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**Youth and Violence:
Drawing Parallels between Child
Soldiers and Youth in Gangs**

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Executive Summary

Youth and violence is a pervasive phenomenon that conjures up various images. The two most common images that come to mind when thinking about this notion are those of children involved in armed conflicts i.e. child soldiers, and of groups of children engaging belligerently in illegal activities in urban locations i.e. youth in gangs. Whilst both groups represent distinctive facets of the phenomenon of youth and violence, the question which this report addresses is whether there are any parallels which can be drawn between the two. The purpose of doing so is twofold. First of all, it may provide a better awareness, understanding and insight into the context and complexities surrounding the conception of children and violence. Secondly, there may be some commonalities between the two that allow agencies working with either group to discover and learn from the experiences of each other and perhaps even apply strategies used by the other. In other words, there may be things that those working with (former) child soldiers can learn from those who have worked with youth in gangs and vice versa. In order to determine whether there are indeed any parallels that can be drawn, various aspects were considered. These included defining key terms and concepts (e.g. who is a child, what is meant by the term gang, what constitutes an armed conflict, etc.), understanding the purposes and objectives of armed groups and gangs, examining how and why children become part of the groups, considering the roles and experiences of children in both groups and exploring the issues and challenges surrounding the children leaving both groups and reintegrating them back into the community.

There are a number of conclusions that can be drawn from the analysis. Firstly, key terms such as “child”, “gang”, etc. are elusive and not easy to define - their definitions vary according to the local cultural context and the setting in which they are being addressed. Secondly, armed groups and gangs have specific purposes and objectives. The core objective for an armed opposition group is to take over the State/government whereas the main aim of a gang is to ensure local territorial control which allows them to carry out various (illegal) activities. That being said, it is noted that in some instances the purpose and objective of both groups change and in such contexts boundaries shift or become less distinctive. Thirdly, there are some

similarities with regards to children becoming part of armed groups and gangs in terms of the reasons as to why they do so. What remains different however, is how they become part of the group. Fourthly, the diversity in the nature, purpose and structure of both groups delineates some major differences between them; although it was agreed that there may be some commonalities with regards to the experiences of the individual members of both groups. Finally, there are some comparable issues and challenges which prevail in trying to reintegrate children associated with gangs and former child soldiers back into the community.

Report

Introduction

What images are typically brought into play by the notion of children and violence? The two most common images that often come to mind are those of child soldiers (i.e. children associated with armed conflicts) and youth in gangs (i.e. groups of children that within the 'urban' setting collectively engage in violent and other illegal activities). In this context the question that arises is whether there are any commonalities between these two frequently evoked images? In other words, whilst a multitude of individual studies have been carried out on both youth in gangs and child soldiers, the issue which remains is whether any parallels can be drawn between these two groups? That being said, what would be the benefits of carrying out such an exercise? There are two main reasons. First, it will give us a better understanding and awareness of the wider picture/context of the concept of youth and violence. Second, there may be some commonalities which allow agencies working with either group to learn something from each other i.e. those working with youth in gangs may learn something from the experiences of those who have worked with child soldiers and vice versa.

In terms of commonalities between the two groups, there may for instance be similar factors – often referred to as push and pull factors - which lead children to become part of gangs and armed groups in the first place. Accordingly, drawing comparisons between youth in gangs and child soldiers may allow for the development of common strategies to address/curb such factors. What is more, do children in gangs and child soldiers share any common experiences? If yes, can anything be learnt from these analogous experiences, which in turn provides us with a deeper insight into the phenomenon of youth and violence and its complexities? In addition, drawing parallels between the two groups may provide us with a better understanding of successful reintegration strategies i.e. what works and what does not when reintegrating such children back into society.

Besides potential commonalities between youth in gangs and child soldiers, there is also a blurring of the line between what is deemed as urban violence and what is classified as an armed conflict. For instance, in recent years, more and more young

people have become actively involved in what are conventionally termed as intra-state armed conflicts, but where the participation and engagement is based on privately-driven, criminal behaviour serving an economic need rather than any ideological purpose. Thus in this context, not only are the youngsters perceived more as behaving like criminals (as opposed to soldiers), but what is seemingly an armed conflict is simply regarded as yet another form of urban violence and thereby challenging the notion of what constitutes an armed conflict.

With all this in mind, this report attempts to draw parallels between child soldiers and youth in gangs by focusing on how and why they become part of their respective groups, their role and experiences in both the groups and their reintegration back into society. More importantly, what, if any, lessons can be learnt?

Definition of a Child

The first step in discussing children and violence entailed defining the term “child”. *Noëlle Quéniwet* and *Shilan Shah-Davis* pointed that in international law, and more particularly under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), a child, broadly speaking, is viewed as anyone under the age of 18. That being said, there remains inconsistency even within the international legal framework as several “threshold” ages may be found within one instrument. For example, within the UNCRC whilst 18 is seen as the cutting off point of childhood, Article 1 permits State Parties which set a lower age for the end of childhood to retain that lower age with the use of the words “unless majority is attained earlier”. By doing this the Convention is in actual fact accommodating socially and culturally diverse national age limits. Likewise, Article 38 UNCRC allows for the recruitment of children from the age of 15 onwards. Moreover, within the international legal framework different age limits are applied under conventions regarding special contexts such as when a child can work. For instance, this can be seen in the International Labour Organisation Conventions 138 and 182. This leaves room for difference in approach and no uniformity. With all this in mind, it is difficult to assert that there is a clear cut definition of a child in international law. Yet, the international community, especially the United Nations, continues to view 18 as the cutting point of childhood, a position reinforced by the straight-18 approach adopted by a range of NGOs and more recently United Nations bodies. This is further reinforced by regional instruments

such as the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child where Article 2 defines a child as “every human being below the age of 18 years”.

It could be argued that international law in defining who is a child and what is deemed as childhood fundamentally adopts a Eurocentric, romantic notion. In reality however, the definitions and concepts vary depending on the cultural context in which they are set. Furthermore, there is often a difference between the legal and social/cultural definitions and perceptions. *Shilan* contended that it often becomes an issue of competing views and negotiating what a child and childhood means for the system that regulates it.

In the UK a child is someone under the age of 18 for the purposes of a number of things e.g. voting. But as already mentioned the social reality is very different. As for instance, *Jade Royal*, a worker for Community Resolve, a NGO whose aim is to intervene within and between communities and young people to solve conflicts, pointed out that in inner city areas and in poorer families 16 is the cutting off point where individuals become adults and are thus deemed independent of the parents. This is in part as a result of a government policy whereby parents do not receive any money for children who are over the age of 16 and out of educational system. At this point, drop out children are encouraged to start working and thus viewed as adults. Therefore, it might be claimed that in the UK, the age of 16 is considered a *de facto* indicator of adulthood, but this may increase to 18 or beyond, subject to further education or training.

Ismael Velasco, Director of Community Resolve at the time, outlined that another pertinent factor used socially in determining who is a child is the level of responsibility given to the individual. For example, he witnessed how the Masai in Tanzania gave their children, especially girls from a young age (e.g. 5-6 years of age), responsibility geared towards preparing them for adulthood. Here, as noted by *Shilan*, childhood becomes a transitional phase where household and other responsibilities given to children are seen as work and not labour and thereby regarded as perfect training for entry into adulthood. This point of view is clearly distinct from the classical Western notion of what is childhood. In this light the phenomenon of a child soldier aged 15 makes sense. After all the level of responsibility an individual is entrusted with is weightier than his/her age itself.

Building on her knowledge as a sociologist in youth studies, *Jenny Maher* laid emphasis on the fact that in the United Kingdom society views anyone under 21 as

young and unable to make reasonable decisions. In other words, the level of responsibility given to young people is an essential factor in gauging their “childhood” or “youth”. Particularly important is to note that sociologists investigating young people in the United Kingdom draw on the concept of “youth”, thereby expanding the time limit of this lack of responsibility beyond childhood proper.

Following on *Ismael’s* idea that within the Tanzanian cultural context the concept of teenagehood is not really known (and certainly not in the same way as in Western cultures), for, becoming an adult is viewed along a continuum of tasks and responsibilities being taught and finally entrusted to individuals, and *Jenny’s* introduction of the concept of “youth” rather than “childhood” in the United Kingdom, *Noëlle* highlighted that the general population in some states (e.g. Afghanistan and Sierra Leone) is very young and thus individuals take on roles that are viewed in the Western world as those of adults. As in Western countries the population lives longer, the time to become an adult has also been elongated. To some extent it can be claimed that life expectancy affects the length of one’s childhood. *Noëlle* also stressed that the straight 18 approach honed by a range of international actors is problematic when both on the international and national levels the law accepts that there are different ages for different acts. For example, a child can be recruited in the armed forces from 15 onwards, a child can marry from 16 years of age onwards and, yet, only vote once he/she has reached 18 years of age. This lack of coherence appears *prima facie* to be problematic; nonetheless it seems that the drafters of those legal instruments thought it reflected best the way children grow and understand the world in which they live.

Traditionally children were regarded as objects of the law. *Shilan* pointed out that children’s issues and what was deemed good for them was seen from a welfarist and paternalistic position. Over time, however, there was a change in the attitude and children were treated as subjects of the law, able to participate in decision-making processes. The United Nations was mentioned as a potential driver for such a change as children were given a say about their lives, thereby acquiring a certain sense of autonomy of agency. For instance, the UNCRC by adopting a rights-based approach towards children is hailed by many as a very important step in promoting greater children’s participation and fairer power relations. *Jenny* pointed out that one of the consequences of such thinking is that the minimum age of criminal responsibility in England and Wales is 10 in order to reflect the fact that children

have the capacity to understand their acts and should thus be held liable for such acts.

