



EFFORTS TO ADDRESS CHILD SOLDIERS IN THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

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Abstract

Children are a vulnerable group at risk of being recruited as child soldiers in the armed conflicts that have been taking place in Africa in recent years. This research aims to analyze efforts to end the recruitment and use of child soldiers in the Central African Republic (CAR). It will focus on explaining the efforts made by UNICEF using a negotiation management perspective, specifically William Ury's third-party negotiation theory. The present study employs a comprehensive literature review and meticulous document analysis of books, scientific journals, news articles, official documents from the Central African Republic government, UNICEF, and other relevant reports. The findings of this study indicate that UNICEF's strategic mediation has successfully freed and reintegrated thousands of children. However, challenges remain due to mistrust and resource constraints. This study makes a significant contribution to the field of conflict resolution research by emphasizing negotiation as a multidimensional approach worthy of consideration for addressing the issue of child soldiers in complex humanitarian crises.

Keywords: Central African Republic; child soldiers; conflict resolution; negotiation management; UNICEF.

INTRODUCTION

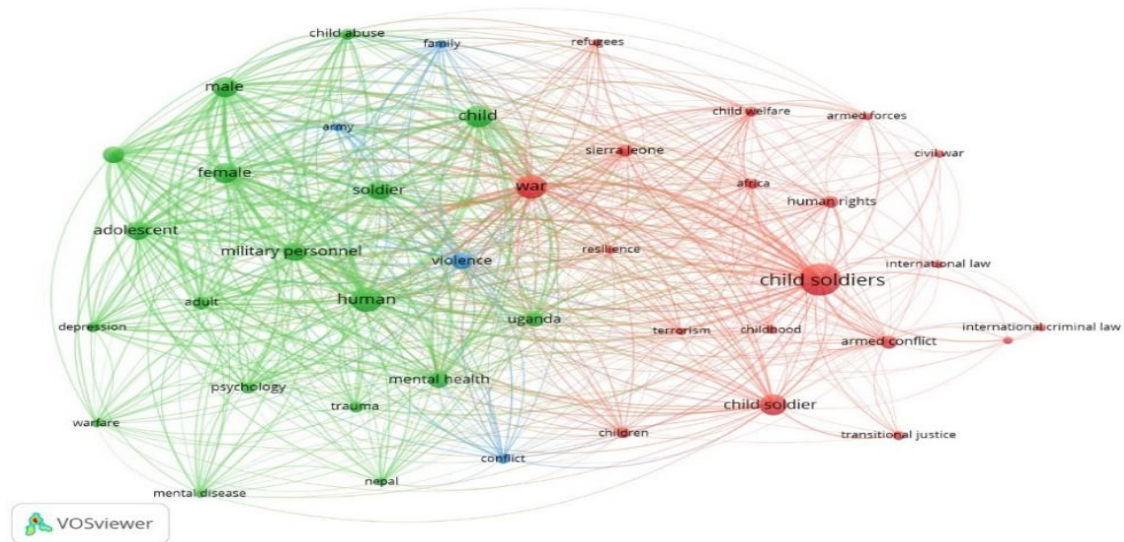
Internal conflict, political intolerance, and escalating sectarian violence in Africa have resulted in widespread poverty, malnutrition, and considerable underdevelopment across the continent (Gowan & Davis, 2024; UNICEF, 2022). The protracted battle over several decades has resulted in the emergence of guerrilla factions and militias, which have facilitated the extensive conscription of minors as combatants (Bodineau, 2015). The Central African Republic (CAR) has consistently experienced warfare and political instability, culminating in a civil war that erupted in 2012 following a coup by Seleka militants who ousted Bozizé from power. This conflict has resulted in significant population relocation, with one of the most devastating consequences being widespread conscription of children as soldiers (Becker, 2013; IHL in Action, 2015; Mlambo et al., 2019). Over 14,000 children have been conscripted by numerous armed factions, while the true figure is likely significantly greater, given that CAR's area is dominated by these groups. Most children are recruited through abduction, but there are also children who volunteer to protect themselves or their communities, as well as children who join to avenge the loss of their loved ones (Davies & True, 2019; ICRC, 2024; Olsson, 2018).

