

Engaging Non-State Armed Groups Through Human Rights Education: Experience with Youth from Southern Philippines

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THE Southeast Asia Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers (SEASUCS) is a regional non-governmental organization (NGO) working to promote respect and ensure compliance with international and domestic child protection standards particularly on the prohibition of the recruitment and involvement of children in armed conflict. It has member-organizations from Indonesia, Burma, Thailand and the Philippines. SEASUCS undertakes research, advocacy and human rights education targeting government actors, non-state armed groups and civil society groups. Since 2002, SEASUCS has conducted several human rights education workshops in southern Philippines involving different groups such as activists, children, youth, women, and academics.

In this article I employ the cyclical process of praxis by looking back at my first-hand experiences of conducting human rights education and reflecting on the lessons learned. I focus on the added value of human rights education in the work of SEASUCS, and the contribution of the initiative in peace-building efforts in southern Philippines. I highlight lessons that can guide the conduct of future initiatives with non-state armed groups.

Engaging Non-state Armed Groups

The term non-state armed group (NSAG) is defined as groups that have weapons, use force to achieve its political and/or quasi-political objectives, and opposed to, or autonomous from, the state. They are also commonly being referred to as “rebel groups” or “armed opposition groups.” In the context of the Philippines, NSAGs do not operate in a vacuum rather they operate with the support of communities and sectors or groups. In some cases, NSAGs are considered as “de facto” government who are given a mandate by communities to exercise influence and control over certain areas. Given this conceptual understanding of NSAGs, any engagement process with them should involve communities or groups whose members may not necessarily be part of the armed groups but directly or indirectly support their cause and activities. Engaging these communities or groups is important because they can condone or defy practices of NSAGs, or facilitate or counter the process of changing their policies and practices.

Engaging NSAGs to ensure the non-recruitment, and/or secure the release, of child soldiers largely remains a new discourse. Many of the existing studies and literature focus on engagement with armed groups in peace processes (Chhabra, n.d.; Guinard, 2002; Hottinger, 2005; Lederach, 1997; Petrasek, 2005). They provide lessons that should be considered particularly in relation to the different objectives and methods of engagement.

There are two categories of engagement based on objectives: political engagement and humanitarian engagement. Political engagement connotes “efforts to persuade armed groups to negotiate a peaceful resolution of the armed conflict, including facilitating their participation in processes to this end” (Petrasek, 2005, 44). Humanitarian engagement on the other hand intends to persuade armed groups to respect human rights and humanitarian standards (Petrasek, 2005, 44; Bessler and McHugh, 2006, 5). Humanitarian engagement is useful in achieving the following goals: secure humanitarian access to those in need, secure agreement on operational mechanisms, ensure humanitarian workers’ safety and secure protection for vulnerable persons in conflict situations (Bessler and McHugh, 2006, 12).

While there are differences in terms of objectives, the lines are blurred between political and humanitarian engagements. From the perspective of peace building, these two approaches are seen as reinforcing. Achieving a situation of peace addresses perennial humanitarian concerns. On the other

hand, the people and communities affected by armed conflict require special attention and have special needs to be addressed while the process of peace building takes place.

The engagement process cited in this article can be considered as a humanitarian engagement because of its clear objectives: to raise awareness and ensure respect for and compliance with child rights laws; to create mechanisms to ensure the non-recruitment and use of child soldiers; to ensure the release of children from the ranks of the NSAGs; and to ensure support for programs on reintegration of children into a civilian environment.

Based on the experiences of civil society groups working on the issue of child soldiers in the Philippines, engagement takes place in various yet interrelated forms, namely:

- monitoring and documentation of the number of child soldiers and their specific cases
- dialogues or negotiations (usually low profile due to the sensitivity of the issue of child soldiers) with leaders or members of a NSAG¹
- advocacy through press releases and letters of appeal as methods in reaching NSAGs that are not accessible or willing to dialogue with civil society groups.

Another form of engagement entails awareness-raising and capacity building for members or communities or groups surrounding NSAGs. Three factors require this kind of engagement: preliminary dialogue with the NSAGs; certain level of confidence and openness with it; and support from local groups affiliated directly or indirectly with it.

Children's Involvement in Armed Conflict

As a party to the on-going conflict in southern Philippines, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) has been cited several times for violating human rights and International Humanitarian Law (IHL) standards. The involvement of children below eighteen years of age in the ranks of the MILF is one example.