Going back to *Jade's* statement that in poorer British households the age of the end of childhood is lower than the law stipulates *Atreyee Sen* noted that the definition of childhood depends on classes i.e. childhood varies according to the class you belong to. In other words, social status becomes an important consideration. Indeed, taking the example of India - where *Atreyee* has accumulated great expertise thanks to a series of research trips - whilst in the upper classes a romanticised idea of the innocent child seems to prevail, in lower classes it is accepted that children may turn into men/women by the age of e.g. 7, mainly owing to economic factors. For example, children are obliged to work in a factory to assist their parents in collecting enough money to feed the family. In other instances children head households and thus have to cater for younger siblings. The level of poverty shapes the perception of childhood. *Atreyee* added a caveat that the age of transition to adulthood depends on countries. Financial necessity, employment or an expectation that a child makes a financial contribution to the household may be a factor in determining when an individual ceases to be a child.

Adding to *Ismael's* statement that it is natural for children to work in their families and communities, *Shilan*, who grew up in Tanzania, remembers that, as a child, she was given chores to do and was expected to help with the work in the house. This was in no way considered as child labour but as child work. This highlights the fine line between child work and child labour as the former is to a certain level expected in order to learn to take on responsibilities that will later be encumbered upon them as adults. This goes to reaffirm the position that childhood is a training platform for adulthood. *Jenny* pointed that there is an expectation that parents teach children to work so that later they can earn a living. At this juncture, *Jade*, speaking from her own experience as a mother and that of mothers of children in poorer areas in Bristol, explained that due to a range of restrictions regarding health and safety, it is sometimes problematic to teach certain skills e.g. ironing or cooking, to children. Moreover, as children have the possibility to call the police if they think that their parents are not treating them in accordance with the law some parents find it difficult to reprimand and discipline children for bad behaviour. In other words, as *Jenny* said, if a child is slapped, the police will be around straight away. Many, often single, mothers are therefore under the growing impression that they are “babysitting”

children for the benefit of the government and are not in a position where they are allowed to control their own children. This stands in stark contrast to a discourse underscoring the lack of discipline and respect at home and in school as a direct consequence of a lack of good parenting skills. *Ismael* underlined that this is unfortunately a self-enforcing system because of the persistent views and expectations of the society, as a result of which parents' hands are often tied up. The constraints that are put on parents with regard to the teaching of basic skills particularly affect the poorer sections of the society as they are highly dependent on the social system which makes their actions more likely to be scrutinised by the government. In other parts of the world, parents, children and communities work together in providing vital skills to children. This illustrates the difference between individualistic and collectivist societies. But the question which arises is whether such collectivist societies better equip children to deal with adulthood.

At this juncture *Atreyee* introduced the concept of violence and its relationship with the definition of childhood. She argued that violence and conflicts affect the definition of childhood. In particular, in conflict areas the transition from childhood to adulthood is much quicker and this is deemed as normal in this situation. Yet, violence by children shocks communities and sometimes there is even no linguistic expression for such violence. Whilst physical, psychological and even linguistic coping mechanisms are developed for an array of violent acts violence by children is often incomprehensible and thus no coping mechanism exists. There is also evidence that some "child gangs" may become violent to protect themselves by projecting an image. There are examples in India whereby children have become violent so that they can play safely. *Ismael* points that these groups have their own norms and rules and that a certain form of normalisation takes place with time. Society recognises this to a certain extent. For example, in the UK special court procedures are in place to deal with violent children. In conflict areas child soldiers are viewed as victims of armed opposition groups. Yet, this does not mean that violent acts committed by children are accepted by society. The violent nature of the act supersedes the fact that it was a child who did it and this is the same whether it carried out in an urban area or a conflict zone.

The idea that children mature depending on the surrounding circumstances was picked up by *Jade* who explained that in Bristol many restrictions are imposed on children and thus prevent children from being a child. For example, "no ball playing"

signs mean that children have to find other, more adult-like, activities to entertain themselves. As *Jenny* described, the privatisation of public spaces prevents children from roaming in the streets and learn to become independent individuals, growing up faster. Alternatively, it is argued that the current civilisation process has crafted a vision of childhood that lasts longer and longer and can be up to 25 years. Those who used to be seen as young adults are now considered children and kept as children, notably owing to the fact that the rite of passage into adulthood - which is usually the time when children take on an employment, get married, etc - is continuously pushed further. In some contexts e.g. the UK, no such rites exist and children look for other ways to identify and exhibit that they have become older and may for instance join gangs. For some young individuals being part of a gang represents a way to move on and grow up, a progression from childhood into adulthood as unemployment is the norm rather than the exception.

Shilan aptly summarised that there appears to be an array of factors influencing the age when one is no longer considered a child and deemed to be an adult, including, culture, economic circumstances, responsibilities, expectations, a rite of passage, etc. Thus, more than anything, childhood becomes a historically and socially constructed concept which can change with the realities of the context in which the child lives. As a consequence it does not come as a surprise that lawyers find it hard to find and approve of a common, appropriate definition. In fact in many ways, and from a socio-legal individualistic context, the question becomes who you are and how you perceive yourself. In other words, how children view themselves often differs from how we, as adults, see them. Within violent settings this becomes even more complicated as issues such as power, mobility and privilege become even more heightened.

Gangs, Armed Groups and Children

The next concept that required to be defined was that of a “gang”. There are many definitions and, as *Jenny* jokingly said, there are probably more definitions than gangs! *Matt Clement*, who joined us later in the workshop, clarified that his preferred definition is that of Mike Davis: “power for the otherwise powerless from their control of small urban spaces” (M Davis, ‘Foreword’ in JM Hagedorn, *A World of Gangs: Armed Young Men and Gangsta Culture* (University of Minnesota Press 2008) p. xi)

as this entails issues relating to economics and, at the same time, highlights the symbolism of power which is the control of space and activities within that space.

Ismael expressed his discontent with the usage of the word gang as, in his opinion, it instantly generates specific images, resulting in stereotyping. Similarly words like mafia or child soldiers raise emotional images in the public mind. Moreover it is the consequences of being branded a “gang” or a “member of a gang” that have severe repercussions on the life of these children (e.g. prosecution of gang members in the UK). Without a doubt, saying that someone is a gang member pushes young people further than those that might be on the periphery. Indeed, the word gang is tricky and has consequences e.g. young people who are prosecuted may automatically be viewed in a negative light if seen to be associated with a gang.

Another way to look at gangs is to view them as a group of friends that sometimes run into trouble. Based on her experience with so-called gang members in Bristol, *Jade* enlightened that many such individuals act as gangsters rather than are ones. The lack of role models and notably a father figure in the family pushes these children to pretend to be gangsters and believe they are. Yet, as she elucidated, no “real” gangsters would consider them as their fellows. This need of identification with a group and demonization of gangs was also acknowledged by *Matt* who stressed that gangs exist across classes. An illustrious example is that of sports academy in Chicago where individuals behave like gangsters although they are upper class.

Building on this, *Atreyee* pinpointed that whilst it is true that the media shapes or assists in shaping gang tags and identities, the importance of self-definition should not be underestimated. For example, in India some Muslim boys from local gangs refused to be associated with jihad, for their interest lies in neighbourhood politics and not in terrorism. In other words, whereas some UK gangs draw their identity based upon how those react around them Indian Muslim gangs make a conscious effort to be seen as distinct from jihad and create a specific culture. It is revealing that, as *Atreyee* notes, the word “gang” in English is used in other cultures and there is no equivalent native term for it. For example, in Indian slums, where no English is spoken at all, the word “gang” is commonly used and drawn upon to refer to certain groups of individuals, mainly because it denotes a certain type of group and implies a certain image. Furthermore, some of these groups actively seek to bring into play the word “gang” rather than a translation in the native tongue. Therefore, the word “gang” becomes a very elusive term.

What is more, *Jenny* pinpointed the lack of definition of “gang member”. Whereas some members might be viewed as part of the core, others might play a rather peripheral role. Nonetheless no clear definition exists and it is particularly revealing that whilst the term is used in the law in England and Wales, no definition of the term is actually provided. The question which arises is what are we essentially trying to define here and do we only need one definition? Often, other words such as clique can be used too. Some authors have attempted to establish a typology of gangs.

Coming back to the use of the word “gang” and the law on gangs, *Matt* described the city of Bristol’s policy of “we do not have a gang problem” and questioned this policy choice. *Jenny* added that in contrast other cities use this terminology in the hope that it will attract financial investment from the State. Furthermore research on gangs is currently heavily funded on the national and European levels, thereby raising more an awareness of the phenomenon and maybe demonising it even further. *Matt* elucidated that in a growing number of occasions, the word “gang” is drawn upon as a brand, a globalised tag. Some gangs have shown a willingness to actively brand themselves as “bloods”, whereas others have adopted part of an international identity. That being said, despite the inherent flaws in the terminology and its application, *Ismael* noted the need for a pragmatic approach to the term. Recognising, for instance in the United Kingdom, the US and Australia, that it had sometimes even become institutionalised in national law and become largely normative in the national media; so where there is no room for nuances or critiques, or where addressing a formal institutional definition, it was valid to use the term as a shared starting point, without actually endorsing it, and where possible and relevant challenging it. The daunting challenges nonetheless are that the term is in need of constant reform and should not be used as a short-hand. In addition, there is the changing nature of how youth groups are viewed. *Atreyee* gave the example of how prior to the Mumbai terror attacks youth groups were not seen as menacing but after the attacks they were regarded as “gangs” and deemed to be threatening.