CAR ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1992 and subsequently ratified the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict in 2017 (Anyikame, 2011; Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan, 2023). Nonetheless, the challenge of child recruiting persists as a significant issue that is challenging to address internally. Due to the ongoing humanitarian and protection crisis stemming from the 2012 conflict, the recruitment of child soldiers surged by 50% between 2016 and 2017, attributed to the elevated levels of violence (UNICEF, 2018). Between July 1, 2021 and June 30, 2023, there were 1,432 major violations involving 1,046 children, including the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict, abduction, and sexual violence (Barnaba, 2024). The CAR's failure to tackle child soldier recruitment in armed conflict underscores the necessity for a neutral intermediary capable of engaging both the Central African Republic government, which is bound by national and international regulation, and the armed factions that continue to enlist child soldiers (Winarti, 2019).

The pressing nature of this issue is demonstrated by the search results for the term "Child AND Soldier" in the Scopus database, which produced 1,128 publications. The

author subsequently employed VOSviewer to elucidate the topic examined on the scopus platform, as illustrated in the following figure:

Figure 1. Overlay Visualization of Literature



Source: Processed by authors using VOS application (2025).

The red group first examines the legal and diplomatic environment that enables discussion for the release of minors. The green category contains a comprehensive overview of the psychosocial effect and mental rehabilitation procedures for former child soldiers, highlighting the involvement of international organizations such as UNICEF. The investigation of field interactions between child refugees and host communities is categorized within the blue group, serving as a context for long-term reintegration. The interrelation among groups highlights the necessity of comprehensive strategy, elucidating how legal policies, mental health therapies, and community support mutually reinforce one another in DDR (Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration) activities, particularly in the context of supporting former child soldiers and facilitating their successful reintegration into society. Numerous prior studies indicate that UNICEF plays a vital role in preventing and addressing the recruitment of child soldiers in the Central African Republic and analogous regions.

Winarti (2019) discusses UNICEF's work with child soldier in Central Africa, focusing on the causes and effect of conflict. UNICEF, as a global advocate for children's rights, has enacted significant changes through collaboration with the international community and by influencing the governments of Central Africa. UNICEF aims to

connect all parties involved in the conflict in the Central Africa by providing donations to construct facilities that safeguard children from the impact of war, thereby preventing their recruitment as combatants and target of violence. UNICEF engages with regional African Union organizations and UN entities to oversee legal infringements against children (Winarti, 2019). Subsequently, Ayman (2020) evaluated the cooperative relationship between the Central African Republic (CAR) and UNICEF. He outlined the conflict in CAR by discussing the factors behind the recruitment of children as soldiers during war and then explained the role of UNICEF in handling cases of child recruitment and its challenges in efforts to prevent recruitment. Alusala through his book "Armed Conflict and Disarmament", explains that to overcome the problem of child soldiers in Central Africa, peace negotiations are needed that include dialogue at various levels, between both government, rebels, international cooperation, and the rule of law, and for this negotiation, UNICEF is necessary as a negotiator. This process is called DDR (Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration) to protect children in armed conflict (Nelson, 2007).

Moreover, Reta (2008) offers negotiations for the release of child soldiers forced to join armed groups during war, particularly non-state armed groups. Key strategies used are intensive-based approaches, legal and diplomatic pressure, and mediators. This research, therefore, highlights the importance of international organizations in negotiating the release of children by providing humanitarian assistance, education, skills training, and enforcement of international law. This process can be successful with a careful, intensive approach and international pressure. Still, the long-term impact on children who have been soldiers is a significant issue that must be addressed next. Although the above literature has mapped out the various dimensions of UNICEF's interventions, there are still conceptual gaps regarding the application of negotiation management theory in addressing child soldiers. Most studies have not systematically used Ury's negotiation framework (2015) to describe the mechanisms of third-party mediation in armed conflict. According to Ury, effective negotiation focuses on basic principles, such as separating issues from relationships between actors, exploring the interests behind positions, creating mutually beneficial options, and using objective criteria for sustainable agreements.

