Revista Eleuthera
ISSN: 2011-4532
ISSN: 2463-1469
eleuthera@ucaldas.edu.co
Universidad de Caldas
Colombia

Reinsertion processes of children disengaged from armed groups in Colombia: what is the problem represented to be?

Villanueva-O'driscoll, Julia; Loots, Gerrit; Losantos-Velasco, Marcela; Exeni-Ballivián, Scherezada; Berckmans, Isabel; Derluyn, Ilse

Reinsertion processes of children disengaged from armed groups in Colombia: what is the problem represented to be?

Revista Eleuthera, vol. 16, 2017

Universidad de Caldas, Colombia

Disponible en: https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=585963499006

DOI: https://doi.org/10.17151/eleu.2017.16.6

El contenido de esta publicación puede reproducirse citando la fuente.

Reinsertion processes of children disengaged from armed groups in Colombia: what is the problem represented to be?

Procesos de reinserción de niños, niñas y adolescentes desvinculados de grupos armados en colombia: "what is the problem represented to be?"

Julia Villanueva-O'driscoll jvillanu@vub.be
Vrije Universiteit, Bélgica
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7344-1259
Gerrit Loots gerrit.loots@vub.ac.be
Vrije Universiteit, Bélgica
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0410-6876
Marcela Losantos-Velasco marcela.losantos@ucb.edu.bo
Universidad Católica Boliviana, Bolivia
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8287-7858
Scherezada Exeni-Ballivián exenischerezada@gmail.com
Universidad Católica Boliviana "San Pablo", Bolivia
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7930-9032
Isabel Berckmans isabelberckmans@gmail.com
Vrije Universiteit, Bélgica
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1449-5369
Ilse Derluyn Ilse.derluyn@ugent.be
Ghent University, Bélgica
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5450-1239

Revista Eleuthera, vol. 16, 2017

Universidad de Caldas, Colombia

Recepción: 10 Abril 2017
Aprobación: 07 Junio 2017

DOI: https://doi.org/10.17151/eleu.2017.16.6

Redalyc: https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=585963499006

Resumen: Objetivo. Se estima que hasta 18.000 niños, niñas y adolescentes están involucrados en grupos armados en Colombia. Después de desvincularse de estos grupos armados, su reinserción en la sociedad es un gran desafío. Exploramos los discursos acerca de estos jóvenes y sus procesos de reinserción. Metodología. Realizamos 64 entrevistas con profesionales de diferentes organizaciones activas en los procesos de inserción usando el enfoque de "What's the problem represented to be?".
Resultados. Este enfoque nos permitió encontrar dos discursos explícitos. El primero, el discurso orientado a la ley, demostró ser fuertemente influenciado por las normas internacionales. Y el segundo, el discurso orientado a la alternativa, mostró resistencia al primer discurso. Conclusiones. A través de la interacción de estos discursos, las organizaciones demostraron estar limitadas en sus implementaciones prácticas, lo cual resulta peligroso para los numerosos esfuerzos dedicados a los procesos y para la inserción de los niños en la sociedad.

Palabras clave: niños soldados en Colombia, "What's the problem represented to be?", análisis del discurso, procesos de reinserción.

Abstract: Objective. There are estimates of up to 18,000 children engaged with armed groups in Colombia. After disengaging from these groups, their reinsertion into

society is a great challenge. We looked into the discourse approaches towards these children and their reinsertion processes. Methodology. We conducted 64 interviews with professionals from different organisations active in the integration processes of these children and conducted the "What's the problem represented to be?" approach. Results. This approach allowed us to outline two explicit discourses. The law-oriented discourse showed to be strongly influenced by international standards, and was found to be dominant in the governmental reinsertion programme. The alternative-oriented discourse showed resistance to this line of thinking. Conclusions. Through the interplay of these discourses, organisations showed to be limited in their practical implementations whereby the many efforts put into the insertion processes, and the insertion of children into society itself are jeopardised.

Keywords: child soldiers in Colombia, What's the problem represented to be?, discourse analysis, reinsertion processes.

