

## PART VI

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

---

The conclusions below bring together identified commonalities of the investigated armed groups and their members in relation to the research variables. By no means does this attempt to detract from the heterogeneity of the groups or their members, or ignore the diversity of the settings in which they operate. Rather, these conclusions are used as a tool to aid in the formulation of the recommendations that follow.

#### **Organised armed groups**

**1. Settings:** Organised armed groups in urban areas do not affect entire cities in a uniform manner. Groups are territorial and generally active only in defined areas. These areas are distinct from the cities that surround them, often distinguished by names such as *favelas*, *comunas*, *colonias*, townships or ghettos, and tend to be relatively poor, underdeveloped and distanced from the state by differentiated public policies such as the absence or limited presence of state security forces, or the inadequate provision of public services. These areas may have a high population density and almost always have disproportionately high levels of unemployment and low levels of formal education amongst youth. Organised armed groups active in rural settings are also territorial and dominate areas that share most of the above characteristics, with the exception of high population density.

**2. Background:** The majority of groups investigated have a medium to long-term history and do not have criminal origins. All groups have transformed over time to become armed or more armed, violent or more violent, and involved or more involved in criminal enterprise. This transformation has been due to growing involvement in the illicit drug trade, increased access to small arms and persistent and often violent state repression. Ethnicity or clan allegiance play an important role in the formation and identity of just under half of the groups investigated. Rather than existing independently from the societies in which they operate, armed groups are often reflective of the environments in which they were established, especially in their use of violence.

**3. Structure:** There are three types of command structure used by the investigated groups: a military hierarchy with a ranking system; a formally organised or corporate structure; and an informal horizontal structure that may have decentralised local branches. The type of command structures utilised does not reflect the levels of violence in which groups are involved, although such military hierarchies tend to be used by the more militarised groups which are more frequently in confrontation with state security forces. Groups may be organised at the local, city, national or international levels. Most groups have structural links to imprisoned members, often leaders, and all groups use physical punishments, including

death, to discipline members.<sup>1</sup> Estimates of the number of members in all investigated armed groups are limited; however, it is believed to run into the tens of thousands within each of the countries covered by this study. Accurately estimating the number of under eighteen year-old members is also difficult; however, joining armed groups is an adolescent experience for many and the majority of group members in all case studies are youths.

**4. Community domination:** Groups that are not openly armed in the community, except during conflict, tend not to control the activities of local residents, restrict their movements or protect them from crime. These groups also tend to be located in areas where state security forces are present, however sporadically. Groups that are an openly armed presence in the community tend to have a monopoly on 'social ordering', often through the maintenance of parallel laws and the provision of justice, may restrict the activities and movements of local residents, and tend to be located in areas with a very limited presence or complete absence of state security forces, where public services may be intermittent partly due to the armed group's ostensibly armed presence. Both groups that conceal their weapons and those that are openly armed may financially support local community projects, such as crèches, although the latter tend to do this more frequently.

**5. State relations:** The state has a direct or indirect role in the activities of all investigated groups. In the majority of cases this is an indirect relationship through the involvement of corrupt low-level state representatives, such as policemen, via the sale of firearms, reception of bribes and/or participation in illegal drug dealing. In three case studies, groups were working directly with state security forces, being funded by government representatives or had been known to receive political patronage in return for guaranteeing votes from local residents.

**6. Economic activities:** All groups are involved in illicit economies and territorial domination is their base for financial gain. All groups are involved in criminal activities; in some cases this includes organised crime and in others only delinquency and street crimes, such as robberies. Groups in all countries but one are involved in the drug trade through cultivation, domestic transportation or street sales. A minority of groups are also involved in licit enterprises, such as transport services. A strong economic base gives groups the ability to become financially self-sufficient and to arm themselves, both of which make them more attractive to disenfranchised adolescents and youth. Half of the groups investigated pay fixed salaries, others pay through commission-based drug sales or logistical support for members' involvement in profitable criminal activities.

**7. Armed violence:** Groups are involved in armed confrontations with other armed groups on a varying scale mostly over control of territory (primarily for economic reasons and the control of illicit markets) and rivalry (related to self-definition, ideals, ethnicity, clan-alliances or beliefs). A number of armed groups also carry out armed violence, such as summary executions, through their involvement in vigilantism. All groups are involved in armed violence because of their participation in crime, and often due to internal disputes. Type 1 groups also come into conflict with state forces for a number of reasons, including in reaction to police or military actions.

