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paper 42

Demobilizing and Reintegrating Afghanistan's Young Soldiers

*A Review and Assessment
of Program Planning and
Implementation*

Demobilizing and reintegrating Afghanistan's young soldiers

A review and assessment of program planning and implementation

by Vera Chrobok



Bundesministerium für
wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit
und Entwicklung



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About the author

Vera Chrobok is currently working as an independent researcher and consultant, mainly on issues related to child protection during and after conflicts. In her previous position as a researcher at the Bonn International Center for Conversion (BICC) she worked on a variety of topics, such as the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DD&R) of ex-combatants (predominantly children), gender and conflict, and small arms control. In 2003, she managed an international research project on the disposal of surplus stocks of small arms by security forces in 10 OSCE member states. The research results were published in 2004 by Saferworld in London as Sami Faltas and Vera Chrobok (editors), *Disposal of Surplus Small Arms: A Survey of Policies and Practices in OSCE Countries*.

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For questions and comments please write to vchrobok@yahoo.de

List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

AIHRC	Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission
AMF	Afghan Military Forces
ANBP	Afghanistan's New Beginnings Programme
AREA	Agency for Rehabilitation and Energy Conservation in Afghanistan
ATA	Afghan Transitional Administration
BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
CFA	Child Fund Afghanistan
CRC	Convention of the Rights of the Child
CWBC	Child Well-being Committee
D&R	Demobilization and Reintegration
DD&R	Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
ILO	International Labor Organization
IMC	International Medical Corps
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IRC	International Rescue Committee
IWPR	Institute for War and Peace Reporting
LDRC	Local Demobilization and Reintegration Committee
MAFF	Minors Associated with Fighting Forces
MDDT	Mobile Demobilization Documentation Team
MLSA	Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs
MRRD	Ministry for Rural Rehabilitation and Development
NEEP	National Emergency Employment Programme
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
SAB	Solidarité Afghanistan Belgium
SC	Save the Children
SIDA	Swedish International Development Agency
UMCOR	United Methodist Committee on Relief
UN	United Nations
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USA	United States of America
UXO	Unexploded Ordnance

Map of Afghanistan



1. Introduction

The participation of children and youth in fighting forces is a common reality in many conflicts around the world. While the factors underlying the phenomenon of child soldiering are complex and multi-faceted, demobilizing and reintegrating young soldiers in the aftermath of conflict poses enormous challenges for civil society, governments and the international community. Although UN agencies, international NGOs, national governments and community-based organizations all have sought to provide protection and assist former child soldiers on their way back to civilian life through disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DD&R) programs, there is much controversy regarding the overall strategy, success and actual impact of such programs.

General
D&R of child
soldiers

The controversy and debate center on several key issues: First, DD&R programs designed for children and youth often lack sustainability and long-term planning. Many former program beneficiaries return to military life or lack sustainable opportunities once reintegration assistance has phased out. Second, formal DD&R strategies only target a limited number of legitimate candidates. A large proportion of potential beneficiaries, such as self-demobilized children, girls or combatants in support roles, do not have access or have systematically been excluded from DD&R programs. Third, most DD&R initiatives exclusively target former child combatants and in doing so may neglect the realities of a broader group of war-affected youth (non-combatants) who may face similar challenges in the aftermath of conflict. Fourth, DD&R programs are often implemented outside the overall process of reconstruction and recovery in post-conflict societies. Finally, DD&R planners tend to implement DD&R models that do not apply to the context at hand.

Experience indicates that the ways in which DD&R programs are planned and implemented have significant implications for the reintegration of former combatants (Kingma, 2001). Unfortunately, the cumulative insights derived from numerous studies on child soldier DD&R programs in the last decades, including policy recommendations and lessons learned, are hardly ever applied. Instead of reforming DD&R, similar models that have failed elsewhere continue to be applied to different contexts, such as Afghanistan.

While there is little doubt that children and youth in Afghanistan have been utilized as combatants, often having been forced into service, it is worthwhile to examine how this injustice

is addressed in an environment in which Afghans across all regions and age groups have suffered tremendously from violence and shattered livelihoods and where every aspect of life—political, social and economic—has been affected by war.

Critical voices of UNICEF's current efforts to demobilize and reintegrate young soldiers in Afghanistan argue that post-conflict reconstruction should focus on all youth instead of providing assistance to a small target group, whose needs are believed to be similar to those of non-combatants. Further, program beneficiaries should be recognized as young adults and thus receive the same support as their adult counterparts who are targeted by a separate DD&R program. UNICEF on the other hand views the specific support to Afghanistan's young soldiers as a critical component in post-conflict child protection efforts.

Special D&R
program for
young soldiers?

This report has been written to reflect some of the debates between different actors and partners involved in the process of demobilization and reintegration of former combatants in Afghanistan, and to examine the planning, coordination and early implementation of UNICEF's program to demobilize and reintegrate war-affected young people within the overall framework of Afghanistan's reconstruction process.

While it is too early to measure the success and long-term impact of the program¹, significant weaknesses in program strategy, design and implementation can already be observed, which might hinder an effective and sustainable reintegration process. It is hoped that policymakers, international organizations, NGOs as well as donor governments may derive useful lessons from this assessment in formulating DD&R strategies and programs (in Afghanistan and elsewhere) for future engagement.

The following chapter provides a brief overview of the overall context in which DD&R is taking place, with a particular focus on the impact of the Afghan conflict on children and youth, as well as the roles and responsibilities of young Afghans. The third chapter will place the efforts to demobilize and reintegrate young soldiers in relation to the ongoing adult DD&R program, to be followed by a description of UNICEF's demobilization and reintegration activities and their current state of implementation. Chapter four focuses on weaknesses in program strategy, design and implementation and raises a number of concerns regarding the program's effectiveness and sustainability.

1 To determine the success and long-term impact of the program, the author envisages a comprehensive follow-up to this research project, which will include in-depth interviews with program beneficiaries, Afghan youth (non-combatants), families, community members, etc.

The main source of information and data utilized for this paper is derived from in-depth interviews and extensive discussions with relevant key informants operating in Afghanistan, such as representatives from UN agencies and NGOs involved in demobilization and reintegration processes, conducted during a four-week field trip to Kabul in June 2004². The review of progress reports, documentation, official information releases, scholarly articles and papers, etc., complement the field research. It should be noted that no interviews with program participants were conducted.

2. Background on the Situation of Youth in Afghanistan

2.1 Afghanistan today: Political, social and economic insecurity

For more than two decades, Afghanistan has been engulfed in cycles of violence and protracted armed conflict. The struggle against the Soviet occupation, the years of ethnic tension and civil unrest, poverty, drought and displacement left the country in ruins, with an entirely devastated social and economic infrastructure and shattered livelihoods. Although the Afghan conflict officially came to an end with the signing of the Bonn Agreement in December 2001, which created the framework for reconstruction and committed Afghan factional leaders to help establish peace and security by dissolving their private armies, it may take years or even decades to turn Afghanistan into a peaceful country and a healthy society.

Progress in moving Afghanistan towards a more stable and secure state, or at least towards more favorable conditions for recovery, has undoubtedly been made: With considerable financial support and technical assistance by the international community, a Transitional Administration was inaugurated by an emergency *Loya Jirga* in June 2002, a new constitution was adopted in January 2004, a new Afghan National Army was established, and on 9 October 2004, the first ever nationwide presidential elections were held—to be followed by parliamentary elections in September 2005. Despite these achievements, the challenges remain enormous and, more than three years after the beginning of the peacebuilding process in Afghanistan, the political and humanitarian situation remains unstable.

One of the most serious challenges to reconstruction is the precarious security situation. Afghanistan's political landscape is tense and fragmented, with factional leaders and local

General
situation in
Afghanistan

2 See Annex I for a list of persons interviewed.

commanders still holding a considerable degree of power and influence in areas outside the capital Kabul, maintaining their private militias and limiting the authority of the central government in the provinces. Factional fighting and local power struggles between rival commanders remain a political reality and clearly undermine the reconstruction process. An urgent requirement for establishing security and one of the most critical components of peacebuilding in Afghanistan is to break down regional power structures and dissolve armed groups. However, the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DD&R) of individual warlords and factional militias entails more than military activity. Primarily it should be regarded as a civilian, humanitarian and development undertaking. Critical voices of the ongoing process argue that DD&R in Afghanistan can only be successful when combatants are offered a viable alternative to the weapons and the lucrative drug industry as attractive sources of income and status. This in turn can only be achieved with committed long-term investments in Afghan economic development and reconstruction, which will eventually provide combatants with an incentive to lead a different economic lifestyle (Poulton, 2004a; Sedra, 2004).

New
resurgence of
violence

Another disturbing reality is the apparent re-organization and resurgence of extremist groups, largely remnants of the Taliban, along southern and eastern border areas, which led to a growing number of extremist challenges against government structures over the course of 2004, particularly during the months prior to the presidential election. At the same time, the number of targeted, and often deadly, attacks on national and international humanitarian staff rose considerably, mostly in the south and southeast, but also in the north, west and in the central region, including areas that were previously thought to be reasonably safe. In response to the numerous violent outbreaks, many international aid organizations scaled down their operations in some regions, which has disastrous effects on the delivery of humanitarian assistance to the Afghan population and slows down overall reconstruction efforts.

It is the lives of ordinary Afghans that are disrupted by the persistent insecurity and instability. In many cases, Afghans are caught in a cycle of factional violence, disease and degrading poverty, and chances to break out of this cycle are extremely low. Afghanistan and its population will be dependent on foreign aid and assistance for years to come and it can only be hoped that, once the election process has been concluded, the international community will not consider their obligation to move Afghanistan on the road to democracy as fulfilled.

Social and
economic
situation of the
civilian
population

It will take years or even decades to raise Afghanistan's living standards from its current status among the lowest in the world. The majority of Afghans live in extreme poverty, with hardly any electricity and water in rural areas, and rudimentary healthcare facilities. Millions of Afghans do not have access to the most basic healthcare provisions. Afghanistan has the world's largest refugee population and one of the highest child mortality rates: thousands of children die from malnutrition every year, one in four Afghan children die before their fifth birthday (US Department of State, 2004). There is a lack of adequate roads, danger of landmines and unexploded ordnance (UXO), and limited access to educational opportunities. According to UNICEF data, 71 percent of Afghans remain illiterate, with female illiteracy rates rising up to 92 percent in rural areas (ibid.).

The economic situation looks equally grim. Despite the infusion of over US \$2 billion in international assistance, improvements in agricultural production and a 30 percent growth in GDP during 2002/03 (excluding wealth generated by the illicit drug industry), the economic performance in recent years has been severely obstructed by the unstable political and security situation (UNAMA, 2003). One of the principal obstacles to economic recovery is the institutional weakness of the Afghan state structure, both at the central as well as at the provincial level and the lack in government capacity to implement effective reforms. Due to limited economic opportunities, the country faces a huge unemployment burden. A labor market assessment undertaken by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in 2003 estimated an overall unemployment rate of 32 percent in Afghanistan, across all regions and age groups (IRC, 2003).

2.2 Past and present challenges for Afghan children and youth³

The previous section broadly illustrates that the majority of the Afghan population lives in a situation of political, social and economic insecurity. This is the context in which young Afghans have grown up throughout the last three decades. Children and young people in Afghanistan have been raised in times of extraordinary conflict and instability, exposed to death and injury, participating in and witnessing acts of violence and destruction. An estimated 300,000 children lost their lives due to the conflict, and over half a million lost one parent (Girardet/Walter, 2004). They suffered in great numbers from collapsed infrastructure, healthcare and education systems as well as from increased economic hardship in an environment of scarce resources and shattered family security.

300,000 children
lost their lives due
to the conflict, and
over half a million
lost one parent

A collapsed educational system

The educational system, both in terms of its physical infrastructure and intellectual foundation, lies in ruins. During previous regimes, approximately 80 percent of schools were damaged and destroyed (US Department of State, 2004) as they were perceived to be “instruments of Western and/or Soviet ideology”⁴. Especially girls suffered from a restricted access to education, and tens of thousands of qualified teachers left the country.

Following the fall of the Taliban regime, UNICEF took the lead in a massive effort to increase access to education throughout the country. Hundreds of schools were rebuilt and 8,500 tents were provided, serving as temporary classrooms. Around 3 million children turned up for class, approximately 60 percent of the school-age population, and up to 70,000 teachers

3 The Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) and common international practice defines a child as anyone below the age of 18. Accordingly, anyone above the age of 18 is an adult. The category of youth is defined as age group 16–25, whereas adolescence is defined by UNICEF as the population between the ages of 10 and 19. The distinction between these categories is blurred, especially in non-Western countries, where children achieve adult status at an early age. In this paper, a slightly different concept is applied. The meaning of the terms ‘child’ and ‘adult’ refer to their Western definitions even if, in the opinion of the author, a chronological age cut-off is an arbitrary concept in non-Western societies. Since childhood in Afghanistan ends at age 13 or 14, the term ‘youth’ is used to describe the share of the population that can neither be considered a child (in the Afghan sense) nor an adult (in the Western sense). However, it does not include anyone above the age of 18.

4 Christian Children’s Fund, www.christianchildrensfund.org

Children and schools

returned to school. The proportion of girls attending school rose from 5 percent in 2001 to 30 percent in 2002, and 37 percent in 2003. By mid-2003, around 3.8 million children were registered in schools across the country (Girardet/Walter, 2004). UNICEF's 'Back to School' campaign is probably one of the more successful examples of international assistance to Afghanistan. Nonetheless, the majority of school-aged Afghan children are believed not to attend classes (Tufts University USA, 2004). One reason is the inadequate school infrastructure. Many schools are not built within close proximity to the villages, and children are often forced to travel long distances. On average, children in rural areas have to walk between 1–3 hours to reach the nearest school. As a result, many parents decide to keep their children at home, not only due to long distances, security concerns and the dangers posed by landmines and kidnappings, but also because they need all available labor in pursuit of their livelihoods. In addition, many rural Afghans expressed concerns about the quality of the facilities and education available (ibid.). In Kunduz province, only few of the 232 officially registered schools (UNHCR, 2004) are actually real buildings⁵. Most classes are held outside. Due to limited government resources and salaries for teachers, there continues to be a lack of trained teachers, books and other material. Cultural barriers to educating girls unfortunately continue to persist, highlighted by a number of attacks on schools that offer education to girls (IWPR, 2004a). According to a recent survey, the majority of girls under the age of 14 do not attend school (Tufts University USA, 2004). Even in Kabul, many parents are hesitant to send their children to school, following an increased number of kidnappings on streets off the main roads.