Drawing a comparison with groups embroiled in armed conflicts (with conflict being seen as the taking over of a territory), *Noëlle* enquired whether the salient, distinctive element between gangs and groups is the lack of legitimacy and legality of the former. In armed conflicts taking place within the territorial confines of a State, individuals of an armed group challenging the authority of the State can be prosecuted for taking part in the hostilities. Only members of the State armed forces

are lawfully entitled to apply force. Yet, international humanitarian law recognises that national liberation movements i.e. groups of individuals challenging the authority of the State but owing to them challenging colonial or alien domination or a racist regime, are comprised of legitimate fighters who are allowed to use force without punishment. In other words, it is the legitimate aim of this display of violence by a group that makes the deployment of violence – though within the limits permitted by international humanitarian law - lawful. The example of Libya was considered, in which it could be argued that some groups have made the transition to becoming “freedom fighters”.

Gangs do not appear to have a legitimate aim and are thus viewed as criminal *per se*. *Ismael* noted that, in a similar way to the gangs, the mafia does not have a legitimate aim and is a criminal enterprise; yet, the difference between the two is that the mafia has plenty of tentacles and is active all around the world as it is organically interconnected whereas gangs are usually more contained in their activities and reach. Gangs, after all, tend to be localised and protect local territory (referred to as local territorialisation). There is often street presence and the possession of a central identity or some other way of easily identifying themselves. Even so, sometimes at the local level gangs are hired by the mafia to carry out a certain task. For example in Canada the mafia worked very closely with gangs. Indeed, *Jenny* stresses that it is this link to the local territory which is what differentiates gangs from other groups. In fact the criminal activities in which they are engaged and which bind the group can only be undertaken on a specific territory. As a result gangs also defend their criminal activities on a territorial basis. *Noëlle* acknowledged that in this instance a clear distinction can be made between youth gangs and armed groups comprised of children: the acquisition of territory is for youth gangs an indispensable means to carry out criminal activities whilst for armed groups it is a means to take over control of the government.

In light of the above, it is evident that youth gangs and armed groups encompassing children are two distinct entities; however, both have members (i.e. the children) that engage collectively in violent activities. As already discussed, for gangs the purpose of such engagement is local territorial control, where as for the armed opposition groups it is about control of the State/government. But ultimately it is about power and control for both.

What is more, the lines between what is seen as urban violence and what constitutes an armed conflict have blurred. An apposite example of this is the drug wars in Latin America where the phenomenon of “war as business” has gained momentum with people often thinking that they are at “war”. Providing another example, *Atreyee*, based on her experience working with slum children in both Mumbai and Hyderabad, explained how these children would imagine/represent their lives in poverty as war (jung) and their violent collective units (whether their activities involved street patrolling or rioting or looting) as armies (fauj). In other words, such group/gang in the slums of Mumbai and Hyderabad akin their role and what they do in the local context (i.e. managing and protecting their local territory) to that of someone in the army (fauj), so broadly speaking, a soldier. This in itself has important implications in terms of the socio-legal context i.e. how do people perceive themselves vs. legal definitions? The shifting priorities of both groups in terms of their purpose are another aspect that needs consideration. With regards to gangs, it could be argued that nowadays in some jurisdictions one of the key objectives of various gangs (and still within the ambit of the concept of local territorialisation) is to use their position to gain local political control. In contrast, it is claimed that for some armed opposition groups, the primary goal is no longer political, but more economic. In other words, members of armed groups, including young people, participate and engage in violent activities not because of any ideological/political purpose, but because of privately-driven, economic interests. Some of these issues will be re-visited later on in the report.

With all that being said, it must nevertheless be reiterated that both in gangs and armed groups the notions of power and control have a significant presence. This in turn raises the question of whether this then becomes one of the motivating factors/forceful reasons why young people become part of either group.

Becoming Part of the Group

The next step in the discussion was how and why children become part of the group i.e. member of a gang or member of an armed group.

Based on her professional experience in Bristol, *Jade* explained that often children do not intend to join a gang but through a gradual process enter into one. Often, the point of entry is anecdotal, trivial and unrelated to children’s intention to use violence

or become part of a group that uses violence. For example, teenagers might start to deal with drugs in order to pay for their siblings to attend a range of clubs. Indeed, if the younger children are not kept busy and the parents unable to care for them the children might be taken away from the parents and into the care of the local authority. So, with such a constant overhanging threat and to prevent this from occurring, older siblings often take over parental roles which include looking for financial support. As unemployment is rampant in these areas and even proper jobs do not pay for such extras, teenagers tend to look for illegal ways to make money. *Matt* buttressed this idea by stating that as children (who have left school but are unemployed) realise that the traineeships they undertook did not result in any apprenticeship leading to a job, they are quickly learning new skills to make money by organising an illegal business. Making quick money is another reason why children join gangs.

Jenny lamented that society expects children to make long-term decisions when in fact adults are not even able to do so and are enmeshed in an “everything now” culture. After all, in a capitalised society short term goals, such as making money to buy the latest gadgets, are often prioritised over longer term ones. So, how can we expect children to prioritise long term goals? This problem is particularly exacerbated by the economic gap in the United Kingdom and the current financial crisis present in British society. *Shilan* stated that driven by materialistic desire, there appears to be some competition between individuals and families in the sense that one wants to have what the neighbour has too. Furthermore, *Shilan* pondered over the possibility whether there could be less opportunity for violence if the gap between the rich and the poor was smaller.

Rather than money, *Atreyee* contended that it is the acquisition of a specific privilege that drives individuals towards gangs and armed groups. She added the caveat that it is an arduous task to define what a privilege is and illustrated her point by asserting that for some the ability to avert sexual harassment or to play safely might be viewed as a privilege. Having lived in Indian slums, she pointed out that power and mobility (i.e. the opportunity to leave the slums) are more critical than education, simply because education will not provide you with the “goods” one hopes for. *Jade* confirmed that this idea of holding a privilege is also prevalent in youth gangs in the United Kingdom. Again, the privileges of being part of a group can be rather benign such as being granted free access to clubs. *Jenny* referred to privileges or access to

“goods” as an individual’s social capital. The British society considers that children should have an education and a job, irrespective of what children wish for themselves. Within their own social group children might be in a rather high hierarchical position. Education is not seen as a privilege in as much as it does not always bring any benefits with it. On a practical level (i.e. when children have left school), *Jade* stressed that whilst training might be available there are no apprenticeships to complete the training and thus young people query the purpose of seeking training in the first place. It is this difficulty to enter the system that is resented by young people. In contrast, in the gang world such barriers do not exist and thus many young people walk away from a social structure that cannot offer them what they would like.

Matt doubted that children are forced into such a lifestyle only owing to the lack of economic opportunities. A sub-culture exists. He highlighted that TV documentaries broadcasted after the riots in summer 2011 showed that some children had a political manifesto and believed in some values. Some of them also had connections with people who are in the e.g. education or employment system, which shows that these young people are not completely out of the system.

Ismael introduced a further reason why children joined gangs, that is membership in such groups as a reaction to the isolation, low expectations and low self-esteem cultivated by stereotyping and racism which is particularly prominent in schools. As he said, failure, especially in secondary schools, is often met with the clichéd response of “they are black guys anyway”, meaning that the prevailing educational impacts of social exclusion on black boys in particular mean many teachers already expect them to fail in the first place. Children are from an early age viewed through a prism of categories: gender, race, ethnicity, criminal record, etc., and this undoubtedly affects their lives and what they will make out of their lives. In the “gang” young people establish a parallel social world where they are not isolated, where they have different standards and expectations of achievement and sense of belonging. It thus seems that the community’s perception of the children partially determine their choices.

Going one step back and building on the idea that certain groups emerge out of reaction rather than creation, *Jenny* referred to a “tipping point” when young people, a bit lost, start to challenge authority in order to prove themselves. At this juncture, the reaction of the community to this challenge of authority is imperative to

determining the future of the child. The negative attitude of the community might be resented and a group of friends who get into trouble from time to time turn into what they are seen to be, but yet were not i.e. a gang. The creation of the gang is thus conditioned by the reaction of the surrounding community. *Jade* concurred with this view, recounting that in Bristol young people who want to make quick money get together and organise a drug dealing group. As the police and professionals working on community-related matters brand them as dangerous they are but encouraged to act even more so and thus adopt further gang-like behaviour. *Matt* felt that cultural prejudice towards a certain stratum of the population is partially responsible for this attitude of some young people. Indeed, in light of their age and (in)experience they take on criticism, sense the rejection and ineluctably reject the system. As *Ismael* surmised, this rejection generates a common identification that leads to the creation of a gang proper. *Atreyee* noted that this is in contrast to her own experience in India where groups of 9-14 years old have a good relationship with the police who is, in reality, outsourcing to them the work on the street. It is only when these groups define themselves as Muslim and, thus, produce a distinct identity that the police and the government view them as potential troublemakers.

