

CAAFAG ASSESSMENT REPORT



Danish Refugee Council

Southwest Region, CAMEROON

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List of Abbreviations

BHA	Bureau for Humanitarian Affairs
CAAFAG	Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups
CBPC	Community Based Protection Mechanism
CDCS	French Crisis Support Center (Centre de crise et de soutien)
CFS	Child Friendly Space
CP Task Force	Child Protection Task Force
CP	Child Protection
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration
DRC	Danish Refugee Council
ECHO	European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations
FGD	Focused Group Discussion
ILO	International Labor Organization
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
KII	Key Informant Interview
MINAS	Ministry of Social Affairs
NSAGs	Non-State Armed Groups
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
SRHR	Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
SSF	State Security Forces

Summary

The anglophone regions of Cameroon have, since 2016, witnessed a socio-political crisis which has deteriorated overtime, affecting over 2 million people (628,000 internally displaced persons and 420,000 returnees)¹. Marked by massive displacement and disruption of education, children in these regions have been exposed to various forms of violence and exploitation, association and use by state and non-state armed groups which negatively affects their wellbeing and development. The recruitment of children, including girls, is often considered by the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action as forced, coerced, manipulated or “voluntary,” although the distinction has no legal significance and recruitment remains unlawful for minors, regardless of the process.

The overall objective of this assessment was to assess the incidence of child recruitment, with a focus on the factors that trigger and sustain association, release and reintegration. The specific objectives are to assess factors that ranged from those that triggered children’s association, the different forms of association and available community structures and their role in prevention, release and reintegration of children formerly associated. The report utilized the mixed method approach, leveraging on the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative tools and analysis. The data sources were mainly primary (KIs and FGDs) and secondary (desk review).

Findings from the assessment informs DRC’s comprehensive strategies to identify boys and girls associated with armed forces and armed groups, strengthen community structures (child protection task force, traditional councils, child friendly spaces, adolescent life skill clubs, and foster parents) to prevent recruitment, encourage release and facilitate reintegration as well as reinforcing the capacities of parents and caregivers to effectively support and care for children in this category.

A key lesson learned/major recommendation will inform the developing of a comprehensive programming for children associated with armed groups. The programming will be achieved by leveraging on the services provided by partners and community structures (through capacity strengthen and continuous advocacy) and complementing psychosocial support programs (CFSs and Life skill) with more tangible hard skills that will focus on skills acquisition and youth economic empowerment.

1. Introduction and General Overview

Conflict disproportionately affects women and children. In many conflict-affected areas, children form up to half of the population, and girls and boys are frequently illegally recruited into armed forces and groups,². Over the last four years, escalating violence and attacks against civilians and children in the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon have forced many families to flee from their homes, putting children and young people at risk of injury and disability, physical and sexual violence, psychosocial distress, separation from families, recruitment, and various forms of association with armed groups and armed forces.

The prevailing social conditions in the Northwest and Southwest (community violence, poverty, the absence of schools and support structures, separation of families and the emergence of unaccompanied and internally displaced children), increases the likelihood of children’s association and recruitment into armed forces and armed groups. Children who are without their parents, because of death or displacement, are more vulnerable than those living with their families, and at greater risk of recruitment into these armed forces or armed groups. Children are most vulnerable to recruitment because, they can

¹ OCHA situation report, FEB 2023.2

² ICRC, 2012

be easily manipulated, are not fully aware of the dangers and have undeveloped notions of right and wrong.

1.1. International legal framework

The recruitment and use of children by armed forces and armed groups is prohibited by international human rights law, the international criminal law³ and international humanitarian law, Children are indeed covered by the fundamental guarantees for persons not taking direct part in the hostilities (Art. 3 common to the GC and Art. 4 APII).

International Human Rights Law, particularly the Convention on the Rights of the Child, provides the core principles for always protecting the rights of all children, more specifically it prohibits the recruitment and the participation in conflict of children of less than 15 years of age. It lays down State obligations in several areas which are of direct relevance to children recruited by armed forces or at risk thereof. These include the protection of separated and unaccompanied children; the recovery and social reintegration of children victim of neglect, exploitation or abuse, torture, ill treatment, or punishment, as well as of armed conflicts; children's right to education; the prohibition of torture and the unlawful or arbitrary deprivation of liberty; and treatment under the juvenile justice system.

The ILO Convention No. 182 on the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour defines children as under 18 years and refers to forced and compulsory recruitment of children in armed conflict as one of the worst forms of child labour. An Optional Protocol to the CRC on the involvement of children in armed conflict was adopted in the year 2000 (ratified by Cameroon on the 4th February 2013) which raised the minimum age for direct participation in hostilities and compulsory recruitment to 18 years, urging armed groups not to recruit or use children under the age of 18 and calling on State Parties to take all feasible measures to criminalize such practices. This Optional Protocol builds on the 1999 African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child which prohibits all recruitment of children under age 18, forced or voluntary, by armed groups and armed forces. The charter is the only regional treaty in the world which addresses the issue of child soldiers. It defines a child as anyone below 18 years of age without exception and charges States to ensure that no child takes direct part in hostilities and to refrain from recruiting any child.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child requires States Parties to:

- "Take all feasible measures to ensure that persons who have not attained the age of fifteen years do not take a direct part in hostilities" (Article 38/2); and
- "Refrain from recruiting any person who has not attained the age of fifteen years into their armed forces. In recruiting among those persons who have attained the age of fifteen years but have not attained the age of eighteen years, States Parties shall endeavor to give priority to those who are oldest" (Article 38/3).

