



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.

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We also would like to acknowledge the review of the Working Paper from additional colleagues, namely Abigail 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 Executive Summary on the collaboration between peacekeeping missions and child protection actors (2026).

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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, and 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 armed 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.