---

<sup>1</sup> The smaller *pandillas* of Ecuador are the exception to this and tend not to kill members.

**8. Typology:** Utilising the criteria established by the *working definition* of organised armed violence<sup>2</sup> and combining Categorical Judgement and Comparative Judgement<sup>3</sup> techniques, three types of armed groups are identified. Type 1 groups are a ‘quasi-military’ and openly armed presence, exert high levels of control over the local population, dominate both licit and illicit local resources, fight directly with state forces if necessary and use war-grade weapons. Type 3 groups have less militarised characteristics and are not an openly armed force, have less control over local populations within the areas they dominate, control illicit local resources only, avoid direct confrontations with the state and are more representative of traditional notions of ‘youth’ or ‘street’ gangs. Type 2 groups are those that share characteristics of both Type 1 and Type 3 groups. The level of violence in which groups are involved is not related to their type, although Type 1 groups are more detrimental to the socio-economic development of the areas they dominate due to: 1) the prolonged and militarised types of violence in which they participate; and 2) the high levels of domination over population, territory and resources that they exert, usually in place of the state.

**9. Structural risk factors:** The following external risk factors are identified as causal and/or contributory to the establishment and continued local dominance of Types 1, 2 and 3 groups: urban enclaves of poverty; a high percentage of youth in the local population that suffer disproportionately low levels of education and disproportionately high levels of unemployment; a limited or differentiated state presence in certain areas; state representatives being open to corruption; government reliance upon repressive and violent state apparatus against group members and non-involved residents of the communities in which they are active; group access to illicit economies such as drug trafficking; and group access to small arms. There appears to be a correlation between the degree to which a specific area suffers these risk factors and the type of group that emerges; Type 1 groups are more typically present in areas that suffer these structural risk factors to the greatest degree, especially when state security forces are absent.

## **Children and youth in organised armed violence**

**1. Personal histories:** A significant number of child and youth respondents reported coming from single parent families (typically matriarchal), overcrowded homes, having poor relations with other family members including parents and suffering from domestic violence. Almost all respondents were school dropouts who had failed to finish primary/secondary level education due to poverty, not seeing school as worthwhile, being expelled for poor and often violent behaviour or leaving because of a greater presence of rival group members within their school. Failing to finish school is seen as a cyclical problem, as many respondents reported that their parents had attained equally low levels of education. Nearly all respondents considered themselves to come from poor or relatively poor backgrounds.

**2. Process of involvement:** The average age at which respondents from all countries involved in this study joined armed groups was 13 years and six months.<sup>4</sup> The age that young people

---

<sup>2</sup> See ‘Methodology’.

<sup>3</sup> See ‘Typology of Armed Groups’.

<sup>4</sup> Excluding Nigeria, where interviewees had joined ethnic-militia and vigilante groups on average between 15-16 years of age.

are joining appears to have been decreasing in most countries since the 1980s. This is due to the increasing involvement of almost all groups in the drug trade and the consequent openings in street-level jobs for local adolescents. It is also due to the fact that children have been increasingly born into communities in which armed groups have already established a dominant presence. Joining an armed group is not a one-off event but rather a gradual process that may take months or even years to complete. The following five stages are identified for this process in all case studies, although some stages may be missed out in some cases, or take place in a different order in others: 1) Exposure to the group by setting (association by neighbourhood); 2) Introduction by family or friends; 3) Transitional phase ('hanging out' and doing favours or being given small jobs or apprenticeships); 4) Full membership (considered as trustworthy, may have right of passage); 5) Armed (given a firearm). An abundance of young adolescent males seeking to join their local armed group means that an active recruitment policy is unnecessary in most cases; only in two countries were investigated groups found to actively recruit.

