaging with communities.

Another major constraint lies in **delays in verification procedures** of the presence of children associated with armed forces and armed groups. Formal release of children is dependent on age and status verification by UN actors, and missions to verify the presence of children can take weeks or months to organise, particularly if a UN military escort is required. In some countries, interviews highlighted that verification missions could take up to six months to be organised, during which children risked disappearing or being re-recruited. Verification also intersects with the reintegration timeline. In many countries, for UNICEF partners, the reintegration process cannot start before children are verified by UNICEF, which can take several months. This leads to NGOs being unable to provide reintegration support in a timely manner. In other countries, verification missions that were highly visible had unintended consequences –the visibility of convoys, often including many vehicles and personnel of the peacekeeping mission, UNICEF, and government agencies, led armed groups to conceal the children prior to the verification mission's arrival.

Resistance from armed groups also emerged as a recurrent challenge. In the DRC and in CAR, some commanders asked for payment or imposed conditions on families before releasing children. Others refused, arguing that releasing children would weaken them in their fight against the armed group M23 in Eastern Congo.

The interviews also point to the issue of **stigma, fear, and community dynamics as obstacles for release**. Children frequently hesitate to come forward because they fear being labelled as perpetrators of violence rather than as victims. In CAR, children who had taken part in abuses were reluctant to present themselves for release because of the fear of community rejection. Communities sometimes resisted reporting cases out of fear of reprisals from armed groups or because they misunderstood humanitarian actors' intentions. In some countries, there was also the risk of "inflated" claims by communities

presenting children as CAAFAG in the hope of accessing services, which complicated the verification process of the presence of children.


© UNICEF/UN0441487/Tremeau (DRC)

Identifying and releasing girls from armed forces and armed groups remains uniquely complex. Armed elements, including commanders, conceal girls by referring to them as "wives" or domestic workers, thereby denying or obscuring their recruitment and use with the armed group. This deliberate dissimulation is compounded by girls' own reluctance to come forward, driven by fears of stigma, rejection, or reprisals. In CAR and South Sudan, for instance, lists submitted by commanders routinely excluded girls, and verification teams did not identify those hidden inside military compounds or private homes. Child rights violations such as child marriage blur the line between marital unions and child association, making girls nearly invisible to CAAFAG protection systems. In the DRC, many girls exit armed groups through self-release rather than formal release, which limits their access to reintegration support. Girls who return to their families with their own children born of unions with armed group members face particularly severe stigma, as families and communities perceive them as complicit or as bearers of shame. The lack of survivor-centred services on verification teams significantly restricts disclosure of sexual violence, leaving girls' and boys' experiences unacknowledged.

The detention of children associated with armed groups emerged as a recurring concern in several contexts. In the DRC, in some instances, children captured during operations could still face detention before release procedures were activated.

A further cross-cutting challenge is **resource and funding constraints**. In several countries, actors explained that although children were ready for release, the process was delayed by several months until reintegration funding was secured from bilateral donors. This meant that the timing of releases was sometimes dictated not by the best interests of the child or a child-centred approach, but the availability of funds for reintegration. In the DRC, despite successful negotiations for release, resources to provide reintegration support were missing at times, leaving children disillusioned when promises made during awareness-raising could not be fulfilled, with increased risks of re recruitment. This situation has led to increased challenges in the negotiation of release with armed groups as well as in discussion with children. The opportunity of access to reintegration support is one of the key elements used during negotiations. As one key informant noted: "*If there is no reintegration, this calls into question the prevention and release work.*"

Recommendations

Key informants made several recommendations targeting:

Peacekeeping missions | UNICEF | NGO (national and international) | Member States

Implement Nimble and Agile Verification Missions 

While the presence of one UN staff is essential during missions to verify the presence of children, delays of several months to conduct a mission to verify the presence of children in an armed force or group undermine child protection outcomes. Verification should be carried out in small, flexible, and discreet teams, with one peacekeeping mission child protection officer *or* one UNICEF representative, and when possible, an increased involvement of trained local partners, to avoid alerting armed groups, while maintaining coordination between UN agencies, government, and child protection actors.

Accelerate Verification Processes 

Timelines for verification of the presence of children should be shortened thanks to smaller verification teams that are easier to mobilise in a timely manner and delegation to available trained partners, reducing delays that expose children to re-recruitment or disappearance. Flexible procedures should be established to reduce bureaucracy and delays when UN military escorts are needed.

Delink MRM Verification from Reintegration Programming 

MRM verification processes should be delinked from reintegration interventions. In situations where children have self-released and are already back into their communities, reintegration support, such as case management, should not be contingent on the MRM verification.

Ensure Gender-Sensitive and Survivor Centred Verification 

The verification team should systematically include at least one woman who should be in charge of girls' interviews (recommendation from girl CAAFAG interviewed). All members engaged in verification of the presence of children should be trained on gender sensitive identification (including being able to identify girl CAAFAGs who are not immediately visible) to ensure that girls are not missed during the verification process. They should also be trained on interview techniques, including survivor centred and trauma informed approaches to ensure confidentiality, empathy, and psychological safety for children and interviewers during the release process.

Enhance Community Engagement and Mediation 

Local men, women leaders, and networks should be involved in negotiations and identification, as their influence frequently facilitates release were external actors face access restrictions. Where possible and safe, train national actors in engagement with armed groups through selected intermediaries to promote the identification and release of children.

Advocate for the Release of CAAFAG from Detention 

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), peacekeeping missions through Human Rights, Justice, and Child Protection Units, UNICEF, and other child protection actors should seek access and conduct regular visits to detention centres to monitor the presence of children formerly associated with armed groups and facilitate their release and reintegration according to international and national legal

frameworks[14]. In many cases, it will be necessary to highlight that children who have been recruited or used by armed forces or groups are to be treated as victims of offences against international law rather than as perpetrators[15], and that there should be no prosecution for the mere association of a child with an armed force or group.[16]

Handover protocols are a concrete way to standardise and systematise children's release from detention and their transfer to child protection authorities to provide them with reintegration support. Hence, advocacy to implement provisions of existing handover protocols, or towards setting up new ones where they do not exist is key.[17]

Facilitate the Immediate Release of a Child Upon Identification 

Releases should not be delayed as a result of lack of funding for reintegration. Services such as medical support, psychosocial counselling, and case management must be available immediately after separation to maintain credibility towards children and armed groups leaders and protect children's rights. The information collected by the verification mission during the verification of the presence of children process that is relevant to reintegration should be shared with the organisation in charge of case management and reintegration of the child. This would support the NGO in the documentation of the case, the application of immediate action when needed, and reduce risk of re-traumatisation if the child disclosed sensitive information during the interview.

Disseminate and Operationalise Protocols 

Standard operating procedures for handover and release of children, including those identified and captured during military operations, should be widely shared, summarised into simple infographics, translated in local languages, and disseminated through training sessions to judicial, police, and community actors.

Maintain Constructive Engagement with Security Actors 

Provide training to peacekeeping forces, national militaries, and judiciary on handover protocols to ensure they can support the safe identification and handover of children, while fully upholding the do no harm principle.

Conclusion

The identification and release of children associated with armed forces and armed groups remains a critical protection step, as reflected in Principles 9 and 12 of the Vancouver Principles. Good practices across CAR, the DRC, and South Sudan show that nimble coordinated missions, to verify the presence of children community mediation, child-sensitive approaches, and constructive engagement with security

[14] Art. 39 CRC requires states to take all appropriate measures to promote physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of 'a child victim of armed conflict

[15] Paris Principle 3.6: https://www.refworld.org/docid/465198442.html; UN Security Council Resolution 2427 (2018), para. 20."

[16] States should consider granting amnesty in such cases. See Second Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions, Art. 6(5), Paris Principles 8(7) and Rule 159 of the ICRC Study on Customary IHL

[17] For more information see Watchlists' 2022 Operational Guidance on Negotiating and Implementing Handover Protocols for the Transfer of Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups (CAAFAG).

actors can create safe pathways for release. However, persistent challenges such as insecurity, delays in verification, resistance from commanders, stigma, detention, and funding gaps continue to undermine progress. Implementing child-sensitive verification processes, enabling survivor-centred and gender-sensitive processes and securing reintegration support as soon as possible are essential to protect children.