Young people in the United Kingdom, *Jenny* argued, feel alienated from the community who views them as boisterous, constantly occupying the streets and kicking a ball around, etc. Individual members of the society avoid looking at them in the street and accuse them of doing certain things. This lack of friendly neighbourliness, of not greeting each other and not socialising with each other leads to children sensing rejection and alienation even within their own communities. Again, the issue of class is present here as children from upper and middle classes have places to go to whilst children from lower-income classes do not and consequently hang around in the streets, meet and eventually group up in gangs. From his own experience, *Ismael* confirmed that many children from lower-income families have nowhere else but the street to hang out and thus the street becomes the location where they can share ideas and bond. *Jade* contributed to the debate by sharing her first-hand experience of a group of fifteen boys hanging in a park in Bristol. *Jade* witnessed how the police asked the group to leave the park although none of the individuals were causing any trouble. Yet the police insisted that the children left the park on the basis that too many of them were there. In the end *Jade* who knew the children convinced them to leave. In this context, *Ismael* shared that

he had recently attended a recent conference on the UK summer riots in 2011. At that event there were youth workers, parents, youth, researchers and policy makers, including some who had conducted extensive interviews with protagonists in each of the riots across the country. The unanimous conclusion of all those youth, family and practitioners was that three factors played a key role in explaining the “riots”: the lack of youth spaces that leads to the community viewing children as anti-social; unsupportive parenting (especially of 12-14 years old); and the negative relationship with the police and other professionals more generally.

Turning to the factors that lead children to taking part in hostilities, *Noëlle* first stated that it must be borne in mind that most children are recruited by armed opposition groups rather than conventional state armed forces. Also many children are not recruited in a formal manner by these groups but are abducted or forcibly recruited and thus compelled to join them. Referring to terminology commonly used in both academic and policy literature, *Noëlle* categorised the reasons why children become members of armed opposition groups into “push and pull factors”. These factors include economic hardship and poverty, the lack of opportunities and access to education, a sense of belonging, ideological attraction, feelings of revenge, survival, the loss of parents and relatives able to protect them, breakdown in the extended social support system, the need to find a safe(r) environment, the impression that one is in control and power and, thus, proactive rather than passive and victimised, fear of being abducted, etc. Children may also be sent by their families to defend the community or to find a basic source of income. *Jenny* recognised that the same terminology is used in reference to youth joining gangs and referred to the categories of “risk” and “protection”. *Matt* criticised this “risk and protection” expression as one that puts the problem back on the individual as such and dismisses the role of the community in pushing these individuals into a criminal life. He argued that such a phenomenon does not tell the whole story and simply puts the onus on the individual and does not take into account the much needed requirement to examine the role of the collective as well. Speaking from her experience in Bristol, *Jade* concurred with that children join gangs because they feel pressurised, they yearn to belong to a group, they want to protect relatives (especially younger ones), they want to exact revenge, etc. Moreover, she gave the example of girls who come from backgrounds where they have been sexually assaulted and therefore want to be linked with gangs for the purpose of having a sense of belonging, taking revenge, etc. *Shilan* added

that such an example gives support to the argument that there may be some similarities between girls connected with gangs and armed opposition groups in as much as the underlying risks such girls encountered prior to their association are comparable to a certain extent.

Ismael, who worked with former child soldiers in Sierra Leone and currently works with youth gangs, expounded that recruitment seems to vary along a continuum of coerced to voluntary. He also emphasised that, in his opinion, compared to child recruitment in armed forces and groups, there is less violence in the way children are recruited in gangs in the United Kingdom. *Ismael* exemplified this by what happened in Sierra Leone where children were recruited through an extremely brutal process (including being abducted, being forced to kill their own families, etc.) that did not give them any room for choice. In contrast, whilst there are some examples of forceful recruitment and aggression being used in the process of joining gangs in the United States of America, *Jenny* stressed that the violence affiliated with youth gangs was usually linked to initiation processes i.e. once an individual had decided to join a group.

Shilan noted that push and pull factors can be gendered i.e. there can be different and gender-specific reasons why boys and girls become part of armed groups. Yet, literature as well as international programmes focus on boys and thus tend to obliterate the push and pull factors relating to girls joining armed opposition groups. *Jenny* confirmed that the same is true of gangs in the UK where the focus is on boys rather than girls as they are deemed to be peripheral rather than core to the gang and the gang culture. *Ismael* deduced that it is likely that girls join gangs because they like the appeal of being surrounded by these kinds of boys. Once again, the sense of belonging appears to be a major factor for girls to be part of gangs.

To surmise, it seems that there may be a number of commonalities in why children become part of gangs and armed opposition groups. Some of these commonalities include lack of support/breakdown of support systems, coming from abusive backgrounds, wanting a sense of belonging, notions of power and control, peer pressure, etc. In other words, there seem to be some similar underlying risks that act as catalysts with regards to why children become part of either group. That being said, it is incontrovertible that such risks are undoubtedly exacerbated during times of conflict. Besides, there may also be analogous gendered factors i.e. specific comparable reasons as to why boys and girls become part of gangs and armed

groups. However, what seems to be different is how these children become part of these groups. The recruitment process of children into armed opposition groups seems to be far more brutal and violent compared to that of youth gangs.

Experiences of Children in the Group

The workshop then moved on to discussing whether parallels can be drawn between what children do and their experiences in armed conflicts and in gangs. The participants attached particular importance to examining life in the group and how children view themselves.

One topic that was thrown back into the debate was that of the “playground” of child soldiers and youth gangs. *Shilan* started off by providing a definition of an armed conflict since for a child to be considered a child soldier, he/she needs to be involved in an armed conflict. She added the caveat that although children might be recruited in peacetime, the epicentre of the phenomenon of child soldiers is that of children taking an active part in the hostilities. Reiterating the definition of an armed conflict as spelled out in the *Tadic* case before the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, *Shilan* recalled that an armed conflict is defined as the use of armed force between two States (in this case the conflict is deemed international) or as protracted violence between governmental authorities and non-governmental organised armed groups, or between such groups within a state (in this case the conflict is deemed non-international). The determinant factors are the intensity of the conflict and the organisation of the parties to the conflict. *Noëlle* added that, strictly speaking, acquisition of and control over territory are only pieces of evidence to prove that the conflict has reached a certain threshold of intensity and that the group is organised enough to control that piece of land. There is no clearly delineated playground for child soldiers: they act wherever the conflict occurs.

In line with the point made earlier in this report, *Noëlle* affirmed that whilst the activities of gangs cannot usually be framed in territorial acquisition terms, there are instances where gangs vie for control over a certain territory. For example, gangs in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, defend specific points where the drug and arm deals are being concluded. In this circumstance the streets around the pick-up points are defended against other gangs or potential intruders. Some illustrious examples are gangs being in a position where they close down entire streets to ensure that the

deals will be done according to the plan. *Ismael* further exemplified this by presenting the situation in Mexico: organised gangs are able to block entire cities for a couple of days whilst the negotiations between groups are taking place and the deals done. Also the supply route is secured by such interventions. In this context, *Ismael* referred to a functional territory that contrasts with the acquisition of the territory for the sake of it. *Shilan* raised the issue whether the changing nature of conflicts that include low level intensity conflicts such as the ones depicted by some participants should be taken into account by the law on armed conflict to reflect the reality. *Atreyee*, as already outlined before, remarked that children in Indian slums use war-related terminology (i.e. “Fodge”) and view themselves as an army. The concept of “war” is especially used in the context of the protection of a specific community.

A second difference observed by *Noëlle* is that of the groups’ ideology. In her opinion, the ultimate aim of an armed opposition group is to challenge and eventually change the government and do so by having recourse to armed force. The armed conflict is the means to achieve a change in government. Yet, *Ismael* pointed out that in Sierra Leone it appeared that those who raised arms and later recruited children, especially young ones, were not ideologically motivated in taking over the government to change the social order they merely fought to secure final control over rival factions over the mineral and economic resources of the country for purely personal gain. In contrast with other armed movements in Africa, there seemed to be neither a political agenda, a tribal conflict, or a religious sectarianism. It was all about the diamonds. *Matt* wondered whether the true reason for children to be involved in conflicts (in a broad sense) was the decreasing dichotomy between informal and formal economy. Children then tend to accept that in order to make money violence is part and parcel of their lives. *Jade* clarified that there is another side to this display of violence and crime, namely security amongst the community. For example, in Jamaica, Christopher Coke, a notable drug dealer, had the police on his payroll and thus ensured some form of peace and security. Also, he paid for children to attend school and was thus considered a saviour in many people’s eyes. His arrest and conviction in the US for drug trafficking is seen by many as a calamity that will lead to tougher times for a certain fringe of the Jamaican population. Arguably, gang leaders (in e.g. Brazil and Jamaica) may find themselves protected by the community if there is evidence of charitable work.