Lack of economic opportunities

2 million child-headed households are struggling to earn a daily livelihood

Children and youth across Afghanistan clearly lack adequate skills training and employment options that would provide them with opportunities to be active members of society and support themselves and their families. Ghaus Rashid, deputy minister of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MLSA), states that over 2 million child-headed households are struggling to earn a daily livelihood (IRIN, 2003). According to Rashid, over 60 percent of young Afghans are jobless without perspectives to a viable future (ibid.). The International Rescue Committee's (IRC) labor market survey found a much lower percentage of unemployed youth, which can probably be explained by different definitions of

5 Christian Children's Fund, www.christianchildrensfund.org

'youth'. According to the IRC, youth unemployment⁶ was identified at 26 percent across all regions and locations. By region, youth unemployment ranged from 39 percent in the Central Region to 19 percent in the Western region (IRC, 2003). Regardless of the exact figure, unemployment among young Afghans in all parts of the country is fairly high. Without a regular income and with only very few options to learn a marketable trade, the cycle of poverty will not be broken, and there is a realistic danger for young Afghans to be drawn into illegal activities such as poppy cultivation or smuggling.

Breakdown of traditional protection mechanisms

Afghans traditionally care for and are protective of their children⁷, with the family and the extended family network being "the most important institution in Afghan society" (UNICEF, 2001). However, this fundamental coping mechanism has largely been eroded as a result of prolonged conflict, weakened family and community structures and increased economic vulnerability. Death and the loss of livelihoods have damaged the capacity of families and communities to emotionally and financially support and protect their children. Single female-headed households are a common reality in Afghanistan today, often struggling to survive close to subsistence levels. Social welfare systems do not exist in Afghanistan, which often leaves families with no other choice but to send their children to work or beg on the streets; join armed groups⁸; or place them in orphanages. Contrary to the situation in many other war-torn countries, the number of separated or unaccompanied children in Afghanistan is insignificant since, despite the social and economic hardship, ties with families and communities mostly remain intact. Reportedly, only around 1 percent of the 12,000 officially registered 'orphans' have lost both parents. In the majority of cases, children are placed in one of Afghanistan's 36 orphanages with the hope of being better cared and provided for. Many return to their families and communities on weekends⁹.

The exact number of children working on the streets in Afghanistan is difficult to determine, but it is believed to be enormous and, alarmingly, on the rise. Recent estimates vary

Detrimental
influence of conflict
on traditional
family and social
structures

6 The IRC uses the international definition of youth (age group 16 to 25).

7 A perception that was shared by many of the people interviewed for this paper.

8 As will be explained in subsequent sections of this paper, a number of additional factors led Afghan youth to take up arms and join militia groups.

9 Interview with Save the Children USA.

Variants of child labor

between 50,000 and 70,000 (Save the Children, 2003). A survey conducted by Terre des Hommes in early 2002 observed 37,284 children working on the streets of Kabul alone—with more than one-third being only 8–10 years old (Girardet/Walter, 2004). Most of these children are not homeless, but live with at least one parent or guardian, and are typically sent out to beg for money, polish shoes, wash cars or search for items that could either be of use at home or could be sold, such as firewood, plastic, metal or paper (ibid.).

However, street children represent only a fraction of children involved in various types of labor across the country, such as working in stone mines, carpet weaving or tailoring. In rural areas, children from the age of six support their families' agricultural activities, for instance by herding animals. Generally, most of the work carried out by children and young people in Afghanistan cannot be regarded as unacceptable. It certainly is not unacceptable in the eyes of many Afghans, considering the appalling economic vulnerability and hardship, but also the roles and responsibilities Afghans traditionally take on at a very young age. Working children and domestic child labor clearly have to be placed within the past and present Afghan context. Problems arise when such work becomes exploitative and abusive, as is for instance the case of child trafficking or sexual violence.

Child trafficking is, in fact, a matter of increasing concern in Afghanistan. Recent reports suggest that Afghanistan serves as an important source country for children who are abducted, smuggled over the borders and sold as sex slaves or child laborers in neighboring countries or the Gulf states, most prominently Saudi Arabia (IOM, 2004). According to the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), child trafficking was identified as one of the most serious human rights abuses currently taking place in Afghanistan¹⁰.

The—highly sensitive—issue of sexual abuse of both boys and girls is a largely neglected reality in Afghanistan and surrounded by a strong culture of silence. Reasons for this silence are social taboos, embarrassment and fear of societal or family rejection. It is extremely difficult to address this problem in Afghanistan, let alone to obtain information on and from victims of sexual abuse. Only in very rare cases do Afghan families and victims report crimes of sexual violence. This can primarily be explained by the widespread belief that “sexual acts committed outside the framework of marriage are perceived to diminish

¹⁰ Interview with the AIHRC.

family honor” (ibid.). Generally, the shame surrounding the crime is carried entirely by the victims of abuse and their families¹¹.

Reports indicate that sexual violations against Afghan boys are most common in the South and East of the country, but the practice is believed to also be prevalent in other regions (Tufts University USA, 2004). The growing recognition of this phenomenon might be due to the notion that, according to a Human Rights Watch (HRW) report released in July 2003, people are more willing to talk about sexual abuse against boys than against girls (ibid.).

Although child protection agencies operating in Afghanistan are slowly and very carefully starting to address the issue of sexual abuse within the communities they work in, their influence is constrained by the potential risks victims face when talking openly about their experiences. The necessary assistance and shelters to protect victims of sexual abuse are absent in most parts of the country¹².

2.3 Child soldiering in Afghanistan

Very little is known about the demographic and social profile of Afghanistan's numerous armed groups. Likewise, no reliable information exists on the number of children and young people who fought in these groups, and there are equally no precise figures on how many of these were spontaneously and informally demobilized during the last years. The causes of participation, recruitment patterns, as well as the impact of involvement with the fighting forces on children and youth have never been studied and analyzed in depth. A rapid assessment undertaken by UNICEF between March and June 2003 found an estimated total number of 8,010 child soldiers in regions all across Afghanistan.

Afghanistan's fighting forces have a long history in recruiting 'child soldiers'¹³. In a recent survey of over 3,000 Afghans the HRW found that up to 30 percent had participated in military activities as children (Becker, 2004). Under Soviet occupation, boys were trained as spies whose task it was to lead Soviet troops to the homes of *mujaheddin* leaders which they had identified earlier. During the civil war, thousands of boys reportedly joined *mujaheddin* groups for employment, food, shelter, protection and

Long history of
child soldiers

11 Interview with Save the Children USA

12 There are three shelters for female victims of sexual abuse in Afghanistan: in Kabul, Herat and Mazar-i-Sharif. There are no shelters for male victims.

13 In the following, the terms 'Underage soldiers' or 'Children/Minors associated with fighting forces' are used.

economic opportunities (Boyden et al., 2002). Throughout the 1990's until their defeat in 2001, the Taliban recruited young boys, mostly from *madrassas*¹⁴ in neighboring Pakistan. Reportedly, 5,000 students (both Afghans and Pakistani) aged between 15 and 35¹⁵ left the *madrassas* to join the Taliban in August 1999. How many of these actually participated in active combat is unclear—many of the younger ones are believed to have received military training without ever serving at the frontlines.

Definition of child soldiers

The standard accepted definition of the term 'child soldier' is contained in the Cape Town Principles and Best Practices (1997)¹⁶, which state that a child soldier is “any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular and irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers and those accompanying such groups, other than purely family members. It includes girls recruited for sexual purposes and forced marriage. It does not, therefore, only refer to a child who is carrying or has carried arms”.

Most of Afghanistan's well-known armed groups, including the Taliban and the Northern Alliance, recruited underage soldiers in a variety of capacities. In addition, there are over one hundred different local commanders who relied on children as an important source of new recruits. UNICEF identifies the proximity of an armed group to a community as the main determinant for the recruitment of underage soldiers (UNICEF, 2003a). All across the country, local commanders 'drafted' one young man from each household or family for military training to provide an agreed quota of fighters to the provincial commanders. Those families who were not able to present a

14 *Madrassas* are religious schools in Pakistan.

15 The share of under-18s is not known.

16 The Cape Town Principles provide leading international guidance on child soldier policy and programming. They were adopted by the participants in the Symposium on the Prevention of Recruitment of Children into the Armed Forces and on Demobilization and Social Reintegration of Child Soldiers in Africa (Cape Town, 27–30 April 1997).

young recruit had to face serious repercussions and were charged with sanctions in form of a monetary tax.

On the other hand, many of the NGOs interviewed for this paper stated that the majority of underage soldiers joined militias 'voluntarily', primarily for social, economic, political or religious reasons. Young boys in Afghanistan, who learn how to use a gun at a very early age, would accompany their fathers or older brothers to fight off any threats to their family or community. For some, family involvement in the conflict has even become a cultural tradition (Brett/Specht, 2004). Sedra (2002) asserts that the decision of Afghans to take up arms is to a large extent market-driven. They lack alternative livelihoods and are attracted by promises of better economic status. Accordingly, young men often joined militias to earn money for their families. Whether they actually received a salary for their services depended on the individual commander. One young soldier reported to have received a monthly payment of 800 Afghanis (US \$18) as well as a pair of shoes, a uniform and food (UNICEF, 2004a), whereas other former underage soldiers earned up to 2,000 Afghanis (US \$46) a month (IRIN, 2003). After the fall of the Taliban in late 2001, the majority of those who did not get paid on time or who received no payment at all left the group to take on a different job, such as working in stone mines. In fact, it seems to be generally agreed that many of the younger fighters were demobilized through informal processes and returned home, either because they were no longer needed in absence of an imminent threat of war, or because commanders themselves demobilized. Some, however, are believed to be retained by armed groups or remain under the authority of those commanders who have not yet demobilized, mostly because they have no other means of livelihood. A survey undertaken in April 2002 suggests that underage soldiers would prefer to return to civilian life if they had a job and a means for earning a living (Wessells/Kostelny, 2002). Likewise, former underage soldiers interviewed in 2004 identified economic insecurity as their primary concern (IWPR, 2004b; UNICEF, 2004b).

In recent years, young soldiers in Afghanistan were usually not involved in active combat. Fighting at the frontlines was more common during the resistance against Soviet occupation. During the Taliban era, children served at the frontlines only on rare occasions and if so, they were mostly used to carry weapons and ammunitions, dig trenches, and search for the dead or wounded (UNICEF, 2003a). They primarily were used as security guards or spies, placed landmines, cleaned and stored weapons, worked in the kitchen, etc. Reports indicate that a high number of young

Why do young soldiers take up arms?

Children rarely served at the frontlines

Part-time
soldiering

boys were subject to sexual abuse by military commanders (IOM, 2004; Tufts University USA, 2004), a crime that several NGOs on the ground consider even more worrisome than the involvement of children with the fighting forces¹⁷. There is no information on girls serving in the militia groups. According to Islamic law, girls and women are excluded from participation in military activities¹⁸. However, recent anecdotal field reports indicate that girls were targets of sexual abuse by members of armed groups (UNICEF, 2003c). There are also rumors of a female commander in the northern province of Baghlan, who had 'at least 100 soldiers under her command'¹⁹. According to NGO sources on the ground, she disbanded her troops after the fall of the Taliban²⁰.

A phenomenon that is unique to Afghanistan (compared to other regions or countries in the world where children are participating in combat) is 'part-time soldiering'. In Afghanistan, combatants usually were no professional, full-time soldiers; only a small share served under regular command structures. Most soldiers were conscripted for short periods of time. Reportedly, children and young people were often kept for 2–3 months only and, upon release, returned to their communities (IOM, 2004). Since fighting took place mainly within or close to their home communities, the majority of children remained in their local communities or were free to visit their families regularly (UNICEF, 2003a). These circumstances and recruitment patterns lead NGO staff on the ground to presume that Afghan underage soldiers are less damaged (psychologically as well as physically) than, for instance, child soldiers involved in armed conflicts in Africa or other Asian countries, where atrocities are committed by children at very young ages, who, upon demobilization, are often rejected by family members and communities. This is not a major concern in Afghanistan. Children under the age of 14 did not normally serve in Afghan militias, and former underage soldiers do not face any notable difficulties with being accepted by their home communities. However, one of the experiences that Afghan children share with child soldiers around the world is their economic vulnerability. In Afghanistan, former underage soldiers return to an environment profoundly affected by war and destruction, where "the greatest sources of stress are not always

17 This is one of the reasons for targeting all underage soldiers by the UNICEF led D&R program, to ensure that all boys associated with fighting forces (and, as such, potential victims of sexual abuse) are removed from their command structures.

18 Interview with the ANBP in June 2004.

19 Quote from a NGO staff member interviewed in June 2004 in Kabul.

20 There is no evidence to support this rumor. UNICEF denies her existence.

the violence one experienced or perpetrated, but the current living situation, which often poses issues of economic stress, inability to marry and raise a family due to hopelessness and a lack of livelihood” (CFA, 2004). As such, former underage soldiers face very similar challenges as Afghan youth in general (see section 2.3).

Nonetheless, their need for support should be recognized in the Afghan reconstruction process. They require social and economic security, and deserve a chance to establish a livelihood that does not depend on an involvement with military structures. The Afghan government is, at least on paper, determined to protect youth from life as a soldier. In May 2003, the Afghan government issued a Presidential decree, prohibiting the recruitment of children and young people under the age of 22 into the newly formed and trained Afghan National Army (UNICEF, 2003b). Later that year, on 24 September, the Afghan Transitional Administration (ATA) announced Afghanistan's accession to the Optional Protocol to the CRC on the involvement of children in armed conflict, which raises the minimum age for direct participation in state and non-state forces to 18²¹. Despite these remarkable achievements, children's rights seem to have so far only improved in theory. Particularly in rural areas, the government has no capacity to enforce its national and international obligations. According to NGO sources, there are indications of soldiers under the age of 22, and even under the age of 18, serving in the new government forces²².

While organizations interviewed for this paper generally agree that underage soldiers in Afghanistan require assistance, opinions on the 'right' approach to demobilize and reintegrate these children differ widely. While UNICEF strongly supports a special program for underage soldiers within Afghanistan's overall reconstruction efforts, critical voices on the ground question its relevance in the Afghan context and tend to view the extent of the underage soldier problem as overstated. This criticism is largely based on the often temporary status of youth as soldiers as well as their limited functions during combat. Opponents of a targeted and separate approach advocate for more comprehensive and coordinated child/youth protection and development efforts with a wide geographical coverage, and argue that, for reasons of

Protection of youth
in the new
Afghanistan

21 The Optional Protocol does not, however, prevent voluntary recruitment of under-18s. States are only obliged to raise their age of voluntary recruitment above the age of 15.

22 There are no indications of soldiers under the age of 16 in the new government forces.

practicability, underage soldiers should be demobilized and reintegrated alongside their adult counterparts.

2.4 Roles, responsibilities and needs of young Afghans today

Rights and needs of
vulnerable young
Afghans

Obviously, the above-listed ‘vulnerable groups’, including underage soldiers, describe only a share of those affected by the conflict and its consequences alongside other sub-groups such as young refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), disabled youth, etc. In fact, virtually every child or young person in Afghanistan can be categorized as ‘vulnerable’ in some form or another, as the majority of young Afghans were exposed to violence and conflict, live in poverty, lack access to basic services and lost out on education and training. Many young people do not fit into the special categories but face very pressing problems. This important reality should be kept in mind when designing program responses for a specific category of ‘vulnerable’ children and youth. Opponents of exclusive approaches even object to the implementation of special programs altogether as long as the basic conditions of all children have not been improved (Save the Children, 2001).