**3. Why children and youth join:** For most interviewees, joining an armed group was a rational decision rather than simply 'deviant' or 'criminal' behaviour. Joining an armed group gives a young person the ability to actively *respond* to the following *risk factors*: poverty/inequality; a lack of economic alternatives due to poor levels of education and high unemployment; social marginalisation; violence from state forces or other armed groups; problems in the home; and a lack of leisure facilities. There are also a number of identified *influences* that play an important role in young people's decision to join an armed group. Although these *risk factors* and *influences* are common to all young people living in high-risk environments, the majority of children and youths in such areas do not join an armed group. 'Choosing' to join an armed group depends on *personal context*, which is made up of the types of *influences* and options an individual has access to. Children and youths in high-risk environments are more *vulnerable* to joining local armed groups when their *personal contexts* offer few options to *respond* to *risk factors*, and are susceptible to *influences* that encourage them to join. Children and youths are more *resilient* to joining local armed groups when their *personal contexts* offer varied options to *respond* to *risk factors*, and they are less susceptible to *influences* that encourage them to join, usually due to the presence of stronger and more supportive *influences*. Local diagnosis that charts prevalent local *risk factors* and *influences* may help design specific interventions that affect young people's *personal contexts* in order to boost *resilience* amongst them.

**4. Working functions:** In all groups, children and youths are subordinate to adults or older youths. All groups have a system of rules for internal discipline, working functions and/or having a clear and defined identity. All groups maintain rules through punishment including physical beatings and death (the latter in all but one case study). Two of the investigated groups have rules to protect their youngest members. However, in all cases notions of entering adulthood are not based on a numerical age, but rather on the ability to carry out working functions, use a firearm or local cultural beliefs. Working functions can be divided into two categories: non-armed and armed. Non-armed functions include: lookouts; informants and spies; carrying, cleaning and guarding guns; and other supportive roles. Armed

functions include: bodyguard/protective escort; guarding territory and property; armed patrols; manning tolls and check points; drug dealing and crime; assassinations; and participation in armed confrontations. In all cases except commission-based drug dealing child and youth workers are paid less than their adult counterparts. Child and youth workers may be paid by a fixed salary, on commission, per criminal act, with token gifts or by logistical support to carry out profitable criminal activity.

**5. Children, youth and armed violence:** Within the context of territorial and other disputes, carrying out criminal activities and upholding internal discipline in the group or social order within the community, all armed groups arm minors.<sup>5</sup> With the exception of respondents in Nigeria and Jamaica, all respondents talked of being armed between 12 and 14 years. Most groups have a cache of arms under the control higher-ranking members. The level of training given to members greatly varies between groups although in most cases respondents were already familiar with firearms from growing up in communities with high levels of gun violence and seeing firearms in the street or with family and/or friends. Being exposed to gun violence before joining an armed group was also common to the majority of respondents. Once in armed groups, most children and youth interviewed had been shot at or hit by gunfire. Two respondents interviewed for this study were shot and killed before fieldwork was completed. Minors and youths in all armed groups investigated shoot at and murder other people. In addition to becoming psychologically affected, participating in lethal violence also caused respondents to express a very fatalistic attitude toward their own deaths occurring violently and soon.

When comparing available **public health statistics** such as **fire-arms related mortality rates** between investigated countries since 1979, we find that: minors have been consistently more affected by injury as a cause of death than the general population, and this has increased disproportionately amongst this group over time; firearms-related deaths as a percentage of all deaths by external causes has increased disproportionately more amongst minors than for the total population in all localities compared<sup>6</sup>; in all cases gun deaths most affect young males between 15 and 24 years of age; when attempting to gain more precise knowledge of the involvement of armed group members in gun violence there is a need for specific public health and mortality data that can differentiate the target group by age, gender and specific locality; and due to limitations in acquiring relevant statistics for these comparisons, there is a need for a unified global data bank regarding violence related statistics.

**6. Gender considerations:** the majority of respondents (92%) from organised armed groups were male. In most investigated groups female members are in the minority or are not present at all. Like boys, girls that do join armed groups come from poor communities and face many of the same socio-economic disadvantages as their male counterparts, are school drop-outs and may join for similar reasons, such as for protection. In the majority of armed groups female members do not use firearms or they use them to a lesser degree than male members, tending instead to rely on other weapons such as knives. This differential usage of firearms

---

<sup>5</sup> Except for some of the smaller *pandillas* in Ecuador.