Ismael proposed that institutionalisation and scale are two crucial elements differentiating child soldiers and youth gangs. Whereas gangs were largely semi-formal hierarchical, charismatic structures, armies were institutionalised, formal, routinised organisations. Secondly was scale: where does the crime start and end? Where does the crime turn into an act of warfare? *Ismael* posited that the main difference between gangs and groups in armed conflicts might be the scale of the conflict. Whereas street conflicts associated with gangs only occur on an occasional basis and are usually triggered by a specific event, in a state of warfare the violence is constant and massive, not sustained by periodic and small-scale encounters but by an uninterrupted campaign for military dominance, with incomparably heavier casualties and much heavier weaponry. Street conflicts are informally organised, sporadic and small scale in territory, violence, weaponry and casualties. States of warfare are formally institutionalised and dramatically greater in the scale of sustained and constant violence, weaponry, numbers involved, contested territory and casualties. As *Atreyee* revealed in the context of Indian slums, guns are usually provided by illegal warehouses, snatched away from houses or even from police stations as guns are not locked up in a special cabinet. It is revealing that children are not considered as a real threat by either the police or the community. In fact, children are regarded as those who are able to stop outsiders from entering the community. They are considered as protectors. This sheds light onto why the police and the community only nominally complain about these youth gangs; yet, in reality little is undertaken to curtail their acts and power more generally. Nonetheless, as children become adults they are deemed dangerous. There appears to be a tipping moment from being “threatless” children to dangerous criminals. Remarkably, this change coincides with the growing awareness of religious identities in India. Training camps are set up within towns and even cities like Mumbai and children become mercenaries, oftentimes working for political parties. In some instances it is even possible for these children to enter a career in politics or business as they have found their way out of the slums. In Africa, although youth wings in political parties (e.g. in Sierra Leone) assist politicians vying for power, *Ismael* claimed that they are often not regarded as gangs. In fact some of these boys become politicians. *Jenny* explained that groups form and mutate: they originate at the local level and then transform in many different ways. *Jade* clarified that whilst in many countries it is undeniably possible to move from gang boy to a role in society, this is impossible in

the UK namely owing to the existence of criminal records that follow an individual all his/her life. *Jenny* surmised that this difference in reaction of the community and State more generally might be linked to the fact that political youth wings are institutionalised whilst gangs or even organised criminal group emerged on their own. *Ismael* agreed, stressing that clearly the informality and spontaneity of gangs is dissimilar to that of institutionalised and organised group and can thus be less controlled by the authorities. In other words, as *Jenny* highlighted, it is important to consider how the group was formed: the group was formed by young people or the group is part of a larger lawful organisation. It is nevertheless conceivable that a gang develops into a youth wing; yet, this means that the group mutated and its actions are consequently re-examined in a new light. In fact acts that used to be viewed as criminal may then be considered as lawful or are at least accepted in the community.

With regards to commonalities and differences between the experiences of youth in gangs and child soldiers the question may be one of extent and context. *Ismael* conjectured that what happens to child soldiers is an exaggeration of what happens to children in gangs. *Matt* saw eye to eye with this proposition and stipulated that it is about spectrums and the instrumental use of violence. He argued that child soldiers are on one extreme end of the spectrum whilst dysfunctional families and communities are at the other end of the spectrum. That being said, the commonality is that children are prepared to use violence. In fact, in some instances violence becomes a foundation of repute in the sense that if an individual does not have recourse to violence to assert his/her power he/she is dismissed as a member of the group. Respect and disrespect is primordially based on the display of violence and, thus, the use of violence becomes a key factor in retaining a certain position in the group. As a consequence a slow process of decivilisation is taking place, both for child soldiers and youths in gangs. *Ismael* questioned whether it was not the other way round in that children set up their own “civilisation” in the group. They respect each other and establish their own social networks. To some extent, it can be said that a lot of positive values (e.g. loyalty and respect) are only possible due to the creation of these gangs. Nonetheless the problem is how they act towards outsiders i.e. the community in which they live. They certainly have a destabilising effect on the community. Whilst these groups are able to create opportunities for other children in

their own system they destroy opportunities outside their own system. Joining such a group means that children gain companionship, loyalty and protection.

Based on her experience and conversations with members of youth gangs, *Jade* confirmed that gangs have “universal” street rules that are readily applicable to the group members. For example, a female gang member does not sleep with another boy if her boyfriend is in prison; members do not talk to the police or any representative of the authorities; a male gang member does not date the sister of another male gang member without asking permission, etc. Other rules include clothing and preferences in terms of music and language. What is more these rules are also applicable to all those who live in the neighbourhood and thus need to learn and assimilate them so as to ensure that they do not run afoul of them and be punished. *Jenny* pointed to Anderson’s work “Code of the Street” (E Anderson, *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City* (WW Norton & Company 2000)) which talks about general behaviour that is expected irrespective of which gang you are from. In contrast, *Shilan* maintained that there are no proper codes of conduct, like the street rules, for child soldiers. She contends that for child soldiers the key issue is usually about survival and how they behave and operate depends very much on the local context and the armed opposition group they belong to. For instance, how child soldiers in Sierra Leone behaved is very different to the behaviour of child soldiers in the Middle East. In fact, it is the purpose of the armed group that sets the boundaries. *Ismael* concurred that whereas gangs craft their own separate identity based on their own sets of norms and rules (some of which are secret) which are often in opposition to outsiders this is not the case for child soldiers, who are instead co-opted into the identity and norms of the armies they join, which have not been created by themselves or their peers and in which they have no say: they join an army which can be extremely hostile and violent toward them, not a group of friends who share group norms they create as a group. In gangs a parallel world emerges.

The next part of the discussion focused on whether the common identity is forged around religion. Remarkably gang members in prison tend to be attracted by religious discourses. For example, Islam often becomes the unifying thread in the prison. That being said, individual members of the group populate the word “Islam” with a particular meaning, a particular type of action that might not be understood in the same manner by other individuals or members of another gang. *Atreyee* noted

that there are a number of religious gangs in South Asia but that religion does not feature much in the life and discourse of gangs in Western societies. Likewise, the women in India whom *Atreyee* has been researching for a number of years are not specifically religious. Actually, they use a religious identity to garner support from religious groups. She further pointed out that even where gangs affiliate themselves with particular religious political parties, it is not always about having the same religious identity, it is more about a strategic move, that of being associated with a larger group. *Matt*, comparing the slum communities in Latin America, Asia and the US which are, in his words, “monocultural warehouses” and the multicultural run down communities in Europe, acquiesced. Religion, ethnicity, race, etc. are not fundamental elements. *Jenny* subscribed to the view that few gangs in the UK have religious affiliations. In her opinion, one needs to differentiate between the religion of an individual in the group and the religion of the group as such (e.g. the Black Panthers) and the use made of religion by that group. Religion is often more individual in British gangs. This ties in with *Ismael’s* comment that religion is often discovered in prisons and binds the group together. However, *Shilan* pinpointed that some groups in the UK have clear religious affiliations. For example, a number of gangs in Birmingham offer a distinctive Muslim discourse although, she admitted, there are discreet Muslim groups often based on factors such as race, ethnicity, etc. Indeed, religion, as *Jenny* stated, might help to differentiate oneself from others and certainly becomes a more important aspect of the gang but it is not key in the formation of the group.

As a number of participants have undertaken research on girls in gangs and girls in armed opposition groups, the group moved on to discussing the role of girls. In particular the enabling role of the girl soldiers and the girls in gangs was stressed by *Ismael* who though acquiescing that girls are peripheral to the group the risks they undertake are likely to be the same. *Jade* in fact added that girls are going the extra length to show that they are full members of the group. As some girls go further than the boys they are often viewed as a bit mad (as they challenge the gendered perception of how girls should behave). That being said, *Jade* stated that she was not aware of girl gangs in the Bristol region. *Atreyee* supported this view that girls are going further than their male counterparts. In her research she found that they displayed less inhibition to kill and when they were involved in some illegal activities they tended to be more brutal than men. *Jenny* contrasted this with the situation in

Western countries where in the case of a drive by shooting the girls would likely be in the car and thus involved in the entire process but would not take a direct part in the shooting. They do not enact the violence themselves. *Jenny* further highlighted the precarious position of girls in gangs as they are also victims of the group. They are used as mules, take on the domestic chores and, alas, used as sexual service providers which turns them into “slags of the lads”. *Shilan* noted that in situations of armed conflict, similarly to the girls in gangs, girl soldiers are used as carriers, carry out domestic chores, take care of the younger children of the group, and, again, utilised as sexual objects. In fact in many armed conflicts these girls become sexual slaves at the mercy of one or more male members of the armed opposition group. *Jenny* distinguished this from the way girls are used in gangs in the UK; in her view, it is difficult to say whether these girls are sexual “slaves” or not. *Jade* elucidated that at first, these girls might be up for sexual encounters but as time goes by and they are forced to perform sexual acts they do not wish to be seen as “slags of the lads” anymore. Sadly, at this stage it does not matter anymore what the girl wants as she is a part of the group and needs to abide by its rules. *Ismael* confirmed that girls in gangs are regarded as sex objects and that this perception is even more exaggerated among child soldiers where girls are indeed enslaved for sexual purposes.

Imbued by discussions on whether gang members, especially girls, really choose and consciously accept their position and lives in the group, the participants turned their attention towards speculating how children view themselves. For example, as *Ismael* explained, an Asian gang involved in large scale drug trafficking might ask a local “gang” of black youth whose playground is the street to sell drugs. Yet, the Asian group will never be seen in the street and thus involved in drug dealing, meaning that when the police intervene, it is the street youth who get prosecuted, while the serious criminals are shielded. Similarly, these local youth “gangs” will sometimes use children as “mules” to carry and deliver drugs, shielding themselves in the same way from the risk of prosecution. Moreover, it is well-known that children are less reticent to shoot to kill and that the police is reluctant to fire upon children and thus adults may order children to carry out certain lethal operations. *Atreyee* confirmed that children are used in a strategic way by adults: children are put in front of a group to “detect” landmines, children are put first as a wall to shield older

members of the group from the police or another gang, etc. In other words, children are deemed to be very expandable.