Introduction

This contribution offers a discourse analysis of how organisations speak about the reinsertion process of children and youth disengaged [1] from armed groups in Colombia (throughout the article we further refer to them as children). Colombia has been characterised by armed conflicts for as long as most people can remember (Richani, 2010). From the '60s onwards, the main actors could be divided between the governmental, guerrilla and paramilitary groups. Whereas in the past the conflict was based on political and ideological struggles, more recently political motives have escalated to more financial ones, which are strongly linked to illicit activities such as drug trafficking.

Consequently, the main goal or outcome of the conflict has become less clear (Kalyvas, 2001) and the overall conflict dynamics have changed. Examples of these changes are the demobilisation of certain groups after peace negotiations (e.g., demobilisation of paramilitary groups between 2003 and 2006 and of FARC in 2016) and the emergence of new, not clearly defined, groups which might be identified as criminal gangs. One of the aspects that has remained present throughout the decades of conflict is the engagement of children in armed groups, with recent estimates between 11,000 and 18,000 (Human Rights Watch, 2003; Springer, 2012; Coalico, 2010). Towards the end of the ´90s, as a response to the optional protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict (United Nations Human Rights, 2000), children disengaging from armed groups were treated as victims and the state was identified as responsible to fulfil their rights. The governmental entity of the Colombian Institute of Family Welfare (*Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar* – ICBF) of the Department of Social Prosperity (*Departamento para la Prosperidad Social*) thus received the responsibility to re-establish or fulfil these rights and ensure their social integration (ICBF, 2010)

Between 1999 and 2013, up to 5156 children participated in the governmental insertion programme for children disengaged from armed groups (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2013). Though the programme has evolved through the years, in recent years it

consists principally of three phases, namely (1) emotional stabilisation; (2) specialised attention towards violated rights regarding education, health, psychosocial wellbeing, and registration of citizenship; and (3) consolidation of the life project. Additionally, there is a follow-up of social integration. Depending on the situation and possibilities of the child and its entourage, these phases are fulfilled through an institutionalised or socio-family path (ICBF, 2010).

Several publications have shown successful outcomes of children who participated in the governmental reinsertion programme (Santiago, 2007; McCausland, 2010; González, 2016). Nevertheless, in recent years Villanueva-O'Driscoll, Loots and Derluyn (2013) inventorised the formal support offered during children's reinsertion, which raised questions about possible gaps in the programme, whereby many children do not seem to reinsert into society successfully and return to armed groups or remain at risk of doing so also (Coalico, 2010; Springer, 2012; Álvarez y Aguirre, 2001). Only 15% of children disengaged from armed groups are estimated to reach the programme (Thomas, 2008). Moreover, for those who do participate it does not always guarantee a successful outcome. A lot of children neither fully disengage, nor are they inserted into society in a sustainable way.

To our knowledge, most research on the reinsertion programme is descriptive and remains internal. Research solutions to seemingly unsuccessful insertion of children are often offered through recommendations, which are not always implementable due to the ongoing conflict, and are addressed towards the state to fulfil their legal obligations (Coalico, 2010). Additionally, little research focusses on the impact of interventions aimed at helping children (Euwema et al., 2008).

Moreover, the active participation of children in research is considered to be more appropriate to adequately answer children's realities. However, earlier research has shown difficulties in reaching children disengaging from armed groups (Betancourt et al., 2013) and in certain situations talking to children puts them at risk, an additional risk to the ones they already encounter in their daily life. This partly explains why children are being protected from interviewers and researchers by organisations. Furthermore, these children are protected under law and their anonymity must be secured. Cameron (2010), for example, mentioned that journalists and researchers have not always respected ethical issues involved in such complex situation of ongoing conflict.

Hitherto, research mainly described the practical support children receive or focused on external factors of children's conditions contributing to the failing of sustainable reinsertion (e.g., continuous presence of armed groups). This has neither answered the gap between disengagement and reinsertion, nor has it taken account of the broader context of the reinsertion process. Hence, rather than originating from the lens of the children's conditions, this study focuses on the reinsertion context itself. Considering children's reinsertion processes are constituted in discourse, we take the perspective of discourses expressed by staff members of different organisations when talking about

the reinsertion process. In the first place, those staff members can be considered as the mediators of the reinsertion programme and they may be seen as a temporarily hinge in children's reinsertion process into society. Secondly, we want to examine how these discourses translate into the practice of support and in doing so understanding the insertion process from another angle.

