



The Challenges of Doing Research on Child Soldiers in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

Shelly Whitman, Dalhousie University

In July to August 2010, I undertook research related to my work as Project Director of the Child Soldiers Initiative at Dalhousie University in the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. This research involved travel to Goma and Bukavu.

The original purpose for research in the DRC was to identify tactics utilized by perpetrators who command, recruit, and control child soldiers. The aim was to build a deeper understanding of new approaches towards the eradication of the use of child soldiers. The purpose of better understanding these tactics is to provide civil society actors and those working in the security sector, humanitarian organizations, and community groups with a data bank to support their important work in eradicating the use of child soldiers in conflicts across Africa.

I partnered with Kirsten Johnson of McGill University's Humanitarian Studies Initiative for Residents. In March 2010, she traveled to DRC while conducting a feasibility study and made key contacts on the ground in Eastern DRC. Johnson's findings have influenced and informed our decisions to tailor our research in a phased approach. This involves a series of roundtable discussions with stakeholders on the ground in the Eastern DRC that began in July 2010. We also established partnerships with key Congolese and international partners and researchers on the ground.

The roundtable discussions with stakeholders are structured discussions around the two key interventions: prevention of recruitment and release and re-integration of those recruited/re-recruited. In the area of prevention of recruitment, it is important to establish what other actors in the region are doing and to understand any knowledge gaps to improve effectiveness. In the area of release and re-integration, we seek information on relations with community and religious leaders, as well as members of the communities into which the children will be released and re-integrated. We also need to identify the actors, if any, that are involved in this kind of intervention; and we need to explore areas of collaboration, including the military perspective of this intervention, which almost certainly leads to the challenges currently being experienced.

Key Challenges to Research

The prevailing levels of insecurity combined with the failure of government institutions and the flourishing of corruption can make any journey to the DRC a challenge at best. It is imperative that anyone wishing to enter the DRC holds a letter of invitation from a host institution. We initially thought that, because of our liaison with the International Medical Corps (IMC), IMC would assist us with such a letter. Unfortunately, this did not occur due to both a change in the IMC country directorship at that time and newly implemented regulations stipulating that organizations in the DRC can be taxed by the government for issuing such letters. Fortunately, we also had a good relationship with UNICEF DRC and they were exemplary in assisting us with the required letter. All of this, of course, made the efforts to obtain a visa increasingly difficult in terms of the timing of our project.

Another challenge is the fact that in order to enter Goma and Bukavu (the two major towns to which we journeyed), we had to fly first into Kigali and then make our way via land to Goma. It turned out that a few weeks before our journey, I rediscovered a former colleague of mine who was now working for the MONUC – Kigali office. Through my friend and with the assistance of the letters from UNICEF, we were able to get on board MONUC shuttles to and from Goma at no cost. In addition, we were placed on MONUC helicopters to journey between Goma and Bukavu. It pays to make friends and to stay connected, meaning that preliminary trips to establish the necessary contacts to gain access to the research site are an important first step when working in conflict zones such as Eastern DRC.

Despite connections with non-governmental organizations on the ground through e-mail and telephone, and with the assistance of Johnson's field trip in March 2010, confirming meetings prior to embarking on the research trip was extremely difficult. However, by having a few key contacts such as experienced researchers from the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, UNICEF DRC, and MONUC, we were able to easily facilitate meetings as soon as we arrived in Goma and later in Bukavu. Therefore, researchers should not panic about having all of the interviews and contacts prior to arrival as the opportunities will open up as soon as one hits the ground.

In Bukavu, assistance from the IMC and from the Search for Common Ground was very helpful. Once again, having a relationship with a credible host institution can make a huge difference in the doors that are opened for any researcher. Search for Common Ground assisted with meetings, logistics, contacts, space, and advice on key individuals and programs. Most notably was the fact that they facilitated meetings with former child soldiers and FARDC commanders who provided pivotal information.

The meetings with the two FARDC officers were valuable and revealing on many levels. The first FARDC officer we met arrived unexpectedly at our hotel for the meeting. As we sat down to talk with him, we could see that the hotel staff and especially the Belgian owner, were not welcoming of his presence. The officer noted this, and it led to an explanation of the kinds of prejudice that he often encounters. Toward the end of the meeting, this officer made a phone call to another FARDC officer to arrange a meeting for us the following day.