According to Cagoco-Guiam (2002, 76), at least ten to thirty percent of children in a community influenced by a NSAG have volunteered or have been convinced to participate in its activities. This partly explains why children have been involved in the activities of the MILF.

A 2005 research that interviewed one hundred ninety-four current and former child soldiers from different NSAGs in the country shows a number

of reasons for the participation of children in the armed conflict. Most of their responses cited support for the political ideologies of the NSAG, religious conviction and belief, lack of options and uncertain future, and defense and protection of the family and community (PhilRights, 2005, 40). The respondents affiliated with the MILF expressed strong support for secessionist advocacy guided by the belief that the struggle for self-determination was their best offering to Allah (PhilRights, 2005, 77).

The research shows that the nature of children's involvement with NSAGs is highly voluntary. Other researches (Cagoco-Guiam, 2002 and Brett and Specht, 2004) support this claim.

Brett and Specht (2004), however, qualify their concept of voluntary involvement by questioning the degree of free choice the children have prior to their participation. They further add that the interplay of various factors such as militarization, the presence of armed conflict, poverty, lack of options, religion and culture pushed the children to be involved.

Children from Bangsamoro (Muslim) communities in Mindanao who might have voluntarily joined a NSAG also believed that doing so meant obeying Islamic teachings and fulfilling the responsibilities of a good Muslim laid down by their elders (Cagoco-Guiam, 2002, 75). Some of these children have parents who were *mujahideens* (freedom fighters) while some children believed that it was their religious and moral obligation to take part and help the adults in the community in their *jihad* or holy struggle to liberate their community from social injustices (Cagoco-Guiam 2002, 40).

In response to these researches and reports, the MILF issued a statement reiterating its policy concerning the involvement of children in armed conflict, to wit:

1. The general policy of the MILF is not to recruit children for conflict; if they are with the MILF, their roles are purely auxiliary in character;
2. The MILF is fully cognizant that the rightful place of children is in schools;
3. The MILF recognizes the right of everybody including children to self-defense especially when communities or villages are under indiscriminate military actions by the enemy; and
4. It is preferable that children, who are forsaken or those who have no reliable guardians, are taken cared of by the MILF rather than allow them to [become] misfits of society... (MILF reiterates policy on 'child soldiers,' 2006).

The Philippine government as well as various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) responded to the issue. The government established an Inter-agency Committee composed of lead government agencies such as the Department of Social Welfare and Development, the Department of National Defense, Office of the Presidential Adviser for the Peace Process, and some NGOs as well. This Committee was mandated to implement programs aimed at the demobilization, rehabilitation and reintegration of children involved in armed conflict. There were support services meant to help in the reintegration of the children into civilian life such as programs for education, livelihood, and temporary shelter for those who were separated from their families or communities or for those whose families or communities were involved in or affected by armed conflict.

On the prevention of recruitment and involvement of children, SEASUCS held low-profile dialogues with members and leaders of NSAGs. These dialogues led SEASUCS to realize that the information shared and the engagement in the dialogues was limited to the top leadership. As a result, SEASUCS modified its approach by employing human rights education as an alternative strategy.

Human Rights Education as a Strategy

On 2 to 5 May 2006, SEASUCS held a training workshop entitled “Trainer’s Training on HR and IHL for Bangsamoro Youth” at the Bangsamoro Development Academy, Cotabato City, Philippines. The workshop was organized in cooperation with international organizations such as Geneva Call and local organizations, namely, the Center for Muslim Youth Studies and the Institute for Bangsamoro Studies.

This workshop served as a follow-up activity to a previous workshop on human rights, IHL and child protection involving members of the MILF. The previous workshop took place on 12-17 November 2005 and was organized by several organizations, notably Geneva Call and the Institute of Bangsamoro Studies.²

This workshop involved twenty-five youth who were selected by the leadership of the MILF. The participants represented organizations and communities in the armed-conflict-affected provinces of Maguindanao and Cotabato.

This workshop’s overall objective was to encourage respect and compliance with international human rights standards.³ To achieve this objec-

tive, the training employed a progressive approach that started with raising awareness and critical understanding of various laws and programs, and followed by the training on developing capacities and skills to educate other youth.