Using a qualitative descriptive approach, this study will analyze: (a) how concrete agreements to remove children from armed groups are formulated; (b) the joint commitment of relevant parties to stop the recruitment of children; (c) the implementation of reintegration programs that bridge children back into society; and (d) efforts to strengthen relations between the government, local communities, and armed groups to prevent recurring conflicts. The focus of the study on UNICEF as a third-party mediator is expected to reveal indicators of negotiation success, including the sustainability of social reintegration and the stability of inter-party relations, as well as enrich the body of conflict resolution and international relations theory with an empirical and measurable perspective on negotiation management. This study presents a novel viewpoint on the significance of dialogue and collaboration in addressing child soldier frequently depends exclusively on legal military approaches, suggesting that issue can be effectively tackled through a negotiation management framework.

METHODOLOGY

Conceptual Framework

Third-Party Negotiation Theory

Conflict management is a deliberate procedure for resolving disagreements arising from divergent perspective, interest, or objective through negotiation. This process necessitates efficient interaction and communication among the involved parties to achieve consensus, ensuring that all parties comprehend each other's objectives, stences, and interest by actively engaging with constructive feedback and ensuring that message aligns with the negotiation goals (Robbins & Coulter, 2016). Emotional regulation is essential in negotiations; a negotiator must guide the dialouge towards the fact and solutions rather than allowing negative emotions like anger to dominate. Empathy is essential for comprehending the viewpoint of the opposing party (Fisher et al., 2013; Gates, 2011); thus negotiation management not only addresses problems but also generates additional value and fortifies enduring connections.

This research employs the third-party developed by Ury, a distinguished authority in negotiation and dispute resolution, and a co-founder of the negotiation department at Harvard Law School. This approach emphasizes the significance of a third party as an impartial mediator who facilitates meaningful dialogue without bias. A fundamental

nation in this approach is *going to balcony*, which entails achieving an objective perspective by detaching oneself from the emotions and tension induced by the conflict (Glaser, 2016; Ury, 2015). The disagreeing parties are anticipated to disengage from the reactive cycle that incites negative emotions by proceeding to the balcony, thus enabling them to choose sensible measures. A third party is employed to ensure that all participants are acknowledged and understood without any domination in the dialogue, maintaining neutrality and fostering a favorable atmosphere for negotiation (Susskind & Field, 1996; Wheeler, 2013). Furthermore, Ury established the concept of *bargaining with principles*, which emphasizes addressing the fundamental requirements of all parties through objectivity, adaptability, and innovative solutions. This notion elucidates the necessity of objective criteria, including legal standards, empirical evidence, or societal norms, to mitigate bias and emotional influences that obstruct negotiation (Glaser, 2016; Kriesberg & Dayton, 2021). A third party is required to discover shared interests and leverage them to establish a durable agreement.

Ury assert that conflict frequently emerges from disparities, absence of trust, and insufficient positive connectedness among the relevant parties. The involvement of a third party as a facilitator seeks to enhance interactions between parties by promoting empathy and mutual understanding. The third party serves as a catalyst, fostering a collaborative and conducive environment for conflict resolution, which is typically recognized as a crucial element in lasting solutions. This approach indicates that the significance of the solutions attained extends beyond urgent requirements; it must also be sustainable to avert future conflict. In certain instances, third parties may serve as post-conflict monitors to guarantee adherence to the agreements established by all parties (Gartner, 2014; Ury, 2015). Ury's concept is employed to examine UNICEF's function as a neutral mediator in the context of child military recruitment in CAR. UNICEF serves as an impartial intermediary that promotes dialogue among the government, armed factions, and local populations to alleviate tensions by establishing a secure environment and cultivating trust. Through this method, UNICEF assists the opposing parties in adopting an impartial perspective about the issue of child recruitment. Consequently, Ury's third-party theory elucidates UNICEF's role in enhancing the sustainability of negotiations outcomes, encompassing both the formulation of agreements and the monitoring process in the context of the child soldier recruitment conflict in the CAR.