This contribution thus aims at answering what discourses concerning children and their reinsertion process are present in how organisations speak about children's reinsertion processes and how this translates itself into practice. By having more insight into the context of the reinsertion process, this might enrich understandings of how support programmes could contribute to the insertion of children disengaged from armed groups in a more effective and sustainable way.

Method

The data

The first author conducted a 6-month study in different areas in Colombia, with the aim to inventorise the support towards children disengaged from armed groups (Villanueva O'Driscoll, Loots & Derluyn, 2013). Organisations were identified through snowball sampling.

The highest amount of possible relevant organisations was involved until saturation of

information was obtained. Open interviews were held attending the following issues: nature of the conflict, children engaged with armed groups, armed groups involved in recruitment, recruitment policy, welfare support, financing, and insertion programmes. By using open interviews, the participant had the freedom to talk about certain subjects and delve into certain subjects to the extent she or he thought relevant. Though the official reinsertion programme is offered through the governmental organisation of ICBF, other organisations are also involved in the reinsertion by being subcontracted by ICBF or working more independently in the

peripheral sphere. In total, 64 interviews were conducted with staff members from organisations from different backgrounds, namely international organisations (10), governmental organisations (17), and non-governmental organisations (37). All participants verbally provided informed consent.

After conducting a thematic analysis on these interviews (Villanueva O'Driscoll, Loots & Derluyn, 2013), it became clear staff members from different organisations spoke about children and their reinsertion process in different ways. This indicated the presence of different discourses, which appeared in overlap and in different combinations. This primary exploration brought us to identify two more explicit surging discourses.

From the 64 interviews, we choose two of the richest interviews in which each of the two recognized discourses were more explicit (two interviews where one discourse seemed more explicit, and two interviews where the other discourse seemed more explicit), and two of the richest

interviews that seemed to lie in between both discourses. This brought us to six interviews with staff of different organizations, namely one governmental organization, one public governmental organization, one international organization, and three nongovernmental organization. As a means of verification of our findings, and to confirm saturation of information, we ad randomly went through six of the 58 additional interviews (two of one more explicit recognizable discourse, two of the other more explicit recognizable discourse, and two of the other more explicit recognizable discourse, and two in the middle range).

The discourse analysis

We conducted a discourse analysis based on the work of Bacchi. Bacchi (2009) introduced the analysis approach of 'what's the problem represented to be?' (WPR). This approach allowed us to look at discourses through which staff members talked about children and their trajectory of reinsertion, and how this translated into the support offered.

The approach was originally thought out as an approach to policy analysis, assuming nothing is taken for granted and the very idea of policy becomes a subject of interrogation

(Bacchi, 2009). As Bacchi (2009) explained, (public) policies are often translated into (governmental) programmes, whereby policy is a priori considered as a good thing that fixes things. This line of thinking furthermore implies there is a problem that needs to be 'fixed'. This implies that policies give shape to 'problems' and are active in the production of these problems. Furthermore, Bacchi stated that the way in which a problem is represented is not necessarily conscious, but it carries all sorts of implications for how the issue is thought about and how people involved are treated, and are evoked to think about themselves. She argued that "we need to problematize (interrogate) the problematizations on offer through scrutinising the premises and effects of the problem representation they contain" (Bacchi, 2009, p. 21). She proposes to do this by applying the next six interrelated questions to the problem representation.

The first question refers to what the actual problem is represented to be. The WPR approach implies working backwards and looking at what is being done as a solution, and what this says about what the problem is represented to be. If you propose a solution, you must assume a certain problem.

The second question looks at what presumptions or meanings underlie this identified representation of the problem. With the understanding that policies are elaborated in discourse, it digs deeper than language as it is, and explores ways in which meaning is created through particular language uses of binaries (e.g., licit/illicit), key concepts (i.e. abstract labels, meanings), and categories (i.e. ways of organising people across space and time, such as youth). An important aspect in this second question is to recognise imbalances in the influence of different styles of problematization (e.g., dominant versus alternative).

A third question refers to how this representation of the problem has come about. Here, the aim is to reflect on the specific developments and

decisions that contribute to the formation of the problem representation. Furthermore, recognising that competing problem representations exist both over time and across space implies the need to begin the analysis in the present and seeking to trace the history of the current problem representation, focusing on the process (genealogy).