This workshop had a four-day program consisting of plenary discussions and small group interactions on topics regarding basic human rights laws and principles, the Geneva Conventions and its Additional Protocols, the landmines issue including Geneva Call's *Deed of Commitment* banning anti-personnel landmines signed by the MILF,⁴ the role of young people in peace building, and child protection issues and concerns.

The sessions on child protection focused on both international and national laws, including the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict. The facilitators stressed that both state and non-state armed groups have the responsibility to observe human rights laws and ensure the protection of children. The session was also designed to elicit ideas and practical measures to encourage their communities and also the MILF, as a political body exercising effective control of certain communities, to become child-friendly organizations. See Annex A for a similar training module used in the 2005 training workshop.

During the open forum, one participant asked why was it important that the youth become aware of human rights, IHL and child protection standards. One of the facilitators responded that if the youth wanted to create an independent Bangsamoro state, it would be necessary that they participate in the development of policies and laws that were consistent with international human rights standards.

The workshop introduced an innovation by including practical sessions on facilitation skills and development of training modules. After providing knowledge on human rights and IHL, the participants were challenged to develop ways of disseminating such information to their colleagues. They were divided into groups and were asked to produce modules related to the topics assigned to them. The modules were tested during the training and were critiqued by the facilitators and fellow participants.

The participants appreciated well the workshop. During the evaluation session, most of the participants said that their attendance in the workshop on human rights and IHL was a first. The knowledge gained was new and could give them an alternative view in dealing with armed conflict.

They also appreciated the methodology employed, which allowed them to clearly understand the content. With the use of simple language and par-

ticipatory methodologies the interaction and exchange of opinions became highly valued.

The issue of involvement of children in armed conflict turned out to be a sensitive matter. There were divergent and conflicting positions that surfaced during the discussions. To explain the reasons behind the voluntary involvement of children, the participants raised religious obligation and the need to respond to the injustices and oppression caused by the government. Others mentioned that child soldiers did not exist in their communities, but there were children victims of war who were in the custody of the community leaders.

While the workshop program had an explicit position on the issue, the facilitators designed the sessions in the form of a dialogue. The facilitators realized that imposing previously held views was not beneficial. Frank and open discussions grounded on respect for each other's opinions and cultural background were the prevailing norm.

The exchange of different views was a learning process for both the organizers and the participants in order to have a wider perspective and broader analyses to address the problem. Understanding the cultural foundations of their perspectives was beneficial in developing context-specific approaches in the design of future workshops. Agreements on certain critical issues were not anticipated. The underlying interest, however, was to seek a common understanding on the need for further dialogue and interaction, and a common objective to protect the rights of children.

One of the strengths of the workshop was its respect for the capacity of local partner groups. Such principle of respect inspired all members of the organizing team to mutually reinforce and support each other's interests.

The workshop was intended as a collaborative effort to establish a sense of local ownership of the project. Hence, there were close consultations with partner organizations from the project's conceptualization, to the designing of the training program, and to its implementation. The local partners who supported the workshop were the Center for Muslim Youth Studies (CMYSI), a local youth organization based in Mindanao, and the Institute of Bangsamoro Studies (IBS). These two organizations have also played a vital role in facilitating SEASUC's request for permission from the leadership of the MILF to undertake the project. Other international organizations such as Geneva Call have also given a significant contribution to the project.

Encouraged by the participants' positive feedback and interest to sustain the initiative, the workshop organizers plan to hold follow-up work-

shops. This time the focus will be on the development of skills in the areas of facilitation, creative pedagogy and module development. This is intended to equip the youth with knowledge and skills needed to systematically reach out and spread the information to other members of their community.

Apart from the follow-up workshop, the participants have also expressed their interest to organize themselves into a group that would take the lead in educating young people on human rights and IHL, and also to undertake monitoring and reporting of violations within their communities.

Reflections on the Activity

SEASUCS chose the youth as primary participants in its human rights education project given the belief that they constitute the “new blood” and can catalyze change within their community. This is probably manifested by the plan of the participants to organize their ranks as a youth-led mechanism that promotes human rights and IHL within their ranks through education, and monitors their violations.⁵ The creation of this youth-led mechanism can also be seen as similar to devising new structures of accountability, an element considered to be part of social change (Sharma 1999).

While the training did not make all participants agree to the new perspectives concerning children’s involvement in armed conflict, they nevertheless gained common understanding on the shared responsibility of protecting children.