REINTEGRATION OF CAAFAG

Relevant Principles: 12. DDR and 14. Peace processes

The step of reintegration is included in Principles 12 and 14. Under **Principle 12**, the reintegration element is included in disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration programmes. Peacekeepers should be educated on DDR processes and missions should support and fund long term DDR effort for children.[18] Under **Principle 14**, child protection provision should be part of peace processes, including the release and reintegration of children, the protection of children in justice and reconciliation mechanisms, and the provision of social services for children.[19]

Good Practices and Lessons Learnt

A consistent lesson across all three contexts is the value of **community-based reintegration**. Reintegration succeeds most where it is rooted in families, community networks, and local associations rather than imposed externally. In the Central African Republic, RECOPE networks and NGOs played a decisive role in mobilising families and supporting children in their transition to civilian life. Their approach to offer both formal education support and livelihood activities to CAAFAG has shown positive results in the success of children reintegration. While most reintegration programmes require children to choose between education and livelihood, in the case of CAR, children were provided with a small livelihood opportunity which enabled them to access education by covering the school fees and support their household, creating opportunities for long term sustainability. The presence of RECOPE gave children a sense of belonging and mediated tensions with families who feared reprisals from armed groups. Discreet work by community organisations proved particularly effective, as they were able to navigate sensitive local dynamics without drawing unwanted attention by armed groups.

© UNICEF/UNI864113/Anonymous (CAR)

Supporting families through programmes such as parenting skills sessions for caregivers to address their fears, judgement, stress, and improve parent-child relationships was found as a key element that contributes to a supportive family environment.

[18] Government of Canada (2019) Implementation Guidance for the Vancouver Principles (Chapter 12 Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration)
[19] Government of Canada (2019) Implementation Guidance for the Vancouver Principles (Chapter 14 Peace processes)

The importance of **embedding reintegration in national policy frameworks** has also been highlighted by key informants. In the DRC, the Programme for Disarmament, Demobilisation, Community Recovery, and Stabilisation (PDDRCS) provided an institutional anchor that gave legitimacy to reintegration work, even if resources remained scarce. In South Sudan, the establishment of the national DDR Commission ensured that reintegration followed a recognised and coordinated pathway for both formally and informally released children.

Children awaiting family tracing were placed in interim care centres. Increasingly, many countries are prioritising the use of **interim foster families**, as this approach is less costly, offers a smoother transition into civilian life, especially for girls who feel safer in foster care, and, in some contexts, provides a safer alternative to highly visible centres. The transit centres are only used when there are many children released at once.

In countries such as South Sudan, the UNMISS Child Protection Unit works in close **coordination with child protection actors** to support the reintegration of children. Weekly case conferences are held on Fridays to address complex cases, while the Unit also participates in Child Protection AoR meetings to share information, coordinate assessments, and plan field missions.

Finally, good practices include the involvement of peacekeeping missions in direct or indirect activities that **promote reintegration**. For instance, in the DRC, MONUSCO facilitated the establishment and management of transit centres for CAAFAG and provided funding to national organisations delivering reintegration services. In CAR, the Civil Affairs Unit of MINUSCA contributed to the rehabilitation of government vocational training centres, creating learning opportunities for vulnerable children, including those formerly associated with armed groups. More broadly, in all three countries, peacekeeping missions implemented Quick Impact Projects which, despite their short duration, helped rehabilitate key community infrastructures such as schools, water points, and roads, and provided some funds to national NGO. These initiatives, while limited in scope, contributed to creating a more enabling environment for the reintegration of CAAFAG and the empowerment of local actors.

Challenges

Despite these good practices, reintegration faces persistent structural challenges.

The most widely cited is the **short-term and underfunded nature** of reintegration programmes. In all three contexts, programmes were described as too limited in time and scope to provide meaningful and lasting support. Training opportunities and apprenticeships for former CAAFAG frequently ended prematurely, leaving children with partial skills and no viable livelihoods. The lack of monitoring after the set-up of livelihood programmes was consistently reported, particularly by former CAAFAG interviewed, creating frustration and risk of business failure. Reintegration of CAAFAG is a long-term process that requires sufficient resources to address the multiple needs of children, including mental health and psychosocial support, medical support, family and community sense of belonging, education and economic recovery, as well as protection and care. Short project cycles often fail to deliver durable solutions and undermine the credibility of reintegration efforts, with some children perceiving them as broken promises. This situation also affects NGO capacity to retain qualified personnel due to short term contracts and the financial stability of national child protection actors.

In response to severe funding constraints, the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) has initiated a **humanitarian reset** to enhance the efficiency, effectiveness, and sustainability of humanitarian action. A hyper-prioritised Global Humanitarian Overview (GHO) was released[20], where Humanitarian Coordinators were asked to prioritise "life-saving interventions," and now targets only 64% of the total people targeted for humanitarian assistance in 2025 (178.7 million). Furthermore, the consolidation of the CP AoR into a one single Protection Cluster (which will also have oversight of issues previously covered by the Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and Mine Action Areas of Responsibility), poses a risk to technical child protection coordination at country level, which is critical to coordinate programming to prevent and respond to grave violations, should guardrails not be put in place.[21]

In several contexts, **the risk of re-recruitment** remains extremely high. In parts of South Sudan and CAR, only few child protection actors have the resources to provide a comprehensive reintegration package due to insecurity and limited resources. The withdrawal of U.S. humanitarian funding since January 2025 has further reduced available services, making referrals for children increasingly difficult. Extreme poverty and food insecurity continue to drive recruitment and use, and without sustained reintegration strategies, the cycle of association with armed groups repeats itself.

Insecurity and limited access represent another major constraint. In CAR, reintegration kits could not be distributed in insecure zones, as armed groups robbed their belongings. The lack of markets in unsafe areas to procure specific items for reintegration kits is another challenge. In South Sudan, shifting frontlines restricted access to rural areas, while in the DRC, MONUSCO's gradual withdrawal removed a key source of logistical support for reaching remote communities. These limitations meant that even when programmes existed, they could not reach all children in need.

Reintegration programmes that focus solely on CAAFAG, rather than on vulnerable children including CAAFAG have, at times, unintentionally created **incentives for child recruitment and use** or false claims in order to access services. In the absence of strong coordination, some children were able to receive reintegration packages from multiple NGOs, while communities also sought to benefit from the system. As one key informant in the DRC observed, *"Reintegration started to become a business."*

Another set of challenges relates to **gender norms**, **stigma, and community dynamics**. Girl CAAFAG in particular faced severe discrimination in comparison to boys. Girls associated with armed groups were regularly labelled as "wives" of commanders or were rejected when returning with children born during the period of association. This stigma exacerbated the trauma of their experiences and limited their ability to reintegrate socially. Girls who return to their communities with their own children are also more likely to be economically disadvantaged, and as a result, are at heightened risk of gender-based violence, perpetuating a cycle of violence throughout their lifetime. In some cases, communities even resisted receiving girls back due to fear of reprisals from armed


© UNICEF/UNI519203/Mulala (DRC)

[20]https://humanitarianaction.info/document/hyper-prioritized-global-humanitarian-overview-2025-cruel-math-aid-cuts/article/hyper-prioritized-global-humanitarian-overview-cruel-math-aid-cuts#page-title
[21] The Alliance. (2025) Briefing on the impact of Humanitarian Reform on the CAAC agenda.

groups, while in the DRC, stigma led many girls to self-release without accessing formal support. These patterns illustrate how social norms and gender dynamics continue to undermine the reintegration of girls, despite the presence of reintegration programmes.

Key informants across contexts highlighted that **children with specific needs** remain largely overlooked in reintegration efforts. Cases of injuries, exposure to explosive remnants, and long-term disabilities with the loss of a limb were noted in CAR and South Sudan. Access to specialised medical care, such as surgery, prosthetics, or rehabilitation, remains extremely limited and costly, forcing many children to live with untreated conditions. In the DRC, mental health and psychosocial needs, including trauma, behavioural disorders, and drug dependency, were identified, yet the availability of specialized care is rare. Hearing impairments and mental health conditions were also reported, but services remain scarce, and social workers are not always trained to respond adequately. Transport to specialised centres is frequently impossible in remote or insecure areas, leaving children isolated from assistance.

Children with specific needs frequently face particular challenges, as illustrated by the case of an albino girl in the DRC who was prevented from being released by a commander. Advocacy with the commander to facilitate her release was not successful due to the supposed powers attributed to albinism. In one instance, a CAAFAG reported with a transgender identity was considered as having intellectual disability and as a result was denied the support they needed. Overall, the absence of inclusive programming, the lack of training of social workers, and the scarcity of resources mean that children with specific needs continue to fall through the cracks of reintegration processes.