The next question refers to what is left unproblematic in this problem representation. Where are the silences? Can the problem be thought about differently? What fails to be problematised?

The fifth question considers the effects that are produced by this representation of the problem. The WPR approach has the presumption that some problem representations create difficulties (forms of harm) for members of some social groups more so than for other groups.

The ultimate question refers to how and where this representation of the problem is produced, disseminated and defended. It furthermore questions how the problem representation could it be questioned, disrupted and replaced.

Translating the main question of the approach to our topic, if you develop a programme to fulfill children's rights and insert them into society, you are implying that the problem is a matter of violation of children's rights and of children being 'desocialised' due to their engagement with armed groups.

To answer the above questions, we went through three phases. In the first phase, we read through the interview transcript several times underlining all text extracts referring to the identified problem representations - desocialised children whose rights are violated - and solutions - the insertion process. After doing this with a first interview and exploring the underlined extracts, we identified eight themes. These themes were:

Children, which included accounts referring to children disengaged from armed groups in the broad sense, and children in general.

Children's context, which included aspects referring to their life conditions, mainly in society.

The governmental programme, which included accounts referring to what the programme offers, how it functions and what challenges it has.

The support context, which included external aspects that influence the support offer and outcome.

Alternatives to the programme, which encompassed the support offered to children outside the official programme and suggestions for alternative support.

Others involved, including people in the family or societal sphere who are involved in the insertion process.

The discursive context, meaning striking features of how participants spoke about the topics.

Rules and legislation, which included mentioned laws and norms.

The other interviews brought us three additional themes:

Their own programme, which included accounts which the programme offered outside the governmental programme when the staff member was not part of the governmental programme.

Lacking aspects in the governmental programme, which involved identified gaps or deficiencies in the programme and what interviewees deem should be included.

The armed group context, containing what children's life was like while being engaged with the armed group and how armed groups were still involved in children's lives after disengagement.

In a second phase, we isolated all extracts referring to a certain theme and thoroughly analysed these by identifying what exactly was being said and how this interrelated. Based on the analysis of these themes, the third phase consisted of answering the six questions Bacchi (2009) considered. After doing this for each interview separately, we joined findings which brought further identification and reinforcement of the two alleged discourses.

Results

Identified discourses

The WPR approach allowed us to understand the problem representation of children disengaged from armed group by approaching the proposed solution namely, the reinsertion programme, and conversely the problem representation gave a clearer understanding on the proposed solution. Although, the different organisational backgrounds in our research outline resulted in a web of discourses all interwoven, running parallel, in collision, countering, secant, meeting, antagonising and chaotic, two discourses on the insertion processes of children were more explicitly identifiable.

A dominant law-oriented discourse was found prominent. This discourse showed to be strongly influenced by international standards and international pressure concerning the fulfilment of children's rights, which might be logic in the frame of maintaining international political and economic relations. Moreover, it was mentioned there is also a strong societal pressure for the government to fulfil legal standards. Due to the structure of the reinsertion programme being centralised by a governmental organisation by law, the practical implementation of alternative interpretations to this discourse is restricted. However, where there is dominance, there is resistance. Alternative-oriented discourse implementations seep through in organisations and are mirrored in the practical field where organisations have (financial and structural) possibilities to work more independently. Note that within organizations these discourses interplay and organizations are not constituted in one discourse alone, but rather in an interplay of discourses, independently of whether the organizations are international, governmental, or non-governmental. This shows how the discourses held by staff of these organisations are strongly influenced by the main societal discourses. In the following sections, we will outline the two more explicit discourses more profoundly.

The law-oriented discourse

This discourse seemingly grew through international implementation of the international law on children's rights. Although previously violations of these rights focused on other aspects like poverty, street children, and displaced children, the UN report on the situation of children in armed conflict (Machel, 1996) brought child soldiers on the agenda, whereby they were represented as a problem to be 'fixed'. This led to international and national discussions and an interpretation of international laws on the Colombian level, which resulted in that the concept of child soldiers has been translated to the Colombian context as 'children engaged with and disengaged from armed groups'. The current of thought behind this, is that the government doesn't recruit children as this is illegal and children in armed groups can thus not be called soldiers.