The question then is whether a child realises that he/she is being used by adults. Based on the work of Alcinda Honwana, *Shilan* explained that the concept of “tactical agency” well describes the way children become accustomed to their changed circumstances and make decisions to cope with the immediate conditions of the environment they find themselves in and have to operate from. In other words, whilst they may not be fully aware of the long term consequences of their actions, children adapt themselves to their surroundings and make decisions on short term issues. Alternatively, some children may, to a certain extent, use “strategic agency” i.e. where they are in a position of power, somewhat conscious of the ultimate goals and consequences of their actions and expect some kind of long term benefits from their actions, in order to cope with and survive their new surroundings. In this instance, the children make “strategic choices”. It is thus no surprise that children wish to define themselves and determine the issues that matter to them. *Noëlle* added that in the context of child soldiers, and more particularly girls accompanying armed groups, it is well documented that young girls take decisions based on their knowledge of the system within the group. For example, they will bond with the individuals in the group who will offer them the best physical protection or access to certain goods. In other words they use their experience and understanding of the situation in a strategic way. Likewise, after an armed conflict some girls who used to be associated with these armed groups prostitute themselves to the newly arrived peacekeepers. Some, from the age of 8 to the age of 30 will know nothing more than this life. Viewed from a Western understanding of “informed choice” these girls have never had a choice. Yet, in their own eyes, they have each times opted for a specific action.

Drawing a comparison with gangs, *Jenny* referred to the “reluctant gangster” – an expression coined by John Pitts – who espouses a certain identity not so much because this is an active decision on his/her part but more because it is part of the environment in which this individual lives. *Ismael* confirms that the internalising process of the stereotyped “gangster” through the adoption of a certain culture (e.g. rap music, videos, clothing and guns) is extremely strong. *Atreyee* also noted that some youngsters are very proud of who they are and will not shy away from revealing their acts and justifying them publicly.

In a nutshell, whilst some parallels can be drawn between the experiences of youth in gangs and child soldiers, the key issue is one of context, intensity and extent. Indeed, both groups give children a sense of identity, power, control, etc. In addition, some commonalities can also be drawn between girls associated with gangs and girls who are part of armed opposition groups. Furthermore, in both groups, children demonstrate both tactical and strategic agencies in order to adapt to the circumstances and survive in the new environment they find themselves in. That being said, there are many differences between the roles and experiences of the members of both groups. These differences primarily lie behind the purpose, composition and organisation of the groups and the context in which they operate.

Leaving the Group and Reintegrating into the Community

The participants then examined how it is possible for these children to leave their respective groups and subsequently reintegrate into the wider community.

The first question to be determined was the time when children can leave the group. With regard to child soldiers *Noëlle* pointed out that a child is not a member of the armed opposition group the moment the armed conflict is over. Theoretically, from this moment onwards the child returns to a civilian life. Two issues however need to be considered in this context. First, it is not all too clear when a conflict is over and this is particularly true of non-international armed conflicts. In some instances conflicts stop and resume later and in the interim period, although there is legally no armed conflict, a situation of trouble persists. Second, even once the conflict is over many children choose to stay with the armed opposition group or with members thereof, thereby refusing to return to civilian life. Armed opposition groups are often encouraged to return to a normal life through cash for arms programmes and thus may dismantle themselves. Consequently those children who go back to civilian life are either those who take the opportunity to leave the group once the conflict is finished or those whose groups have been dismantled. Yet, returning back home is often not an option for child soldiers who were forced to carry out ghastly activities in order to ensure that at the time they could not go back into the community or would face stigma.

In contrast, as *Ismael* established, the situation with children in gangs is less simple. Indeed the timing is central to the issue. Sometimes the wish for a change happens

in prison or through work. Sometimes being removed from peer pressure from friends and relatives also works. Oftentimes what matters is that the individual acknowledges who he/she is, who he/she wants to be and how he/she is being seen by others. The issue of identity is crucial in this context, all the more as some people are afraid of their own personality. By contextualising who the individual is and changing perspectives it is possible to give the individual the opportunity to leave the group. This process from removing the individual from a life of crime to him/her understanding the meaning of his/her life is often a protracted journey. *Jenny* supported this idea of maturing out of the gang as being key to reintegration and the end of a gangster life. It is indeed possible to start the “back into the society” process whilst the individual is still a member of the gang. This stands in contrast to the situation of child soldiers who are forced out of their lives of soldiering once the armed conflict ceases but might not mentally be ready for a life outside of the group. This in turn raises the question of whether it is easier to reintegrate children who are still members of a group, or children who are former members of a group.

With regards to the reintegration of youth in gangs, *Matt* asked who can assist these children in understanding that a life of crime is not a long-term solution. Indeed, in his experience as a mentor with Bristol’s Youth Offending Team, he described how so-called police protection is viewed by young individuals as an intrusion in their personal and family life. For example, an Irish traveller currently in prison has been warned that he might be abducted by his own family and, yet, refuses to accept the protection of the police mainly for the reason that he does not trust the police. Accordingly, even if a child would want to be integrated it is not really possible, primarily due to the wide gap and misunderstanding between the authorities and the youngsters. *Atreyee* acknowledged that the language used by the various communities, all “willing” to help, may in fact stigmatise these children further. The church, the police, anthropologists, criminologists, psychologists, psychiatrists, etc. wish to assist these children in their journey towards a life without crime; yet, their approaches are sometimes so vastly different that it is difficult to implement viable strategies. *Noëlle* noted that whilst these strategies might be deployed whilst children are still members of youth gangs they are unsuited in the context of child soldiering, for there is no access for outsiders to such children and thus the process of reintegration can only commence once the conflict is over and the children away from the armed opposition groups.

As soon as children leave the groups they need to be catered for and this means offering them food, shelter and, most importantly, skills which they will be able to use to sustain themselves. As *Ismael* stressed, an alternative must be in place when these children come out of the group; a support system needs to be there for them and, most importantly, it needs to work properly. *Jade* informed the participants that the work by Community Resolve in Bristol is based on building solid relationships with and between people and this seems to work. Building a shared language is essential in this setting. Informal conversations in non-institutional settings appear to be a success recipe when dealing with children in gangs. In her opinion groups and associations that take on such children who are willing to enter such groups and associations have the best results.

Furthermore the need to allow children to freely join groups that will assist them in leaving the group for good and reintegrating the society was highlighted by *Jade*. *Atreyee* agreed that the voluntary basis approach works well mostly because the main issue at stake is the trauma suffered by these young individuals rather than the intensity of the conflict or situation in which they took part. Linking onto this, *Noëlle* claimed that in relation to child soldiers coming out of a conflict, voluntarism also seems to work unlike educational and training camps in which children are almost automatically sent once they have lain off their weapons and nominally consented to take part in such programmes. Building up trust in the child, making him/her understand who he/she is are often the aims of those running voluntary institutions. *Shilan* supported this by adding that the impact on the individual and how he/she reacts to the situation are what is of primordial importance i.e. it is about the impact, not the extent, and accordingly, forced reintegration does not work. To some extent, as *Ismael* elucidated, such children have adopted parallel behaviours; they are usually on good terms with adults and, nevertheless, at the same time, commit crimes. Recognising this parallel identity is needed when reintegrating these children. Often those who are best placed to assist in the process are part-siders i.e. people who are inside but outside at the same time and offer them a bridge between their past and their future. This vindicates why, as *Jenny* argued, in the context of programmes focusing on youth in gangs the most effective ones are those that do not concentrate on the gang as such and membership thereof but on the behaviour of the individual. Such programmes solely focus on changing the behaviour of the children and do not consider affiliation with a gang as a bad thing. Indeed, if

programmes were to focus on gang membership they would fall into the trap of having to define a gang, a gang member, a gang crime, etc. However not all bad behaviour is linked to the gang (e.g. domestic violence). Therefore one has to rather talk about the behaviour than the membership in the gang. *Noëlle* added that remarkably the most successful programmes for the reintegration of child soldiers have been those run by faith-based institutions that seem to stress the importance of rediscovering one's inner self.

Shilan highlighted that one of the main issues of concern in relation to institutions where children are sent is the rather paternalist view espoused with regard to children. The "we know what is best for you" policy goes against asking the "who are you" question that will lead to a better solution i.e. a child who believes in him/herself and consequently makes his/her own decisions. That being said, *Atreyee* warned that often children would be rather dangerous; yet, NGOs that are in charge of such facilities do not want to acknowledge this. In particular, *Atreyee* argued, those setting up and running such institutions need to be aware that they might be imposing their own ethical, religious, and political values. *Jenny* acknowledged that such institutions indeed aim at changing these children's attitude and ethics but link it to learning certain skills or, more accurately expressed, to turning the skills acquired in the gang into skills that are useful in society. *Ismael* likened these children to entrepreneurs who are endowed with a number of skills and need to learn how to use them in a lawful manner. He believes that tapping in the skills that these children have acquired might be a way to show them that they are employable in the "normal" world.