This meeting with the second FARDC officer was extremely interesting. Like the first officer, he arrived at our hotel and earlier than anticipated. When we began to talk we realized a more secluded space was required. At the beginning of the interview, he asked us whether we would pay him for his time. We clearly told him that we did not have a budget to do so and that it was our ethical decision not to pay our interviewees. We were convinced he was going to get up and walk away. Yet after a few minutes of silence, he said, “let us proceed”. We felt this was a test of our character. The information he then revealed about his time as a recruiter of child soldiers was amazing.

Unfortunately, due to security concerns and the difficulties with accessing the non-state armed groups such as the FDLR and the Mayi-Mayi,¹ we were unable to conduct interviews with them. However, we were able to connect with two researchers that spend a great deal of time in the DRC and who have built relationships with the FDLR and the Mayi-Mayi; they have agreed to further our research by reaching out and conducting interviews on our behalf.

Security issues are always a concern in the DRC. The pervasive levels of violence are generally targeted towards the locals and especially the women. We left Goma on the 30th of July, the same day a major, three-day attack began on a village just 30km outside of town; the attack included mass rapes and culminated in the killing of the entire village. Thus, it is key to know your exit strategies, to have a heightened sense of awareness at all times, and to know the areas you are in. I should, however, mention that the only particular point at which I felt my security was compromised at all was driving from Bukavu airport into Bukavu. This was a 35km ride that took almost 3 hours, and we encountered three military checkpoints manned by the CNDP.² On another occasion we had a flat tire and had to stop to have it changed. In this case, many Congolese welcomed us warmly and my deep understanding of the conflict and the people were of great assistance. In particular, the people appreciated my ability to engage them and to ask questions that were meaningful to them.

In addition, another key challenge came from the emotions that would often arise after meeting former child soldiers or seeing rehabilitation programs and transit centers. We visited a *Centre de Transit d’Orientation* in Goma where there were 85 children who had been demobilized within the last month. I had very little idea what to expect as we walked through the doors of the Centre. However, I was struck by that as I made my way to greet each child one-by-one, each one seemed desperate for some human contact. I saw my own children’s eyes in many of their eyes and had to take a moment to turn away as tears began to well up. That evening, my colleague and I were in need of decompression and we both broke out in tears as we discussed how many of these boys would soon be returning to a life of insecurity, poverty, and uncertainty. Researching

1 The Mayi-Mayi is the name of a local armed group that emerged as a response to the violence in the Eastern DRC to protect their villages.

2 The *Congrès national pour la défense du peuple* (CNDP) is another armed group operating in the region.

such a matter, it is difficult to always remain impartial or unemotional; however, I think we need to recognize our human side, as this is often what drives our desire to conduct such work.

Ethically there were many challenges to conducting research in the DRC, and especially in the case of child soldier recruitment. However, one clear difficulty is the reliance on institutions and organizations for logistics and assistance that you also want to be able to critique. It is difficult not to have views on the performance of MONUC in the DRC; yet at the same time you come to understand the complexities of their mission far more by talking and visiting with them in the country. Consequently, remaining balanced in your viewpoints and analysis is always a challenge.

Another key challenge was a lack of hard data that could be accessed. For example, record keeping for the number of child soldiers or for those who have been demobilized or rehabilitated was almost non-existent. When it did exist, it was in the form of a hand-written note. As a result, the successes or failures of such efforts are nearly impossible to measure. You are thus left with impressions and possibilities for more work before you can even begin to develop a coherent analysis of your original research questions.

Conducting research in the DRC, particularly the East, will always present multiple challenges. It is possible to do meaningful work, though it requires adequate preparation and flexibility. One needs to be prepared to adjust constantly and not be frustrated by rigid timelines. We are pleased that we made key contacts on the ground, discovered many gaps in knowledge and data collection, and found partners with whom we are maintaining relationships for future field work. In 2011 we will return to the Eastern DRC for phase two of our work; our initial ground-work has certainly helped prepare us for the challenges ahead. It is imperative that researchers continue to explore conflict and post-conflict zones and that this research is socially responsible.