

# CASE STUDY

## Helping Child Soldiers Reintegrate

**USAID works through local partnerships to reach out to vulnerable, often-hidden groups.**



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*In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, USAID supported an NGO working to reintegrate girls and boys abducted or coerced into joining the armed forces.*

### **CHALLENGE**

The issues facing children abducted or coerced into joining armed forces are particularly difficult for the international community to address. Children are frequently left out of the formal disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration structure. They are also afraid of seeking outside help for fear of being identified as ex-combatants and held accountable by their communities for atrocities committed during the conflict. During 10 years of conflict in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), armed groups abducted many girls and boys under the age of 18 and forced them to work with fighting forces. Female abductees were forced into marriage or sexual slavery and faced high levels of gender-based violence. Upon leaving — whether through escape or voluntary release by armed groups — and returning to their communities, these girls faced enormous challenges. Ostracized by their families or distrusted by the community at large, many tried to hide rather than seek help.

### **INITIATIVE**

Reintegration programs need to address the challenges openly with communities. In the DRC, USAID supported COOPI, an Italian NGO working in Ituri district, to assist and reintegrate abducted boys and girls, along with children conceived by abducted girls during their time with the fighting forces. The project used many innovative methods to reintegrate victims into their communities safely and prevent future abduction, trafficking, and sexual violence. An extensive communication campaign addressed discrimination directly through meetings with community leaders to change attitudes and door-to-door outreach to abducted girls. Through its support center, COOPI provided a comprehensive package of services to victims, including psychosocial counseling and support, health assistance, education and skills training, and social activities. Among the victims were the hard-to-reach — those in hiding, or those who self-demobilized and refused association with care programs for fear of being identified as ex-combatants. Attracted



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# Helping Child Soldiers Reintegrate *(Cont'd.)*

**Comprehensive services for victims included health assistance, skills training, counseling, and social activities.**

by social activities, they stayed on for other services, such as education and health support.

## **RESULTS**

The program reached often-hidden girls by working to change the behavior of communities toward abductees, reducing stigma and shame and helping victims improve their self-identification. Through social activities, workshops on discrimination, and dialogue with parents and neighbors, the program encouraged girls' participation in education and training. For victims and other women and girls at risk, COOPI provided psychosocial support and life skills training. Communities that once ostracized the abductees are now helping to protect them.

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