The protection of human rights in general and of children is framed in Cameroon by a legal arsenal consisting of protocols, ratified charters and international conventions, national laws, and regulations. This implies that, Cameroon is legally bound to the international laws protecting children from various forms of recruitment and association with armed groups and armed forces. In Cameroon, the international laws and treaties ratified by the state override the national laws.⁴

The preamble of Law No. 06 of 18 January 1996 amending the 1972 Constitution states that "**the human being without distinction of race, religion, sex or creed possesses sacred inalienable rights.**" In it is also

³ Paris Principle (2022-Revised)

⁴ Constitution of Cameroon art. 45.

found Cameroon's commitment to fundamental freedoms enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UN Charter, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and all related and duly ratified international conventions. At the international level, Cameroon has ratified the following relevant treaties:

- The Convention on the Rights of the Child, date of ratification 11 January 1993;
- The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, date of ratification 05 September 1997;
- Convention No. 138 of the ILO Minimum Age for Admission to Employment, date of ratification 13 August 2001;
- Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour, date of ratification 5 June 2002;
- The Optional Protocol to the CRC Protocol of 25 May 2000 on the involvement of children in armed conflict, instrument of accession dated February 4, 2013;

1.2. National legal framework

At the national level, the Cameroon government have legislative and regulatory measures critical to the implementation of children's rights, and initiated procedures which are at a very advanced stage. These measures are:

- The Penal Code in which the protection of children's rights is evident, particularly in the provisions of Articles 29, 39 al.6, 48, 80, 179 (custody of a minor), 340 (infanticide), 341 (attack on descendants), 342 (slavery and pawning) 198 paragraph 1 (b) and (c) (banned publications) and 337 and following articles that deal with the child and family.
- The adoption of Law No. 2005/007 / of 27 July 2005 on the Criminal Procedure Code, which has many favorable provisions for the child who commits or is victim of an offense.
- The adoption of Law No. 2011/024 of 14/12/2011 on the fight against the traffic and trade of persons, repealing Law No. 2005/015 of 29/12/2005 on the fight against the traffic and trade of children.
- Decree No. 2011/408 of 09/12/2011 on the organization of Government, establishing several departments in charge of the promotion and protection of children's rights. These are, for example, the Ministry of Social Affairs (social protection of the child), the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and the Family (promotion of children's rights), the Ministry of Basic Education (teaching Nursery and General Primary), the Ministry of Secondary Education (technical and general education), the Ministry of Public Health (Prevention and health care to the mother and child), the Ministry of Youth and Education Civic (promotion of leisure and post and extracurricular activities, etc.).
- The Labor Code and regulatory acts relating to labor from which children are prohibited.
- Decree No. 90-524 of 23 March 1990 established a National Commission for Juvenile Delinquents, Abandoned Children, or those in Moral Danger

Even though Cameroon is a signatory to these International, regional and national laws/treaties protecting children, it has been observed that the government arrest children (mostly adolescents) for alleged/suspected involvement with non-state armed groups in different capacities and forms with little or no evidence nor access to justice while in detention.

Since late 2019, DRC supports the protection of children and families affected by the armed conflict in the Southwest Region including girls and boys associated with armed forces and armed groups. In an effort to better understand the context, the needs and risk (individual, family community and societal risk factors), and identify potential community prevention reporting and response strategy, DRC engaged in a needs

assessment to generate both qualitative and quantitative to support its intervention/response in the Southwest Region.

2. OBJECTIVES

2.1 General Objective

The general objective was to conduct a comprehensive assessment to contribute to the understanding of the specific needs and experiences of Children Associated with Armed Groups and Armed forces (with a focus on the factors that trigger and sustain association) and community-based strategies for prevention and response (with a focus on the factors that trigger release and reintegration).

2.2 Specific Objectives

- To understand the different forms of child association prevalent in the communities
- To understand the factors that trigger and sustain association
- To understand the specific child protection needs of CAAFAGs.
- To understand factors that trigger release and reintegration
- To identify community-based strategies to report and prevent cases of CAAFAG with attention to safety and Best Interest of the Child practices.
- To generate evidence-based data for advocacy and effective response.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Secondary data

The assessment utilized prior studies (UNOCHA SITREPs, ARC resource Pac-Module 7 and USAID/IRC desk review on CAAFAG) and internal assessment reports (protection monitoring reports, positive parenting assessments etc.) to complement the primary data generated from the KIIs and FGDs. The data collection tools were KIIs and FGD guides contextualized from the CAAFAG Program Development Toolkit⁵

3.2 Sampling and selection of sites for data collection

DRC used the purposive sampling technique in order to target the most affected populations and those considered knowledgeable/safe to talk about issues affecting children associated with armed groups and armed forces in hard-to-reach communities with high prevalence rate of child association/recruitment. Of the 6 locations that were targeted, all the communities had children (including adolescents), IDP population, returnees, and host communities. DRC prioritized high risk areas which are considered most volatile and thrive to balance between rural and peri-urban communities for better representation. The team reached 36 persons for the KIIs and conducted 2 FGD per community (adult-facilitators and CP Task Force members, and adolescent boys and adolescent girls).

3.4 Key Informant Interviews

Facilitators, members of CP Task force and CBPC members formed the sample for the KII. The key informant interviews were conducted to understand the perspective of people working directly with children, who also have mastery and broad information on the risk and perceived experiences of children associated with armed groups and the context of the crisis.

⁵ CAAFAG Programme Development Toolkit | Guidelines

3.5 Focus Group Discussions

Focus group discussion with children and adults (facilitators and members of the CP Task Force) was used to complement the data generated from the KIIs. The FGD sessions gave room for in-depth experience sharing and enabled DRC to capture the views of children who are the subject matter of the assessment.

3.6 Data Management and Analysis

Data from the KII was uploaded directly into the kobo collect tool which was designed for the assessment, the cleaning and analysis was supported by DRCs MEAL Team. The data was collected by the Child Protection Team in the Southwest (a team of 5 people). Prior to the assessment, the team had a working session to gain mastery of the objectives and assessment tools. Data collected from the FGD sessions were transcribed and analyzed in themes (thematic analysis) while data from KIIs was analyzed based on the frequency rate of KI's responses. Possible bias from the KI's data was mitigated by direct observations, FGDs and secondary data reviewed during the assessment.