Finally, reintegration programmes suffer from a **lack of gender-sensitive design**. Packages are regularly generic, failing to include essential items such as dignity kits, reproductive health services, or childcare support for girls returning with infants. The absence of female staff during reintegration processes further restricted the disclosure of sexual violence and other forms of gender-based violence (GBV) and the development of tailored responses (including referrals to specialised GBV, mental health, and psychosocial services for girls). This systemic oversight leaves many girls' needs unmet and perpetuates their marginalisation.

Recommendations

Based on these challenges, several recommendations emerged from the interviews targeting:

Peacekeeping missions UNICEF NGO (national and international)
Member States

Provide Longer Term and Better Resourced Reintegration Programmes

Short project cycles that are less than one year leave children with incomplete training and limited prospects; donors and implementing partners should commit to multi-year funding that allows for sustainable reintegration outcomes. Peacekeeping missions should continue their contribution to direct and indirect reintegration programmes, particularly with national organisations in a context of funding scarcity.

Recognise CAAC as a Priority

Within the Humanitarian Reset, CAAC-related prevention and response services, as well as monitoring and reporting, are explicitly prioritised and protected from cuts.

Promote Multi-sector Contribution

All sectors have a role to play in the reintegration process, particularly health, mental health and psychosocial support, education, economic recovery, food security, and peacebuilding, as well as strategies that promote road access to isolated areas, or infrastructure repair for instance. Reintegration is a collective effort, including the peacekeeping mission, to promote a conducive environment for the reintegration of children, but also for the prevention of (re)recruitment.

Adapt Reintegration to Insecure Environments

Actors should invest in flexible modalities, such as mobile teams and local partnerships, when access is constrained. Collaboration with peacekeeping missions, when guided by clear humanitarian protocols, can provide temporary safe access for reintegration activities.

Foster Community Acceptance

This requires sustained sensitisation campaigns, dialogue with community leaders, and investment in reconciliation processes. Programmes that involve communities directly, for instance support to education for all children in the community, have shown promise in shifting perceptions and promoting community ownership of child protection. The involvement of the community child protection committees, such as the RECOPE, is essential in this process. The empowerment of families is another key element. Families should own the reintegration process to create sustainability and be accompanied through parenting skills programmes. Additionally, the use of interim foster families, rather than transit centres, contributes to ease children's transition into civilian life and supports their acceptance within the community.

Implement the Non-targeted Approach Inclusive of Children at Risk

Reintegration programmes should integrate support such as livelihood opportunities for vulnerable adolescents more broadly, not only for children released from armed groups. This reduces the risk of envy and resentment within communities while tackling risk factors of recruitment and use of children, such as poverty and lack of education opportunities. By combining reintegration with prevention, child protection actors contribute to break the cycle of recruitment and use and re-recruitment.

Maintain or Strengthen Coordination for Reintegration

The reintegration of CAAFAG needs stronger coordination and closer linkage to the release process, with the active involvement of all relevant actors. This can be achieved through platforms such as CAAFAG Task Forces or protection Working Groups that bring together government, peacekeeping missions, UNICEF, NGOs, and the ICRC, which plays a vital role in cross-border family tracing and reintegration. To ensure a comprehensive response, other sectors, including mental health, education, and food security, should also be engaged to contribute to the collective effort.

Promote Inclusive Reintegration Programmes 

Reintegration programmes should be made more inclusive by systematically integrating intersectional approaches such as disability and diversity, as well as gender, age, and social status. This entails enabling access to specialised medical care and mental health and psychosocial support, training social workers to identify and respond to different types of specific needs, and providing tailored support for children with impairment, with mental health conditions, or from minority groups. Partnerships with specialised organisations should be strengthened to extend services such as prosthetics, rehabilitation, or specialised mental health care, while community sensitisation initiatives are needed to reduce stigma and harmful beliefs.

Include Gender-Sensitive Reintegration Strategies 

All reintegration programmes should be tailored to the needs of girls. Girls require specific forms of assistance, including but not limited to dignity and baby kits, mental health and psychosocial support tailored to survivors of sexual violence and other forms of GBV, access to reproductive health services, and childcare support for those returning with babies. Employing more female staff in reintegration teams and training them in survivor-centred techniques would also improve disclosure and ensure that girls' experiences are adequately recognised and addressed.

Ensure Meaningful Participation of CAAFAG 

Reintegration programmes (as well as prevention) should intentionally foster the meaningful participation of CAAFAG throughout design, implementation, and evaluation processes–recognising them not only as active agents in their own recovery, but also as lived-experience experts who bring nuanced perspectives and ideas that can strengthen peace and well-being within their communities.

Engagement must be safe and aligned with the Do No Harm principle, and participation should always reflect the individual's own readiness and self-defined desire to engage. Participation strategies should be responsive to gender, age/life stage, and disability, while also accounting for community norms and access to multisectoral reintegration services.

Conclusion

The reintegration of children associated with armed groups remains a difficult task in all three countries. Nevertheless, the interviews demonstrate that progress is possible when reintegration is rooted in community structures and embedded in national policy frameworks. Good practices show the importance of empathy, confidentiality, and child-centred approaches, while challenges highlight the dangers of short-term, fragmented, or politicised interventions. Moving forward, reintegration efforts must be longer term, more inclusive, and better tailored to the realities of children's lives, with particular attention to the needs of girls and children with special needs. Only then can reintegration contribute not just to the recovery of individual children but also to the rebuilding of communities and the prospects for peace.

MONITORING AND REPORTING ON GRAVE VIOLATIONS AGAINST CHILDREN

Relevant Principle: 6. Monitoring and Reporting

Peacekeeping missions (with a protection mandate) are expected to monitor and report on the six grave violations against children in situations of armed conflict. It sits under the **Principle 6** Monitoring and Reporting which includes guidance on the monitoring and reporting mechanism (MRM), pre-deployment training for peacekeepers on their monitoring and reporting roles and responsibilities on MRM, advocacy for the development of a standardised reporting template and exploration of information sharing opportunities with other regional organisations.[22]

Good Practices and Lessons Learnt

The experience of MRM across CAR, the DRC, and South Sudan shows that the monitoring and reporting mechanism constitutes a robust tool for documenting grave violations against children, supporting accountability and facilitating dialogue with armed groups.

© UNICEF/UNI767627/Benekire (DRC)

A key lesson is the importance of establishing and drawing on **community-level child protection alert networks** to strengthen early warning and incident reporting. In some countries, community-based organisations were trained on the six grave violations and supported with phones and credit to facilitate rapid communication. These experiences show that empowering communities to serve as the first "eyes and ears" of the mechanism increases both coverage and timeliness of data collection.

A further positive lesson is **capacity building on monitoring and reporting**. Across all three countries, UNICEF and peacekeeping missions conducted extensive training for local NGOs, social workers, and community focal points on the documentation of the six grave violations, using the 1612 form. In South Kivu (DRC), training supported by Watchlist enabled local civil society to participate in missions to verify the presence of children in the ranks of the armed forces or armed groups and advocacy with government and armed groups. In CAR, training at the regional and field levels strengthened the interviewing skills of focal points. Reliance on local NGOs to collect data, combined with capacity building through repeated training, allowed for continued monitoring even when access for international actors was restricted. These initiatives not only strengthened the technical capacity of local actors and the quality of monitoring and reporting of grave violations but also built a sense of ownership of the mechanism beyond the UN system.

In addition, the MRM has proven its effectiveness as an engagement and **advocacy tool**. In all countries, verified data has been used by the UN to engage governments and parties to conflict in dialogue to better protect children, to develop, sign, and implement action plans to end and prevent grave violations against

[22] Government of Canada (2019) Implementation Guidance for the Vancouver Principles (Chapter 6 Monitoring and reporting)

children, and to encourage compliance with international standards. In South Sudan, MRM data was used in the engagement with commanders for the release of children, while in the DRC it underpinned engagement with the government and the development of action plans. At global level, the MRM has provided the Security Council with timely, objective, and accurate information to inform their deliberation, conclusions, and resolution. The MRM has enabled the illustration of the impact of armed conflicts on children and created the basis for evidence-based discussions on child rights violations with parties to conflict. As one key informant observed, *"Without MRM[framework], it is hard to have discussions with parties to the conflict."*

Challenges

Throughout its existence since the adoption of Resolution 1612, the MRM has made significant achievements for children. To sustain these, this research identified challenges and elements for reflection.

