



Children and Conflict

Aim:

that young people explore the impact conflict has on children caught up in it.

Age:

12 years and older

Time:

35 minutes

Materials:

copies of Alhassan's and Adama's story, world map (optional)

What to do:

Begin with a brainstorm on the effects of conflict on people. Ask if young people are particularly affected. How? Make a note of all the ideas.

Form small groups. Give half the groups a copy of Alhassan's story and the rest Adama's story. If you have a world map, point out where Sierra Leone is. Allow 5 minutes for the groups to read the story. Ask the groups to discuss the following:

What do you think life was like for Alhassan and Adama before they were captured?

What basic rights or needs were denied them while they were captured? How did that make them feel?

When they were rescued, what things do you think were most important for them to do to readjust to life?

Write the questions up for everyone to see. After 15 minutes, get feedback from the groups. Read out the 'Did You Know?' box.

In the large group, ask what can be done to prevent more children being forced to join armed forces. Who should take responsibility for this?

Did you know?

- More than 300,000 children around the world are being used as child soldiers.
- In the 1990s, 2 million children were killed as deliberate targets of war or because they were forced to fight.
- Millions of children suffer from malnutrition, disease and sexual violence as a result of war.
- Almost 20 million war affected children have been forced from their homes and have no schools or communities to offer them or their families support.
- In Ireland, the age for joining the army is 17 years. Many campaigners feel that 18 should be the minimum age for joining the army.

Source: www.epals.com/waraffectedchildren





Action

The crisis in the Great Lakes region in Central Africa and the ongoing war in Liberia has re-ignited awareness of the continuous use of child soldiers by both government and rebel groups in many parts of the world. (Source: Child Soldiers newsletter, June 2003). Trócaire has campaigned for both the UK and Irish governments to ratify the Optional Protocol, which requires states to "take all feasible measures to ensure that members of their armed forces who have not attained the age of 18 years do not take a direct part in hostilities" and are delighted that both governments have done so. The UK government however has included a clause reserving the right to deploy under 18's in combat when they believe there is "a genuine military need". This clause gives the UK an opt out at any time.

Join the International Coalition against the Use of Child Soldiers action encouraging the UK government to withdraw its reservation.

In the Republic of Ireland, write to the UK ambassador Stewart Eldon at 29 Merrion Rd, Ballsbridge, Dublin 4 with a copy to Brian Cowen, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Iveagh House, St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2.

In Northern Ireland, write to the Secretary of State Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs Rt. Hon Jack Straw MP, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Old Admiralty Building, Whitehall, London, SW1A 2PA.

Suggested letters are available from Trócaire.

Alhassan's Story

Alhassan Sheriff Kamara (12) from the Kambia District in Northern Sierra Leone was a child soldier. In 1998, when Alhassan was nine years old, he was playing football in his village when his community was attacked by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), who were fighting against the government. He was captured and brought 50 miles away to the rebels' base.

For the next week, he was taught how to cook and how to fire, put together and take apart an AK47. Just two weeks after his capture Alhassan was involved in his first clash - a raid into neighbouring Guinea where the RUF chased Guinean soldiers. He explained: "I was firing but didn't know if I killed anyone".

For the next three years the pattern of his life would involve fighting every day for a number of weeks - sometimes three weeks at a time - before retreating into the jungle to rest. He said: "I didn't like the jungle. It was dangerous. When you were going into battle, you didn't know if you were going to survive or not. Many of my friends died. I always wondered if one day it was going to be my turn." He continued: "I often thought about my family. Sometimes we [child soldiers] would sit together and say that we knew where our families were but they didn't know where we were. I missed the play every Saturday and Sunday when there would be a festival in the village. In the jungle, there was no time to play. I could not move about freely."

The children were also ordered to execute prisoners of war. Alhassan disobeyed this order when sent to the jungle to execute a Guinean soldier who had been mercilessly beaten. "I allowed the Guinean to escape. I fired some shots into the air. I came back and reported I had killed him. I just felt sorry for him."

Alhassan was freed in May 2001 as part of a peace agreement between RUF and the government. At the time of the interview he was being cared for by Caritas Makeni and his family were being traced.

On war, Alhassan said: "I have experience of warfare in the jungle and I wouldn't want any child to get involved in it".





UN Children's Convention on the Rights of the Child

Article 6 - Children have the right to life survival and development.

Article 7 - Children have the right to a name and nationality, to know and be cared for by their parents.

Article 11 - Children will be protected from kidnapping.

Article 19 - Children have the right to protection against violence and abuse.

Article 28 - Children have the right to go to school and learn.

Article 31 - Children have the right to rest, leisure and play.

Article 38 - Children have the right not to take part in armed conflict.

Adama's Story

Adama Mansaray (16) comes from Kabala in Sierra Leone. She was separated from her mother in 1994 when the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) attacked Kabala. Up to 60 school girls from Kabala were abducted by the rebels and Adama fears that most of her friends are now dead.

After her capture, Adama was taken to Kono, a district far from her hometown. She was raped by the rebels. For the next two years, she was used as a sex slave by the soldiers and as a servant by the wives of a commander.

Life changed when a female commander called Ashia took pity on her. She took Adama under her wing to care for her children. From then on, Adama was protected.

Adama was rescued in 1998. She found it difficult to adjust to her new life at first. Caritas Makeni have trained her in tie dying which she says will make her self reliant and independent.

On the day she was to be reunited with her mother, she said: "Today is the happiest day of my life. I have not forgotten her. I will recognise her when I see her. I could not sleep last night I was so excited."

Source: Caritas Makeni/Trócaire (2002). Lenten Post Primary Resource.