Research Method

This study employs a qualitative-descriptive methodology to thoroughly elucidate the problem of child army recruiting in the Central African Republic. This methodology was used to offer an extensive comprehension of the topic from the historical, social, and institutional viewpoints. The social phenomena will be examined by delineating the values of variable according to the researched indicators, without establishing link or comparisons with other variables (Zuhdi et al., 2025). Research data were obtained through library research, compiling information from diverse sources, including books, scientific journals, pertinent news article, and official documents from institutions such as the Central Africa Reapublic government, UNICEF, and others relevant reports. The gathered data will undergo analysis through data reduction techniques, a qualitative research method that entails simplifying, categorising, and omitting extraneous information, thereby yielding significant insights and aiding in the formulation of conclusions.

The Children's Soldier Recruitment

According to data, approximately 300,000 children are at risk of being recruited by one of the 164 armed groups that use child soldiers. Forty percent of these children are from African countries (Romaniuk et al., 2023). This phenomenon is closely related to Africa's entrenched culture of war, in which many youth feel responsible for participating in violence to protect their villages and resources. In some cultures, rituals leading to adulthood often include violent elements, such as war (Burke & Hatcher-Moore, 2017). The situation in the Central African Republic illustrates complex internal challenges, including insurgencies, coups, and human rights violations resulting from intergroup conflict. The government has difficulty controlling the situation. Despite the country's ratification of the Conventions on the Rights of the Child and the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict and a 2019 peace agreement between the government and armed groups, children in the country are still frequently recruited or used by armed groups (UNHCR, n.d.). Although there are formal commitments, implementing child protection policies still faces significant obstacles.

Between July 1, 2021, and June 30, 2023, the UN recorded 1.432 grave violations involving 1.046 children, the most frequent of which were the recruitment and use of

children in armed conflict (Intersos, 2024). This recruitment targets not only boys but also girls. While some research suggests that the recruitment of children is forced (Mlambo et al., 2019), there are also indications of voluntary recruitment. The reason behind this phenomenon tends to revolve around a lack of security in refugee camps, poverty, and a desire for revenge. Refugee camps are prime recruitment grounds for armed groups. Conditions such as food shortages, poor security, and increased disease exacerbate the situation, driving children to seek protection and acceptance in armed groups. Conversely, the government often fails to prioritize improvements to camps, exacerbating conditions. Poverty plagues sub-Saharan Africa, where children have limited access to education and employment. This is a major factor driving children into these situations. This can lead to frustration and depression. Revenge motivates, especially in religious conflict, and also plays a role. Children feel compelled to avenge the deaths of family members who were victims of religious violence (Koena, 2024). While some children may take the initiative to join armed groups, this phenomenon remains a serious problem that threatens the security and well-being of children in the Central African Republic.

UNICEF as a Third Party to Handle Child Soldier Issues

As one of the United Nations' international organizations that promotes children's rights and protection, UNICEF plays a pivotal role in addressing the challenges children globally face. Additionally, UNICEF ensures that each member state that has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child and all its protocols implements the international regime. One of the primary concerns for UNICEF in the African region, particularly in the Central African Republic, is the issue of child recruitment. Consequently, UNICEF can fulfill its international organization's roles as a third party in regulation, supervision, and operational functions (Anugerah & Deniar, 2022). In the context of the Central African Republic, UNICEF has implemented a series of programs based on international conventions and applicable regulations and has assumed responsibility for fundraising to address several child-related issues, including the problem of child soldiers in the Central African Republic.

UNICEF's Child Soldier Response Efforts

Under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989, children have the right to life, development, participation, and protection. The fundamental principles and legal norms established in this Convention underscore the obligation of each nation to ensure the survival and well-being of children, to empower them to engage actively in decision-making processes that impact their lives, and to safeguard them from all forms of violence, exploitation, and abuse (Gunawan et al., 2021). Children can experience physical growth disorders, cognitive development delays, and emotional trauma that have long-term impacts if their rights are not fulfilled. This will impact a country's social conditions, for example, through low-quality education, rising dropout rates, and weak community welfare, which can trigger intergenerational poverty. Therefore, the effectiveness of implementing the Convention on the Rights of the Child is an essential indicator for assessing a country's progress toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially targets related to poverty alleviation, good health, and inclusive education.