To run such programmes requires money and unfortunately, as *Ismael* maintained, whilst funding is available it is only given for a short period of time when in fact the work needs a couple of years to bear its fruits. Institutions and individuals need to follow through the individuals and accompany them long enough on their journey out of the gang to be successful. Gang members may require one-to-one mentoring which is expensive or may achieve good results but over a longer term. Reintegration is time-consuming and some individuals will need more time than others. This sadly clashes with the way funding is allocated as funding institutions want to see immediate results and are not prepared to wait a couple of years to see whether a specific method of redirecting an individual towards a life without crime is profitable. *Shilan* described a similar, albeit even more acute, situation in relation to

child soldiers. Not only should the child embrace his/her new life but the community also needs to accept this child back in the community. As a result reintegration programmes tend to require even more time. Targets cannot be met because, as *Ismael* elucidated, there are systematic barriers. He contended that those who design funding, evaluation and outcomes have limited knowledge of what is required for a thriving programme, and furthermore possess virtually no local expertise. Consequently, they often neglect the intergenerational and intra-communal approaches that are vital to the success of a reintegration programme.

This misunderstanding of the importance to work with the individual, the family and the whole environment in which the child will be returned is often the cause for such reintegration programmes to fail. Thus *Atreyee* stressed that it is of utmost relevance to initiate changes in the community itself so that it accepts (back) the children. *Matt* also underlined that whilst solutions might be offered to individuals often such programmes fail to look at the wider community in which these children will be “returned”. As a result the problem of re-offending is acute; only 10% of young people do not reoffend in Bristol. *Matt* claims that this is due to the pressure under which young people are put when they return in the community and the lack of support they receive.

In relation to child soldiers, *Noëlle* underlined the importance of providing support that is flexible and protracted and, most significantly, close to the children and their community. Parents should be introduced into the child’s new environment rather than sending children back to their parents – if they still have any – as the parents are oftentimes unable to grasp the changes that have occurred in their child and/or reject their child on account of what they see as a tainted past. *Jade* agreed, Community Resolve also works with parents and extended families, an example being that courses are opened to parents too. This provides parents the opportunity to understand better what their children are doing but it also signals to the children that these courses are crucial, for, adults are taking part in them too. *Ismael* explored the way how intergenerational programmes work best: a team of adult mediators works with the concerned adults whilst a young mediator communicates with young people until both “sides” are ready to talk to each other. Only when such willingness is present it is possible to proceed to a meeting and create a supportive, alternative world for the children. Children have to reinvent themselves with the assistance of outsiders but also their families and communities.

Most reintegration programmes include training that aims at endowing children with indispensable skills needed to function in society. As *Atreyee* expounded, acquiring such skills allows the child to seek alternatives to their previous lives. But are these viable alternatives? Many participants doubted that they were. *Noëlle* noted that in the context of former child soldiers it is nearly impossible for them to gain employment after they have undergone training. Therefore some want to return to the conflict zone and live with the armed opposition groups as they know at least what awaits them there. Whilst the United Nations designs elaborated training programmes it cannot reduce the high unemployment rate in the country and increase job opportunities for former child soldiers who, as a result, are disappointed and look for alternatives. *Ismael* pointed out that in the case of youth gangs the problem lies in convincing youngsters to take on these training courses. Indeed, why go for training when you can do it the easy way by selling drugs and “earning” quick money, being a member of a gang who takes care of you, etc. Moreover, like former child soldiers, those children who register for such training courses often face a lack of job opportunities. Consequently it is difficult, if not nearly impossible, to convince these youngsters that a training and a lawful job are better. *Shilan* asserted that a common training skills taught to former female child soldiers in African states is that of sewing. Yet, the money earned from sewing is not enough in comparison to other types of jobs which means that girls might prefer to work as prostitutes rather than tailors and seamstresses. Moreover, as children are taught the same kinds of skills and trained for similar jobs, there is saturation of jobs. On a macro-level this may weaken the local economy if not correctly managed. This seems to be a common sore point of both, former child soldiers and former gang members, reintegration programmes. Furthermore, as *Shilan* explicated, children may feel that they have lost control over their lives once they start working for someone i.e. a boss. Indeed, some child soldiers may have during the conflict been in charge of a group of children and had some form of freedom. Thus a second problem that is similar in both groups is a lack of status upon return. Child soldiers may have experience of “being the boss” and former gang members may earn significantly less money, and may be forced to start in relatively poorly paid positions. *Ismael* recounted his positive experience with a reintegration programme in Sierra Leone which started by assisting the children in searching for their own identity and goal in life before moving onto providing some training to the former child soldiers. These individuals were then

entrusted with a piece of land and the instruments to plough the land. They would then sell the harvest and be able to reinvest the money. In the meantime the communities were being prepared to accept these individuals back in their lives. Once both the individuals and the communities were ready they would meet. This particular programme, the Sierra Leone Red Cross Child Advocacy and Rehabilitation Programme (CAR), was undoubtedly extremely successful.

Atreyee also noted that whilst the acquisition of these skills might be useful the problem lies in the fact that according to international law, children are not allowed to work. In other words, it appears that endowing them with skills that can be used in a proper job goes against the grain. What is more, this problem is more acute with boys than girls in as much as whilst girls can fall back into the normality of peacetime by adopting gender roles, boys feel a lack of direction. This sense of “directionless” is accentuated by the inability to find work. Without a doubt, war challenges the notions of masculinities and femininity. *Shilan* criticised the gendered stereotyping kind of skills taught to former female child soldiers. Indeed, Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programmes that equip women and girls to fall back into the community appear to reinstate the male/female role divisions that are ingrained in the community. For example, girls are ordinarily taught sewing skills. This is probably in order to make these girls, who have often been sexually assaulted and in some instances come back with children conceived out of wedlock, being accepted in their community. *Ismael* supported this proposition, cautioning against some DDR programmes; ideally, such programmes must be carefully crafted so as not to impose Western values upon these young girls. For instance, a girl trained in skills which in the West may be ungendered or less gendered and which in Africa may be even legally gendered, will be, for practical purposes, unusable and therefore disempowering. For instance any training programme which takes for granted the possibility of women to own land, would face extreme barriers to its application in Sierra Leone where women legally cannot own land. Compromising pragmatically with local constructions of gendered labour might be more realistic and therefore financially and personally empowering. But are there role models to emulate from? *Atreyee* lamented the extreme level of segregation between those who escape the slums of India and never come back and those who stay and will never know of anything else, even to the extent of believing that there is nothing beyond the slum. The class and physical boundaries seem to overlap considerably so that upward

social mobility does not stream back down. This can somehow be contrasted with the child soldier phenomenon which, as *Noëlle* pointed out, is widely advertised around the world through a variety of channels. As a matter of fact a number of former child soldiers such as Ishmael Beah are travelling the world disclosing what happened to them and providing some comfort that there is a way out.

Two problems however emerged during the debate: the way the interests of the wider community are dealt with and who should be considered as the “wider community”. *Shilan* introduced the idea that there might be competing interests between the individual child and the wider community. She illustrated her point by referring to the situation after the conflict in Sierra Leone at a time where discussion about the establishment of an international criminal tribunal was rife. Whereas the population demanded the prosecution of children the Secretary-General of the United Nations preferred not to hold children accountable for their crimes. Strictly speaking the Special Court for Sierra Leone has jurisdiction over individuals over 16 years of age but the Prosecution has turned a blind eye to crimes perpetrated by those aged 16 to 18. Some justify this by recourse to the best interests of the child principle. Others claim that a lack of accountability hinders reintegration as in societies where children are given roles of responsibility from a young age, youngsters are not viewed as “innocent kids” but regarded as being answerable for their actions. Also, when children are being reintegrated into communities which they have terrorised during their time as a child soldier, there needs to be some kind of mechanism in place which will allow for both accountability to be upheld and justice to be served. This in turn will hopefully provide for a smoother transition into the future by allowing all parties to move on.

As *Jenny* emphasised that the community is entitled to have some say about how to integrate children and thus be part of the reintegration process, *Matt* questioned the definition of “community” that was widely employed during the deliberations. This query became even more relevant as *Ismael* referred to cultural translators who help channelling the reintegration process and build trust relationship between the communities and the youth gangs. Partial insiders play a role of connectors so as to provide a holistic response to violent situations. In particular *Ismael* acknowledged the importance of partial insiders who are part of the integration bridge. *Matt* doubted that community leaders are crucial in assisting young people, for they do not necessarily represent the communities but are often opted by the police and are thus

not regarded as impartial actors whose sole interest is the reintegration of the youngsters. That being said, *Matt* conceded that a change is under way in the police forces as police officers are getting used to talk to individuals without using “police language” and to act as friends of the communities. This is certainly a welcome improvement in his opinion.

Probably an apt beginning of an overall conclusion was *Shilan’s* thoughts on the parallel and competing identities of children, the competing childhoods (i.e. multiple roles played by children), the competing interests of the children (i.e. best interests of the child) and that of the community, etc. In other words these various competitions lead to the potential use of violence by children. *Atreyee* exemplified the concept of competing childhoods: Muslim children in Indian slums only turn dangerous because otherwise they would be seen as vulnerable to attacks and thus would not be able to play football. Originally, children wanted to play without feeling threatened but the circumstances have made them embrace violence as a means to protect themselves and the children’s lives they would like to have. *Ismael* preferred the notion of competing identities rather than competing childhoods in as much as it refers to the consequences of one identity taking over. That being said, *Shilan* did question whether such a notion would be accurate in the situation where children feel that they had derived some positive elements as well from their time in the group, be it a gang or an armed opposition group. In such a scenario are they truly competing identities?