This discourse defines children disengaged from armed groups as a clearly aligned group of children, including minors (under 18) who have been engaged with officially recognised illegal armed groups and who disengaged through the governmental programme. Through the law 1448 of victims and land restitution ratified in 2011, they are recognized as a group of victims whose rights have been violated and who have desocialised from society due to their engagement with armed groups.

These children are not only seen as victims, due to their recruitment by armed groups, but also due to child recruitment being identified as one of the worst forms of child labour, and forced recruitment being seen as a form of human trafficking and thus a form of forced displacement. In that way, they fall under victimhood through different laws. Contrastingly, children who are excluded from this definition, like youth over 18 or children who are engaged with an otherwise defined group (e.g., delinquent gangs or other emergent groups) are considered as perpetrators who have legal responsibilities.

This also implies that all recruitment of illegal armed groups is seen as forced. The armed groups coerce children or deceive them into joining. Thus, when children comment they engaged with the armed groups voluntarily, this voluntariness is considered as invalid when holding into account these children's living conditions previous to their recruitment.

The armed groups take advantage of their vulnerable situations such as domestic violence.

Moreover, an important characteristic of children was mentioned to be that they are often from rural areas and consequently have low educational levels, meaning these children are not reflective and are not psychologically mature. As a result, they are not mature and responsible enough to make consent decisions.

According to this discourse, armed groups are considered as the enemy taking advantage of these vulnerable children. The time in the armed group is seen as a lost time, where all their rights are violated, from sexual abuse to forced labour. Moreover, it is characterised by rough experiences, where children lose their name, friends, family, and childhood. Children are considered not as active agents in crime, but as passive subjects of crime.

Whereas armed groups are considered to rob children from their childhood, this discourse portrays the governmental programme as offering them a future by fulfilling their rights in every way. This is done through the reinsertion programme by offering education, formation, health care and working out a broader future for children. Psychosocial attention mainly focusses on addressing the experiences in the armed group and changing the indoctrinations of armed groups against the government. The programme is considered to fulfil, restore and guarantee children's rights, offering them a chance in life and decent life opportunities.

These opportunities are ensured through education and working skills.

Though this discourse acknowledges institutionalisation is not the most appropriate model, it also mentions it is often the only alternative considering the ongoing conflict and danger in society. Moreover, for security reasons the programme remains as closed as possible to outsiders (e.g., other organisations, researchers). This discourse demonstrates a gap between the programme's intentions and possibilities in practice, meaning the insertion programme is restricted by the conflict and armed groups. Considering the main challenge of the programme is the ongoing conflict, children are stuck in a vicious circle of vulnerability. Hence, once the children leave the programme they return to conditions where armed groups are present to victimise and make use of them.

Youth that have turned 18 are no longer considered part of this group of victims in need, but as youth with legal responsibilities and capacities. When children in the programme turn 18, several possibilities were mentioned by interviewees youth staying in the programme for additional time, youth being transferred to the care of the parallel programme for adults

(who are legally not acknowledged as victims, but receive support in the frame of demobilisation processes), or they are expected to live an independent life, whereby the programme offers a follow-up after six months.

The alternative-oriented discourse

The alternative-oriented discourse considers children disengaged from armed groups as equal to other children in society. It was mentioned that children in general live in marginalised situations, in violence and in violation of their rights. A differentiation could be made from other victims of the conflict in that other victims didn't have the choice in their victimhood, contrary to children who engaged with armed groups.

Moreover, this discourse does not differentiate in definitions of armed groups. All children that have engaged with an armed group, including otherwise categorised groups like those defined as delinquent gangs or other emergent groups, are taken into account when talking about children disengaged from armed groups. Moreover, participants mentioned a large amount of children are expected to have disengaged from armed groups in an unofficial way, meaning they have not participated in the governmental reinsertion programme and have equal experiences as children who have officially disengaged.

Though the above reasoning may result in that most people of the Colombian society are living in conflict and are thus victims, this discourse more so highlights that the society is strong and resilient, implying that not the individuals are dysfunctional but that the context is.

This broader lens points out that children are part of societal dynamics and their engagement with armed groups should thus be seen in this line.

Considering the influence of the societal dynamics, this discourse presents children engaging with armed groups not as a peripheral phenomenon but as a part of a natural course in their lives. The ongoing conflict, the continuous violence, the presence of armed groups, and a popular mafia and drug trafficking culture of luxury and easy money are aspects which back-up this discourse.