In Afghanistan, there is little awareness of the rights and needs of children and youth, and very few programs are aimed specifically at the overall development of the country’s younger population. Donors’ as well as the Afghan governments’ interests and priorities focus primarily on emergency relief programs or assistance to specific ‘vulnerable’ groups. The Afghan Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MLSA) as the main ministry to provide social services and economic opportunities to children and youth lacks the technical capacity and has a limited understanding of child protection and assistance mechanisms. Social protection and income-generation in Afghanistan clearly requires strengthened capacity and cooperation among all levels of government. However, several international, child-specific NGOs operating in Afghanistan observe that, since the end of the Taliban era, the government has made little progress in reforming social policy, implementing child and family support systems and advocating for youth participation in job creation programs. Youth involvement in the reconstruction process is extremely important in developing the future labor force of the country. Nonetheless, Afghan youth does not participate in one of the large national programs, such as the National Emergency Employment Program (NEEP), which was initiated in 2003 to generate minimum-wage

employment through labor-intensive public works²³. Instead, youth in Afghanistan today is largely dependent on humanitarian aid and small-scale initiatives from national and international NGOs that offer vocational training to a small group of young Afghans.

In the case of Afghanistan, it is a serious mistake not to adopt a holistic and coordinated approach to child and youth protection and assistance. Children and youth are important social, political and economic actors, who require progressive social and economic change. Their participation and development is essential for rebuilding the country. Child and youth protection—including the demobilization and reintegration of young soldiers—therefore needs to primarily focus on “fighting socio-economic exclusion, promoting poverty reduction and creating economic development for young Afghans” (Poulton, 2004a).

The Afghan population is very young and, with an average 6.8 children per woman (The Economist, 2004), all of whom will enter the labor market at one time or another, is one of the fastest growing populations in the world. Children and youth represent the majority of Afghans. According to UNICEF, 57 percent of the country's population is under the age of 18, which means that “there are more Afghans alive today whose lives have been shaped by war than those who have known stability and peace” (UNICEF, 2004b). The median age in Afghanistan is 18.1, compared to 39.9 in Germany (The Economist, 2004). This partly explains why children and youth in Afghanistan take on different roles than youth in Europe or the United States, for instance. In countries such as Afghanistan, children and youth naturally assume adult responsibilities at an early age, out of economic vulnerability but also due to cultural and societal structures that hold different views of what is an adult. The largely Western concept of adolescence does not apply. In the words of Louis Dupree, “the young Afghan boy from 10–12 (or even younger) moves directly into an adult world. Adolescence is primarily a function of a literate, pluralistic society, which can afford to waste half a man's life in socialization, or preparing him to live as a productive member of his society.” (Dupree, 1980). Families rely on children's work. Children and young people all across the country contribute to household incomes and perform similar types of labor as adults (Tufts University USA, 2004). This role and the reality for Afghan youth must be recognized in assistance programs.

A holistic approach
to child and youth
protection is
necessary

23 Interview with the ILO in Kabul, June 2004.

An appropriate way to target Afghan ‘children’ within the reconstruction process would therefore be to target young adults, whose needs are similar to the needs of ‘real’ adults in terms of education, employment and developing secure livelihoods.

3. Background, Design and Structure of the Youth-specific Demobilization and Reintegration Program

3.1 DD&R in Afghanistan: Two parallel but separate processes

Before reviewing and analyzing the design and implementation of the underage soldier demobilization and reintegration (D&R)–program, it is absolutely necessary to place the program in the context of overall efforts to demobilize and reintegrate former combatants in Afghanistan.

D&R of
youth versus
DD&R of
adults

Similar to experiences in other war-torn countries around the world, disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DD&R) of former combatants is an integral part of Afghanistan’s national recovery strategy and an essential element within the country’s wider security sector reform process. Two parallel but separate DD&R initiatives are currently running in Afghanistan. A DD&R program targeting adult soldiers, managed and implemented by the Afghanistan’s New Beginnings Programme (ANBP), and a demobilization and reintegration (D&R) program targeting ‘minors associated with the fighting forces’ (MAFF), a process designed and led by UNICEF. As the program acronym indicates, disarmament is not a component of UNICEF’s D&R initiative.

Even within the adult program, the disarmament component is viewed as purely symbolic and is unlikely to result in more than the collection of a small percentage of the weapons in the country, the bulk of which will not be serviceable (Sedra, 2004b). In the short term, the removal of guns from Afghan society is an unrealistic objective as ongoing ethnic struggles and an unstable peace prevents armed factions from feeling confident enough to lay down their arms. Özerdem (2002) argues that armed groups need to first “experience the peace dividends of the new [political] status quo so that they know that their weapons are no longer needed for earning their livelihoods or having access to the decision-making process”.

Defining DD&R

International experts agree that DD&R is one of the most important steps in post-conflict peace processes. A report of the UN Secretary-General on the prevention of armed conflict, for

example, recognized that lasting DD&R is the key component in conflict prevention (UN, 2001). The ultimate objective of a DD&R program is to provide combatants with an alternative and sustainable livelihood as civilians and restore peace and security. Reintegration should aim at integrating “former combatants into productive civilian life through skills training and employment opportunities” (Özerdem, 2003) as well as at ensuring the social acceptance of ex-combatants in their home communities. In this sense, DD&R is much more than just a technical, military issue. It is a complex operation with political, security, humanitarian and development dimensions, and its success depends on the “holistic and integrated implementation of various postwar recovery programs” (Knight/Özerdem, 2004).

What is DD&R?

Formal disarmament is defined as the “collection, control and disposal of all weapons including small arms, explosives, light and heavy weapons of both combatants and civilians” (UN, 2000). Demobilization describes the process of release or discharge, “by which armed forces (government and/or opposition or factional forces) either downsize or completely disband, as part of a broader transformation from war to peace” (UNDPKO, 1999). However, formal demobilization is only one of the many ways in which soldiers will disengage from participation in an armed group. Many do not go through an official demobilization process and may escape or simply leave the armed group once the conflict has ended.

Reintegration, the third component, is a long-term process meant to provide assistance measures to former combatants that would “increase the potential for their and their family’s economic and social reintegration into civil society” (ibid.). The reintegration of ex-combatants is considered to be the most crucial, but at the same time the most complex and challenging phase of a DD&R process, as it involves many variables that are beyond the control of donors or the international community.

Afghanistan’s New Beginnings Programme (ANBP)

After a long preparatory and planning phase, the Afghan DD&R process finally got underway in February 2003 with the creation of the ANBP. The ANBP was established under the auspices of UNAMA and UNDP to assist the Afghan government with the design and implementation of a comprehensive DD&R program as part of the security sector reform process, and acts as the lead agency in the process. Strategy and direction is provided by a DD&R Commission within the Afghan government. The DD&R program aims at decommissioning military formations and units

and at disarming 100,000 members of the Afghan Military Forces (AMF), of which 40,000 combatants were planned to be demobilized before the October elections. The initial target of 100,000 officers was later reduced to around 50,000 soldiers to be disarmed and demobilized, a much lower number than originally planned. This figure, identified by UNDP, apparently reflects a more realistic picture of men who are working on a regular basis in the various private armies²⁴ (Poulton, 2004).

The US \$167 million three-year program, which is partially funded by Japan (as the lead donor), the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada, further seeks to create "life options for these demobilized soldiers that would allow them to be fully reintegrated into their society"²⁵.

The pilot phase of the DD&R program began on 24 October 2003 in the northern province of Kunduz and moved, after its completion in June 2004, to the main implementation phase in the provinces of Kabul, Kandahar, Gardez, Mazar-i-Sharif and Baghlan. Additional target regions include Takhar, Badakshan, Jalalabad, Herat and Bamyan. An update posted on the ANBP website announced that by 18 January 2005, the ANBP had disarmed 35,030 members of the Afghan Military Forces²⁶. 32,080 of those were demobilized and 31,191 enrolled in a reintegration program of their choice, such as teacher training, small business, de-mining, Afghan National Army, Afghan National Police, vocational training and agriculture. According to the ANBP, agriculture and vocational training are the most popular reintegration choices, with 44.8 percent of former AMF fighters opting for an agricultural career and 29.8 percent choosing vocational training²⁷. In the northeastern provinces of Kunduz, Takhar and Badakshan, up to 70 percent of demobilized fighters reportedly chose to enroll in agricultural programs (Poulton, 2004a). The small business option is also quite popular among demobilized soldiers, with around 17 percent enrolled in the relevant reintegration package. In order to increase the chances for former combatants of establishing a secure and sustainable livelihood upon graduation, the ANBP is currently

24 Estimates of the number of AMF members differ widely; especially members of the Afghan military establishment estimate a much higher figure of up to 200,000 soldiers and officers.

25 ANBP Website, www.undpanbp.org

26 According to ANBP data, 89 percent of the demobilized forces were soldiers whereas 11 percent were officers. (ANBP Website, www.undpanbp.org).

27 ANBP Weekly Summary Report, 17–23 January 2005.

working on incorporating both individual and group micro-credit schemes into its current reintegration activities.

Although these figures look encouraging, it should be noted that quantitative data is not sufficient to determine the success or failure of a DD&R program, especially in a country where the majority of combatants are not part of a permanent fighting group, and who would, most likely, be ready to take up arms as soon as fighting breaks out again. Peace in Afghanistan is unstable and, although a relatively high number of the identified combatants have been demobilized, law and order has not yet been restored. The success of DD&R is ultimately dependent on economic recovery and employment creation. Given the weak Afghan economy, it remains to be seen whether those combatants currently enrolled in reintegration programs can and will be absorbed by the labor market.

The Afghan DD&R process has in fact been subject to extensive critical analysis by international experts, with diverging opinions on its progress. Poulton (2004b) views the process so far as quite successful, given the difficult environment the program has to operate in. Sedra (2003a) concurs that the program has made some important gains, but identifies a number of flaws in its design and structure that have limited its impact. There are even more critical voices of the past and current DD&R efforts. In a recent article published in the *Guardian Weekly* the “almost total failure” of the DD&R program was attributed to a lack of available employment opportunities for demobilized officers and soldiers (Chipeaux, 2004).

One major concern regarding the Afghan DD&R program is its strong focus on breaking power structures and, as such, reducing the threat posed by Afghan militia groups.

DD&R in Afghanistan is largely driven by political and security objectives, with a tendency of principally focusing on the disarmament and demobilization phase rather than placing a stronger emphasis on sustainable reintegration²⁸. In a situation where

“combatants cannot be offered alternative livelihoods, a means to care for themselves and their families, there will be no impetus to reenter civilian life. The demilitarization of Afghan society cannot be achieved unless suitable reintegration opportunities are available” (Sedra, 2003b).

The DD&R process has been subject to harsh criticism

²⁸ Unlike disarmament and demobilization, reintegration initiatives do not result in easily quantifiable results, such as the amount of weapons collected or the number of soldiers demobilized.

In Afghanistan, a successful DD&R project requires a comprehensive approach that goes beyond the purely political issues and strengthens public confidence in the availability of sustainable alternatives to soldiering. After all, the current political and economic conditions in Afghanistan do not provide long-term incentives for warlords and soldiers to disarm, and there are at least another 15,000 AMF soldiers and officers yet to be targeted before the end of the disarmament and demobilization phase in June 2005.

ANBP versus UNICEF

Initial idea:
Demobilization of
underage soldiers
within the
framework of
ANBP ...

When the ANBP was created in early 2003, a UNICEF staff member was seconded to the ANBP. The initial idea was to carry out a D&R program targeting young soldiers within the framework of the ANBP, based on UNICEF's premise that children and youth require different interventions and support than adults in the aftermath of conflict. Although UNICEF's program objective to "support the sustainable social and economic reintegration of underage ex-soldiers [...], give them a viable alternative to their involvement in fighting forces and to resume their life in the community" (UNICEF, 2003c), is very similar to the reintegration objectives of the adult DD&R program, UNICEF argued that the psycho-social and medical state of former underage soldiers in Afghanistan requires specific targeting. This view was not entirely shared by the ANBP, but eventually the program planners of the two organizations worked out the following mechanism: the ANBP would demobilize all underage soldiers (yet to be identified) along with their adult counterparts, in accordance with the overall DD&R schedule and, upon completion of the demobilization phase, hand them over to UNICEF for reintegration. This arrangement seemed to be a compromise between the largely security-focused, technical ANBP and UNICEF's more humanitarian dimension to reconstruction, especially considering UNICEF's aim of expanding reintegration assistance to a broader group of war-affected and at-risk youth (see 3.2.1).

... reintegration
through UNICEF
program.

During the months of March until June 2003, UNICEF carried out a rapid assessment with the purpose of collecting underage soldier figures, which would subsequently guide the development of the D&R program. The methodology applied by UNICEF included field visits in randomly selected communities in 26 out of Afghanistan's 32 provinces and meetings with provincial government authorities and commanders. A head count was not carried out (UNICEF, 2003a). Instead, UNICEF

staff had to mostly rely on the willingness of commanders to provide information. And, according to UNICEF and NGOs on the ground, although some of them were cooperative, many were not willing to disclose any information on the number of children and youth in their ranks. The resulting figure of underage soldiers in Afghanistan is thus not more than a broad estimate. The following table outlines the approximate number and location of underage soldiers:

Table 1: Data on underage soldiers and geographic locations

Region	North					Northeast			
Province	Balkh	Faryab	Jawzjan	Saripul	Samangan	Kunduz	Baghlan	Takhar	Badakshan
Number of Child Soldiers	250	500	80	120	125	325	275	320	250
Total	1,070					1,170			

Region	South					Southeast			
Province	Kandahar	Nimruz	Hilman	Zabul	Uruzgan	Paktya	Paktika	Ghazni	Khost
Number of Child Soldiers	200	180	120	150	150	120	180	55	110
Total	800					465			

Region	East				West			
Province	Nangarhan	Laghman	Kunar	Nuristan	Heart	Badghis	Farah	Ghor
Number of Child Soldiers	295	280	250	250	275	250	360	250
Total	1,075				1,135			

Region	Central					Central Highlands
Province	Kabul	Parwan	Kapisa	Wardak	Logar	Bamiyan
Number of Child Soldiers	285	220	280	250	275	985
Total	1,310					985

Source: UNICEF, 2003a

UNICEF's release of the total number of 8,010 underage soldiers in Afghanistan led to serious tensions with the ANBP. In the view of ANBP officials, UNICEF greatly exaggerated the scale and scope of the problem to justify a child-centered D&R

Varying views
on definitions
of 'children'
and 'youth'

program. Reportedly, the ANBP found that during the pilot phase of the adult DD&R program, less than 1 percent of the soldiers processed were children. These children were mostly new recruits²⁹. The ANBP criticized UNICEF's objective of following a strictly rights-based approach, which draws a clear line between children and adults as defined by age and assumes that children and youth below the age of 18 need special protection and should not serve in armed groups at any time and in any function. It

“specifically appeals to the leaders' conscience and their concern over their international and national reputation to release children from their ranks and abstain from further recruitment. The rhetorical separation of children from their violent environment also translates into the demand for their immediate physical separation from adults during the demobilization and reintegration efforts” (Kemper, 2005).