<sup>6</sup> With the exception of El Salvador where firearms-related deaths as a percentage of all deaths by external causes have decreased amongst both the under 18 year-old age group and the total population.

means that girls are much less affected by gun death in all countries covered by this study (where homicide rates were available). Because gun usage, as well as joining an armed group, is associated with notions of 'manhood' in many of the communities where investigated armed groups exist, adolescent males are more prone to join an armed group and use a firearm. More research on gender roles within armed groups is needed in order to divert this trend and: understand why some girls do join; learn about the specific demobilisation, re-integration or rehabilitation needs of girls and women; investigate to what extent the actions of mothers, sisters and girlfriends support boys and men joining armed groups; see whether 'camp followers' are also a phenomenon of organised armed groups that function outside of armed conflict; and investigate if sexual violence influences the behaviour and involvement of girls, boys, men and women in armed groups.

**7. Future perspectives:** In all cases leaving an armed group can be dangerous and potentially lethal. However, if done in the correct manner it is possible. Respondents were not unanimous in their desire to leave their groups. Some did not want to leave because of feelings of belonging and excitement. Others had a fatalistic acceptance of their situation, claiming to have no choice. Those that wanted to leave said they would only do so if they got jobs or if the state/society/community helped them. Almost all respondents stated that they did not want their younger siblings involved, and that to guarantee this there is a need for more jobs, alternatives instead of repression, gun control and investments in sports and cultural activities. Most had a negative view of their lifestyles and regardless of whether they wanted to leave or not, the majority were hopeless about their futures. A common feeling amongst respondents was that the responsibility for them to leave the group depended primarily on the actions of others. This may reflect limited options rather than an outright lack of interest amongst respondents in leaving their group altogether. However, whether respondents wanted to leave their groups or not, having viable socio-economic alternatives is fundamental to a young person being able to really make such a choice, and equally important to preventing future generations from becoming involved.

## **Treatment**

**1. Current trends in public policy:** In all countries covered by this study governments are focusing on repressive tactics to deal with children and youth in organised armed violence. Government repression may be via legislation that singles out youth groups or their members, repressive and increasingly militarised policing policies, the detention and imprisonment of group members or their summary execution. State prevention and rehabilitation programmes are often limited, under-funded or non-existent, and in some cases organised armed violence is not recognised as a specific problem by government. Although there are some notable exceptions where repressive tactics have effectively treated the problem of armed violence in urban centres, in the case of children and youth in organised armed violence, focusing solely on repression will tend to be ineffective as: it does not deal with the root causes of the problem; the juvenile justice and penal systems in most countries covered by this study are inadequate and may even worsen the problem; and armed groups tend to become more organised and increasingly violent when faced only with repressive tactics.

**2. Local interventions:** To truly treat the problem of children and youth in organised armed violence it is necessary to eliminate the external *risk factors* identified as causal and/or contributory to both the establishment and continued existence of armed groups, and those *risk factors* that directly affect young people within high-risk environments. However, as eradicating these *risk factors* is a lengthy and difficult process, local level interventions that boost *resilience* amongst children and youth in affected areas is a more effective and concurrent strategy for the short-term. Despite the diversity of the best-practice projects and programmes presented, their success comes from being able to offer children and young people the chance to *respond* to the *risk factors* they face within their environments without joining an armed group. The most successful of these projects offer beneficiaries sufficient options and supportive *influences* necessary to *respond* to all or most of the *risk factors* in their environment, rather than just one or two, thus affecting their *personal context*. Other factors for success include: being community based; responding to locally-identified *risk factors* and *influences*; designing integrated and personalised projects; working with family members; integrating involved and non-involved young people in local projects; and involving the target group in the design, coordination and evaluation of the project wherever possible. Psychological support for young people that have participated in and experienced high levels of violence is also beneficial.

**3. Strategic approaches:** In order to stop organised armed violence rather than merely geographically displacing it, integrated, localised and personalised projects that build *resilience* amongst children and youth should be part of municipal or regional prevention and rehabilitation strategies. These strategies should be based on local analysis and coordinated jointly by stakeholders such as the government, the police and civil society groups. Strategies should include: a network of locally-based interventions; integration with macro-level programmes working to treat structural *risk factors*; the involvement of the juvenile justice system and adult prisons; conflict resolution between groups and protection programmes for members leaving under threat; and the building of local, national and international advocacy and networking mechanisms.