In these societal dynamics, armed groups are attractive to children as they offer children options and opportunities. While this discourse argues that society sees children as helpless, lazy, delinquent, passive, and not having any interests, it also mentions armed groups illuminate more positive characteristics of children like creativity, activeness and purposefulness. In this armed group context children participate actively and are recognised as valuable, and armed groups offer them friends and a family. In that sense all of society is involved in making armed groups popular options fulfilling children's ideals. Moreover, children sometimes see time in the armed groups as a time away from the rough conditions in society (e.g., children coming from the country side, who live in rough socio-economic conditions and have to conduct hard work). Joining an armed group can also function as financial support towards their family. According to the alternative-oriented discourse, these circumstances make voluntary engagement of children self-evident. This discourse doesn't position armed groups as being responsible for the problem of engagement, but places the responsibility in the lack of opportunities in society. This also explains how even after participating in the programme, armed groups remain an attractive option. Participants mentioned armed groups claim that children auto-postulate to join their troops in a voluntary way. This argument is strengthened by mentioning that other children living in equal conditions also voluntarily take the decision not engage with any armed group.

The alternative-oriented discourse highlights how disengaging from armed groups may be emotionally difficult in many ways. Examples are how leaving behind their weapon may feel like an amputation; what others call sexual abuse in the armed group can signify love to them; and leaving behind the group may mean leaving behind their family. In that sense, according to the alternative-oriented discourse the governmental insertion programme silences meanings children themselves give to their engagement, disengagement and reinsertion.

Furthermore, the societal culture of violence and conflict was explained to be a well-oiled engine in society, and many people develop feelings of anger, revenge, despair, and pain which are not treated in the broader population, and thus contribute to the vicious circle of violence. This discourse underlines that for children's wellbeing these do not benefit

from support without support towards their environment, considering they function in that environment. Moreover, this discourse emphasises that considering these societal dynamics, a specific group does not benefit from attention without attention being offered to their environment and the dynamics of the context.

According to this discourse, taking children out of armed groups, does not necessarily entail disengagement, considering armed groups are part of their daily life. In this sense, engagement with armed groups is not seen as desocialisation, but rather as part of the societal culture.

In these societal dynamics, the governmental insertion programme is questioned to be part of a war strategy. This discourse mentions the government is as much part of the armed conflict as other (illegal) armed groups. It was argued that the government is also victimising children and society by not fulfilling their basic needs and leaving them to live in hunger and poor conditions. Participants mentioned that equally to other armed groups, the army has also recruited children and has used them for logistic information for example. Moreover, they mentioned governmental troops have found to be guilty of killing children that were falsely suggested to have been killed in battle. In this frame, disengaging children and offering them the reinsertion programme can be seen as taking away military forces from the enemy.

This discourse questions the motives of the government to support children, in contrast with the clear finance driven motives of armed groups to recruit children. The alternative-oriented discourse claims this is a strong argument to leave the insertion programme in the care of more neutral non-governmental organisations, in shared responsibility with society, family and children.

Furthermore, this discourse explains social organisations encounter difficulties attaining both children who have disengaged from armed groups through the official path and children who have unofficially disengaged. The first due to the poor sharing of information by the governmental programme and the latter considering they are not traceable due to security reasons. This discourse thus questions how children's rights can be fulfilled. Due to the reinsertion programme sharing little information on children with other organisations or researchers who are not directly involved in the governmental programme, the programme comes over as envious and overprotective of their information, which only makes outsiders wary about what is really going on.

The alternative-oriented discourse believes the reinsertion programme aims at fixing children in a way that children are treated as objects causing a culture of dependency.

Participants mentioned children are sustained of developping autonomy and responsibility due to imposed control and rules of the reinsertion programme. Children do not have to make an effort and are receivers of benefits instead of deservers. This does not mirror how things are outside the programme in the daily reality of children, where they have to put efforts into their achievements. Moreover, participants

argued that what needs and how to fulfil them are a priori decided on in the programme, often based on an internationally based financial focus, instead of holding account of subjective meanings children make of their experience.

This discourse argues that it are the aspects outside armed groups that might be causing difficulties in children's lives. It also includes that if children's needs lie in being part of armed groups, then organisations convincing them otherwise is not sufficient. In that way, this discourse argues that broader structural attention is important to ensure children have alternatives.