The workshop provided several benefits to the sector. First, it provided new knowledge to the youth and built their capacities relating to human rights and IHL. The training helped them fill the gap in the education program for young people, particularly on human rights and IHL.

Second, it helped provide a positive image to armed groups such as the MILF in allowing civil society groups such as SEASUCS to conduct a human rights education activity. A positive image is necessary to mobilize support to its advantage given that the MILF is currently engaged in peace negotiations with the Philippine government.

It is important to note that the MILF used to be listed by the government of the United States of America as a terror organization. It is also listed in the United Nations Secretary General’s reports submitted to the Security Council as one of parties that recruit or use children in situations of armed conflict. (United Nations, A/59/695-S/2005/72, page 38)

In terms of strategies, the use of human rights education in engaging NSAGs serves not only the participants but also facilitates the evolution of a human rights culture. The mobilization of local civil society groups independently operating in MILF stronghold areas serves to pressure the armed group to seriously take on its responsibility of respecting human rights and humanitarian standards. In this way, local “owners” would sustain the mobilizing of local support for any advocacy.

Contribution to Peace Building

The workshop in itself is not the solution to the conflict in Mindanao but it has a contribution on the process of peace building. The contribution might not be tangible compared to the efforts of other organizations providing direct services to victims. It might not be as precise compared to close involvement in the conduct of peace negotiations.

The issue of child soldiers is a concrete manifestation of a larger problem related to the armed conflict. Addressing the issue of child soldiers through human rights education leads to the option of shifting from armed conflict to non-violent politics. The knowledge on human rights and IHL, including that of the non-usage of child soldiers, can serve as a catalyst towards greater respect for the rule of law and giving primary concern for civilians affected by war.

Addressing the long-term goal of resolving the conflict in Mindanao is a long and arduous task that would certainly involve all actors from the national level down to the grassroots level. Addressing the issue of child soldiers through human rights education can then be viewed as a two-pronged approach using Lederach’s paradigm (Lederach, 1997).

The workshop’s contribution can be characterized as a reinforcement of the peace process as it promotes a sense of obligation and accountability to all parties to the conflict to respect norms and standards to protect vulnerable groups such as children, and at the very least respond to their needs to alleviate suffering. It also seeks to minimize further violations that could either pose as a consequence of or an impetus to perpetuate the conflict.

Second, human rights education provides options. The process of resolving the conflict also needs to recognize the need for the community to sustain its post-conflict productivity. Human rights education can provide a different way of looking at social life in terms of one’s roles and contributions. The role of children and young people can be taken as one aspect.

Given the justifications for involving children in armed conflict in Bangsamoro areas as presented in existing researches, it is indeed difficult to advocate for the non-recruitment and non-use of children in armed conflict from the perspective of human rights standards. However, human rights education provides an alternative approach that can provide an understanding of the strategic role of children and young people in the development of an ideal Bangsamoro society. As articulated by the participants, allowing children and young people to participate in the armed conflict weakens the realization of the vision of having future doctors, nurses, educators, engineers and other professionals that will constitute the social capital in a post-conflict Bangsamoro society. This is probably one message that has to be communicated in order for armed groups to see the benefits of engaging with SEASUCS and other civil society institutions.

Conclusion

Engaging non-state armed groups to respect and comply with human rights and humanitarian law standards is a long and arduous process. One challenge facing any entity that wishes to engage an armed group is to identify common interests underlying conflicting positions. Human rights education is a potential tool in both extracting common interests and responding to them. Based on the experience of SEASUCS and my reflections, these common interests can be found in the following factors: the provision of benefits to the NSAG such as capacity-building and legitimacy, and the integration of efforts to the larger goal of building peace that would benefit both the NSAG and its constituency at the community level.

Endnotes

¹A concrete example of the second form of engagement is the multi-partite dialogue with the Revolutionary Proletarian Army – Alex Boncayao Brigade (RPA-ABB) that eventually led into the signing of a unilateral statement in 2005. The RPA-ABB is a leftist armed group that broke away from the Communist Party of the Philippines-National Democratic Front-New People's Army (CPP-NPA-NDF). The talks with the RPA-ABB concerning the issue of child soldiers started in 2003 by an NGO called the Philippine Human Rights Information Center (PhilRights). The author was directly involved with the talks with RPA-ABB's Commander Gen. Carapali Luallhati. The talks introduced to the group's leadership international and national child protection laws and identified ways by which the RPA-ABB could cooperate in various

aspects of child protection work. The dialogues with the RPA-ABB culminated with the signing in February 2005 of a deed of commitment on non-recruitment or non-use of child soldiers.