**4. Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration:** as with child drug faction workers in Rio de Janeiro, child and youth members from many of the armed groups investigated by this study also have much in common with child soldiers in more traditionally defined situations of armed conflict: all come from poor communities in which local armed groups have a strong presence; most are school dropouts who become involved during their early to mid teens, often seeking protection, status, financial reward, survival and/or the chance for revenge; they carry out many non-armed and armed functions that are almost identical to documented cases of child soldiers; and in almost all cases these young people have witnessed killings, have been involved in exchanges of gunfire (in some cases with state forces) and many have killed. Children and youth in organised armed violence are not child soldiers and should not be referred to as such. However, there is much to gain from exchanging knowledge of good practice for the treatment of both distinct yet similar situations for the advancement of sound methodological practice and the design, development and implementation of 'ddr' programmes in urban non-war situations, as well as making DDR programmes in armed or post-conflict settings more effective.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**1. Recognition:** The growing involvement of children and youth in organised armed groups outside of situations of war is a distinct problem that needs to be recognised by both international child protection agencies and national governments.<sup>7</sup> Recognition of children and youth in organised armed violence is important because the accepted definition of this phenomenon determines the treatment of those involved. An accepted definition is also an important step toward focusing on the involved child or young person's needs and welfare, rather than just the armed group to which they belong, when deciding strategies for treatment.

**2. Specific and integrated municipal/regional policies based on local diagnosis:** Although they share numerous commonalities in causality, organisation, function and setting, organised armed groups are distinct entities in different environments. The findings from this study offer greater understanding of their nature and provide a model for the design of local interventions and municipal level strategies to treat the problem. However, there is no quick fix or uniformly applicable remedy. Specific policies for specific manifestations of this problem are needed. Policies should be based on local diagnosis that:

- Identifies the local manifestation of organised armed violence;
- Identifies structural *risk factors* that are causal and/or contributory to the establishment and continued dominance of local armed groups;
- Identifies the risk group that are most involved;
- Identifies *risk factors* and *influences* that are causal and/or contributory to children and youth 'choosing' to join local armed groups.

Once this is complete, a strategic and integrated policy that concurrently treats the structural *risk factors* (Recommendation 3) and develops local level *resilience* amongst children and youth (Recommendations 4 to 6) should be designed and implemented at the municipal/regional level.

**3. Treatment of structural *risk factors*:** Structural *risk factors* that are causal and/or contributory to the establishment and continued dominance of local armed groups must be addressed. These may be different in each setting. However, recommendations follow for the treatment of the structural *risk factors* that were found to be common in all or most case studies.

**Socio-economic inclusion of populations within distinct urban areas:** organised armed groups flourish in geographically distinct urban enclaves of poverty that are often distanced from the state via the provision of differentiated or inadequate public services to the local population. These areas need investment in infrastructure and local residents need health, education and employment programmes for their full socio-economic inclusion. Until these areas are an integrated part of the cities that surround them, armed groups will continue to have geographical and logistical bases.

---

<sup>7</sup> At the time of publication, recognition of the problem amongst some international agencies was beginning to take place. For example, the involvement of armed child workers in Rio de Janeiro's drug factions was reported in the Brazil section of the 2004 Child Soldiers Global Report (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2004, [www.child-soldiers.org](http://www.child-soldiers.org)).

**Fast track educational inclusion and job opportunities for all youth:** a high percentage of youth in the local population with disproportionately low levels of education and disproportionately high levels of unemployment is common to all areas where armed groups are dominant, almost all youth members being unemployed school dropouts. Youths need to know they will have access to jobs in the future if they are to be encouraged to stay in school. Combining education courses with paid part-time work placements is one way of ensuring young people finish their education rather than seek illicit enterprises, including joining an armed group.

**Community policing:** in all areas where groups are active the presence of state security forces is of a limited or differentiated nature. A reliance on reactive and repressive policing policies within these areas has led to poor relations between the local community and police. In some areas, security forces are not present at all, which encourages armed groups to become an openly armed presence. Within both such scenarios local residents are more likely to support dominant armed groups in their communities than the police. The police need to be a constant and respected presence within the community if they are to gain the support of local residents and stop armed groups becoming an openly armed fixture.