Coordinating reporting channels has at times proven challenging. In some instances, UNICEF and peacekeeping missions required that directly funded partners would first report the information collected to them, creating delays. The CP AoR also receives information on child protection issues across the country, which may include reports of grave violations. However, information sharing protocols do not always include data exchanges between the CP AoR and the MRM, indicating the need for cooperation on this matter.


© Plan International/Maignant (CAR)

National civil society organisations play a critical role in alerting on grave violations incidents so that affected children can receive assistance, and the incidents can be documented. However, these organisations do not systematically receive feedback on the information they provided and do not have access to the grave violations data and trends analysis they contributed to produce. Many partners expressed the wish to access trends and patterns on grave violations to strengthen their programme interventions, advocacy efforts and fundraising.

In some locations, the MRM also faces difficulties related to **data protection.** In some situations, actors reported fears that sensitive information could fall into the wrong hands, and community focal points faced risks of reprisals, particularly in very insecure and volatile contexts. In South Sudan for example, the risk of reprisals against trained focal points limited their ability to more openly discuss their role in their communities and as a result receive information on grave violations against children. These issues contribute to reducing partners' confidence in the system, and limited the reporting on sensitive cases, including for instances cases of sexual violence and child recruitment.

In some countries, **documenting girls' association** with armed forces and armed groups is difficult, due to gender norms and the lack of "visibility" of associated girls. This is particularly the case when they are used as wives and in domestic roles, which require active documentation of both the sexual abuse as well as the child recruitment violations. Additionally, the cases of sexual abuse and other forms of GBV that are disclosed during the case management process, particularly for boys, are not automatically reported through MRM channels because the sexual abuse information is not available at the same time and emerges subsequently through the provision of a response.

Finally, **resource and capacity constraints** have a direct impact on the MRM. National partners in the DRC reported that fluctuations in financial support left them dependent on sporadic or with no funding. In South Sudan, actors spoke of the burden placed on under-staffed partners to shoulder documentation work without sufficient training or logistical support. Even within peacekeeping missions, budget cuts and recruitment freezes directly impacted the capacity of child protection units, limiting their ability to maintain a sustained level of engagement with partners and communities.

Recommendations

Key informants made several recommendations to address these challenges targeting:

Peacekeeping missions UNICEF NGO (national and international)
Member States

Reinforce Training on Gender-Sensitive Data Reporting

Training on monitoring and reporting should include a stronger focus on gender-sensitive data, particularly in the reporting of girls married, in unions with, or survivors of sexual exploitation by armed groups as child recruitment and use, *and* as sexual abuse. Partners implementing case management should also be trained and sensitised on the reporting of violations disclosed after the verification, such as sexual abuse on girls and boys.

Promote Stronger Investment in Local Actors and Communities

The examples from the DRC show that community-based focal points are essential to data collection, particularly in insecure areas. Providing them with sustained resources, secure reporting tools, and regular training would not only improve coverage but also the quality and timeliness of data collected. The CTFMR should identify feedback modality to national NGOs. They should also be more engaged in advocacy, not only in data collection, to foster ownership.

Strengthen Coordination between UN Organisations

Clear information sharing protocols between UN organisations, including clarity on roles and responsibilities, shared access to databases, and joint decision-making protocols, could promote efficient coordination. The set up of the MRMIMS+ would facilitate co-ownership and role-based access to data.

Promote a Unified Reporting System with the MRMIMS+

Relevant UN agencies should coordinate, including with national actors, to conduct regular and inclusive training of partners on documenting grave violations against children; in line with established and agreed upon information sharing protocols, to follow a coordinated communication tree and centralised reporting channel.

The MRMIMS+ is the approved database to safely store and manage data on grave violations against children. The MRMIMS+ facilitates efficient data collection, management, and reporting, which is particularly critical in a context of limited resources.

Organisations could consider using the MRMIMS+ for some of the conflict affected areas before rolling out the system to the whole country. This would allow staff to practice the system and to identify specific needs for guidance and adjustment before the system is implemented across the country situation.

Streamline Internal Peacekeeping Reporting of Grave Violations 

The development of simple fact sheets with infographics summarising the criteria for each database used by the peacekeeping missions and the SOPs for peacekeepers and gender focal points would support efficient reporting. This should be complemented with regular training as well as alternative learning opportunities such as short videos circulated on WhatsApp groups with peacekeepers. Access across the three databases (MARA, OHCHR, and MRM) for database managers would allow for cross checking and reduction of duplication of data.

Strengthen Confidentiality and Security of Information 

Secure reporting channels, such as remote encrypted digital systems from the MRMIMS+, should be prioritised, and focal points must be trained on confidentiality protocols. Special attention should be given to sensitive cases, including sexual violence and violations committed by state actors, to ensure that survivors and reporters are not put at risk.

Provide Adequate Resources 

Donors should recognise that monitoring and reporting are not peripheral but central to child protection and accountability. Multi-year funding for the CAAC mandate including funds for implementing partners, logistical support for verification of grave violations reports, and sufficient staffing within UNICEF and peacekeeping missions are critical to sustain the system and protecting the most vulnerable population in conflict zones. This would provide the capacity to follow up through direct engagement with armed forces and groups, including via field visits, and the development, monitoring, and implementation of Action Plans.

Conclusion

The Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism remains a powerful tool to document grave violations against children and hold parties accountable. Good practices demonstrate the value of community-based alert networks and the use of MRM data for advocacy. At the same time, access challenges, mission delays, coordination, and resourcing continue to limit its impact. Addressing these issues will strengthen the MRM which continues to serve as a cornerstone of child protection in conflict and a vital source of accountability for grave violations.

CONDUCT AND DISCIPLINE

Relevant Principle: 10. Conduct and Discipline

Safeguarding is a key element of the credibility of peacekeeping missions. It sits under **Principle 10** Conduct and Discipline. This principle entails regular training for peacekeepers, the set-up of a confidential reporting mechanisms, investigations of misconducts, legal accountability, and support to child survivors of misconduct, among others.[23]

Good Practices and Lessons Learnt

The UN Trust Fund in Support of Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse has emerged as an essential mechanism for restoring dignity and autonomy to victims and children born of sexual abuse. Since its establishment in 2016, the fund has distributed around $5 million and supported over 1,600 direct beneficiaries and 58,000 indirect beneficiaries in Haiti, Liberia, CAR, South Sudan, and the DRC. Beneficiaries received psychosocial support, medical care, vocational training, income-generating activities, and school fee assistance.[24] In CAR, the DRC, and South Sudan, such initiatives have allowed beneficiaries to rebuild their lives.

Complementing these efforts, the UN's Conduct in Field Missions initiative demonstrates the importance of **prevention, enforcement, and remedial action** in upholding peacekeeping integrity. Rolling out training on UN standards of conduct before and after deployment, establishing community-based reporting mechanisms, and vetting personnel for past misconduct have helped promote a zero-tolerance policy across missions.[25] In the DRC, some national organisations are involved in community awareness-raising on the prevention of sexual abuse and exploitation, and the set-up of reporting mechanisms, including anonymous suggestion boxes.


© UNICEF/UN0563501/Alhindawi (DRC)

Additionally, a **Policy on Accountability for Conduct and Discipline in Field Missions** was issued in 2015 including role and responsibilities for addressing misconduct and enforcing accountability. In CAR, where allegations of sexual exploitation by non-UN foreign forces surfaced in 2015, the UN responded with an independent review panel and appointed a Special Coordinator to harmonise system-wide reforms, including structure for rapid investigation teams, to bolster immediate response and accountability.[26]

Challenges

Despite the proactive framework outlined above, several persistent obstacles limit effectiveness and sustainability.

---

[23] Government of Canada (2019) Implementation Guidance for the Vancouver Principles (Chapter 10 Conduct and Discipline)
[24] United Nations (2023) Annual report of the Trust Fund in Support of Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
[25] United Nations. Conduct in UN field missions. Addressing sexual exploitation and abuse. United Nations. https://conduct.unmissions.org/addressing (Consulted on 26/08/2025)
[26] Ibid

Funding remains stretched and insufficient to support survivors. Though over $5 million supported 20 projects, including ones in CAR, the DRC, and South Sudan, more than $3 million was needed to implement new projects effectively.[27] In some countries, women's associations have reported that survivors of sexual abuse perpetrated by UN peacekeepers received an allocation from the peacekeeping mission of $250, as a compensation. Yet this amount is insufficient for the needs of survivors in the long-term, particularly for those who are parents of children born of sexual abuse and exploitation.