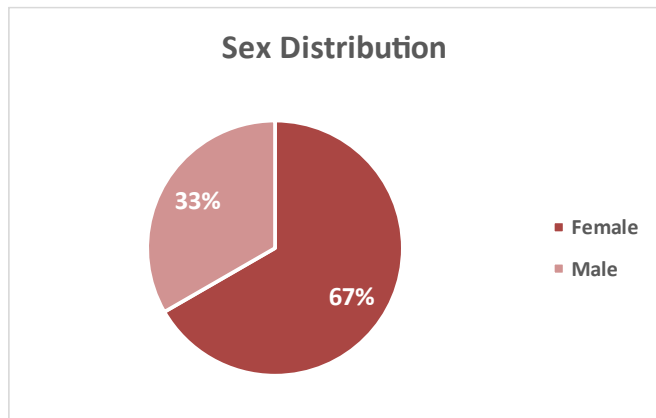
4. Ethical Considerations and Safeguarding

The study followed a robust ethical approach and put systems in place to ensure the highest standards were adhered to at all times. Given that the context is still very volatile and issues around CAAFAGs are sensitive, DRC worked with trusted facilitators and CBPC members, parents and caregivers who have attended at least 3 positive parenting sessions and adolescents participating in life skill sessions who understand DRC's mission and the work done in the community. In each community, DRC staff explained the objectives of the research, procedure for conducting the FGDs and KIIs and obtained consent from the participants. The participants were also separated by age and gender for safety concerns during the FGD sessions. Adolescents who could not share their personal experiences (for sensitive topics) during the group sessions were encouraged to have individual sessions with the staff where PSS were administered following their needs.

Research limitations include issues of security and access that restricted the locations the research team was able to reach. For example, it was not possible to conduct FGDs in Owe due to the high level of insecurity, so the team leveraged on the KIIs with facilitators and parents. Furthermore, finding respondents who were formerly associated with armed groups proved difficult since children are still actively involved, hence the category of children included in the study was limited to adolescents participating in DRCs Child Friendly Space activities and Life skill sessions.

5. Presentation of Findings

5.1 Demographic characteristics disaggregated by gender and displacement status

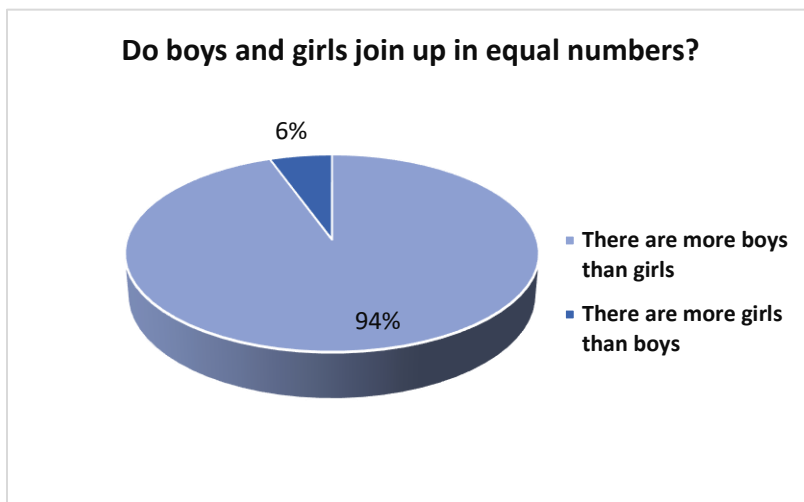


For the KIIs, the team reached out to 36 participants.

Females made 67% (of this total, 42% were IDPs, 38% were from the host communities and 21% were returnees) of the total sample population, while males made up 33% of the total sample population (44% IDPs, 33% from the host communities and 22% returnees).

Data from the field revealed that there were more boys associated with armed groups and armed forces than girls. The association of

adolescent girls ('voluntary or forced') is a noticeable phenomenon in this context, even though their experiences (reasons for association, power relations within the armed groups, how communities perceive them) varies significantly from the boys. Adolescent girls tend to participate in more reproductive and caregiving roles, a reflection of the prevailing patriarchal system that exist in the context. This gendered power dynamics however limits girls' ability to agree or refuse association and also affects the extent of their participation.



About the possibility of girls leaving their partners, data from the FGD suggested that girls associated with armed groups especially as "intimate partners" do not see leaving as an option because of the threat of violence that they and their families will be exposed to. One outstanding characteristic about marriages between adolescent girls and NSAGs is the fact that no dowry is paid to the girl's family. Notes from the FGD sessions revealed that, parents do

not have the "honor" of giving their daughters in marriage or receiving a "dowry" or any form of compensation. One of the participants recounted that:

"...the boys do not ask the opinions of parents when they want their daughter, they take the girls they want and no one has the ability to confront them given the power they have in the communities." Male parent, Owe.

The experiences of girls in armed groups are therefore characterized by compromised SRHR, new social status (though closely linked to the status of the men in their lives), difficulty marrying after the death of the partners. Notes from the FGD sessions revealed that, adolescent girls married to soldiers are often faced with restricted/limited interaction since their exposure can increase the likelihood of their partners being found by the SARs.