**Deal with corruption and impunity:** most armed groups benefit greatly from corrupt low-level state officials, especially the police. It is fundamental that corruption within such areas of the state apparatus is dealt with in order to lessen the dominion of armed groups within the territories where they are active, and end the impunity exercised by their members. It is also important to stop corrupt police officers being a source of illicit firearms and confiscated drugs.

**Policing is necessary, illegal violence by state forces is not:** reliance solely upon a repressive and violent state apparatus against group members and non-involved residents of the communities in which they are active often serves to turn the community against the state and support or protect local armed groups. Abuse of authority may also lead to armed groups becoming increasingly armed, organised and violent in their response to state action. Policing is necessary; however, it is fundamental that the police act within the boundaries of the law both because it is the law, and in order to gain the community's support. Police abuse of power must be publicly dealt with by government.

**Gun control:** extensive access to small arms is common to all groups due to lax state gun control and the illicit arms trade. In Northern Ireland, stringent gun control by the government in the form of arms seizures and prosecutions, and the control exerted by paramilitaries themselves in order to maintain their power base in communities, has effectively kept guns out of the hands of children and youths and meant that firearms-related deaths stayed relatively low during the last few years of the conflict and since the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. As this example clearly demonstrates, gun control is crucial to lowering group access to small arms, and consequently the number of gun deaths.

**Drug policy reform:** in nine out of ten countries covered by this study, groups make their profit from the illegal drug trade. Access to illicit economies such as drug trafficking makes armed groups financially self-sufficient and provides the necessary funds to buy arms and bribe government/state officials. Governments have been unsuccessful in stopping drugs from entering illicit markets and repression has served to push prices up, greatly increasing

violent competition between drug traffickers as well as their profits, and leading to the employment of increasingly militarised tactics by both drug trafficking groups and the police. Furthermore, police abuse of power is often carried out under the aegis of 'drug control', wherein the demonisation of drugs and drug traffickers is such that the use of excessive force by the police, and even the summary executions of drug traffickers, becomes accepted practice. Alternative drug policies could have a major impact on the employment of children and youth in organised armed violence. Cross-country policy comparisons of non-repressive drug policy should be carried out and promising alternatives identified.

By limiting the degrees to which the above risk factors affect specific areas, it may be possible to make armed groups a less present, active and dominant local force, or to transform Type 1 groups into Type 2 or 3 groups. Treating structural *risk factors* should be done in an integrated manner, and concurrently to building *resilience* at the local level (Recommendations 4 to 6)

**4. Build *resilience* through a network of community-based prevention interventions:** Integrated networks of community based prevention interventions should be established at the municipal/regional level. Interventions should be based on local diagnosis and designed to identify and successfully engage the most at-risk children and youth, affecting their *personal contexts* by providing sufficient options and supportive *influences* for them to *respond* to prevalent *risk factors* within their environment without joining local armed groups. Local community-based organisations, such as existing grassroots NGOs or local churches, should receive training to coordinate prevention projects locally, and act in an integrated fashion via participation in the network. Network participation can be encouraged through members having access to training, funding opportunities and other forms of support.

**5. Build *resilience* through a network of community based and institutional rehabilitation programmes:** In addition to prevention, children and young people must be offered ways out of armed groups when they choose to leave or when they are apprehended by the authorities. Rehabilitation programmes at community level for those that choose to leave and within closed institutions should follow a similar methodology to prevention programmes; having sufficient options and supportive *influences* to *respond* to prevalent *risk factors* is as important to build *resilience* amongst children and youth already involved as it is for those 'choosing' not to join. Similar to prevention projects, community-based rehabilitation projects should be based on local diagnosis of the problem, be coordinated by specially capacitated and existing local organisations (where possible), and co-ordinated strategically via a network of local organisations/government at the municipal/regional level. Projects in the community must also design the correct strategies to safely contact involved children and young people within affected communities, and be integrated with state rehabilitation programmes within closed facilities in order that young people can continue to be rehabilitated after leaving detention.