The ANBP questions the strict definition of children espoused by UNICEF (under 18), and argues that it is not applicable in Afghanistan. By Afghan standards, underage soldiers in Afghanistan (mostly aged between 14 and 17) are considered men whose needs are the same as those of adult combatants. Besides, they argued that the majority of young soldiers did not participate in active fighting (see section 2.2.6). The ANBP, in violation of the Cape Town Principles, was only willing to target the relatively small share of underage soldiers who were actively involved in combat as opposed to those in other capacities.

ANBP's restrictive interpretation of the underage soldier definition (see section 2.3), which also explains the small number of underage soldiers identified during the pilot phase of the DD&R program, was not acceptable to UNICEF. Given UNICEF's role as an advocate for child rights and the protection of children affected by conflict, this is understandable, and UNICEF deserves credit for its efforts to adhere to the Cape Town Principles and not discriminate against underage soldiers in support roles. Besides, the adult DD&R program is limited to the Afghan Military Forces and does not cover all armed groups in Afghanistan. However, it can indeed be questioned whether, in the Afghan context, the situation and experiences of underage soldiers with a non-combatant status requires a specific targeting through an official D&R exercise, or whether they could be reached by more general programs to support war-affected youth in Afghanistan.

29 Interview with the ANBP in June 2004.

ANBP officials view UNICEF's rationale for targeting underage soldiers a "matter of principle"³⁰, without allowing for the specific Afghan context. According to the ANBP, UNICEF's estimate of 8,010 underage soldiers in Afghanistan, combined with children's and youth's limited functions during combat and their status as adult members of the Afghan society, did not warrant a special sub-program, a view that is shared by many of the international NGOs working with children and youth in Afghanistan. Several NGOs interviewed for this study expressed a wide array of concerns about UNICEF's "inaccurate and unreliable"³¹ assessment as well as the overall concept of delivering assistance measures to a small sub-group at the expense of more urgent needs faced by Afghan youth. The young soldiers identified by UNICEF are not believed to be heavily traumatized (at least not more than other Afghan youth). It is argued that, to have a long-term impact, any initiative aiming at reintegrating young soldiers should be translated into a program that targets a wider group of war-affected youth. Besides, children and youth are believed to be confronted with "more serious problems than being called up for fighting with their fathers or to plow the grounds of their commanders"³², such as sexual abuse or economic hardship, for instance.

Young soldiers are not believed to be highly traumatized

Nonetheless, NGOs are aware of the need to support these children who have been deprived of a secure childhood, and recognize the value of a program targeting underage soldiers in a country where the rights and needs of children and youth were largely neglected in the past. UNICEF's NGO partner organization Christian Children's Fund/Child Fund Afghanistan (CCF/CFA)³³ is particularly vocal in its support for a special program for Afghan underage soldiers, drawing on experiences from other post-conflict countries, where lessons learned have highlighted the often damaging effects on former underage soldiers, whose needs were not targeted by a separate DD&R process.

In the opinion of the author, lessons learned in other post-conflict situations cannot necessarily be transferred to the case of Afghanistan. Programs and strategies that are appropriate in one situation might not fit the circumstances or reality of another.

30 Interview with the ANBP in June 2004.

31 According to NGOs interviewed during the field trip to Kabul in June 2004.

32 As stated by an NGO representative interviewed during the field trip to Kabul in June 2004.

33 In Afghanistan, the Christian Children's Fund (CCF) is operating as Child Fund Afghanistan (CFA). In the following, the acronym CFA will be used.

Is a special D&R program for youth necessary?

The nature of the conflict, roles and functions of children and youth during combat, the duration of their involvement with the fighting forces, recruitment patterns, the self-perception of youth, the notion of childhood in Afghan society, as well as the relationship between young people and adults in Afghanistan should be determining factors in deciding which type of demobilization and reintegration program or strategy will be most suitable in the given context.

In mid-2003, the ongoing disputes between UNICEF and the ANBP, which can be explained primarily by diverging views on the necessity of a youth component in overall DD&R efforts and, apparently, a clash of personalities between the program planners of the two organizations, finally led the former Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi, to separate the two DD&R (D&R) programs. Under the new scheme, the ANBP is solely in charge of the adult DD&R program whereas UNICEF is responsible for demobilizing and reintegrating children and youth. One of the more hidden reasons behind this split was the concern that an implementation of the underage soldier D&R program within the framework of the ANBP would be too costly—not only financially, but also politically, in case the D&R program failed. Apparently, Brahimi feared that the ANBP would have a huge burden to carry should future evidence indeed prove an overstated initial assessment of child soldiering in Afghanistan³⁴.

As a result, UNICEF's D&R and ANBP's DD&R program activities today run completely detached from one another. There is only a limited degree of communication between the headquarters of the two organizations which, given the neighboring location of their office buildings within the vast UNAMA compound in Kabul, is especially surprising. According to ANBP officials, program updates and implementation schedules are not shared. Timelines and target regions are not coordinated. Database systems, created to store and regularly update information on each individual program beneficiary, are designed and operated independently.

Although cooperation seems to have improved slightly since mid-2004, at least at the regional level, occasional information exchanges mostly concern the referral of underage soldiers identified by the ANBP to the UNICEF program. Once the ANBP receives the lists from different military units with the names of potential DD&R participants, regional verification committees are tasked to identify all soldiers under the age of 18.

³⁴ Interview with the ANBP in June 2004.

These soldiers are immediately screened out and not accepted into the adult DD&R program. All relevant information is passed on to UNICEF.

3.2 D&R program design

Based on the rapid assessment carried out in early 2003, UNICEF developed a program framework, which outlines D&R implementation guidelines and activities over a three-year period. It should be noted that individual program participants will not receive demobilization and reintegration assistance throughout the duration of the entire program. Each participant will be entitled to one year of reintegration support (both in terms of skills training and basic education). The D&R program itself, however, will be carried out in various phases and, to reach all potential beneficiaries in all target regions, full program implementation is expected to take a total of three years.

Target groups

The primary and direct beneficiaries are 8,010 underage soldiers, a number estimated but—at the time of program development—not yet verified by UNICEF. The eligibility criteria for underage soldiers³⁵ to enter the D&R program are clearly defined: They should not be any older than 18 years of age at the time of demobilization, they should be part of a military unit with a formal command structure, they should have been involved in activities that are directly related to that unit, and they should have served in a military unit for a period of at least six months. These are the official criteria. Unofficially, only those who demobilized six months at most before the start of the official demobilization phase and those who are not benefiting from any form of education at the time of demobilization are accepted into the program. Apparently, this would indicate a certain degree of stability and future prospects for young adults, a rather shortsighted view given the complex and long-term process of (economic) reintegration³⁶.

Target groups for
D&R

35 Including all 'minors associated with the fighting forces' (MAFF), as defined by the Cape Town Principles (see footnote 16). Following a rights-based approach, underage soldiers regardless of their actual combatant status are accepted in the D&R program.

36 Information received during an interview with one of UNICEF's implementing partner organizations. This information does not necessarily apply to all target regions. According to UNICEF, there is evidence that even those in school/with formal education were demobilized.

Other war- affected youth

In addition to the specific target group of underage soldiers, other war-affected youth should also benefit from the services offered during the reintegration process (UNICEF, 2003c). Given the disastrous impact of war and conflict on almost every child and young person in Afghanistan and the resulting difficulty of identifying the most vulnerable, UNICEF and its implementing partner organizations heavily rely on the support from respected groups within the target communities—such as the local *shura*³⁷ and Child Well-Being Committees (CWBC)—to determine the level of vulnerability and identify potential beneficiaries. The following criteria (agreed upon at the community level) are applied to select program participants from the vast number of war-affected youth in Afghanistan³⁸:

- households headed by children
- returnee refugees/internally displaced persons (IDPs)
- migrant child laborers/victims of child trafficking
- out-of-school young people, especially girls
- disabled children not engaged in formal education/economic activity
- children from households with limited food all year round
- street/working children and young people.

While recognizing that it is unrealistic to assume that all vulnerable children and young people in Afghanistan can be included in reintegration activities, the method used by UNICEF to determine—and limit—the actual number of war-affected youth beneficiaries, is rather controversial. Apart from a few exceptions, the (estimated) numbers of underage soldiers in different target provinces were simply doubled to account for war-affected youth in these provinces (see 3.4, table 5).

The demobilization phase

In line with the program design, the preparatory phase to the demobilization process marks the period in which most of the information on underage soldiers in Afghanistan is obtained and further activities are planned. UNICEF's stated objective is to

37 A *shura* is a council of elected elders that are empowered by the local community to resolve disputes and enforce the application of social norms, values and sanctions.

38 Information provided by UNICEF Afghanistan, 15 February 2005.

“verify the minor’s participation in fighting forces, to collect basic information which will establish the identity of the minor for reintegration and to assess priority needs, and to provide the minor with information about what is likely to happen next” (UNICEF, 2003c).

In each operational area, Local Demobilization and Reintegration Committees (LDRCs) are formed that are composed of four members of the local community and serve as “principal mechanisms through which consultations on D&R will take place on the community level³⁹” (UNICEF, 2004c). The role of the LDRCs is to inform and sensitize communities on matters related to the D&R program, and to visit village elders and families to identify potential program beneficiaries. They seek to verify documents that were submitted by individual commanders on UNICEF’s request, listing the names of underage soldiers in their ranks (so-called ‘A-lists’)⁴⁰. Where possible, LDRCs interview these children to retrieve information on their ages, the nature of their involvement with the fighting forces, and their knowledge of different commanders. Based on the information gathered through the community visits, the LDRCs create lists of potential participants. These ‘B-lists’ are passed on to Mobile Demobilization Documentation Teams (MDDTs)⁴¹, who, among other tasks, carry out the final validation of underage soldier data and check whether the identified children meet the criteria for entering the demobilization program.

Once this is completed, actual demobilization begins. Previously identified underage soldiers assemble at the demobilization sites (established per district or per cluster of districts) and are registered by the MDDTs. UNICEF’s NGO partners brief the ex-combatants on the program and present different training options. At the same time, medical staff⁴² assesses the physical condition of each child and offers voluntary testing for HIV and sexually transmitted diseases. Reportedly, disabled children will be entitled to special services during the

The demobilization phase

39 To ensure a minimal or zero movement of underage soldiers from their communities, and to engender a high involvement of family members and local community structures and institutions, the demobilization process takes place at the community level (UNICEF, 2003c).

40 It has to be noted that not all commanders approached by UNICEF were willing to disclose information on underage soldiers in their ranks.

41 MDDTs are composed of staff members from a local NGO, the Agency for Rehabilitation and Energy Conversation in Afghanistan (AREA), and an international NGO, the International Medical Corps (IMC) (UN News Center, 2004a).

42 UNICEF contracted the IMC to carry out the medical assessments.

subsequent reintegration phase (UNICEF, 2003c). All generated data, including the underage soldier's profile, soldiering status, psycho-social and medical assessment as well as reintegration preferences, is entered into a database to facilitate overall monitoring and reporting on the program. This database is regularly updated during reintegration. As stated earlier, disarmament is not a program component. If program participants own a gun, they are allowed to keep it. Otherwise, guns are handed over to the former soldiers' commander once they enter the D&R program.

The demobilization process concludes with a ceremony in each community. Former underage soldiers are provided with information on their civic responsibilities, drug abuse prevention, hygiene, HIV/AIDS, etc., followed by the signing of a code of conduct. This mostly symbolic procedure is witnessed by a member of the local *shura*. Finally, each child is issued a personal identification number (PIN) and an ID card for future identification and monitoring.

The reintegration phase

The program design developed by UNICEF foresees a 'community-based approach to reintegration' in Afghanistan, a term that is subject to ongoing debates between actors and partners in DD&R processes around the world. Unclear objectives and differing views of what community-based reintegration approaches should entail or prioritize are pivotal in these debates, reflecting controversies surrounding the question whether to target individual families and households as opposed to all vulnerable households or the community as a whole.

Community-based approach to reintegration?

A study carried out on behalf of the international NGO Save the Children states the following:

"The focus of reintegration should be on improving the availability of health care, education and other key services in communities where child soldiers are being reintegrated. The economic role of the child cannot be independent of the family and community. [...]. By addressing the fundamental development challenges that households and communities face, organizations can thus help to prevent future recruitment as well as promote social reintegration" (Verhey, 2003).

The purpose of a community-based approach to reintegration is thus to strengthen the communities that absorb former underage soldiers, to emphasize family livelihood activities and efforts to

extend education and health benefits to all children in the communities. Since an exclusive targeting of former soldiers focuses primarily on individual self-sufficiency, vocational training interventions or the creation of employment opportunities should benefit the larger community (ibid.).

In the Afghan case, both the demobilization as well as the reintegration process takes place within or in close proximity to the home communities of the program participants. Ideally, they should not be relocated or trained in regions distant from their place of origin. The reintegration program thus is 'community-based', in the sense that reintegration services are brought to the children and not vice versa. However, whether UNICEF's D&R program indeed follows a reintegration approach as briefly introduced above must be measured by the program's inclusiveness, i.e. efforts undertaken during program implementation to address the needs of youth and families in the wider community.

Data and information received by both UNICEF and implementing NGOs suggest a disproportionate focus on former young soldiers in the formal reintegration initiative. The fact that underage soldiers are only a small minority relative to the overall poverty and vulnerability of Afghan youth is not reflected in the program design. Contrary to the official program objective of providing reintegration assistance to "war-affected youth including underage soldiers" (UNICEF, 2004d), the D&R program primarily targets former combatants plus an additional, but limited, number of other war-affected youth. It is thus doubted whether this D&R program fulfills the requirements of a community-based approach to reintegration. Reintegration assistance in all D&R target regions should be tailored to the context of the communities and incorporated within a comprehensive framework of recovery. Community projects that focus on family livelihoods rather than focusing on the individual could have positive multiplier effects and deliver broader economic and social benefits to these communities.