²See: Geneva Call, 2006, Training of Trainers Workshop, <http://www.genevacall.org/resources/conference-reports/f-conference-reports/2001-2010/gc-2005-12nov-totfim.pdf>

³These include the Optional Protocol of the CRC on the involvement of children in armed conflict, the Geneva Conventions, the ILO 182 on the worst forms of child labor as well as domestic laws such as the Republic Act 7610 on "Special Protection of Children Against Child Abuse, Exploitation and Discrimination Act."

⁴The Deed of Commitment for Adherence to the Total Ban on Anti-personnel Mines and for Cooperation in Mine Action was signed by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in 2002. See: <http://www.genevacall.org/resources/testi-reference-materials/testi-deed/2007-07apr-milf.pdf>.

⁵SEASUCS is currently working together with key persons from the group formed by the participants to organize a follow-up workshop focusing entirely on skills development in the areas of human rights education philosophy and pedagogy, module development, and training techniques. All these are aimed at supporting the group's function to promote human rights and international humanitarian law by educating the members of their ranks.

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Annex A

Session on Child Protection in Armed Conflict

Prepared by the Philippine Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers

Workshop Objectives: To

1. Determine the notions of the participants on children and childhood, exploring Islamic and organizational perspectives on children's rights, particularly survival, development, protection, and participation;

2. Identify the existing policies of the MILF on children, childhood, and child protection;

3. Determine the extent of knowledge and views of participants on international and national laws and instruments (such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, and Republic Act 7610, Special Protection of Children Against Child Abuse, Exploitation and Discrimination Act) and whether the group has considered these instruments in making their policies/ practices.

Workshop Flow:

1. Introductions and Expectations Check

The summary of the participants' expectations is as follows:

- Knowledge
 - Means to protect children
 - National and international laws concerning child protection
 - Understand the Optional Protocol
 - Understand the minimum age for recruitment
 - Identify ways to prevent the involvement of children in armed conflict
- Skills
 - Ways of caring [for fellow] children
 - Ways of handling children captured/ rescued during conflict
 - Skills to disseminate information concerning child protection/ rights.

2. Understanding Childhood

There was a change of module given certain factors: time-limitation, attention span of the participants, and their expectations. In the initial group (Davao/Tausug group), there was a preliminary activity to elicit the participants' childhood experiences. The

plenary was divided into four groups and instructed to complete the following phrases:

- Noong bata pa ako, ang naaalala kong masayang pangyayari ay.....
(When I was a child, one happy experience I can remember is...)
- Noong bata pa ako, ang naaalala kong malungkot na pangyayari ay.....
(When I was a child, one sad experience I can remember is...)
- Noong bata pa ako, ang turo sa akin ng tatay ko ay.....
(When I was a child, my father taught me...)
- Noong bata pa ako, ang turo sa akin ng nanay ko ay.....
(When I was a child, my mother taught me...)
- Noong bata pa ako, napagalitan ako ni tatay dahil...
(When I was a child, my father got angry at me because...)
- Noong bata pa ako, napagalitan ako ni nanay dahil...
(When I was a child, my mother got angry at me because...)
- Noong bata pa ako, natuwa sa akin si tatay dahil...
(When I was a child, my father was happy with me because...)
- Noong bata pa ako, natuwa sa akin si nanay dahil...
(When I was a child, my mother was happy with me because...)

This activity was dropped during remaining sessions. Instead, the discussion proceeded with some process questions to elicit the participants' understanding of childhood. The matrix below provides the summary of the participants' responses:

Who is a child?	When can you say that he/she is no longer a child?	What are your bases?	What is the view of the MILF on the age of the child?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Someone who needs attention, care and direction - Plays unlimitedly - Neglect or ignores the parents' advice - Not more than 15 years old. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Adolescents: Girls - 13 to 14 years old; Boys - 15 to 17 - Not "balig" (A Moro term for puberty. There is no specific age indicator to determine when a person is in the stage of "balig." Ages differ between girls and boys. The signs of "balig" are the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Adams apple - Menstruation - Pubic hair - Wet dreams/ desire for sexual intercourse 	<p>Note: Initially, the question asked was "How does the Holy Qur'an define the child?" Almost all the participants responded that they need a religious leader to answer that. Hence, the trainers rephrased the question into: "Based on your understanding of the Islam, how does it define a child?"</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understand Islam - Obligatory to do prayers during Ramadhan - All should learn and understand the Qur'an 	<p>There were various responses but the most common was "no comment."</p> <p>Others gave the following answers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Based on Qur'an - 15 years old and below - 18 years old and below

There were other process questions to surface the participants' understanding of children and their parameters of their participation in community.