In some instances, girls faced **difficulties in filing complaints** to the peacekeeping mission. Some survivors received financial support for the care of their children from the perpetrator, but when the mission closes and the perpetrator leaves the country, the girls are left without any assistance. Women's associations have noticed an increase in the number of complaints and requests for support as the mission is drawdown.

A further barrier is the **difficulty girls face seeking accountability through the national justice system** when the alleged perpetrators have left the country. Reports from contexts such as the DRC and CAR indicate that when abuse is reported, alleged perpetrators are dismissed and sent back to their country of origin. Survivors are then left with no legal avenue to pursue justice in their country. Although there are some legal actions taken in the country of origin, the survivors often feel dispossessed of the process. They have no control and regularly no information on the legal actions taken. The departure of perpetrators thus leaves complaints unprocessed in the country where the abuse took place.

Additionally, in some locations, the lack of **knowledge of international standards and of the six grave violations** led to the use of children by UN peacekeepers. The children are used to run errands to buy cigarettes, collect water, or find women. Children sleep next to the camp, to be ready to respond to the needs of peacekeepers. These cases fall outside the scope of the MRM, which is designed to monitor violations committed by parties to armed conflict. Since most peacekeeping missions do not qualify as "parties to conflict," these cases do not meet the MRM's reporting criteria. In one country, limited awareness of international standards by peacekeepers resulted in the inappropriate use of a school compound, where the mission's helicopter was used to land in the schoolyard.


© UNICEF/UNI670831/Hoveyda (DRC)

Within peacekeeping missions, enforcing standards remains **complex and slow-moving**. While the UN has adopted a prevention and response strategy involving training, risk assessments, local Task Forces, and timely investigations, systemic issues persist. This includes weak awareness of procedures, limited investigation capacity, high personnel turnover, and cultural resistance within missions, hindering rapid response and enforcement. For example, in one context two girls became pregnant as a result of sexual exploitation by peacekeepers. Although the incident was promptly reported to the mission by an NGO, the case remained unresolved for months while awaiting responses from headquarters. Furthermore,

[27] United Nations. Trust Fund help victims and children born of sexual abuse, appeals for continued support. UN News. 20 July 2023. https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/07/1138967 (Consulted on 26/08/2025)

missions rely on Member States for disciplinary action (e.g. court-martial of perpetrators), which can delay justice and damage credibility if not handled promptly.[28]

Recommendations

Key informants made several recommendations to address these challenges involving:

Peacekeeping missions UNICEF NGO (national and international)
Member States

Mobilise Sustained, Multi-Year Funding for the UN Trust Fund

Donors and missions should be encouraged to commit to the full funding envelope required to sustain projects implemented by the UN Trust Fund in contexts like CAR, the DRC, and South Sudan. For instance, a percentage of the missions' budget could be allocated to the Trust Fund. This would allow for uninterrupted support for survivors of sexual abuse and their children, ranging from psychosocial care to livelihood support and educational assistance during and after the drawdown of peacekeeping missions.

Include the Use of Children by UN Peacekeepers in Existing Reporting Mechanisms

The use or exploitation of children by peacekeepers should be explicitly recognised as a violation and included in existing conduct and discipline reporting systems. This requires clear operational definitions, mandatory awareness among all mission personnel, (such as through targeted training, scenario-based exercises, and clear "dos and don'ts"); and consistent coordination with child protection actors and MRM focal points to ensure the child-sensitive handling of cases. Reporting pathways must allow for confidential, child-friendly complaint submission by victims or witnesses, including through community-based channels. Regular analysis of reported cases and public dissemination of anonymised data would strengthen transparency and deterrence. Integrating this within established mechanisms, while maintaining distinction from the MRM, would close a critical protection gap and reinforce accountability across all tiers of UN peacekeeping.

Strengthen Prevention and Accountability Systems

This requires facilitating the process to file complaints and improving the responsiveness of complaint mechanisms and ensuring immediate mobilisation of Rapid Response and Investigating Teams. It also includes reinforcing training on conduct standards for all UN peacekeepers with regular refreshers through short videos shared on WhatsApp groups, or through online quizzes for instance, in addition to pre-deployment and on arrival in-person training. Clear expectations and timelines for Member State accountability (e.g. sanctions or repatriation within set periods) should be enforced, as outlined in Security Council Resolution 2272.

[28] United Nations. Trust Fund help victims and children born of sexual abuse, appeals for continued support. UN News. 20 July 2023. https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/07/1138967 (Consulted on 26/08/2025)

Enhance Coordination Across Prevention and Response Initiatives 

Align the Trust Fund's projects closely with Conduct and Discipline Teams, victim assistance units, and local service providers to ensure survivors receive complementary support, taking into consideration the presence of children born of sexual violence, from complaint reporting to psychosocial care and economic empowerment. Women should also be informed of the legal proceedings against the perpetrator in their country of origin if no legal actions can be taken in the host country. The complaint mechanism should remain available at least one year after the drawdown or closure of the mission to allow all women to file complaints.

Provide Mental Health and Psychosocial Support to Peacekeeping Personnel 

In line with the Vancouver Principle 13, the provision of mental health and psychosocial well-being of peacekeepers before, during, and after deployment could reduce stress, mitigate mental health adversities, and strengthen adherence to conduct and discipline principles.

Conclusion

Safeguarding under Principle 10 is central to the legitimacy of peacekeeping missions, yet persistent gaps undermine trust and accountability. Good practices such as the UN Trust Fund and community-based reporting mechanisms have supported survivors and children born of sexual exploitation, demonstrating the importance of prevention, response, and rehabilitation. However, underfunding, and reliance on Member States for accountability continue to leave survivors without adequate remedies. To restore credibility, peacekeeping must strengthen prevention through regular training, ensure timely justice, and integrate survivor-centred support into all phases of mission drawdown. Only through robust conduct and discipline measures can peacekeeping missions uphold zero tolerance policy and protect the rights of children and communities they serve.

GIRLS ASSOCIATED WITH ARMED FORCES AND ARMED GROUPS

Relevant Principle: 11. Contribution of Women

The situation of girls is tackled through **Principle 11** on Contribution of Women. Under Principle 11, there are provisions to promote gender diversity in all teams, including the child protection focal points and police units; and to train peacekeepers on the gender dimensions of child recruitment and use of children in armed conflict, among others.[29]

[29] Government of Canada (2019) Implementation Guidance for the Vancouver Principles. (Chapter 11 Contribution of Women)

Good Practices and Lessons Learnt

Community-based approaches have been central to reducing stigma and encouraging disclosure of girls' association with armed groups, particularly in CAR. Structured dialogues with local leaders, women's associations, and youth groups have helped to shift perceptions about returning girls. In some countries, women's associations were identified as key partners to discreetly identify and refer girls who are married to combatants, helping practitioners to recognise CAAFAG cases that would otherwise be normalised as child marriage. By framing reintegration as a benefit for the whole community, programs created collective ownership and reduced the risks of rejection.

In both the DRC and South Sudan, the inclusion of **female child protection officers during verification and reintegration** has proven transformative. Girl CAAFAG interviewed for this study reported that they are more willing to disclose experiences of sexual violence and forced marriage to women rather than to male staff. The continuity of female caseworkers from verification through reintegration increased trust and improved psychosocial outcomes.


© UNICEF/UNI646927/Naftalin (South Sudan)

Several **gender-sensitive reintegration models** have shown positive results. In South Sudan, faith-based organisations focused exclusively on girls and combined education, counselling, and vocational training to provide girls with sustainable pathways to resilience and prevent sexual exploitation. In the DRC, the use of carefully selected foster families, which often placed girl CAAFAG with girls of similar age, provided stability and companionship and reducing isolation during reintegration. In CAR, relocation to different communities was used to protect girls from stigma when returning home was unsafe. This option proved especially important for girls with children born of sexual violence.

Where programs addressed **girls' needs more holistically**, through dignity kits, psychosocial care, baby kits, and livelihood opportunities such as food processing or embroidery, reintegration was more successful. In South Sudan, targeted baby kits and medical support helped adolescent mothers meet basic needs and reduced risks of exploitation.