**6. Reform the juvenile justice system:** For children and young people that do not opt to leave organised armed groups, the only window of opportunity for prolonged contact with them is their possible apprehension and detention within the juvenile justice system. In many

of the countries covered by this study, juvenile detention centres are overcrowded, violent and abusive, and have inadequate facilities to successfully rehabilitate youth offenders. Youth detention facilities are in need of drastic reforms in order to stop the maltreatment of inmates and offer the necessary educational, job training and rehabilitation programmes.

**7. Focus on inclusion rather than just repression:** The application of the law by the police is necessary to deal with organised armed violence. However, government dependence upon solely repressive legislative, military, policing and incarceration policies for the treatment of organised armed violence has failed to treat the root causes of the problem and has been unsuccessful in counteracting the existence of armed groups, their dominion over local territories, populations and resources or the participation of children and youth within them. Furthermore, in areas where such policy has been relied upon, public health statistics do not demonstrate a fall in the firearms-related homicide rates over time; on the contrary, in many cases this has risen considerably within these localities since 1979. Increasingly militarised action from governments has so far only led to an increasingly militarised response from armed groups. Rather than just relying on repressive and military tactics, policing and legislative policies must focus on prevention and rehabilitation in order to offer involved children and youths the necessary support to opt for alternatives to armed group membership.

**8. Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration:** The similarities in causality and function between children and youth working for politically-oriented armed groups in armed conflicts and children and youth in organised armed violence is considerable. Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) are therefore applicable to both situations of war and organised armed violence. Organisations working with DDR of child soldiers and CAAC<sup>8</sup>, and those with reintegration projects of child and youth armed group members in non-war situations have much to learn from one another. Knowledge of good practice examples of prevention, rehabilitation and DDR interventions in both situations should be exchanged and compared for the advancement of sound methodological practice and the design, development and implementation of 'ddr' programmes in urban non-war situations.

**9. Engage groups in dialogue wherever possible:** In order to ensure significant participation, wherever possible, and especially with Type 1 and 2 groups, group leaders should be contacted and encouraged to assist in the design of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes for their members. A number of projects have successfully engaged armed youth actors in social projects and reintegration programmes, and in El Salvador and Guatemala for example, *pandillas* have even requested meetings with government representatives, and vice-versa. Including those youths open to discussion in how to lessen their participation in gun violence will greatly improve the success of programmes with that objective. Different methods of negotiation and dialogue may be needed for Type 3 groups. These may be similar to conflict resolution tactics with armed groups in situations of armed conflict, and these techniques need to be learned, adapted and evaluated by those working with organised armed violence for their use in non-war situations. Conflict resolution between groups should also be focused on by the authorities in order to limit gun violence.

---

<sup>8</sup> Children Affected by Armed Conflict.

**10. Monitoring legally recognised armed groups:** Some ethnic-militia and vigilante groups in Nigeria and the Civilian Volunteer Organisations in the Philippines are legally recognised. In addition to DDR programmes for child members, these groups need to be closely monitored by government to ensure they are not armed, do not act outside of the law and do not use child labour.

**11. Need for better and more specific violence-related data:** An independent and unified global data bank that records comparable violence-related data is needed if the levels of violence in which armed groups are involved are to be recorded and monitored. This includes public health statistics such as detailed and comparable firearms-related homicide data relevant to the profile of group members within the specific communities in which armed groups are active.

\* \* \* \*

The evidence presented here suggests that the involvement of children and youth in organised armed violence is a growing phenomenon with diverse and distinct manifestations that share a significant number of commonalities. These commonalities are a great help to understanding these groups and their members better, and advancing methodological and practical approaches to treat this increasingly serious problem.

The number and size of organised armed groups, the rise in child and youth participation within them, and the ever growing use of firearms amongst youth as a tool for dispute resolution and economic and social advancement, may lead one to imagine this is a hopeless and intractable situation. However, small grassroots projects are showing what is possible in terms of prevention and rehabilitation; techniques that if applied correctly can be more successful than simply relying on repression to lower firearms-related mortality rates in the long-term, or prevent those previously arrested for involvement in armed groups from re-offending in the short-term.

The challenge for professionals working on this theme is whether the lessons learnt from such successful community-based interventions can be applied on a scale that can affect the problem on a neighbourhood or even citywide level. What is for certain, however, is that to substantially improve the chances of success, governments and the police must be willing to work together with relevant civil society organisations, community representatives and even involved youths themselves.