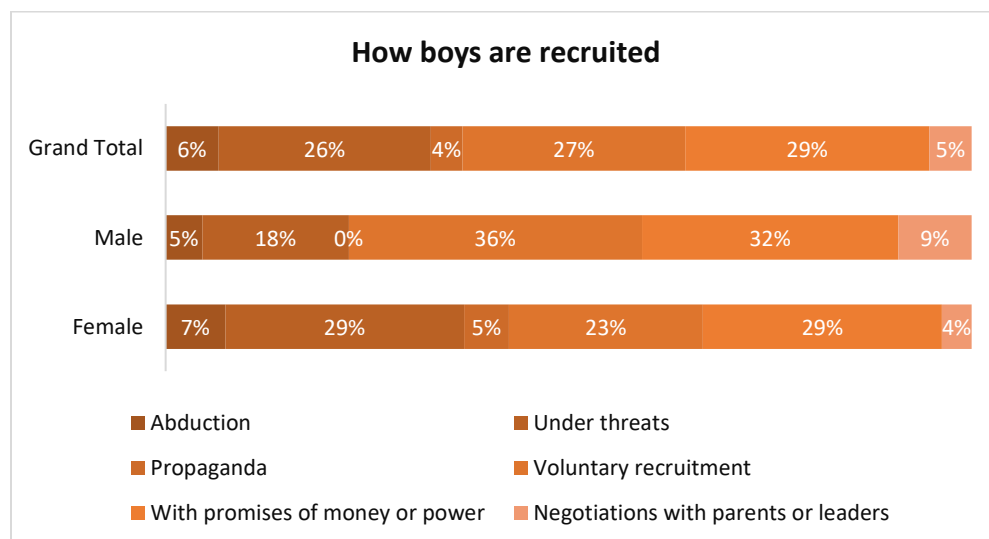
5.2 Forms of Recruitment/Associations

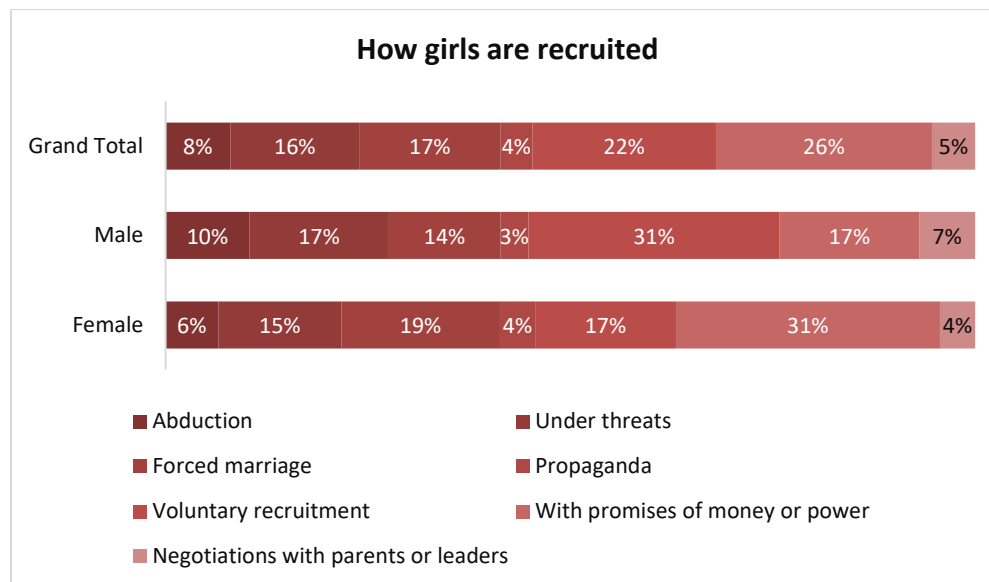
The most prevalent forms of recruitment for adolescent girls in this context are promise of power/money according to the 26% of the responses collected during -FGDs and KII -and voluntary enlistment reported at 22%. Similarly for boys, the promise of power and money stood at 29% while voluntary enlistment was reported at 27%. It is interesting to note that male respondents and female respondents have opposite perception about how girls are recruited especially regarding reasons as ‘voluntary’ recruitment, promises of money or power, and forced marriage.

A part of the figures (22%) present child recruitment as ‘voluntary’. It is however difficult to ascertain when recruitment is purely voluntary, because a child’s decision to join or associate with armed groups is often because of lack of safe alternatives, coercion and other associated risk factors that will be addressed in the paragraphs below.

On the other hand, recognizing the agency of children (children’s individual right to decide) to choose whether to belong or be associated with armed groups is important because positions them as active participants in the decisions that concerns them. This will and personal agency, if harnessed, could be promising to determine the success of reintegration programs.

Forced marriage as a means of recruitment for adolescent girls was reported by 17% of the responses of the KII. For the total of participants of the – survey, personal threats were the reason for recruitment reported by 16% of the responses. Moreover, abduction, negotiations with families, and propaganda were reported by 8%, 5% and 4% respectively.