Challenges

Notwithstanding these encouraging practices, serious challenges persist to support the reintegration of girls across the three contexts.

Invisibility and misrecognition of girls is a recurrent challenge. In some countries commanders conceal girls during missions to verify the presence of children by considering them as "wives" or domestic workers. For example, this practice was reported in South Sudan, where commanders asserted "ownership" over girls. In CAR, commanders frequently excluded girls from release lists, arguing that they were not combatants.

Compounding this, practitioners themselves sometimes failed to classify child marriage with armed force or armed group members as a form of association. In some countries, social norms that normalise child marriage further aggravated the invisibility of girls in unions with fighters. As a result, these cases are

overlooked or misclassified, leaving girls invisible in protection responses tailored to association with armed forces or armed groups.

Stigma remains one of the most significant barriers to reintegration for girls. Girls who return with children, particularly in the DRC and CAR, are frequently rejected by families and communities. One informant from the DRC noted, "*They are self-released, and the culture weighs on them. We (community members) consider them as the wife of a military, and they have less chances to remarry*." Girls who return with children face the greatest barriers to reintegration, often facing rejection from families and communities unwilling to care for children born of armed groups. They may be seen as complicit rather than as victims, which can result in exclusion, violence, or exploitation for both the girls and their children. As a result, some girls are reluctant to leave the armed group. In the DRC, in several instances, despite sustained advocacy and sensitisation, the girls themselves refused to leave, fearing shame and social rejection upon return to their communities. Pregnant girls in particular may prefer to remain in armed groups, where their status, however exploitative, is more socially accepted than in civilian life.


© UNICEF/UNI614327/Benekire (DRC)

Across all contexts, field practitioners face **resource limitation**. Reintegration packages frequently fail to meet girls' multi-faceted specific needs. For example, in CAR, some programs designed primarily for boys overlooked childcare and reproductive health services. In the DRC, financial allocations per child rarely covered the cost of long-term psychosocial care or reproductive health needs.

Sustained follow-up during the reintegration process is often absent. In the DRC, girls expressed ambivalence between the desire to be free of association from the armed group, but also a fear of stigma should they return to their community. Without long-term psychosocial or economic support, some considered rejoining armed groups. Weak community-level systems, combined with underfunding of gender-sensitive reintegration interventions, meant that many reintegration processes ended prematurely, leaving girls vulnerable to exploitation.

Recommendations

To overcome these challenges, reforms and programmatic adjustments are required directed at:

Peacekeeping missions UNICEF NGO (national and international)
Member States

Conduct a Gender Analysis

In all countries, a context-specific gender analysis should be conducted to identify the most effective mechanisms for locating and supporting girls associated with armed forces and armed groups. Gender analyses should be intersectional, taking into account gender, alongside age and social status, including disability status.

Contextualise and Disseminate the Technical Note on Girls

The technical note developed by the CAAFAG Task Force of the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action on girls associated with armed forces and armed groups (published in 2020) should be contextualised and disseminated through webinars and workshops to ensure that all actors are trained on gender dynamic and strategies to prevent recruitment and use, identify, release, and reintegrate girls.

Recognise the Forms of Girls' Association

It is essential to strengthen the recognition of girls' association with armed groups in all its forms, including child marriage and sexual exploitation. Embedding gender analysis into DDR programmes would ensure that their realities are explicitly addressed and that girl survivors of child marriage and sexual exploitation are also considered as CAAFAG.

Develop a Guidance Note on Child Recruitment and Use (OSRSG CAAC)

The SRSG CAAC has already developed guidance notes on abduction and denial of humanitarian access. The development of a Guidance Note focusing on child recruitment and use would provide concrete and practical guidance to CTFMR to document and verify cases of child recruitment and use, including the various forms of girls' recruitment and use.

Develop Identification Strategies of Girls

Deliberate strategies are required to ensure that girls are not missed during identification and release processes. Missions to verify the presence of children must be planned with the deliberate intention of identifying hidden cases of girls' association, rather than relying on passive observation, but without stigmatising girls or putting them in danger. This includes engaging women's associations and gender-based violence service providers as entry points to identify girls.

Ensure Gender-Disaggregated Data (SRSG CAAC)

Reliable gender-disaggregated data collection across all monitoring systems is important to capture the real scale of the issue and inform evidence-based responses. For instance, the annual SRSG CAAC report should include disaggregated data by gender in the overall number of children documented per violation.

Implement Survivor-Centred Approaches

The systematic deployment of female staff in teams conducting missions to verify the presence of children and case management has proven essential, as girls are more likely to disclose sensitive experiences of violence and coercion when interviewed by empathetic and non-judgemental women. The training of members of the verification team in survivor-centred approaches will ensure ethical and respectful interviews of girls' survivor of sexual abuse (recommendation from girl CAAFAG).

Develop Gender-Sensitive Reintegration Programmes

Reintegration programs must be tailored to meet girls' multi-faceted and specific needs. Standard packages rarely provide the holistic package of services that adolescent mothers or survivors of sexual

violence require to successfully reintegrate. Adapted support should include dignity kits, baby kits, childcare services, sexual and reproductive health, and psychosocial counselling.

Relocation options should be considered for girls who cannot safely reintegrate into their home communities due to stigma, threats, or the presence of their former captors. These relocation pathways, preferably in locations where they have trusted family members and a support network, should be accompanied by psychosocial support to recover and foster new beginnings. Reintegration support with multi-year funding must cover long-term psychosocial support as well as sexual and reproductive health services such as post-delivery support and treatment for sexually transmitted diseases or infections, recognising that recovery from trauma and marginalisation cannot be achieved in short project cycles.

Promote Community Engagement and Social Acceptance

Community-level engagement is central to breaking the cycles of stigma and rejection that undermine girls' reintegration. Partnerships with women's associations, youth groups, and religious leaders can foster more inclusive environments and encourage families to accept returning girls. Awareness campaigns, when appropriate, should frame child marriage and sexual exploitation as forms of child recruitment and use, challenging harmful norms that normalise these abuses. The involvement of key influencers like faith leaders and family-based interventions, such as parenting skills or psychosocial support, would help ease some of the stigma. Beyond sensitisation, investment in practical support structures, such as community-based foster care and mentoring programs, is needed to provide safe environments, especially for adolescent mothers. These approaches not only enhance reintegration but also prevent re-marginalisation and the risk of re-recruitment.

Conclusion

The experiences from CAR, the DRC, and South Sudan show both the potential and the shortcomings of current approaches to addressing girls' association with armed forces and armed groups. Good practices demonstrate that gender-sensitive staffing, holistic reintegration packages, and strong community engagement can make reintegration safer and more sustainable. Yet persistent challenges such as invisibility, stigma, and underfunding continue to leave many girls at risk of rejection or re-recruitment. Addressing these requires systemic reforms to ensure recognition, accountability, and long-term support tailored to girls' needs.

COORDINATION

Relevant Principles: 4. Child Protection Focal Points and 5. Doctrine, Training and Education

Principle 4 promotes internal and external coordination with child protection focal points and child protection advisors. This includes that role and responsibilities are clearly articulated; and the training of focal points integrated into the force. [30] **Principle 5**, particularly the training component, is essential to

[30] Government of Canada (2019) Implementation Guidance for the Vancouver Principles (Chapter 4 Child Protection focal points)

effective coordination. It includes pre-deployment and ongoing training of UN peacekeepers on the prevention of child recruitment and use.[31]

Good Practices and Lessons Learnt

Within the UN peacekeeping missions, Child Protection mandates are well recognised across most missions, particularly at senior military levels. Child Protection officers maintain effective working relations with other mission components such as Human Rights, Civil Affairs, Protection of Civilian, and Women's Protection. Joint activities, such as weekly coordination meetings, shared reporting systems like SAGE, and collaborative prison visits, help ensure that information flows between divisions and that violations affecting children are systematically documented and addressed.

Peacekeeping missions have actively contributed to the implementation of child protection mandates. Civil Affairs, Human Rights, Child Protection, and Gender Units collaborate to monitor violations, collect information, and engage local communities in prevention efforts. These units frequently work in coordination with national actors and NGOs to conduct public awareness campaigns, facilitate dialogues with armed groups, and promote respect for international humanitarian law.