What can a child do which adults cannot?

Playing such as entering small spaces, sucking mother's milk, playing naked, begging, crying out in public

What can an adult do which a child should not do?

Sex, handling firearms, driving vehicles, carry heavy equipment, travel freely

Can a child marry?

Participants' categorically said no. However, they said that there are certain cultures in Mindanao that allow such.

Can a child vote?

Participants mentioned that children are not legally allowed to vote. But there are

exceptions when they are coerced to do so.

3. Discussion on International Standards and National Laws

The trainers gave an overview of the following international laws pertaining to child protection:

- [United Nations] Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)
- Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict
- ILO Convention 182 on Worst Forms of Child Labor

The national laws covered during the discussion were the following:

- Philippine Constitution
- Republic Act 7610, Special Protection of Children Against Child Abuse, Exploitation and Discrimination Act
- Republic Act 7658, Act Prohibiting the Employment of Children Below 15 Years of Age in Public and Private Undertakings
- Republic Act 9208, Anti-trafficking in Persons Act of 2003.

The participants raised many questions and clarifications. Some shared first hand information of human rights and humanitarian law violations committed by the Philippine armed forces that they have witnessed. The trainers suggested that these incidents have to be documented properly and submitted to independent bodies such as the IMT [International Monitoring Team], the ICRC [International Committee of the Red Cross], and the UNCRC [United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child].

Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law Violations Shared

In Sibugay, a mother and a two-year-old child were imprisoned for three months after they were caught by the police for unestablished reasons.

In Camp Abubakar, military ransacked schools in the community during the military takeover in 2000.

Some were not specific with their cases. Instead, they have repeatedly mentioned the actual conditions of Bangsamoro children where they do not have access to education and basic quality healthcare.

Clarifications/ Talking Points on the Topics Discussed

What do we mean by situations of emergency? It involved both natural disasters and human-made disasters such as armed conflict or other forms of disturbances.

Protection should include children who are in conflict with the law. What will happen to children who are caught because they are involved in the conflict?

What is the role of UNICEF? Do they have an office in the Philippines?

What are the penalties if we violate the law?

Is there any country that was already sanctioned because of their violations of the CRC? [United Nations] Security Council listed down countries where child soldiers are being used.

These included Congo, Burundi, Sudan, Sierra Leone and Rwanda. There are calls for arms embargo. There were six resolutions made already related to children in armed conflict.

- "The laws are there but what's the point?" Such was raised commonly by participants who expressed frustration on the non-implementation of the laws. (This could have been processed better by asking them also: How could the MILF contribute towards the respect and implementation of these laws?)

Recommendations by the Participants Raised during the Discussions

- Reproduce materials
- Conduct follow-up trainings particularly on the conduct of monitoring and documentation
- Need more time to discuss the laws.

4. Evaluation of the Session

The participants were asked the following questions:

- What is your dream for children?
- What can you do to make that dream a reality?

Dreams for Children	Contributions	Feelings after the Session
Education Peace Freedom Leader	Impart knowledge Provide training Provide education Help them become <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brave • Good fighter • Good counselor • Good father Provide security Work for peace	Happy More knowledgeable Satisfied Remembered the past Comfortable Liked everything Feel good Best

Some observations on the process:

- Time allotted is very limited given the coverage of topics.
- The participants seemed to be open to directly discuss the issue of child soldiers. It was opposite to some assumptions that bringing such topic would instigate a heated debate that might lead to discussions on religious perspectives. Should the topic of child soldiers be brought up, the discussion must be from a legal/ policy angle.
- Some groups have undergone the human rights and International Humanitarian Law session prior to the child protection session. It would be good to build on their understanding of human rights and International Humanitarian Law in discussing the issue of child soldiers.
- There is a need for more audio-visual materials such as videos and pictures.
- Using the local language makes the discussion more participatory. In fact, various stories and information were shared during the informal discussions during breaks.