As outlined by UNICEF, the reintegration phase is planned to follow upon the final demobilization ceremony in a timely manner, with a gap of 2–4 weeks at most between the two phases. This way, UNICEF hopes to keep the program participants motivated and ensure their immediate engagement in training activities. Based on the participant's choice as well as advice and assessment given by the MDDTs and implementing NGOs during the demobilization process, demobilized underage soldiers enroll in one of the following reintegration options: Vocational training (e.g. tailoring, carpentry, masonry, mechanics, metal

Critique:
Underage
soldiers are only
a small minority
relative to the
overall poverty
and vulnerability
of Afghan youth

Educational training, other activities for one year at the most

working) or, since the majority of children is reintegrated into rural communities, agricultural development programs. In addition to their preferred reintegration choice, all program participants receive basic educational training courses (e.g. literacy and numeracy), and are encouraged to engage in psycho-social activities such as sport teams or traditional art forms. In total, underage soldiers and other war-affected youth enrolled in the reintegration program will receive training for a period of one year at most. CFA explains this relatively short program duration with the lack of long-term commitment from donor governments⁴³. UNICEF disagrees with this explanation, emphasizing that the D&R program was designed to run for 12 months in each target region, and that donors funded the program accordingly. In fact, some of the funds received from donor governments are foreseen to last longer than one-year.

All training in education and income-generation, either in agriculture or the vocational labor market, is open to other war-affected youth (particularly including girls) in the communities to which demobilized underage soldiers are returning. However, as mentioned previously, this only applies to a fixed number of war-affected youth, which has been determined prior to the beginning of the D&R program.

The D&R program does not include any monetary payments to underage soldiers or their families. At the very beginning of the demobilization process in Kunduz, rumors spread that each program participant would receive a cash payment upon entering the D&R program. Apparently, this led to a number of false claims. Only a portion of those who came forward, most likely with the incentive of collecting a cash benefit, actually met the eligibility criteria for entering the program (IWPR, 2004b).

No cash payments

The question of handing out cash to former soldiers also arose nationally in the context of adult demobilization. A few months after the beginning of the adult DD&R program, the ANBP decided to discontinue one-time cash payments of US \$200, due to repeated incidences of commanders intimidating soldiers into surrendering part or all of the cash to them. Instead, the money is now integrated in the adult reintegration packages, by, for instance, increasing the daily wage allotted to soldiers during reintegration. Another reason for dismissing this practice was that one-time cash payments were encouraging corruption. Several commanders submitted illegitimate candidates to the program to secure the cash payment. Reportedly, soldiers are still entering the program with the expectation of receiving some

43 Information received by CFA, February 2005.

financial support⁴⁴. Reportedly, this also holds true for the youth D&R program⁴⁵, which points to an insufficient information strategy with regard to services and benefits offered during the process. Similar to many other DD&R processes around the world, false claims are put forward by young relatives of commanders or community leaders to benefit from reintegration options offered by UNICEF and its implementing partners. It is the responsibility of the MDDTs to determine whether applicants are eligible to enter the program.

3.3 Target regions and implementing partner organizations

Setting up structures completely independent from the ANBP naturally entailed severe difficulties, mostly in terms of securing long-term funding as well as identifying national or international partner organizations that would be willing and have the capacity to implement the program in the provinces. As a result, the program start was repeatedly postponed.

Nonetheless, UNICEF managed to secure funds of nearly US \$5.3 million.

Table 2: Donor funding to the D&R program⁴⁶

Donor	Programmable Amount (in US\$)
United States Department of Labor	2,857,200
Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA)	554,344
Government of Germany	135,135
Government of the Netherlands	227,275
Government of Japan	100,580
UNICEF National Committee - Germany	804,516
UNICEF National Committee - Japan	181,202
UNICEF National Committee - UK	131,019
UNICEF National Committee - France	279,042
TOTAL	5,270,313

As will be explained in the following section, UNICEF has adopted a phased approach to D&R, which means that the D&R

44 Interview with ANBP staff in June 2004.

45 Information received by CFA in November 2004.

46 Data provided by UNICEF Afghanistan, 15 February 2005

First phase of D&R is to take place in the north, northeast, east and the central region/central highlands

program will be carried out in two or more phases, by moving from one geographical area to the next. The available amount of around US \$5.3 million will mainly be spent on the first phase of program implementation, and cover the expenses of demobilizing and reintegrating underage soldiers and war-affected youth in the north, northeast, east and the central region/central highlands. During phase two, a similar amount will be required to target the western, southern and southeastern regions of Afghanistan. In total, the estimated costs of the full program amount to around US \$10 million.

Difficulty of contracting partner organizations

Although UNICEF (in cooperation with the MLSA as the government ministry responsible for child and youth protection in Afghanistan) is the lead agency in the execution of D&R activities at the central, regional and community levels, actual program implementation is carried out by a number of NGO partner organizations. NGOs usually remain on the ground for many years and often have better relations and a better standing with communities which may have a favorable influence on a more efficient program implementation. NGO partners are chosen and contracted by UNICEF. The size of the grant issued by UNICEF and, if needed, training and technical assistance, is decided on a case-to-case basis, depending on the number of program participants in the region they are covering, as well as on existing capacities in terms of staff, logistics and technical equipment. According to UNICEF guidelines, each contracted NGO is responsible for program implementation (either demobilization or reintegration, or both) in one or more provinces (see table 3) so that all geographic locations where underage soldiers were identified are covered. Implementing NGOs are responsible for the coordination of the demobilization procedure as well as for the planning of the reintegration phase (i.e. training options available to the participants as well as the overall time frame). During the actual reintegration phase, implementing agencies provide education, vocational training and other opportunities and alternatives to military life (see section 3.4.1).

In late 2003, UNICEF invited around ten different international and local NGOs with expertise in child protection issues and/or significant experience in reconstruction and development work in Afghanistan to discuss the D&R concept and establish ties with qualified and interested organizations. The turnout was rather disappointing, as some of the larger NGOs operating in Afghanistan, such as the International Rescue Committee (IRC), decided against an active involvement in the D&R program. Their decision was mainly based on arguments

already mentioned earlier in this paper (see section 3.1.3): They argued that underage soldiers, the primary target group UNICEF wishes to address, ought to be treated as adults as they require assistance similar to the assistance offered to adult soldiers. In addition, any youth-specific support activities ought to be translated into a comprehensive program aimed at the overall development of youth, instead of targeting underage soldiers plus a limited number of war-affected youth. Some even criticized UNICEF's "ineffective priority-setting" in a country devastated by over 20 years of war and conflict⁴⁷.

Why non-involvement by NGOs?

More practical reasons for non-involvement included the lack of qualified staff and financial resources, since UNICEF's grant would not cover all program-related expenses. To develop long-term, sustainable reintegration options, additional funding would have to be sought by organizations that had agreed to implement the program in a certain region. This was not an option to those organizations which depend on external project funding, especially since several of them considered the underage soldier problem not to be as serious or urgent as other, more pressing matters.

Due to the difficult and lengthy process of identifying and contracting implementing NGO partners, the demobilization phase was initiated by UNICEF in fewer regions than initially planned. The D&R program therefore did not carry on at similar times in all target regions, but only in those regions where adequate program partners were already in place, and will move to the remaining regions at a later stage. UNICEF explains the use of a phased approach by its intention to extract lessons learned from program experiences in one region, share them with NGO partners in regions to be targeted in subsequent phases and apply these lessons learned to avoid repeating potential mistakes. A reasonable argument (provided that program experience is actually shared between NGOs), especially in light of the unstable security situation in many parts of Afghanistan. It does, however, further delay the program start in several target regions. A close cooperation with the ANBP or, as initially planned, an integrated approach to the demobilization and reintegration of youth and adults, could have been of great benefit to the young soldiers in these regions.

Even in regions where demobilization partners had already been identified, the start of the D&R program was delayed considerably. Since UNICEF seeks to avoid a gap of longer than 2–4 weeks between the end of the demobilization phase and the

47 Interview with an NGO representative in June 2004.

Northeastern
regions

start of the reintegration phase, the whole process was postponed until reintegration partners were contracted. In those cases where demobilization started without reintegration partners in place, the resulting gap between the two phases left program participants without immediate access to reintegration options.

The international NGO Christian Children's Fund (CCF)/Child Fund Afghanistan (CFA) was among the first organizations to get involved in the D&R program in the **northeast**. In November 2003, shortly after the first D&R meeting with potential program partners was held, CFA signed an agreement with UNICEF to cooperate in the demobilization exercise in the northeast of the country, where CFA had been operating since December 2001. One of the organization's main projects aims at creating and strengthening community processes that improve child well-being. This project is based on close collaboration with 8,000 families in the provinces of Takhar, Badakshan and Kunduz (UNICEF, 2004b). In June 2004, UNICEF and CFA signed a second agreement, which committed CFA to reintegrating demobilized children and other war-affected youth in the northeast. UNICEF provided CFA with a grant of US \$883,901 to cover reintegration expenses. CFA contributed around US \$147,440 of its own funds (CCF/CFA, 2004a). Both the demobilization as well as the reintegration process is carried out in four northeastern provinces: Badakshan, Baghlan, Kunduz and Takhar. Interestingly, CFA is currently also acting as an implementing agency for the agricultural option of the adult reintegration program in the same provinces. Although CFA tries to link its work on both programs, e.g. by using the same methodology in agricultural training, the formal separation of the adult and the youth program left CFA with no choice but to set up two separate reintegration structures, corresponding to different time frames and target groups.

Eastern region

In the **eastern** region, covering the provinces of Nangarhan, Laghman, Kunar and Nuristan, Save the Children Sweden (SC-Sweden) was contracted to demobilize former underage soldiers. Since SC-Sweden expected to also be in charge of the reintegration process in the eastern provinces of Afghanistan, SC-Sweden project staff worked out the following program strategy: SC-Sweden would add their own resources to the UNICEF grant and translate the reintegration program into a program targeting all war-affected youth in the region. Unfortunately, this plan was never realized. Despite the successful completion of the demobilization phase in Laghman and Nangarhar in June 2004, UNICEF decided to terminate the cooperation with SC-Sweden in late August 2004 and to contract a different agency to

implement the reintegration phase. UNICEF explains the split by the weak quality of SC-Sweden's reintegration proposal. According to UNICEF, SC-Sweden lacked the expertise and institutional capacity required to run a successful vocational training program⁴⁸.

The Belgian NGO Solidarité Afghanistan Belgium (SAB) is now responsible for reintegrating former underage soldiers as well as a limited number of war-affected youth in the east. Nonetheless, SC-Sweden will continue to carry out its own, independent project on the 'Reintegration of War-Affected Youth and Children at Risk' in Nangarhar province. It is not the intention of the author to question the expertise and capacity of SAB. On the contrary, SAB is a highly experienced NGO and has been operating in Afghanistan since the early 1990s. However, UNICEF not only failed to provide clear guidance on the division of labor between potential partner organizations prior to the beginning of the demobilization phase but also to promote an integrated and cooperative approach to reintegration. As a result, SAB's reintegration activities as part of the official D&R program, as well as SC-Sweden's independent reintegration project in Nangarhar province are currently running parallel, with little or no coordination among the two agencies.

Northern
provinces

Dialogue and negotiations concerning D&R program implementation in the **northern** provinces (Balkh, Samangan, Faryab, Saripul and Jawzjan) have proceeded since early 2004, in particular with the British SC-agency. Initially, it was planned that SC-UK would be in charge of both the demobilization and reintegration initiative in all five provinces. Due to various reasons, this plan was later revised. SC-UK will now be responsible for program implementation in only two provinces: Saripul and Jawzjan. At the time of writing, the demobilization phase in the north only started in Balkh province, on 15 December 2004.

The only additional region where the D&R program is currently underway is the **central region/central highlands**. The United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) had been contracted by UNICEF to demobilize former underage soldiers in the provinces of Kabul, Parwan, Kapisa, Wardak, Logar and Paktika⁴⁹. Per province, UMCOR received an amount of US \$10,000. After completing the demobilization phase in late September 2004, UMCOR is only in charge of the reintegration

Central region/
Central highlands

48 Telephone conversation with UNICEF Afghanistan, 7 February 2005.

49 Paktika is the only south-eastern province targeted by the first round of the D&R program. To facilitate program implementation, it has been added to the central region.

process in the southeastern province of Paktika. Four different NGO partners, Action Aid, SAB, the Catholic Relief Services and the Afghan NGO Aschiana, are in charge of reintegration in the remaining provinces of the central region and in Bamiyan. It appears that, according to information received during an interview with UMCOR in June 2004, training activities in Paktika are only offered for a period of six months. This was not confirmed by UNICEF staff, as it is their policy to provide reintegration assistance for a period of one year (with the exception of the agricultural option or animal husbandry, which does not necessarily require a long training process). However, the exact duration of the reintegration phase depends on the individual organization and its funding situation. Reintegration assistance in the northeast, for instance, is offered for a period of nine months (see section 3.4.1).

Table 3: Demobilization of underage soldiers and reintegration of War affected/at-risk children and young people

Implementing Partners in 2004⁵⁰

Region	Province	Implementing Partner: Demobilization	Implementing Partner : Reintegration
Northeast	Badakshan Baghlan Kunduz Takhar	Child Fund Afghanistan	Child Fund Afghanistan
East	Kunar Laghman Nooristan	AREA	AREA
	Nangahar	Save the Children - Sweden	Solidarité Afghan Belgium - SAB
Central highlands	Bamyan	BRAC	BRAC
Central	Kabul	UMCOR	ActionAid, Afghan Committee for Development
	Parwan		Aschiana
	Wardak*		SAB
	Panshir		Catholic Relief Services
	Kapisa		SAB
	Logar*		UMCOR
Southeast	Paktika*		
North	Balk	AREA	ActionAid
	Faryiyab	AREA	INTERSOS
	Samaghan*	AREA	ADRA
	Saripul*	Save the Children - UK	Save the Children - UK
	Jawzjan*		

* Project proposal already submitted to UNICEF for funding. All other operational areas are currently providing reintegration support to at-risk/war-affected children and young people.

At the time of writing, no NGO partner was found who was prepared to implement the D&R program in the **western, southern and southeastern** regions of Afghanistan. Initially, the IRC, one of the largest humanitarian organizations operating in Afghanistan, considered a potential involvement in the western region, including Herat province, where the IRC is currently running a child protection program. The IRC sent staff members to the western provinces to interview military staff and

50 Table provided by UNICEF, February 2005.

No D&R in the western, southern and southeastern regions of Afghanistan

government officials on the extent of underage soldier participation in the fighting forces. Prior to SC-UK's negotiations with UNICEF regarding program implementation in the north, the IRC also conducted interviews in Mazar-i-Sharif in the northern province of Balkh. Based on their findings, the IRC concluded that underage soldier figures are too small to justify a full-scale program. Besides, since the young soldiers are spread out over around 20–30 villages in each province, the UNICEF grant would not cover the costs required for effective program implementation. For such a program to be sustainable and for it to be expanded to reach more youth, the IRC would have needed a larger amount of financial resources and international staff⁵¹.