In all three contexts, **coordination between peacekeeping missions and child protection actors** has been critical for the identification, release, and reintegration of children associated with armed forces and armed groups. Peacekeeping collaboration with UNICEF, NGOs, and the Ministry of Social Affairs allowed for joint missions to verify the presence of children and shared logistical resources, including helicopters and vehicles, which enabled access to remote areas.

In the DRC, civil society organisations collaborated with MONUSCO's Human Rights and Child Protection sections to identify and refer children, provide medical, psychosocial, legal, and educational support for children, especially survivors of sexual violence. The availability of funds through the Quick Impact Projects, or through Human Rights, or Civil Affairs units supported many national NGO to provide services to CAAFAG and contributed to their reintegration.

In South Sudan and the DRC, technical Working Groups brought together UN peacekeeping missions, UNICEF, and the government to jointly manage prevention, release, and reintegration of children and ensured that action plans for child protection were monitored and contextualised.


© UNICEF/UN0587974/Wenga (DRC)

In the DRC, MONUSCO established a network of civil society organisations working to prevent child recruitment and use, holding annual meetings to support the mapping of armed groups and to coordinate efforts for the identification and release of children. This platform also provided national organisations with the opportunity to connect and position themselves as part of a broader, collective response.

[31] Government of Canada (2019) Implementation Guidance for the Vancouver Principles (Chapter 5 Doctrine, Training and Education)

The establishment of **country Task Force** facilitates coordination at both national and local levels. In all countries, the Child Protection sub-cluster and the UN Country Task Force on Monitoring and Reporting (CTFMR) facilitated regular information exchange and advocacy.

Challenges

Despite these good coordination practices, some challenges have been reported by key informants.

The **frequent turnover of military contingents** in peacekeeping missions led to inconsistent knowledge of child protection procedures. In the DRC, contingents varied widely in their capacity. Some were proactive in identifying and referring children, while others lacked training on MRM and child-sensitive approaches. Similar issues arose in South Sudan, where focal points in the peacekeeping force changed frequently, requiring repeated training.

In some countries, the Child Protection focal points within the peacekeeping force are also responsible for gender, protection of civilians, conflict related sexual violence, and sexual exploitation and abuse. The **multiplication of responsibilities** affects the effectiveness in addressing all five components of their role.

The consolidation of Child Protection with Human Rights sections in some missions, while it contributed to stronger collaboration across sections, has also reduced Child Protection visibility, blurred mandates, and limited access to political decision-making spaces. Coordination is also hampered by bureaucratic silos; Joint Operations Centres, aimed at liaising military with civilian units of the mission, frequently rely on incomplete data and protection issues risk being overshadowed by broader political priorities.

Internal reporting within peacekeeping missions has faced difficulties that have resulted in duplication of efforts and an underuse of available resources at times. In contexts where child protection units are integrated within human rights sections, coordination between teams has improved, but overlaps in data collection remain. Differences in categories of perpetrators, types of violations, and levels of triangulation across databases, such as MARA, (which focuses on conflict-related sexual violence), OHCHR's human rights reporting, and the MRM, further complicate reporting. Peacekeepers and the gender focal point, at times lack clarity on reporting criteria. While their mandate is primarily to ensure the physical protection of civilians, they are also expected to transmit allegations of abuse encountered during patrols through gender focal points, without engaging in investigations or evidence gathering. In practice, however, some commanders request that peacekeepers take photographs of survivors to substantiate reports, a practice that contradicts standard operating procedures. Combined with high turnover within peacekeeping contingents (six months to one year) and insufficient training on reporting standards, these issues contribute to the underreporting of grave violations, despite the significant resources available within peacekeeping missions.

In many contexts, **national organisations feel sidelined** from key coordination bodies. National NGOs are not part of the CTFMR for security reasons, yet this excludes them from coordination networks despite their frontline role.

Additionally, the **UN 80 Initiative** (UN80), a flagship reform process in the lead up to the UN's 80th anniversary is aimed at streamlining the UN in response to the persistent funding challenges it faces. As part of this, workstream three of this initiative focuses on "Changing Structures and Realigning Programmes". Some proposed reforms recommend that for future peace operations, steps would be

taken to delegate relevant programmatic tasks such as rule of law, governance, and child protection – and the associated resources – to UN system entities best equipped to deliver them to allow missions and entities to exercise their comparative advantage and avoid duplication.[32] While the exact meaning of this still needs to be understood, a complete handover of child protection tasks for future missions to UN system entities would be problematic. Child protection in peace operations is not only programmatic; it entails collaboration across mission components to mainstream child protection, the monitoring and reporting of grave violations, advising leadership, negotiating with armed forces and groups to prevent and end violations, strengthening national capacities, and training mission personnel. These functions cannot be replicated by external UN entities, whose resources are already under severe strain.[33]

Recommendations

Key informants made several recommendations to address these challenges targeting:

Peacekeeping missions UNICEF NGO (national and international)
Member States

Strengthen Inclusive and Transparent Coordination

Coordination platforms must be more inclusive of national NGOs, who play a frontline role in prevention, release, and reintegration, while ensuring their security. Greater transparency in information-sharing, while ensuring confidentiality, would also improve trust.

Improve Responsiveness and Reduce Bureaucracy

In some countries, actors suggested more direct communication channels between NGOs and UN peacekeeping missions to avoid bottlenecks.

Institutionalise Regular Training

To counter high turnover, continuous and standardised training on child protection should be mandatory for all peacekeeping contingents. In all countries, NGOs stressed the need for pre-deployment training, as well as refresher courses on MRM and SOPs for interacting with children. Additionally, regular refresher trainings of military and police focal points both from the mission and from the host country would ensure continuity.

Strengthen Child Protection Visibility

Child Protection units must maintain independent visibility, separate budget lines, and access to high-level decision-making to ensure that child protection remains a core priority within mission political strategies, including in DDR negotiations, recognising that child protection can also be an entry point to other political negotiations.

---

[32] Report of the Secretary-General, UN80 INITIATIVE, Workstream 3: Changing Structures and Realigning Programme, Shifting Paradigms: United to Deliver, 18 September 2025, para. 23. Full report available at:https://www.un.org/un80-initiative/sites/default/files/2025-09/UN80_WS3-1_250918_1901.pdf

[33] The Alliance. 2025. Briefing on the Impact of Humanitarian Reform on the CAAC Agenda.

Safeguard Peace Operations Child Protection Capacity

In a context of limited funding, child protection capacity should be protected from cuts, such as Child Protection Adviser (CPA) posts and child protection units in mission budgets, including in the context of mission transitions and withdrawals, with dedicated GA Fifth Committee resources.

Conclusion

Effective coordination is at the heart of protecting children in contexts affected by conflict, as highlighted in Principles 4 and 5 of the Vancouver Principles. Good practices from CAR, the DRC, and South Sudan show that effective collaboration between UNICEF, NGOs, governments, and peacekeeping missions can achieve tangible results. Yet persistent gaps, including high turnover, overlapping mandates, and the sidelining of national NGOs, undermine consistency and sustainability. Strengthening training, clarifying roles through SOPs, and enabling child protection retains visibility at the highest decision-making levels are critical.

PLANNING OF DRAWDOWN AND TRANSITIONS

The planning of drawdown and transitions is not part of the Vancouver Principles; however, it is essential to consider anticipating handover and minimising disruption. This section is based on the findings from the DRC, where the MONUSCO has drawdown in the South Kivu in 2024.

Good Practices and Lessons Learnt

The planning and transition of drawdown processes led to a relatively smooth transition, particularly in the DRC. In the South Kivu, where the drawdown was planned ahead of time, MONUSCO managed a partial transfer of responsibilities to UNICEF, including embedding staff within UNICEF structures for MRM continuity. This arrangement allowed civil society actors to continue documenting grave violations and receiving training and support, even after peacekeepers had left.

One of the most significant lessons has been the value of **local civil society and community focal points**. In the DRC, MONUSCO held consultations with community members and the civil society to communicate about the drawdown and to plan the steps for the handover. A workshop with national NGOs helped to develop a strategy for the handover of the various roles and responsibilities of MONUSCO.

In the DRC, training of NGOs and community leaders prior to withdrawal enabled them to sustain monitoring and advocacy. In the DRC, civil society organisations were trained by MONUSCO to safely continue **negotiations with armed groups** for the prevention of recruitment and release of children after the mission left.

In contexts where **governments were involved** early in planning, some positive practices emerged. In the DRC, the transition was aligned with the national DDR programme, which provided a degree of legitimacy and ownership.