This discourse argues children should be supported in developing into social and political actors, constructors and contributors. This means providing space for active subjects, and positive recognition, self-identification, and guaranteeing children's individual rights in a sustainable frame. The alternative-oriented discourse explains the governmental programme hinders children in this and does not bring children peace, but only temporarily takes them out of war. Though the programme is set out to fulfil children's rights, this discourse questions how rights can be re-established when the conditions for it are absent in their life world.

Furthermore, the alternative-oriented discourse questions the age-limited support, whereby it is unclear what happens with children at the borderline of 18. They mention there is a lack of closing the gap between institutionalisation and independence in society. It was mentioned that a more thorough follow-up is necessary after the age of 18. Following this discourse logic, in any country in the world, not holding account of the conflict situation, it is difficult for anyone at the age of 18 to take up full responsibility for one's life autonomously. Another argument mentioned was that some youngsters only arrive at the programme at the age of 17, and to what extent can their rights thus be re-established in the short time before the youngster turns 18? Additionally, some children entered the armed group at a very young age and others had only been in the armed group for a few weeks or months before disengaging, which may bring different circumstances. This discourse argued children's process is more important than the actual time or age limit.

The alternative-oriented discourse mentions how the reinsertion programme's functioning and development is based on trial and error and leaves space for error, which takes away pressure of fulfilling children's rights in a sustainable way. Furthermore, in case of error, it are the children themselves who are the ones who live with the consequences of it. It was even mentioned that the governmental programme is a problem for children's insertion process, and children are better off when they're not involved in the programme. It was argued that staying out of the reinsertion programme was their only chance of real insertion. This discourse entails that due to the programme being centralised by a governmental organisation and the target population being limited, the insertion process is restricted.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to gain insight into discourses that are part of reinsertion processes of children disengaged from armed groups in Colombia. Because research focussing on children's socio-economic conditions does not seem to offer satisfactory understandings and palatable solutions for the aforementioned restrictions, we opted to investigate the reinsertion context itself by conducting a discourse analysis on interviews with staff members of different organisations involved in children's reinsertion processes.

The discourse analysis indicated that the reinsertion practice is affected and limited by two more explicit, contrasting discourses; a dominant law-oriented discourse and a resisting alternative-oriented discourse. These discourses represented a limbo between children being disengaged from armed groups and them being (re)inserted into society. Though a lot of

(both financial and human) efforts by all kinds of organisations are being put into the reinsertion process of children to fix this limbo, reality shows that this does not guarantee an effective disengagement or insertion.

Both discourses showed restrictions in the implementation of support. Firstly, international law-led interpretations are not (or no longer) in accordance with the Colombian reality (e.g., age limits, armed group definition, and defined victims). This brings deficiencies to the reinsertion policy and programme, whereby organisations whose work is constituted by the law-oriented discourse are rigidly restricted to what population they attend and how they offer support (e.g., in isolation).

Furthermore, cooperation among organisations is restricted considering organisations more strongly based on the alternative-oriented discourse do not fit into the dominantly

law-oriented programme policy. Organisations largely constituted by the alternative-oriented discourse thus have poor access to the limited defined group of children disengaged from armed groups. Considering the alternative-oriented discourse includes a broader population when approaching children disengaged from armed groups, they transcend the particular target population funding focuses on. The financial means aimed towards children disengaged from armed groups, does consequently not reach these organisations.

Moreover, the dominance of the law-oriented discourse (both on a national and international level) enhances that organisations need the specific defined group of children for their existence, and priorities accordingly risk not to lie in re-establishing rights, but rather in the continuing existence of the organisation, thus continuing financial support and continuing organisation needing the children. This is placed in contrast with children needing organisations.

The problem representation (the children) thus seems to exist due to the need for the solution (the programme) to exist, whereby the solution becomes represented as a problem and vice versa. This implies a vicious circle consisting of the dominant discourse having power over

where financial support goes and where the attention is focussed. These restrictions raise questions on where the rigorous care to victims of the conflict is.

The identified discourses demonstrated that the official reinsertion programme does not ensure what it is set out to do, namely (re)inserting children into society. Society additionally lacks adequate conditions for it. Hereby the reinsertion programme defers from the social reality, where the conflict is ongoing and risks of re-recruitment remain tangible.