Meanwhile, UNICEF has decided to postpone any efforts to demobilize and reintegrate underage soldiers in the west. The same holds for the southern and southeastern regions, where no significant progress has been made in providing support to underage soldiers and other war-affected youth⁵². UNICEF emphasizes that this decision is not based on a lack of interested and qualified NGO partner organizations, but rather, as mentioned earlier, on UNICEF's objective to maintain the quality of the program by first learning the lesson in one target region before moving to the next⁵³. Other explanations for the delay in D&R implementation in the western, southern and southeastern region include funding shortfalls and insecurity (UNICEF, 2004d). The ANBP on the other hand operates both in the western as well as in the southern region of Afghanistan. The adult DD&R program in Kandahar, for instance, began on 20 April 2004. Reportedly, two underage soldiers were discovered during interviews by ANBP staff members who, due to the previously separated structures, are not demobilized by the ANBP (UN News Center, 2004b). Instead, they are referred to the UNICEF program. According to a UNICEF program update in June 2004, a total number of 10 underage soldiers from Kandahar province have been referred to UNICEF (UNICEF, 2004c). In the western provinces, 90 referrals of underage soldiers to UNICEF have been counted. The remaining underage soldiers in Kandahar province as well as the majority of underage soldiers and other war-affected youth in the south, southeast and west

51 According to information received by UNICEF in March 2005, the IRC recently re-stated an interest to work on the program in the west.

52 UNICEF explains the delay in D&R implementation in the western, southern and southeastern regions by funding shortfalls and insecurity (UNICEF, 2004d).

53 Telephone conversation with UNICEF Afghanistan, 7 February 2005

will, most likely, not receive any assistance until UNICEF's D&R program moves to these regions.

3.4 Progress and status of the D&R process

Status of the
D&R process

As stated in the previous section, the D&R program is carried out in various stages, moving from region to region, depending (among other things) on the availability and preparedness of adequate NGO partners as well as prevailing security conditions in the target provinces. Each implementing NGO thus follows an individual timeline.

By June 2004, four months after the official launch of the program in Kunduz province, a total of 2,203 underage soldiers from target provinces in the northeast, east and central highlands had been demobilized. By December 2004, this number had risen to 3,998 and included demobilized children from Kunar province in the east as well as the six central region provinces. The table below indicates both the June and December figures of the total number of demobilized underage soldiers per province:

Table 4: Status of the demobilization process as of June 2004 and December 2004⁵⁴

PROVINCES	Number of demobilized underage soldiers as of June 2004	Number of demobilized underage soldiers as of December 2004
Northeast		
Kunduz	267	267
Badakshan	157*	155
Takhar	307*	303
Baghlan	361*	348
TOTAL	1,092*	1,073
East		
Laghman	232*	236
Nangarhar	290*	293
Nuristan	36	36
Kunar	0	244
TOTAL	490	809
Central Highlands		
Bamiyan	621	620
TOTAL	621	620
Central Region		
Kabul	0	278
Kapisa	0	271
Logar	0	233
Parwan	0	290
Paktia	0	267
Wardak	0	157
TOTAL	0	1,496
GRAND TOTAL	2,203	3,998

* It is not clear why there is a slight difference in UNICEF's June and December demobilization figures.

As reported by UNICEF, the demobilization of underage soldiers in the northeast, central highlands, central region, and in three eastern provinces has been completed. The demobilization process in Nuristan province has been suspended, apparently due to security concerns, but will continue in 2005⁵⁵. There is, however, a notable divergence to the initially estimated number of underage soldiers (based on UNICEF's assessment in 2003) in the provinces listed above. In most provinces, the actual number of program participants is significantly lower than estimated by UNICEF in 2003 (see table 1), except in the cases of Baghlan and

54 Based on UNICEF data reported in June 2004 (UNICEF, 2004c) and December 2004 (UNICEF, 2004e).

55 Information provided by UNICEF in December 2004.

Parwan, where more young soldiers were demobilized than originally expected. This would suggest that UNICEF's rapid field assessment indeed overstated the extent of child soldiering in Afghanistan. Interviews with implementing NGOs however provided a different picture: In several provinces in the northeast, CFA identified even more underage soldiers than initially estimated by UNICEF, in some villages up to twice the amount, most of whom left armed groups on their own accord (so-called 'self-demobilized' ex-soldiers). At a later stage, SC-Sweden and UMCOR had similar experiences in the eastern and the central region. SC-Sweden carried out an independent identification process, which resulted in a much higher number than estimated by UNICEF. The problem was resolved when, at a later stage, MDDTs determined that none of the additional underage soldiers identified by SC-Sweden met UNICEF's eligibility criteria.

In the central province of Parwan, around 600 underage soldiers were identified. 582 of those made it on the B-lists, which Mobile Demobilization Documentation Teams (MDDTs) use to carry out the final validation process. In the end, only 290 were accepted into the D&R program (which is still more than originally estimated by UNICEF). 310 children were excluded from support activities offered during demobilization and reintegration. Apparently, they did not match UNICEF's official eligibility criteria (see section 3.2.1)⁵⁶.

UNICEF's selection strategy has in fact led to disputes between the lead agency and several implementing program partners. Implementing NGOs seriously question the quality with which eligibility criteria are determined and doubt whether they represent the best interests of children and youth. In their eyes, the reason for the seemingly arbitrary exclusion of high numbers of underage soldiers despite their potential involvement with the fighting forces is the fact that prior to the program start, UNICEF set a certain limit on the number of program participants, based on the rapid assessment carried out in early 2003. This limit (of around 8,000 underage soldiers) determines how many underage soldiers will be accepted into the D&R program. Apparently, UNICEF's objective is to meet its initial targets and to avoid any deviation from the numbers released in 2003, regardless of the real figure or its consistency with NGO findings. Since the program budget is entirely based on the 2003-

Discrepancy on the number of underage soldiers estimated earlier and actually in need of D&R causes concern

Are affected youth excluded from the program?

56 Telephone interview with UMCOR staff in August 2004.

estimates, there seems to be no flexibility to adapt to any changes in the number of program beneficiaries⁵⁷.

The demobilization process in the central region was initiated in July 2004. By early October, 1,496 had signed a code of conduct, received an ID card and returned to their communities to await further actions. According to UMCOR, program planning and implementation in the central region was characterized by significant challenges. Reportedly, UNICEF repeatedly delayed the official starting date, mainly because the identification of reintegration partners turned out to be a longer process than expected. Despite this shortcoming, UMCOR was asked to stick to its original schedule and continue its preparatory procedures, such as establishing contacts and coordination agreements with local government officials, informing them about the upcoming D&R initiative in the region, hiring local staff to form Local Demobilization and Reintegration Committees (LDRCs), etc. With the required structures finally in place, the communities in the respective target regions as well as the implementing NGO itself were eager to begin the demobilization phase. Due to the uncertainty of the program's commencement, UMCOR feared to lose its credibility with the local governors and communities or was anxious that local LDRC staff might reconsider their involvement. Finding new team members would be an "almost impossible task"⁵⁸.

Recruitment of LDRC staff proves to be complicated

In fact, the selection and recruitment of LDRC staff proved to be a complicated and lengthy process (not only for UMCOR, but for all other agencies involved in the D&R process). According to information obtained from UNICEF's implementing partner organizations, it was foreseen that for confidence-building reasons and to ensure that both men and women (and boys and girls) in the provinces are reached LDRCs are composed of two Afghan men and two women⁵⁹. This however proved to be problematic and did not adequately reflect realities on the ground. In many areas of Afghanistan (particularly in rural areas), women are prevented from working and only allowed to travel if escorted by male relatives. Due to the great

57 UNICEF Afghanistan does not agree with the analysis of the author. UNICEF emphasizes that the program does not suffer from any funding shortages and does not exclude eligible candidates (telephone conversation with UNICEF Afghanistan, 7 February 2005).

58 Quote by an NGO representative during an interview in June 2004

59 When reviewing the draft of this report, UNICEF objected to this statement. According to UNICEF, the composition of LDRCs (2 men/2 women) was never communicated to any implementing partner organization.

difficulties in recruiting women, LDRCs are only composed of male community members (with the exception of the northeast, where one woman works as a LDRC member), a practice that clearly undermines the ability to properly identify and meet the specific needs of war-affected girls (who are included in the target group of overall war-affected youth). Especially in a country with a long history in gender discrimination, program managers should ensure that both girls and boys receive equal attention.

Another difficulty in forming the teams was the lack of skilled personnel. Since social workers do not exist in Afghanistan, implementing NGOs had to rely on other 'reputable members of society'⁶⁰, such as teachers⁶¹.

Eventually the demobilization phase began in July and moved ahead on schedule. However, UMCOR was confronted with a critical issue: A great number of identified underage soldiers did not appear at the demobilization site when the program was officially launched. This is due to several factors, such as the long distances many children have to travel to reach the demobilization sites (after all, demobilization sites were not established in every village), pressure from commanders not to participate in the program but to remain in the fighting forces, and the fact that many children had not been sufficiently informed about the program or its exact starting date. As a result, they were not registered and thus will not participate in the D&R program⁶². Apparently, neither UNICEF nor UMCOR have made an effort to locate these children and to include them in the program. Although UMCOR discussed these adverse circumstances with UNICEF, the lead agency did not take any action. On the contrary, UNICEF decided to speed up the demobilization phase and complete it as quickly as possible. This way, only a limited number of underage soldiers would report to the demobilization sites and enter the D&R program. UNICEF would thus be able to meet its initial targets⁶³. Officially, UNICEF accelerated the process to complete it before the start of the harsh Afghan winter. Given that the demobilization process in the north started in December 2004, this seems to be rather a weak argument.

As a result of the repeated delays of the demobilization phase, the reintegration process is, in almost all target regions, still

Demobilization process has been delayed, therefore reintegration has only just begun

60 Quote by an NGO representative during an interview in June 2004.

61 The disadvantage in hiring teachers is that it will reduce the already scarce teaching capacities until the identification and verification process of underage soldiers is completed.

62 Telephone interview with UMCOR staff in August 2004.

63 Telephone interview with UMCOR staff in August 2004.

in its very early stages. In contrast to reintegration in the northeast which was relatively advanced at the time of writing (see section 3.4.1), the process had not even started in the north as demobilization had only recently begun there and in most central and eastern provinces. In fact, services to be offered to demobilized youth and other war-affected youth during reintegration had, in most regions, not been considered by the time the demobilization phase was completed. By September 2004, UMCOR, for instance, had not yet planned the reintegration process in the province designated to them. UMCOR's reintegration proposal did not provide any detailed information on available reintegration options or how program components will be structured and implemented. Also, the organization did not yet have a clear picture on how to include other war-affected youth in reintegration activities.

Accordingly, there are only few numbers available on the current reintegration process. Except for the northeast (see section 3.4.1), the latest numbers date back to August 2004. The following table illustrates the status of the numbers of program participants—both demobilized children as well as other war-affected youth—receiving reintegration assistance as of August 2004⁶⁴:

Table 5: Reintegration assistance to demobilized children and other war-affected youth

Province	Demobilized children and youth	Other war-affected youth⁶⁵	TOTAL
Kunduz	267	267	534
Badakshan	157	157	314
Takhar	307	215	522
Baghlan	361	361	722
Bamiyan	621	879	1,500
Nangahar	0	500	500
GRAND TOTAL	1,713	2,379	4,092

In addition to the almost 4,100 demobilized children and other war-affected youth receiving reintegration assistance, Solidarité Afghanistan Belgium (SAB) provides livelihood support to 500

64 Based on UNICEF data reported in June 2004 (UNICEF, 2004c). According to information received from implementing NGOs in late August 2004, these numbers remained unchanged. A UNICEF donor update of 30 September 2004 confirms these numbers (UNICEF, 2004d).

65 The numbers presented in this table largely confirm the earlier discussion on the method applied by UNICEF to determine the number of war-affected youth in D&R target provinces. As shown in table 3, in three provinces underage soldier figures were simply doubled.

families of street and working children in Nangarhar province. Social workers hired by SAB provide the families of war-affected youth with food and a US \$100 fund to buy seeds and tools or to start their own income generation activities, such as livestock or poultry farming (UNICEF, 2004d).

Child Fund
Afghanistan is
partner in the
northeast

Example: Reintegration in the northeast

In the northeast, where the Child Fund Afghanistan (CFA) is responsible for both the demobilization as well as the reintegration phase in all four target provinces, program implementation is proceeding smoothly. CFA's previous and ongoing activities in the region, experienced program staff and an awareness of and sensitivity towards the needs of youth and local communities makes the organization one of the most competent partners in child protection programming in Afghanistan. The organization has a close working relationship with UNICEF, and, from January 2003 until March 2004, was in charge of a small-scale, UNICEF-funded reintegration program for vulnerable children and youth in the northeast. In addition, CFA is part of an NGO consortium composed of three agencies: CFA, IRC and SC-USA, who share a common goal: to enhance children's well-being by increasing community-based capacity for children's protection and psycho-social support. Within this consortium, CFA is responsible for project implementation in the northeast⁶⁶. One significant accomplishment in 2003 was the creation of Child Well-Being Committees (CWBCs) in around 80 communities, consisting of a mixed group of children, adolescents and adults. The purpose of these CWBCs is to mobilize, monitor and guide child protection efforts, first by identifying the needs of young people and potential risks or threats faced by children and youth, second by trying to find adequate responses and solutions which would benefit all young people in the communities (CCF, 2003). Furthermore, the project seeks to engage youth in non-formal education activities and income-generating skills training⁶⁷. The

66 The NGO consortium is funded by USAID. According to a project evaluation in early 2004, the consortium reached 42,030 direct child and youth beneficiaries with program activity during the months of October–December 2003 (CCF/CFA, 2004c). SC-USA estimates that an additional 171,000 children and youth indirectly benefit from the project and will experience some level of improvement in their standard of living and psycho-social well-being.

67 The NGO consortium also focuses on a range of other child protection-related issues such as child trafficking, road safety and juvenile justice (CCF/CFA, 2004c).

Child Well-Being Committees were founded in 80 communities

reintegration program for former underage soldiers will be tied to and build on the structures which are already in place.

By the end of March 2004, when the demobilization phase in the northeastern provinces was completed, reintegration activities had already been planned and specified in a very detailed and comprehensive reintegration proposal⁶⁸. In addition to the 1,073⁶⁹ demobilized underage soldiers in the provinces of Kunduz, Badakshan, Takhar and Baghlan (see table 4), the reintegration program was to be expanded to include another 1,000 war-affected youth (both boys and girls) in around 80 communities.. Since UNICEF funds are limited to training activities for a total of 2,000 program participants (including former underage soldiers as well as other war-affected youth), the additional 73 children will not be enrolled in training activities funded by UNICEF. Instead, they will participate in a CFA-funded literacy course, which aims to target 3,000 children and youth in addition to the 2,000 recipients of UNICEF's reintegration support.