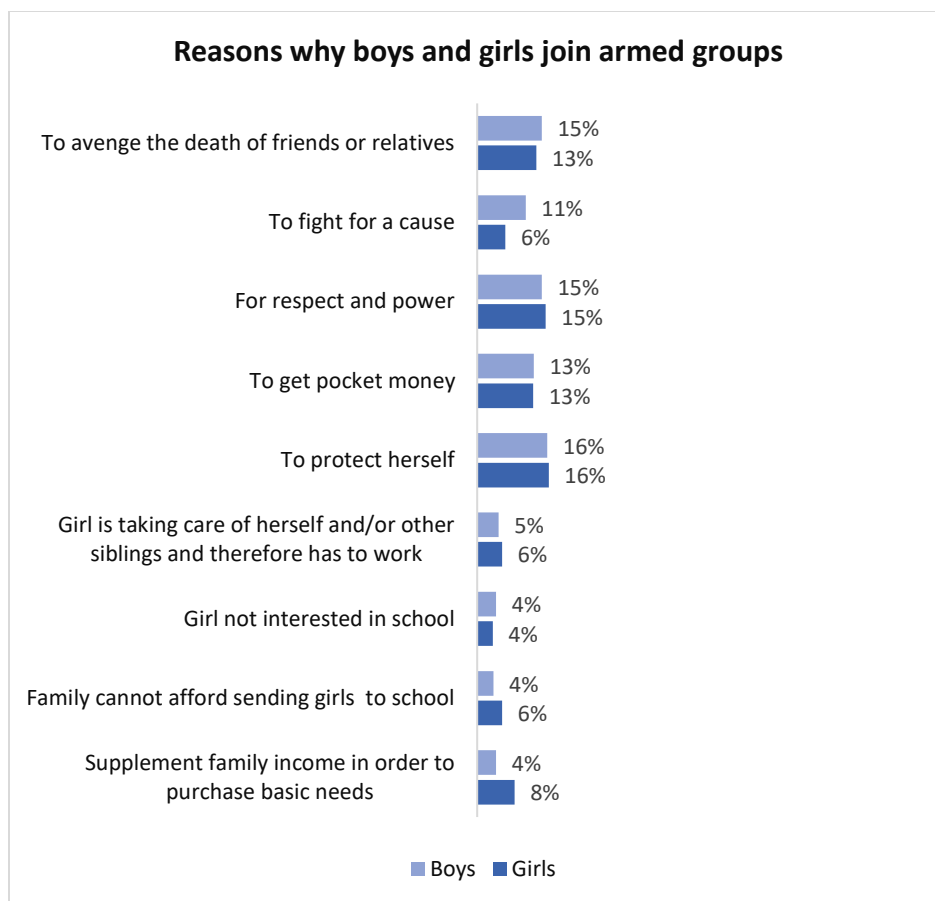




The means of recruitment for boys were similar to the ones used for girls, they however differ in the extent and likelihood. The most reported means of recruitment for boys was promise of power and money reported at 29%, this was closely followed by voluntary enlistment reported at 27%. The use of threats as a means of recruitment for boys was reported at 26% (contrary to the use of threats for girls which was reported at 16%). The use of abduction was reported at 6% while negotiations with parents and propaganda was reported at 4%. School closure and lack of alternative sources of livelihood increases children's vulnerability to association especially when NSAGs offers them money and makes promises of giving them positions of power within the structure. Negotiations with parents and leaders was also reported as modality for recruitment, this occurs when parents and community leaders give direct consent for the enlistment of children. It is common amongst parents/leaders who share the same ideology/course with the NSAGs, they tend to interpret these actions as “honorable”.

5.3 Risk Factors for Association

No one factor can determine children’s association; rather a variety of factors (both voluntary and coercive) account for children’s association with armed groups and armed forces. Data from the field revealed that (as seen on the graph below), children especially adolescent boys and girls associate with armed groups for the following range of factors in an effort to guarantee for themselves security, safety and economic empowerment.



5.3.1 Protection

The most reported reason for children’s association with armed groups was for protection, reported at 16% of the KIIs responses. Given the breakdown in social and traditional structures, the prevailing insecurity sustained by consistent military invasion of communities and the targeting of boys as terrorist, children tend to join NSAGs to gain protection. The need for physical protection is therefore a key risk factor for children’s association with armed groups. Notes from the FGD sessions suggested that children who are most vulnerable to association as a means of protection are adolescent boys who are out of school. An adolescent in Owe reported that:

“... being a boy makes you a target by the military as they think all boys are part of the NSAGs, they do not believe that you can be living in the village without being part of the “boys”, so sometimes they arrest innocent boys on the premise that they are fighters. To be protected, boys my age will join the group only to serve them and run errands.” Male Adolescent, Owe community.

As for girls, adolescent girls living alone or those who lost their parents during the crisis were reported to be at risk of association as a means of protection. The third category of adolescents most at risk of association as a means of protection were adolescent boys and girls whose parents are unable to send them to safer towns either for safety, vocational training, or education. By displacement status, unaccompanied internally displaced children were thought to be most vulnerable to association as a means of protection, this was followed by internally displaced separated children living with extended relatives and children from host communities.

5.3.2 For Power and Respect

Children associating with NSAGs for the purpose of power and respect was reported at 15% of the KII responses. Following the breakdown in traditional and social structures, NSAGs have taken control over most rural communities. Notes from the FGD sessions revealed that in some communities, NSAGs have established their authority extending from social control (through their courts), taxation and community leadership. Hence belonging to the group is a new form of social and economic capital. This makes it very attractive to adolescents and youths who joined to gain a measure of respect and power in the community. An adolescent boy participating in DRC's CFS workshop highlighted that:

"... when you are part of the "boys", people respect you. Even your parents and everyone in the community treats and responds to you with respect. When you join them, you can get access to anything that you need especially food and money. People become so afraid of you because they know that you can harm them. Sometimes the respect extends to family members of the boys". Male adolescent. Ikata.

For adolescent girls, the respect and power they get from associating with NSAGs comes from the rank of their male partners. Stories of female fighters and the respect accorded to them also serve as a pull factor for adolescent girls who wish to participate not just in reproductive roles but combatant roles. This sense of power, authority that adolescent feels being part of the group and the acquisition of a new social status and social recognition (as a fighter or a fighter's wife) is a major contributing factor for children's association with armed groups.

5.3.3 Education

A particularly worrisome and peculiar feature of the socio-political crises in the NW and SW region is the politicization of education⁶. Since 2017, the nonstate armed groups (NSAGs) instituted a no-school policy to pressure the government to acquiesce to their political demands (Solidarity and Development Initiative, 2021). Through a host of school boycott/disruption strategies, 80 per cent of schools have been closed or destroyed, affecting close to a million children (Solidarity and Development Initiative, 2021). These education disruptions are even more acute in the rural and peri-urban areas of the regions where the separatist fighters have gained quasi complete control (ibid). As the conflict intensify, several abandoned school facilities especially in hotspots now served as centres for encampment of armed groups and state security forces. Several attempts by the Government of Cameroon to enforce a return to school have been distorted by the institutionalized phenomenon of 'ghost town' or shutdowns whereby people stayed at home involuntarily or the burning of school facilities and the harassment, brutalization, kidnapping for ransom and killing of students and teachers by the NSAGs (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2021). Similarly, attempts to implement community schools by the separatist fighters or the instauration of safe learning spaces by UNESCO and other humanitarian organizations have been thwarted by the government (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2021). As a result of violence and these disruptions, most families have moved to urban areas in the conflict zones or to the West, Littoral, Centre regions of the country that are relatively peaceful for educational pursuits (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

Another contributing factor to children's limited access to education is parental loss of livelihood and poverty. Most parents in these communities lost their sources of livelihood in the course of the crisis. This loss was either because of destruction or limited access to cocoa farms due to high levels of insecurities. With these economic challenges, parents are unable to send their children to more stable towns for education or vocational training.