To sum up, it seems that the key problem with regards to children leaving the group and being reintegrated into society is how they can be fully and effectively assimilated back into their communities. It seems this is very much dependent on how they are viewed and received within their local context and community. In addition, an essential element for the successful reintegration of such children seems to be the need to replace what they lost by leaving their respective groups e.g. identity, sense of belonging, etc. Accordingly, it becomes a necessity to provide them with a new identity, a new sense of belonging, etc. Furthermore, the root causes of why children become part of gangs and armed groups need to be addressed so as to remove any temptation to go back.

Conclusion

Youth and violence is a widespread phenomenon. In order to gain a better insight into this phenomenon, understand associated concepts and ascertain whether there are any commonalities between children who engage in violent activities in what are different settings, this report has explored whether any parallels can be drawn between child soldiers and youth in gangs. These groups were chosen for comparative purposes as they represent the most common images that are invoked when thinking about children and violence.

So what can be concluded? The first observation that can be made is that it is very difficult to delineate who is a child, youth etc. There does not appear to be a uniform definition. Even within international law various “age thresholds” exist. Actually the definition of who is a child varies according to the local cultural context and what often emerges is competing images of childhood i.e. where children play a multitude of different roles. Likewise, defining the term gang is not as easy task. For instance, whilst the word is regularly used in English law, no formal definition is provided. In actual fact how the term gang is interpreted often very much depends on the circumstances in which it is being used in. Furthermore, it was deduced that notions such as urban violence and armed conflict are also not as clear cut. In other words, although traditionally they were seen as two distinct concepts, the line separating urban violence and armed conflict in recent times has, in certain contexts, become blurred.

Having addressed the reasons as to how and why children become part of gangs and armed groups, it can be concluded that there are undoubtedly a number of commonalities. For example factors such as the lack of support/breakdown of social support systems, coming from abusive backgrounds, wanting a sense of belonging, notions of power and control, lack of other viable alternatives, etc. seem to be commonplace with regards to both groups. In addition, there also seem to be comparable “gendered” factors. What is different however is the way in which children become part of the groups. Compared to how children become part of a gang, the recruitment processes associated with armed opposition groups are far more brutal and violent. In terms of strategies that can be used to prevent children from becoming part of either group in the first place, the focus needs to be on

addressing the root causes. This is of course a more arduous task in conflict settings.

With regards to the roles and experiences of children in both groups, it could be argued that there are some parallels which can be drawn. For instance, membership within either group does provide children with an identity, a sense of belonging, a sense of control and power, etc. Similarly, the discussion on the role and experiences of girls in both groups showed that there were certain analogous commonalities. Being female, girls in both groups were less “visible” (e.g. with girls associated with gangs being seen be more on the periphery rather than a core member of the group), undertook gendered roles (i.e. acting as carriers, doing the domestic chores, etc) and also became the object of sexual gratification for male members of the group. What is more, it was elucidated that existing research, literature and programmes tended to focus more on the male members of both groups. Notwithstanding, despite there being some similarities, participants agreed that there are several distinct differences between the two groups. This primarily stems from the purpose each group serves. For gangs, the main objective is local territorial control, whereas for armed groups it is about taking over the State/government. Nonetheless, the element of the need to control is present in both groups. In addition, it was noted that there are explicit examples where the purpose/focus of the group has changed. For instance, in certain conflict settings, members of armed groups participate and engage in violent activities not because of any ideological/political purpose, but because of privately-driven, economic interests. That being said, it was concluded that the organisation and structure of both groups also delineates the differences between them. So, for example, whilst there appear to be generic “street rules” which apply to gang members, irrespective of which gang you belong to, no such apparent rules seem to exist for members of armed opposition groups.

When it comes to considering the question of the children leaving the respective groups and being reintegrated into the community, a common issue and concern which seems to emerge is how can this be effectively achieved with children who have been exposed to a violent environment. A recurring observation that was made, in light of strategies that have been deployed with regards to both youth in gangs and former child soldiers, was that any reintegration process should be on a voluntary basis, and not forced. Also, it was paramount that reintegration strategies

should be crafted in such a way so as to enable the successful replacement of what the children had lost by leaving their groups e.g. identity, sense of belonging, purpose, etc. In other words, the key challenge is to assimilate the children back into their communities in such a way that they do not return back to the environments they have left behind.

Thus, to conclude, what has been learnt from carrying out this exercise? The first thing to note is that key relevant terms and concepts, be it who is a child, what is a gang, etc, are difficult to define and remain elusive. In effect their meanings change depending on the context in which they are being addressed in. Secondly, whilst some parallels can be drawn between child soldiers and youth in gangs (e.g. in terms of the factors that lead them to join the groups in the first place, some of their experiences, etc), there are explicit and distinct differences. These differences lie in the purpose, composition and organisation of the groups and the context in which they operate. Moreover, the applicable legal regime is also different and depends on whether we are dealing with an urban violence or armed conflict setting. That being said, and as discussed in this report, there are blurring boundaries, perceptions and purposes. Thirdly, with regards to the reintegration of children (who have been exposed to varying degrees of violence) back into the community, the common challenge seems to be how does one do this successfully? Here, agencies working with either group may be able to learn something from each other i.e. those working with youth in gangs may learn something from the experiences of those who have worked with child soldiers and vice versa. And lastly, programmes dealing with either group will need to take into account the specific factors, needs, interests, etc. pertaining to the individuals they are considering.

Annex I: Participants

Mr Matt Clement (University of the West of England)

Matt is Lecturer in Criminology at University of the West of England and Bristol University, specialising on Youth Crime, Riots, Gangs and the Social Psychology of Violence and Crime. He is also reviewing the impact of austerity on these fields and has written a chapter about 'The Urban Outcasts of the British City' in Atkinson, W Roberts, S and M Savage (eds) *Class Inequality in Austerity Britain: Power, Difference and Suffering* (Palgrave Macmillan 2012). Matt has worked for Bristol's Youth Offending Team from 2006 to 2012 before moving into full time lecturing. His influences include Norbert Elias and Loic Wacquant and he has written on whether teenage knife crime can be seen as an example of a 'decivilising process'.

Ms Jennifer Maher (University of Glamorgan)

Jenny is a Senior Lecturer Faculty of Business and Society at the University of Glamorgan. Her role involves teaching, research and overseeing curriculum development at the Centre for Criminology. Jenny's PhD, a multi-method, multi-site investigation into youth gangs in South Wales, explored the type of street youth formations in existence in South Wales, and identified whether these formations could be considered youth gangs. She has since conducted research on youth peer violence, youth weapon use and the use of status dogs by young people and teaches an undergraduate module on youth gangs.

Ms Noëlle Quéniwet (University of the West of England)

Noëlle is an Associate Professor in the Department of Law of the University of the West of England. Her expertise lays with international law and more specifically the laws relating to the use of force and armed conflicts. Her PhD thesis on *Sexual Offences in Armed Conflict and International Law* (Transnational Publisher) was published in 2005 and was awarded the Honorable Mention by the Francis Lieber Society of the American Society of International Law in 2006. She has edited a number of books on armed conflicts and has more recently published articles and book chapters on child soldiers.

Ms Jade Royal (Community Resolve)

Jade is a worker at Community Resolve.

Ms Atreyee Sen (University of Manchester)

Atreyee is a Lecturer in Contemporary Religion and Conflict in the Department of Religions and Theology at the University of Manchester. She is a social anthropologist who is interested in the areas of religious conflict, prisons, slum cultures and gender, childhoods, and contemporary urban violence. The regional focus of her research is South Asia. Atreyee obtained an MA in Sociology from the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, in 1996, and completed her PhD at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, in 2003. In 2007, she joined the University of Manchester as an RCUK fellow in Conflict, Cohesion and Change. Atreyee has published a monograph on the lives of criminalised Hindu nationalist women in Bombay, entitled *Shiv Sena Women: Violence and Communalism in a Bombay Slum* (Hurst and Co, Columbia University Press, 2007). She has also co-edited a collection of essays on cross-cultural perspectives on violence and vigilante communities, entitled *Global Vigilantes* (Hurst and Co, Columbia University Press, 2007). Atreyee is currently writing a monograph on prison cultures in urban India.

Ms Shilan Shah-Davis (University of the West of England)

Shilan is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Law of the University of the West of England. Her research interests fall within the broader framework of international human rights law, with a particular focus on children's rights (including child soldiers) and women's rights. Amidst other publications, she has, with Noëlle Quénivet, co-edited a book on international law and armed conflict and co-authored a chapter on girl soldiers in Africa.

Mr Ismael Velasco (Adora Foundation, Formerly Community Resolve)

Ismael was until 2012 Director of Community Resolve. With more than 20 years experience in three continents in peer education, he has worked particularly in areas of social deprivation in Britain, and internationally at the grassroots in the global South in contexts of conflict, rural poverty, and indigenous settings. He is former

Research Fellow in Sustainable Development at the University of Brighton, specialising in values and social action, and has published over 20 peer reviewed articles, policy reports and book chapters across disciplines. He is currently CEO of the Adora Foundation, an international non-profit focused on social innovation and social mobilisation, integrating community development, research, the arts and social media around pressing social challenges and opportunities, and working in both, local communities and in the international sphere.

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