Reintegration comprises training programs in farming or skills to be developed into a profession

All 2,000 program participants will have access to income-generating training activities, either in agricultural development or in the vocational/technical labor market. Since about 85 percent of the Afghan population is dependent on agriculture and the majority of program participants come from farming families, CFA decided to offer a range of agricultural activities⁷⁰. These include training (such as the introduction of diversification options and agribusiness management skills training), supplies and opportunities for livelihood enhancement, which will enable program participants to farm more successfully and to expand the range of opportunities available to their families (CCF/CFA, 2004a).

The vocational reintegration option will provide reintegration participants with a skill which can be translated into a profession, such as carpentry, tailoring, metal working and mechanics.

In addition to the practical skills training, all participants were to receive literacy, numeracy as well as life skills courses, covering areas such as mine risk awareness, human rights and

68 The following paragraphs provide a summary of CFA's reintegration proposal of April 2004 (CCF/CFA, 2004a).

69 The total number of program participants is most likely to decrease once the reintegration phase has started, since it is expected that a certain number of demobilized children will drop out of the program. Those who will not participate in the reintegration program will be replaced by other war-affected youth.

70 In cooperation with the ANBP, CFA is currently also implementing an agricultural reintegration program for adult ex-combatants.

health education, etc. However, CFA identified the following problem:

“UNICEF will only fund 50 literacy classes (each of them with 40 students), spread over four provinces. The demobilized MAFFs come from over 52 districts and within these districts from over 350 villages. In some cases, the distance between the different villages where the MAFFs come from is 5 km, but a large part of their villages are days apart when travelling by foot or donkey. As discussed with UNICEF, the students should not walk more than 1 hour to the literacy classes, as most of them are also enrolled in vocational training, which takes up 3 hours of their days (plus an additional 1 to 2 hours travel time) (CCF/CFA, 2004a).”

CFA therefore proposed to find matching funds to expand literacy courses to a total of 5,000 participants. This would increase the density of literacy courses per district and thus increase access opportunities for 3,000 additional students (in addition to the 2,000 program beneficiaries already funded by UNICEF).

To give participants the opportunity to deepen the skills they require to enter their new profession, training will be provided over a period of nine months. During this time, participants enrolled in the vocational training option work with and are trained by local artisans. In CFA's experience, usually 2–3 out of 8–10 boys stay with 'their' artisan once the training process is completed. In the final months of the training period, CFA intensifies its efforts to establish linkages between vocational training graduates and other artisans within the same or nearby communities, to increase the employment prospects of those who are not immediately hired. Others are encouraged to start their own businesses. According to CFA, the materials and tools they receive upon graduation will only be sufficient to start a home-based business rather than to open a small shop in their home village or a nearby city. CFA therefore advocates for the introduction of group loans for youth, which would help them to rent a shop or to invest in the materials needed to start a business.

Since UNICEF does not support the idea of handing out loans to youth, CFA will try to give loans to those who completed the reintegration training by securing additional funds. Reportedly, CFA is currently running a successful loan program for adults. According to the NGO, loans are generally being paid

Training will be provided for nine months

off within six months (ibid.). A similar credit scheme could be offered to Afghan youth.

For various reasons, the reintegration phase did not start until July 2004. Once demobilized, program participants were thus left without assistance for a period of three months. The more weeks and months went by without receiving any support, D&R participants with an extremely high motivation to start with vocational training courses, became discouraged. Many former underage soldiers and their families felt that promises were not being kept. Reportedly, some children returned to their former commanders. Others tried to join local police forces or the new Afghan army (mostly due to economic incentives). The majority, however, live with their families and assist with domestic work or agricultural production.

CFA explained the large gap between demobilization and reintegration by the delay in signing the reintegration agreement with UNICEF. According to CFA, the reintegration proposal was submitted to UNICEF with a delay (in April 2004) and approved by UNICEF in early June, long after underage soldiers had been demobilized. Once the agreement between UNICEF and CFA was signed, CFA program staff started to prepare the reintegration phase, i.e. they installed field offices, set up computer systems, etc.

Large time gap between end of demobilization and start of reintegration is detrimental to morale of participants

In early July when reintegration activities were about to begin, CFA (with the support of local *shuras*, district governors and commanders) tried to convince those demobilized children who had rejoined the fighting forces to enroll in the reintegration program. In most cases, they were successful, although some children had to be re-demobilized. Another 30 previously demobilized underage soldiers who rejoined commanders were not willing to return (CCF/CFA, 2004b).

By October 2004, all 2,000 beneficiaries had enrolled in the reintegration program. Former underage soldiers as well as other war-affected youth in the northeast are benefiting from skills training courses. According to CFA data, most participants chose the vocational training option. 1,324 youths (including 105 girls) are being trained in carpentry, tailoring, metal works and other skills offered in one of the 139 vocational training centers spread out over the four northeastern provinces. Carpentry and tailoring are the most preferred choices (ibid.). The remaining 676 youths opted for the agricultural development program. The agriculture option consists of training in livestock (selected by 41 girls) or poultry farming, and includes seeds for grain and rice, fertilizers and kitchen gardens.

Furthermore, 170 literacy courses were established for a total of 2,036 students, including 433 girls. Recreational activities such as the daily organization of sports events started in 152 locations (ibid.).

4. Program assessment: Obstacles, Challenges and Concerns

In the course of the last few years, UNICEF and its implementing partner organizations undertook a huge effort to advocate for children's rights in Afghanistan and to provide young Afghan soldiers with opportunities to establish secure livelihoods. Nonetheless, the information and data presented in the previous chapter highlight weaknesses in both the program planning and implementation process of UNICEF's current D&R initiative.

The main criticism concerns the establishment of a separate and independent program to demobilize and reintegrate underage soldiers within the context of reconstruction and peacebuilding in Afghanistan, and the failure of both UNICEF and the ANBP to develop and pursue a more strategic and coordinated approach (4.1). Further weaknesses are evident in the advance planning and preparation of both the demobilization and reintegration phase (4.2), as well as in the overall coordination among implementing agencies and collaboration with a variety of actors engaged in the Afghan recovery process (4.3).

4.1 Linkage to the ANBP

Given the similar social and economic needs of Afghan youth and adults in the aftermath of conflict, shared objectives of the ANBP and UNICEF, as well as an overall reconstruction process that is characterized by funding shortages, it is a grave mistake and an obstacle to the effective reintegration of young soldiers in Afghanistan to separate youth D&R from the adult DD&R process and to operate with little or no communication and sharing of information.

In the opinion of the author, a separate program for underage soldiers does not necessarily fit all post-conflict situations, and is not necessarily in the best interest of children and young people sought to be targeted and supported. UNICEF's rationale for establishing a special program for young soldiers is based on the premise that underage soldiers require different interventions according to their specific needs. Special child/youth-specific aspects are, however, not visible in the reintegration options offered to D&R participants, at least not in

Main criticism:
separate D&R
program for youth
not necessary in the
case of Afghanistan

terms of skills training. In fact, the main difference between reintegration options for youth and adults seems to be the superior benefits included in the adult reintegration packages, which would have also been highly beneficial for soldiers below the age of 18.

Ideally, D&R of both youth and adults should have been brought about in one single process, while making provisions for exceptional cases (e.g. for very young or highly traumatized children⁷¹). This way, a waste of scarce resources and a duplication of work in the two programs, such as the creation of parallel computer databases, uncoordinated negotiations with often the same regional or local commanders, the establishment of independent working relationships with implementing NGOs, and the targeting of economic needs of former combatants by offering largely similar training options for both youth and adults (such as carpentry, tailoring, mechanics, etc), could have been avoided. Currently, UNICEF's reintegration partners do not benefit from existing structures established by ANBP partners. Instead, independent structures are set up in regions where the adult DD&R program has been running for some time. In the northeast, for instance, CFA acts as an implementing partner for both UNICEF and the ANBP. Nonetheless, reintegration activities are operated separately and follow different timelines, despite the fact that reintegration of both youth and adults largely takes place in the same provinces. As another disadvantage of the missing linkage between UNICEF and the ANBP, the majority of young people are excluded from reintegration assistance in the southern and western regions of Afghanistan, where the adult DD&R program has been ongoing for some time.

D&R of youth cannot benefit from existing structures and experiences made in the DD&R process due to independent structures of the programs

A single D&R process under the auspices of the ANBP, with UNICEF as a close cooperation partner, would have better responded both to the realities on the ground and the roles children and young people play in Afghanistan. In fact, several NGOs interviewed for this paper stated that Afghan youth wishes to be recognized and treated as adults. As such, many D&R participants would, most likely, prefer to be part of the adult DD&R program, not at least due to more comprehensive reintegration options and access to micro-credit schemes.

In the scenario of an ANBP-led D&R process, UNICEF's role as an essential cooperation partner would be vital in providing additional services that meet some of the unique needs of youth, such as basic education courses (since a high number of

71 The number of very young and highly traumatized soldiers in Afghanistan is believed to be minimal.

D&R participants have a low level of primary and secondary education), and engaging youth in recreational activities such as sports or arts. In addition, UNICEF could have paid increased attention to psycho-social assistance, awareness-raising and advocacy work for the non-participation of children and youth in Afghan factional groups. More important, UNICEF could have intensified its efforts in developing a comprehensive, large-scale assistance and development program for young Afghans.

Unfortunately, the separation of the two programs is a given and irreversible fact. Both the ANBP and the UNICEF programs have proceeded in a way that makes a close linkage between the two DD&R (D&R) initiatives highly unlikely, and both agencies are to blame for failing to resolve their differences and develop a joint strategy. Nonetheless, future D&R program implementation in the western, southern and southeastern regions of Afghanistan offers an opportunity for a more harmonized approach to demobilization and reintegration as well as a more effective coordination of reintegration assistance with existing structures in the field.

4.2 Advance planning and design of the D&R program

Advance planning is vital to any demobilization and reintegration process. All too often, D&R planning proceeds outside the humanitarian programming framework in post-conflict countries and does not take into account the “existing and potential capacity in the country where the program is planned, information gathered through national assessments about needs, opportunities and resources at the national level, insight from local assessment about community strengths, structures and dynamics, as well as the availability of financial, human and technological resources” (Save the Children, 2001).

The D&R program for underage soldiers in Afghanistan suffers from a lack in advance planning, not only in terms of developing long-term strategies for reintegration, but also in terms of in-depth pre-programming situation assessments. UNICEF's official D&R process is not based on a solid foundation of data and research. Accordingly, UNICEF and its partner organizations are operating with imprecise data and information, both in numbers and profiles of children and youth involved in the fighting forces, which is especially detrimental to the planning process.

Lack of advance planning in the D&R program for underage soldiers

Lack of quantitative and qualitative research

No in-depth research to determine the extent of young soldiers has been carried out;...

The first step in establishing a D&R program in Afghanistan should have been to determine the extent of the underage soldier problem, particularly in light of the controversial messages regarding the necessity of a special program separate from overall DD&R efforts. To this end, initial data collection and analysis of the local circumstances of child recruitment, the experiences and roles of underage soldiers, as well as a needs survey and skills assessment, including demographic information on combatants such as age, geographic origin, education, skills, etc., should be considered as foundational information for the planning and design of a D&R framework. It is true that the difficult security environment in Afghanistan and, accordingly, limited access to underage soldiers, cannot be disregarded. Nevertheless, the actual decision whether the situation of young soldiers in Afghanistan warrants a separate D&R program should have been based on a comprehensive, country-wide assessment.

In the past, no detailed survey on underage soldiers in Afghanistan was conducted. Child and youth-specific assessments carried out prior to the planning and implementation of the current D&R program focused mainly on the overall situation and general challenges faced by young people in Afghanistan (in this regard, a child/youth-specific assessment with a—very broad—focus on underage soldiers in the northeast carried out by CFA in spring 2002 as well as a comprehensive (internal) UNICEF assessment of Afghan youth in the post-conflict era) should be mentioned. UNICEF's rapid assessment in early 2003 was the first attempt to provide an overview on numbers and locations of young soldiers in Afghanistan.

... a program based on broad estimates cannot do justice to the needs of underage combatants

Despite the fact that this assessment is solely based on broad estimates and on preliminary information received from only a small number of commanders, it builds the foundation for the entire D&R program. The accuracy of the available data is indeed questionable, as NGO findings during the identification and verification process of former young soldiers in various locations demonstrate. Although UNICEF's principles and guidelines for the D&R program clearly state that the released number of underage soldiers (8,010) merely serves as an estimate for planning purposes (UNICEF, 2003c), and is supposed to be subject to verification during the implementation period, it seems to represent the upper limit of the number of underage soldiers to be included in the program. While UNICEF, in a recent discussion with the author, emphasized the flexibility and inclusiveness of the D&R initiative (in the sense that it allows

every eligible candidate to benefit from the services offered), realities on the ground seem to provide a different picture. As experiences by CFA, SC-Sweden and UMCOR show (see section 3.4), the number of underage soldiers identified by the implementing agencies did not correspond to UNICEF's estimate. As a result, those who exceeded the regional limits (see table 1) were not considered eligible to enter the program. UNICEF's pressure to meet its self-imposed targets and to deliver results that are concordant with the officially released underage soldier figure seems to be one of the driving forces for excluding them from the program (it should be noted that UNICEF strongly rejects this criticism). Apparently, the current program set-up does not allow for variations in numbers and is not flexible enough to accommodate changes in the actual number of underage soldiers. A flexible D&R program should be able to respond to events and conditions as they unfold. Goals and objectives should be revised once the implementation process has started, based on lessons learned and changing realities on the ground, as well as on information received during the verification process. It is thus crucial to conduct comprehensive and periodic assessments of the current D&R process in Afghanistan. In addition, eligibility criteria for entering the D&R program should be determined well in advance and agreed upon by all agencies involved in the implementation process.

The lack of adequate data clearly has an adverse effect on the quality of program implementation. Since program partners neither receive comprehensive information on the number of children to be demobilized and reintegrated, nor on their profile, background and level of education, etc. prior to the demobilization process, it is almost impossible for NGOs to plan the reintegration phase in a timely manner, that is prior to the demobilization process of underage soldiers. Discussions with implementing NGOs during the fieldwork for this paper revealed that some staff members responsible for planning reintegration activities did not have any personal contact with potential program participants prior to the demobilization process. This is especially true for those organizations that do not possess any previous experience with child/youth protection programming in Afghanistan. As a result, they lack first-hand information on the needs, physical and psychological conditions as well as on existing skills of underage soldiers and other war-affected youth at the time when reintegration is planned.

Planning the full D&R process

To ensure a coherent and timely delivery of D&R activities, as well as to avoid major delays and the raising of false expectations among program participants and their communities, program planning must be undertaken with the full DD&R process in view. To the extent possible, program designers should plan all stages of the process before the actual program starts. This includes advance preparations for the deployment of staff, training and other resources during the reintegration phase, as well as formalizing relationships with implementing partner organizations.