⁶ Uwem et al. 2019

The lack of educational opportunities increases children’s vulnerability to the different forms of association. In addition to this, limited opportunities for vocational training and apprenticeships are also a contributing factor. Data from the FGDs revealed military invasion of communities led to the destruction (burning) of pre-existing vocational centres and other forms of trade and apprenticeship opportunities, hence children who have been out of school and desires to learn a skill or a trade will have to move to more stable towns to get access to such services. One of the participants mentioned that:

“... in Owe, we do not have tailoring workshops nor big salons that can train adolescent girls on hairdressing, if we have to learn, we either go to Muyuka or to Buea” Female Adolescent, Owe.

5.3.4 Poverty and family structure

Here, we will consider how parental loss of livelihood serves as a pull factor for children’s association with armed groups and armed force. Parents and caregivers have lost their jobs and sources of livelihood in the course of the crisis forcing many households to expose and support their children’s association with armed groups. These changes within families leads to parental stress and hence negative parenting outcomes (little or no parental supervision, parents engaging in negative coping mechanisms, child abuse and child neglect) and the disrupt of the overall development and wellbeing of children. Notes from the FGD sessions revealed that, when parents are unable to take care of their households, adolescents are forced to take over caregiving roles to be able to take care of themselves (captured as desire for pocket money 13%), take care of their siblings and supplement family income for the purchase of basic needs. With little or no economic empowerment and employment opportunities, adolescents tend to join or associate with NASGs for financial support. An adolescent girl reported that:

“... As adolescents, we have needs. We need to buy sanitary pads monthly, buy clothes and our body lotion, sometimes the body lotion we buy, everyone at home gets to use it. My parents are unable to give us these basic needs as they have not been able to access our cocoa farm since the crisis started. The boys always have enough and takes care of their women.” Female Adolescent. Ikata.

Poverty has both direct and indirect consequences on the recruitment of children. Because of poverty, children are unable to get access to formal education nor vocational training, which increases their vulnerability to being recruited. Poverty (the preoccupation to support themselves and their families) is therefore a major driver for child recruitment.

In line with family structures, separation from primary caregivers because of the crisis, living with elderly/vulnerable caregivers and abusive family situations were highlighted during the FGD sessions as factors that increases children’s vulnerability to recruitment. One of the participants of the FGD sessions recounted that;

“... children who are leaving with their extended relatives and facing maltreatment have high chances of joining. Sometimes when an act of maltreatment is reported to the boys, they discipline the caregiver and sometimes take the children into their care. When the child is with them, especially for boys, they start running errands, doing things for them etc.” Adult Male, Ikata.

There is therefore a relation between abusive family situations (physical, psychological and sexual abuse) with children’s decision to join armed groups. This data complements the findings of DRC’s Child protection annual report which highlighted that, internally displaced UASCs were most vulnerable to child maltreatment (48%) in comparison with children from the host communities (8%). Amongst the children most affected by child maltreatment, boys (23%) were more vulnerable than girls (20%)

The association of older siblings was also a major factor highlighted during the FGD sessions. The involvement of family members (parents and older siblings) has a significant impact on children's recruitment. Children tend to take up helper roles like washing, run errands, transport items, security checks (checking military checkpoints) etc. Some parents who are NSAGs encourages their children to join in order to promote an ideology/course they believe in and hold dear.

5.3.5 Desire for Revenge

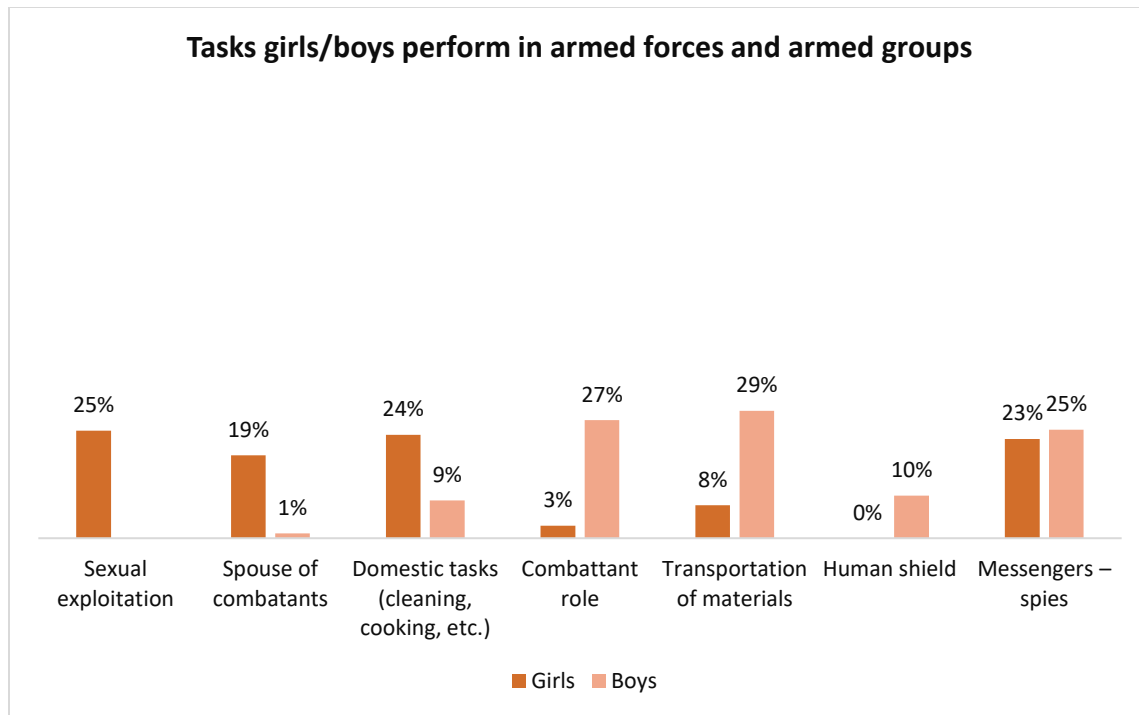
The desire to avenge the death of friends and relatives was reported by 15% of the KIIs responses. Children especially adolescents' boys may join armed groups in an effort to revenge a loss they have suffered. According to experiences shared during the FGD sessions, Children in this category are also motivated beyond revenge to protect their communities from subsequent attacks. It was also highlighted that, adolescents' girls who have been harassed by SSFs may join NSAGs to seek support, protection and empowerment to revenge for the abuse and also protect other women and girls from harassment. Recruitment is therefore perceived as means of regaining control over their lives.