Challenges

Although lessons learnt and good practices have been drawn from a few countries, the drawdown of a mission is extremely complex.

One of the most immediate challenges following withdrawals is the **loss of secure access to conflict-affected areas**. In the DRC, actors reported that without MONUSCO's helicopters and escorts, areas such as Tanganyika became unreachable. In the DRC, peacekeepers' vehicles, aviation, and bases had provided essential security and mobility to child protection actors. Their withdrawal left NGOs and UNICEF exposed, unable to safely travel to conflict zones. This compounded risks for community focal points, who faced threats and mistreatment without international protection.

In the DRC, although the drawdown was planned with **handover of child protection responsibilities** to UNICEF and some peacekeeping child protection officers were hired by UNICEF, the departure of the mission left civil society organisation without the logistical and security to access affected areas which became unreachable. The transfer of grave violation data, as well as names and contact details of armed groups focal points proved difficult, marked by lengthy authorisation processes. Moreover, the plan for the handover of roles and responsibilities, particularly to national organisations has not been funded, as the timing coinciding with the US withdrawal of international humanitarian aid.

In the DRC, UNICEF absorbed some peacekeeping mission staff but with **limited budget** to implement the MRM activities. While the **mandate of negotiating with armed groups** was handed over to a few national NGOs and to UNICEF, gaps remain particularly with the new authorities who have taken control of North and South Kivu since the crisis started in January 2025.

The absence of peacekeepers was followed by **a spike in child recruitment and use**. In South Kivu (DRC), key informants reported that armed groups leaders felt more impunity to recruit children after the departure of MONUSCO, whereas monitoring and reporting remained present. The new crisis that started a few months after their withdrawal led to an increase in the recruitment of children, despite ongoing discussions and engagement to stop recruitment.

Peacekeeping missions often held unique **political leverage** with governments and armed groups, and their departure left a vacuum. In the DRC, local NGOs noted that without MONUSCO's authority, they were more vulnerable and lacked influence in pressing for releases.

Recommendations

Based on these learnings, key informants made some recommendations targeting:

 Peacekeeping missions

 Member States

 UNICEF

Advocate for Gradual and Well-Planned Transitions 

Withdrawals should be phased and carefully sequenced, with clear guidance on which responsibilities can be transferred to governments, UN agencies, or NGOs, and which require continued international engagement. Future transitions should include joint planning workshops with governments, UN agencies, donors, and national NGOs to ensure ownership and preparedness. Future transitions should also include clear guidance on the handover of databases, including those related to armed groups, to safeguard institutional memory and ensure the mandate to negotiate with parties to the conflict can continue without disruption.

Plan Handover of Logistical Support 

The Mission should strengthen national actors by transferring vehicles, IT equipment, and other essential resources and knowledge to support them in carrying out their new roles and responsibilities, particularly in relation to MRM activities and the transportation of released children, especially in contexts where the armed conflict is still ongoing.

Embed CAAC Agenda in Mission Transitions 

The Mission should ensure that child protection expertise is integrated into UN Country Teams (UNCTs) and Country Task Force on Monitoring and Reporting (CTFMR) during mission drawdowns, maintaining full functionality of monitoring and reporting of grave violations against children and child protection commitments. Adequate financial and human resources should be allocated to the CTFMR to sustain MRM functions, support the release of children and continue to engage with parties to conflict on action plans, and to monitor progress on existing action plans.

Explore Alternative Partners to Negotiate with Armed Groups 

During the drawdown and ahead of the departure of the peacekeeping mission, the UN, under the leadership of the resident coordinator, should agree on which organisations will take over the engagement with armed actors. This can be done building on existing channels of communication including those related to humanitarian access. When foreign actors are involved in peace negotiations, advocacy should promote the inclusion of child protection considerations, particularly within DDR discussions.

Strengthen National and Community Capacities 

Efforts must prioritise both immediate and long-term strategies. Investments in national NGOs and community structures should be scaled up well before withdrawal. This includes training on MRM, peacebuilding and negotiation skills, strengthening national systems, enhancing coordination among humanitarian actors, and enabling accountability for grave violations. In the DRC, national NGO trained by MONUSCO continued to negotiate with armed groups even after withdrawal. Expanding such models will help ensure continuity when it is feasible and safe. National NGOs should also be formally integrated into coordination and given access to resources.

Secure Long-Term Funding

Donors should ensure multi-year financing for UNICEF to bridge the gap left by peacekeepers' departure. In the DRC, sudden funding shortfalls led to gaps in monitoring, verification, and interim care, as well as reintegration support resources. Long-term commitments would allow the CTFMR, led by UNICEF, UN agencies, and NGOs to expand and adapt their operations in response to growing responsibilities after missions' departure.

Conclusion

The experiences of the DRC highlight that planning drawdowns and transitions is essential to avoid protection gaps for children, especially those victims or at risk of grave violations. Where processes were gradual and inclusive, as in South Kivu, continuity was partly ensured through staff transfers, community engagement, and alignment with national DDR structures. In regard to the CAAC Agenda, gaps include operationalisation of MRM, dialogue with parties to the conflict, signing, and implementation of peace agreements. Sustaining child protection after peacekeepers leave requires phased transitions, strong investment in national and community capacities, and full compliance with UN guidelines and policies on mandate and resource transfers, including handover of funds, databases, and personnel to mitigate the risk of post-withdrawal instability.

CONCLUSION

This Working Paper underscores the critical importance of strengthening collaboration between peacekeeping missions and child protection actors in the prevention of child recruitment and use, release, reintegration, and monitoring of grave violations, in line with the Vancouver Principles. In a context of shrinking humanitarian funding, it becomes imperative to streamline coordination across all actors. Efficient use of limited resources demands that peacekeeping missions, UNICEF, governments, NGOs, and community structures avoid duplication and build on each other's comparative strengths. Platforms such as technical Working Groups, and the Child Protection AoR have proven their value in aligning interventions and must be taken on by the Protection Cluster and adapted to meet new challenges.

Additionally, national actors should be better engaged and supported at all stages of the process. National NGOs, community protection networks, and local leaders are frequently the first to access areas where international actors cannot operate, and their contextual knowledge is indispensable for prevention, release, reintegration, and monitoring and reporting (MRM). Yet these actors remain underfunded, disproportionately impacted by funding cuts, and too often sidelined from decision-making processes. Sustainable progress requires that they are not only supported through capacity strengthening and longer-term financing, but also granted full participation in coordination platforms, enabling their leadership and ownership of child protection strategies.


© UNICEF/UNI614330/Benekire (DRC)

At the same time, reintegration cannot succeed within short project cycles. Multi-year, flexible funding is needed to ensure continuity, particularly for psychosocial support, education, and livelihoods. Without long-term strategies, both release and reintegration risk becoming symbolic steps rather than pathways to lasting recovery and resilience. This is especially relevant for adolescent mothers and girls returning with children, who require tailored support beyond the standard reintegration package.

Gender-sensitive and inclusive approaches must be systematically embedded in all programming. Girls remain among the most invisible and at-risk, regularly hidden during verification of the presence of children or misclassified as “wives” rather than as CAAFAG. Ensuring female staff are part of verification teams in line with Principle 11 Contribution of Women, providing adapted reintegration packages, and offering relocation options when stigma or threats are too severe are essential measures to protect their rights and dignity.

Another critical element is the preservation of political leverage highlighted in Principle 12 Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration. Peacekeeping missions play a unique role in negotiating with governments and armed groups, creating entry points for dialogue that national or humanitarian actors alone may struggle to sustain. As missions draw down, it is essential that this political space for child protection is maintained through successor arrangements involving UNICEF, Resident Coordinators, or other mechanisms backed by international support.

Finally, credibility and effectiveness depend on strong accountability and safeguarding in line with the Principle 10 Conduct and Discipline. At the same time, peacekeeping missions must uphold the highest standards of conduct and discipline to protect children from exploitation and abuse, reinforcing community trust in international engagement.

Community ownership and resilience are the foundation of sustainable child protection. Investing in local leaders, women’s associations, and community networks not only reduces stigma but also provides safe and supportive environments for children to return to. By positioning reintegration as a collective benefit for the whole community, these approaches strengthen acceptance, reduce risks of re-recruitment, and build long-term protective systems.

Anchored in the Vancouver Principles, these measures are essential to ensure that children associated with armed groups are recognised, protected, and supported in rebuilding their lives.