The D&R program for underage soldiers and other war-affected youth in Afghanistan has been and continues to be characterized by repeated delays. Initiated more than two years after the fall of the Taliban, program implementation is divided into several phases. In each target area, the reintegration phase started several months after the ceremony that marks the completion of the demobilization process. In some areas, such as the west, south and southeast of the country, both the demobilization and the reintegration phase have been suspended until an unknown date in 2005. Both the initial delay in launching the program in the northeast, the delayed program start in the eastern, central and northern regions as well as the long gap between demobilization and reintegration in all target provinces can largely be attributed to insufficient advance preparations of the reintegration phase. In all regions where the demobilization process was initiated, reintegration partners were not in place until at a very late stage in the demobilization process. In some regions, they were contracted after former underage soldiers were fully demobilized.

Reintegration needs
to be long-term

Identifying appropriate partner organizations that possess relevant experience and an interest in the D&R program certainly is a difficult task and a lengthy process. However, to ensure a high degree of quality and consistency in the delivery of D&R assistance, it is vital to recognize the identification of competent and reliable NGO partners as a priority issue during the planning stage. Reintegration requires a huge logistical effort and several months of preparations in terms of staff deployment and training. A failure to deliver support activities in time might build up frustration among ex-combatants. It is thus critical to promptly meet their needs and expectations and provide them with a clear picture of their civilian future. Otherwise, demobilized children with a fading initial motivation might return to their former commanders. In the northeast of the country, CFA had to locate

children who re-joined militias and convince them to enroll in the reintegration program. Such a procedure is a clear waste of time and resources and could have been avoided by a more timely formalization of working relationships between UNICEF and CFA.

Another concern regarding the design of the D&R program is its short-term focus. There are currently no reintegration plans beyond a period of over one year in each target region. Given the need for long-term programming with a specific focus on community assistance, one year of reintegration assistance is inadequate to help former underage soldiers and other war-affected youth to establish a sustainable livelihood, especially when the appropriate tools and financial resources needed to apply the acquired skill, and turn it into gainful employment, are missing.

Naturally, the scale and duration of an underage soldier D&R program is strongly shaped by the availability of funds and, accordingly, by donor priorities. Mobilizing funds for the D&R program has been a major challenge for UNICEF. To complete the reintegration process, committed resources of at least 3–5 years are required. As in many other (post)-conflict situations, a disproportionate focus on demobilization and short-term reintegration exercises, rather than on investments relevant to long-term reintegration, is evident in Afghanistan. Poulton (2004a) states that “donors are notoriously bad at funding the reintegration part. Time and again, donors provide too little and too late”. The split between UNICEF and the ANBP certainly is not conducive to UNICEF’s financial situation, as both organizations now rely on different sources of funding.

A significant component of advance preparations to D&R is the development of an adequate information strategy. As indicated in the previous chapter, information on the existence of a youth-specific D&R program, its exact starting dates in various locations, as well as services provided during the D&R process, has not always reached children effectively. Limited publicity and clarity about the program and its components not only led to a number of false claims for D&R assistance⁷², but also to a lack of interest and engagement by the international community (including UN agencies and donor governments) and the Afghan government. In May 2004, when the D&R program had already been running for three months, a spokesperson of the Afghan Ministry of Defense interviewed by the Institute for War and

Information strategy
to reach program
participants is
important

⁷² This can be observed in most DD&R processes around the world and cannot solely be explained by an inadequate information strategy.

Peace Reporting (IWPR) stated that he was unaware of any initiatives to demobilize and reintegrate young soldiers (IWPR, 2004b). Many young soldiers and commanders interviewed by IWPR were equally unaware of such programs. The same holds for members of the wider international community, including donor governments to the adult DD&R program, UN agencies as well as government officials at all levels (excluding those who are directly involved in the D&R process).

4.3 Leadership and coordination

One of the primary conditions for a sustainable reintegration process is an effective relationship between overall reconstruction efforts and D&R agencies. Given the complexity of military, political and humanitarian aspects of D&R, a variety of actors with a certain degree of overlapping mandates are present in Afghanistan. Ideally, the work of UN agencies, NGOs and the Afghan government should be coordinated by a single vision of the future. Priority should be given to “adopt a common program framework of principles, approaches and standards for all actors and operational coordination mechanisms at the working level” (Verhey, 2003). Unfortunately, all organizations consulted during the field trip for this paper reported the lack of coordination and mutual support to be a serious shortcoming in the work with underage soldiers and war-affected youth. There is little agreement between the different UN agencies and humanitarian organizations working on reintegration initiatives in Afghanistan (for both youth and adults). In fact, serious disagreements between agencies (e.g. between UNICEF and the ANBP, but also, to some extent, between UNICEF and its implementing program partners) seem to have characterized the D&R program from the beginning. A key to improving this adverse situation and to enhancing cooperation and sharing of information and expertise in the future will be more effective leadership on the part of UNICEF.

Other programs
to support young
Afghans

Linkage to other interventions

Not only does UNICEF’s D&R program run separately from the adult DD&R program, it also operates independently from more general strategies to support young adults. By integrating assistance activities, the programmatic scope and effectiveness could be increased greatly, and young beneficiaries could profit from each organization’s area of expertise.

Although few in number, development programs exist, which, among others, cater for Afghanistan's younger population. A project that deserves special mention is a current US \$2.98 million program financed by the World Bank's administered Japanese Social Development Fund (JSDF), to help improve the social and economic status of the country's young adults (World Bank, 2003). The four-year project, which is implemented by the MLSA in cooperation with several Afghan NGOs, aims to reintegrate and rehabilitate young Afghans between the ages of 14 and 29 by offering literacy and vocational courses. Upon graduation, participants are assigned to the private sector or enter micro-finance programs, which provide them with an opportunity to establish small businesses⁷³. Regardless of some significant shortcomings during the implementation phase (mainly due to the incapacity of the MLSA to properly manage the project as well as disagreements between the World Bank and NGO partners⁷⁴), project components are largely similar to UNICEF's reintegration process. There is, however, no linkage between the two programs. This is unfortunate, since D&R participants could benefit greatly from access to micro-finance options or private sector employment opportunities.

A particular challenge in any DD&R initiative around the world is to adequately respond to the economic needs and expectations of program participants. Young ex-combatants and other youth benefiting from reintegration assistance need to find income-generating employment, which does not only correspond to their needs and interests, but, more importantly, to existing and future opportunities in which the newly learnt skill can be applied.

The overall success of D&R in a situation of widespread poverty and unemployment, low economic growth, disruption of agriculture and political instability will be determined by the "immediate availability of short-term and long-term jobs, training, and aid for those entering the agricultural [and business] sector" (Sedra, 2002). Considering the slow economic growth and the slow job creation rate in Afghanistan, no reintegration program can guarantee an immediate entry into the labor market. The lack of income-generating opportunities for program participants in Afghanistan has in fact been recognized as one of the principal factors that might inhibit the success of the reintegration phase (MLSA, 2004), a reality that goes beyond the influence of UNICEF and its implementing partner organizations. However,

D&R can only succeed if economic needs are met

73 Telephone interview with World Bank staff in August 2004.

74 Telephone interview with World Bank staff in August 2004.

program planners have to ensure that D&R participants are provided with the most adequate services and tools so that they can find gainful employment.

Since the reintegration phase has not yet been completed in any of the regions targeted by the D&R program, it is too early to assess the success of current efforts to provide participants with income-generating opportunities. However, to increase the likelihood of a direct entry into the labor market upon graduation from training courses, UNICEF could have pursued the option of collaborating with a specialized agency such as the International Labor Organization (ILO). By establishing networks geared at matching labor supply and demand and to support D&R graduates in terms of job search and placement, the ILO with its long-standing experience in youth reintegration programming in post-conflict countries as well as its leading role in the development of job creation strategies in Afghanistan could have added significantly to the sustainability of the D&R program. Unfortunately, UNICEF and the ILO did not make an attempt to further pursue active collaboration, after initial negotiations between the two agencies during the planning stage of the D&R program failed.

While analyzing the situation for this paper, the author also noted a significant need to enhance cooperation and establish synergies with organizations that provide small-scale reintegration programs in Afghanistan, which are disconnected from the official DD&R process. These organizations are operating without an overall coordinating body and run parallel to UNICEF's program, often in the same provinces (as, for instance, in Nangarhar province, where the official reintegration initiative by SAB is running parallel, but detached from SC-Sweden's independent reintegration project).

Coordination among implementing NGOs

An integrated approach to D&R requires the advance coordination of a diverse group of actors involved in the process, and the development of extensive program partnerships to prevent gaps in D&R implementation and ensure the coherence and continuity of support measures. In the Afghan D&R process, there is only limited contact between the various implementing partner organizations. Unfortunately, there is no coherent strategy for information sharing, lessons learned and best practices among all agencies. Considering that the D&R process consists of several stages and that it moves from region to region, implementing agencies could benefit greatly from effective inter-agency

Not sufficient
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partners

coordination mechanisms. While UNICEF convened several working groups in mid-2003 and engaged various child protection agencies in discussions about the planned D&R initiative, this approach was, until very recently, not followed up sufficiently. Working groups, composed of key representatives of all agencies involved in efforts to demobilize and reintegrate underage soldiers and war-affected youth, such as UNICEF, implementing NGOs and members of the Afghan government (namely the DD&R Commission and the MLSA) should meet on a more regular basis to provide stakeholders with a forum for discussion and an opportunity to overcome their differences regarding design, structure and implementation of the D&R process. Ideally, representatives of the intended target groups of the D&R program (i.e. underage soldiers and war-affected youth) should also be included.

Debates and discussions during such meetings should focus on program strategies, including the linkage to the ANBP and other interventions, and the identification of eligibility criteria and target groups, as well as foster mutual reflection on strengths, weaknesses, constraints and ethical issues arising from demobilization and reintegration programs. During the implementation phase, working group meetings are particularly important to a discussion of reintegration details, development of solutions and the creation of appropriate education- and income-generating opportunities. Especially during the planning period, UNICEF has failed to take a leading role in setting up appropriate coordination mechanisms. Working group meetings are convened inconsistently, and discussions are mostly limited to bilateral meetings between UNICEF and NGOs, mainly concerning program strategies in one particular geographical area. In fact, some of the NGOs interviewed for this paper had, at least in the initial stages of the program, neither been informed about the status of the D&R program in regions outside their own area of responsibility, nor about the respective agencies in charge of program implementation. Although it is UNICEF's responsibility as the lead organization in the D&R program to ensure a high level of communication and exchange of expertise between the various agencies, NGOs are also to blame. Few of them made an active attempt to convene a coordination structure or to initiate discussions and information sharing.

The level of experience as well as financial and technical capacities of the different implementing agencies involved in the D&R exercise varies considerably. Organizations with fewer competencies in child protection and D&R program planning could benefit greatly from interaction with program partners who

bring a wealth of experience to strategies of how to demobilize and reintegrate youth. To ensure an effective exchange of expertise, UNICEF should have undertaken a thorough survey of implementing NGO partners to identify strengths and weaknesses of each. In fact, the expertise of international NGO staff responsible for developing and implementing reintegration strategies in a given area is, in some cases, questionable. Considering the decisive role that individuals play in determining reintegration strategies in Afghanistan, this can cause severe difficulties for the success of the program.

5. Conclusion

The main lessons and conclusions that were identified during and derived from the field research can be summarized as follows:

- The establishment of an independent, youth-specific D&R program led to significant controversies and tensions among actors on the ground. Many opposing views and criticism regarding the current D&R exercise could have been avoided if national and international child protection NGOs, key government officials and, particularly, the ANBP had played a more active role in the overall design of the D&R program, and if they had actively engaged in pre-programming discussions concerning the 'right' approach to supporting young soldiers.
- To respond to the needs and responsibilities of young Afghans, and to avoid unnecessary duplication and overlap as well as a waste of scarce resources, former underage soldiers should have been demobilized and reintegrated within the framework of the adult DD&R program. There is no practical reason why two independent DD&R (D&R) planning and implementation processes in Afghanistan had to be established. In view of the best interests of young soldiers, both UNICEF and the ANBP should recognize the need for a close and coordinated working relationship. A more effective D&R program implementation in the regions yet to be targeted (i.e. western and southern regions) requires a high degree of coordination between the two agencies. Ideally, D&R activities should be integrated into already existing structures.
- Coordination and mutual support among agencies involved in the D&R process is minimal. To enhance communication between all actors, a regular meeting of a technical working group (composed of representatives of key agencies) should

Conclusions

take place to ensure reflection of strengths, weaknesses, constraints and ethical issues arising from the D&R program, and support to each other throughout the duration of program delivery.

- The constructive engagement of program participants is a significant determinant in the success and sustainability of any D&R program. However, the views of the target beneficiaries have largely been neglected in both the D&R planning and implementation phase. UNICEF should make sure that the voices of former underage soldiers, other war-affected youth, families and members of the local communities are heard. Accordingly, UNICEF ought to enhance participation in all decisions affecting these groups.
- The economic insecurity of underage soldiers and their families has been identified as one of the main reasons for youth involvement in the Afghan fighting forces. Accordingly, the economic security of Afghan families not only contributes to the prevention of future recruitment, but also determines a successful reintegration. UNICEF should thus recognize the need for investment in family livelihood support.
- It would be advisable to provide skills training graduates with adequate tools so that they can turn the skills acquired into a profession. Accordingly, an introduction of micro-credit schemes or the establishment of close linkages with organizations that offer micro-credits to both adults and youth should be fostered by UNICEF.

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Annex I: List of People Interviewed

Ibrahim Sesay, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 9 June 2004 and 17 June 2004, Kabul

Ghulam M. Isaczai, Afghanistan's New Beginnings Programme (ANBP), 3 June 2004, Kabul

Shirin Pakfar, Afghanistan's New Beginnings Programme (ANBP), 5 June 2004, Kabul

Frederik Prins, Child Fund Afghanistan (CFA), 7 June 2004, Kabul

Teresa Komegay, Child Fund Afghanistan (CFA), 7 June 2004, Kabul

Kunera Korthals Altes, Child Fund Afghanistan (CFA), 11 June 2004, Kabul

Christine Kuhn, United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR), 4 June 2004, Kabul

Michel Kersten, United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR), 6 June 2004, Kabul

Deborah Barry, Save the Children USA, 8 June 2004, Kabul

Claire O'Kane, Save the Children UK, 16 June 2004, Kabul

Rolf Borgos, Save the Children Sweden, 23 August 2004 (email)

Kathleen Campbell, International Rescue Committee (IRC), 8 June 2004, Kabul

David Salter, International Labor Organization (ILO), 13 June 2004, Kabul

Ahmad Nader Nadery, Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), 10 June 2004, Kabul

Eileen Olexiuk, Embassy of Canada, 10 June 2004, Kabul

Luc Chounet-Cambas, United Nations Development Program (UNDP), 6 June 2004, Kabul

Trevor Martin, United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA), 14 June 2004, Kabul

Stephen Rasmussen, World Bank, 5 August 2004 (telephone interview)

Shideh Hadian, World Bank, 12 August 2004 (telephone interview)