References

Álvarez, E.M. & Aguirre, J.F. (2001). *Guerreros sin sombra. Niños y jóvenes vinculados al conflicto armado*. Bogotá, Colombia: Procuraduría General de la Nación y el Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar.

Bacchi, C. (2009). *Analysing policy: What's the problem represented to be?* Frenchs Forest, N.S.W: Pearson Education.

Betancourt, T.S., Borisova, I., Williams, T.P., Meyers-Ohki, S.E., Rubin-Smith, J.E., Annan, J. & Kohrt, B.A. (2013). Research Review: Psychosocial adjustment and mental health in former child soldiers – a systematic review of the literature and recommendations for future research. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 54*(1), 17–36.

Cameron, S. (2010). *Out of war: true stories from the front lines of children's movement for peace in Colombia.* New York: Unicef.

Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (2013). *¡Basta ya! Colombia: Memorias de guerra y de dignidad.* Bogotá, Colombia: Informe general grupo de memoria histórica.

Coalición contra la vinculación de niños, niñas y jóvenes al conflicto armado en Colombia [Coalico]. (2010). *Informe alterno al informe del Estado colombiano sobre el cumplimiento del Protocolo Facultativo Relativo a la Participación de Niños en los Conflictos Armados.* Retrieved from http://coljuristas.org/documentos/libros_e_informes/informe_alterno_ninos.pdf.

Euwema, M., de Graaff, D., de Jager, & Kalksma-Van Lith, B. (2008). Research with children in war-affected areas. In P.M. Christensen, & A. James (Eds.), *Research with children: perspectives and practices* (pp. 189-204). Oxon: Routledge.

González, G. (2016). *Los niños de la guerra. Quince años después.* Bogotá, Colombia: Aguilar.

Human Rights Watch [HRW] (2003). *"You'll learn not to cry": Child combatants in Colombia*. New York: Human Rights Watch.

Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar familiar [ICBF]. (2010). *Niños, niñas y adolescentes desvinculados de los grupos armados organizados al margen de la ley. Sistema de información*. Bogotá, Colombia: ICBF.

Kalyvas, S.N. (2001). "New" and "old" civil wars: A valid distinction? *World Politics, 54*(1), 99-118.

Machel, G. (1996). *Promotion and protection of the rights of children: Impact of the armed conflict on children. United Nations.* Retrieved from http://www.un.org/documents/ga/docs/51/plenary/a51-306.htm.

McCausland, E. (2010). *Victorias de la paz. Diez historias de jóvenes que derrotaron la guerra.* Bogotá, Colombia: ICBF y Organización Internacional para las Migraciones.

Richani, N. (2010). Fragmentation of sovereignty and violent non-state actors in Colombia. In K. Mulaj (Ed.), *Violent non-state actors in world politics* (pp. 27-44). London, England: Hurst & Company.

Santiago, L. (2007). *Nacido para triunfar. Testimonio de un adolescente desvinculado de un grupo armado*. Manizales, Colombia: Universidad de Caldas.

Springer, N. (2012). *Como corderos entre lobos. Del uso y reclutamiento de niñas, niños y adolescentes en el marco del conflicto armado y la criminalidad en Colombia.* Bogotá, Colombia: Springer Consulting Services.

Thomas, V. (2008). *Overcoming Lost Childhoods: Lessons learned from the rehabilitation and reintegration of former child soldiers in Colombia.* London, England: Y CARE International.

United Nations Human Rights. (2000, May). *Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights A/ RES/54/263.*Retrieved from http://www.unhcr.org.

Villanueva-O'Driscoll, J., Loots, G. & Derluyn, I. (2013). *Children disengaged from armed groups in Colombia: Disengagement processes in context.* London, England: Versita.

Notas

1 We choose to use the terms engaged with and disengaged from armed groups because this is the formal term used in Colombia. Other authors may use child soldiers, child combatants, etc.

Información adicional

Como citar este artículo:: Villanueva, J., Loots, G., Losantos, M., Exeni, S., Berckmans, I., and Derluyn, I. (2017). Reinsertion processes of children disengaged from armed groups in Colombia: what is the problem represented to be? Revista Eleuthera, 16, 85-100. DOI: 10.17151/ eleu.2017.16.6.