6. Roles and responsibilities

Children associated with armed groups serve multiple roles, which covers different responsibilities and task and may also require different levels of physical and psychological involvement. In designing CAAFAG programs, it is important to pay attention to the roles and level of involvement to design activities that will meet the needs of the different categories of children. Children's roles can be direct (combatant roles) or indirect (support roles).

From the graph presented below with data coming from KIIs, girls are more involved in support roles (association as wives of soldiers 19%, sexual exploitation 25%, domestic task 24% and messengers reported at 23%). Boys on the other hand are more involved in frontline activities like combatants reported at 27%, transportation 29%, and human shield reported at 10%. Participants of the FGD sessions highlighted the following points to complement the KIIs on the different roles and responsibilities handled by children upon recruitment:

- The children are usually associated as spies, messengers, and informants.
- Children transport materials for them. This is often for younger adolescents between 10 and 13 since they look innocent and cannot be suspected by the military.
- They serve as drivers (bike riders) during their missions or to transport women for them, this is because they are minors and its easy for them to cross check points.
- They send children to buy drugs for them.
- Children serve as cooks/cleaners (especially girls) who are sometime sexually abused since they stay in the same camp, while some of them are their girlfriends and wives.
- Health care assistants
- Advisers on security strategy monitoring the movement of the SSF to inform the NSAGs on what strategy to take at a particular time and place. They also work to monitor the presence and location of SSFs in the communities.
- They work as technicians; this is mostly done by adolescent boys who were engaged in technical education prior to the crisis.
- They work as middlemen between girls and combatants (NSAGs).



It can however be observed that, the roles played by boys and girls are rooted in pre-existing gender norms. While girls play more support roles (reproduction and caregiving), adolescent boys are pruned to more active and combatant roles which confirms their masculinity. Age, physical maturity and the level of “smartness” also has a great role to play on the level of participation and inclusion of boys and girls in the activities of the group.

7. DRC’s Response Strategies

7.1 Prevention and Response (Mainstreaming CAAFAG in ongoing activities).

Life skills for adolescents’ girls and boys

Life skills is an essential intervention implemented by DRC for adolescents, it is used to complement child friendly space activities. DRC’s life skill sessions are designed to improve and strengthen the social and emotional capacities/skills of adolescent boys and girls (10-18) affected by the ongoing socio-political crisis. The curriculum is made up of 13 sessions, implemented across a span of 13 to 20 weeks (with intergenerational sessions and evaluation including). The curricula cover topics such as team building, leadership, decision making, communication, emotions, interpersonal skills, conflict management and sexual and reproductive health and rights. DRC’s life skill curriculum uses a creative and child/youth centered approach. The sessions are conducted through the use of creative and participatory exercises by trained DRC staff and community facilitators. The sessions engages the most vulnerable children (those considered at risk of joining non state armed groups and in need of additional support), like adolescents who are out of school, separated, unaccompanied and adolescents who are orphaned, adolescents engaged in worst forms of child labor, adolescents who are married or child parents, and adolescents who are survivors of SGBV, adolescents who are associated with armed groups carefully selected by Child Friendly Space facilitators, Child Protection Task Force Members and CBPC members. These life skill sessions have proven to provide safe spaces for adolescents especially girls and at-risk children

(unaccompanied children and children associated with armed groups) where they can safely and confidentially participate in activities and receive assistance where necessary and build resilience. DRC identified CAAFAGs from the life skill sessions and supported them with Individual Personal Assistance, conversations were also held with their parents and caregivers to provide them with options, this was however challenging since these communities are still in active hostilities and the children/families do not have other safe alternatives.

Community members were of the opinion that DRC complements the life skill sessions with vocational training and other forms of apprenticeships as this will increase their employment opportunities and reduce vulnerability to association and recruitment. One of the community members suggested that:

“... these children can no longer go back to school since they have experienced a lot of violence, if they have opportunities to learn a trade, it will help them to have a tangible source of livelihood since most of them are attracted to the armed groups for financial support and economic empowerment” Male Community Leader, Ikata.

Some of the common vocational trainings suggested by community members included tailoring, hair dressing, mechanic, and iron work etc. To complement these life skill sessions, DRC also organized parents and caregivers meeting sessions, targeting parents and caregivers of identified CAAFAGs, UASCs and other at-risk children.

Positive Parenting Sessions for Parents and Caregivers

Families have been greatly destabilized because of the crisis. In the southwest, families have experienced multiple displacements, loss in terms of death and destruction of properties and other forms of violence and harm to their mental health which greatly affects their ability to parent weakening the protective environment around children. Acknowledging the role that parents and families play in children's recruitment and association, DRC organized positive parenting sessions (3 per community) for parents and caregivers in the communities, strengthening their skills and knowledge on topics related to child development, understanding the psychosocial impact of crisis on children especially adolescents, child protection, child supervision, parent and stress management, positive parenting, and positive discipline.

To respond to the specific needs of children associated with armed groups and armed forces, DRC organized a parents and caregivers meeting with parents and caregivers of children in these categories, identified in the life skill workshops and referred by community facilitators and CBPC members. 100 parents and caregivers were reached using the “Growing Together-A Parenting program to support the reintegration of children and prevent their recruitment” by IRC/USAID/The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action. DRC used an indirect approach due to the sensitivity of the topic by working with parents to understand how crisis/violence affects the general (physical, mental and developmental) wellbeing of children, using games, roles plays and group exercises. The sessions also focused on children at-risk, the challenging roles of parents as caregivers and parents of UASCs and CAAFAGs, gender specific needs of UASCs and CAAFAGs, parent-child relationships and selfcare for parents.

Strengthening the Capacities of Community Based Mechanisms to Prevent and Respond to Child Recruitment:

Through DRC's community centered approach and the recognition that community structures (formal and non-formal) play a vital role in preventing and responding to child recruitment, the team identified and strengthened the capacities of 28 Child Protection Task Force with funding from BHA/USAID covering 14 communities, ECHO/SDC in 10 communities and CDCS covering 4 communities in the Southwest Region. Members of the task force (5 per community) were trained, supported, and commissioned to conduct

activities aimed at preventing and responding to child recruitment and other forms of child protection concerns in their communities. The CP Task force consist of community leaders, women leaders, parents and caregivers and religious leaders. They were trained on child protection in emergencies, DRC's code of conduct and safeguarding policy, communicating with children and communities, mobilizing the community to protect children, how to identify and safely refer children, sensitization and awareness raising techniques and reporting. DRC through the Child Protection Team provided regular coaching and supported the task force with materials and airtime to enable them conduct awareness sessions and refer children at risk.

Awareness Sessions and Community Dialogue with Stakeholders.

As part of DRC's implementation strategy, CAAFAG was mainstreamed during awareness sessions in communities. DRC supported Child Friendly Space Facilitators, CBPC members and Child Protection Task Force members to engage communities in awareness raising sessions at the level of the communities, targeting markets, churches, and other community centers. For the purpose of safety and security children in this category will be referred to as high-risk children. This appellation is most suitable as parents already identified/described them as troubled adolescents during the FGD sessions on positive parenting. During awareness sessions, the facilitators shared on the impact of conflict and violence on the wellbeing of a child, child abuse child labor and how to care for and protect children affected by the ongoing crisis. Dialogue sessions were organized with members of the Child Protection Task Force (which consist of community leaders, women leaders and youth/religious leaders). These sessions focused on exploring the risk that children exposed to violence were exposed to, what and how communities can do to protect children from experiencing violence and how they can safely refer those that are already affected. Through these sessions, other topical issues surrounding adolescent girls given to marriage to NSAGs for associated benefits were also addressed, the team consciously highlighted the risk that adolescents' girls are exposed to (biological, physical and psychological).

DRC, through the Child Protection Team works to ensure that, timely, safe and adequate responses are provided to identified and at-risk children. This is done through the establishment of child friendly space activities where children's psychosocial needs are met, provision of individual personal assistance, comprehensive and gender-sensitive case management responses and alternative care placement for unaccompanied children, children without appropriate care and CAAFAGs who are willing to relocate (this is often done in collaboration with the family members especially those considered as safe by the child).

8. Challenges and Recommendations.

8.1 Security concern

One of the most striking operational challenges in the Northwest and Southwest emergency Response is the volatile security situation. DRC targets hard to reach communities which are mostly characterized by hostilities where children are still very much involved and vulnerable to recruitment, in such communities, armed groups are in control and very active with frequent security incidents. This affects proper monitoring of child protection concerns and the eventual response.

As a recommendation, working with community/traditional structures to raise awareness on the impact of violence on children and dialogue sessions with parties to the conflict will go a long way in curbing child recruitment.

8.2 Perception of parents and caregiver

Data from the field revealed that parents support the association for various reasons. This is a major concern since the family is a major determinant of the success or failure of CAAFAG strategies. There is need for DRC and other partners to double efforts on positive parenting sessions, promoting livelihood and economic recovery activities for parents and caregivers to reduce the incidence of child recruitment for economic and financial reason; as reported above, children especially adolescents join armed groups to supplement family income and care for their younger siblings.

8.3 Government's policy towards CAAFAGs

Children associated with armed groups and armed forces are considered by the SSFs as terrorist/criminals. This explains why there are children detained for assumed/suspected association with armed groups. There is need for increased advocacy through dialogues and evidence-based research by the Child Protection Cluster and CHT with government stakeholders and line ministries. There is also need for capacity building sessions for SSFs on child protection and the rights of children in conflict as embedded in the UNCRC. Also, providing technical and operational support to line ministries responsible for child protection (MINAS) with the objective of strengthening formal child protection services will go a long way to protect children detained for presumed association with armed groups.

The Cameroon government recently created a demobilization and rehabilitation center for ex-combatants. However, the institution is not sensitive to the needs of children as child soldiers and adult ex-fighters are lodged in the same facility. This is a major safeguarding concern which needs to be addressed.

8.4 Funding priorities/lack of comprehensive response package for CAAFAGs

In the context of the ongoing crisis, there is inadequate financing and investment in CAAFAG programming which limits the organizations' ability to meet the needs of children associated with armed groups and their opportunity to return to normal life. There is need for the humanitarian community in Cameroon to intensify advocacy efforts with the donor community to prioritize CAAFAG/DDR programs, including research or assessments to gather evidence of factors that enable reintegration after release so as to feed into evidence-based programming.

8.5 SRHR for Adolescents Associated with Armed Groups and Those at-risk

SRHR (Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights) is an essential need for adolescents, especially adolescents' girls associated with armed groups and those at-risk of association. For adolescent girls, especially those associated with armed groups, access to sexual and reproductive health care and services is often limited, increasing the risk of unintended pregnancies, poor health outcomes and complications of pregnancy, disability and death. It is crucial that these children have access to comprehensive SRHR services and education, as they are at a heightened risk for sexual violence, exploitation, and abuse. Designing activities targeted towards improving access to knowledge and information on sexual and reproductive health, including how to prevent sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unintended pregnancies and "unhindered" access to contraceptives and other methods of family planning, which can help prevent the spread of STIs and reduce the risk of unintended pregnancies, Provision of counseling and support to children who have experienced sexual violence, abuse, or exploitation, which can help them cope with trauma and recover from these experiences. Given the prevailing stereotype around adolescents and the use of contraceptives, there is need to raise awareness amongst parents/caregivers and community leaders to improve on acceptance.



8.6 Coordination with ICRC

To strengthen family reunification for CAAFAGs that are separated from their primary caregivers and other UASC at risk of recruitment that are separated from family members, there is need for DRC and other partners to work closely with ICRC. The coordination should include capacity building sessions for partners working with children, working sessions on identifying context specific and safe reunification channels that can be strengthen and use to facilitate reunification.