As a UN agency focused on child protection, UNICEF has developed policies that focus on two main aspects: prevention and protection against violations of children's rights. This policy includes efforts to prevent violence, commercial sexual exploitation, human trafficking, child labor, and harmful customary practices such as female circumcision and child sexual abuse (Unicef, 2006; UNICEF, 2020). In addition, UNICEF also emphasizes the importance of meeting children's basic needs, including access to quality education, health care, balanced nutrition, and an environment that supports the development of their potential. In the SDGs framework, child protection is interpreted as a response to violence and empowerment that provides opportunities for children to participate in society, build positive social networks, and develop life skills. This holistic and sustainable approach ensures that each intervention collaborates with government programs and local partners to achieve maximum and measurable results.

In the Central African Republic (CAR), UNICEF has been operating since 1986, providing a variety of health, nutrition, sanitation, education, and child protection programs. In the context of conflict, one of the main focuses is to address the recruitment of children as soldiers, a phenomenon that threatens the future of young people and hinders the peace process. UNICEF applies three strategic approaches: first, convening and representing the interests of governments, civil society organizations, and the

international community in formulating policies to of ending child recruitment (Backryd, 2024; UNICEF, 2024). Second, it provides a platform for stakeholders to discuss and negotiate concrete steps, such as social reintegration and rehabilitation programs; third, it articulates mandatory child protection standards that all parties must adopt, including monitoring and accountability mechanisms. Through collaborations with local authorities, security agencies, and NGOs, UNICEF seeks to create long-term solutions that stop recruitment and restore children's rights while strengthening the legal and social framework to prevent future recurrence (UNICEF, 2024).

However, the complexity of the conflict in the Central African Republic has led UNICEF to undertake a comprehensive Child Protection Program to address one of the worst impacts of the conflict. The program aims to identify, rescue, and rehabilitate children recruited by armed groups while providing them with psychosocial, educational, and social reintegration support, implemented in collaboration with local governments and non-governmental organizations. The Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) is used to identify child soldiers recruited by armed groups. This process aims to collect systematic, accurate, timely, objective, and reliable information on grave violations against children in armed conflict and other situations of concern, as determined by the United Nations Secretary-General. Furthermore, the purpose of the MRM is to monitor six serious violations that occur, namely the killing or mutilation of children, recruitment or use of children by armed forces and armed groups, attacks on schools or hospitals, rape and other forms of sexual violence against children, abduction of children, and denial of humanitarian access to children (Lignier, 2024; OSRSGCAAC, 2014; UNICEF, 2010, 2020).

UNICEF and the UN implemented a Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) in the Central African Republic with a mandate to collect and present timely, objective, accurate and reliable information on grave violations against children in the context of armed conflict; produce regular and timely reports on the conditions of children affected by the conflict to inform more effective interventions; initiate dialogue with parties to the conflict to formulate and implement an Action Plan on the recruitment and use of children, sexual violence, killing or serious injury of children, and attacks on schools and health facilities; monitor the implementation of the commitments contained in the Action Plan and other obligations of armed parties to end violations against children in armed

conflict; serve as a platform for information analysis, discussion, follow-up and triggering appropriate responses by the UN team and relevant agencies to UN Security Council resolutions on Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC) and recommendations of the Secretary-General and the Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict (SCWG-CAAC); and provide feedback to all parties involved in the MRM, including monitors, communities and civil society organizations, to enhance ownership and sustainability of the mechanism (OSRSGCAAC, 2014; UNICEF, 2021; UNSC, 1950).

In 2019, UNICEF trained more than 75 members of the MRM working group to ethically collect data and report incidents of grave violations against children's rights. Through advocacy in collaboration with MINUSCA, this effort successfully secured commitments from two armed groups to cease the practice of child recruitment. There are 1,197 children, including 250 girls, who were previously associated with armed groups, successfully exited, and have been registered in the reintegration program led by UNICEF (UNICEF, 2018; United Nations, 2024). UNICEF in the Central African Republic (CAR) prioritizes protecting children from violence, especially in humanitarian contexts, with support from UNICEF Regional Offices and regional management teams. This effort is strengthened by improving monitoring and reporting mechanisms for grave violations against children in CAR in close coordination with MINUSCA and other UN agencies. The main goal is to intensively increase child protection advocacy, especially in an effort to free them from armed groups. In 2018, in collaboration with national and international non-governmental organizations, UNICEF in the Central African Republic supported the release of 913 children, including 242 women, from armed groups (UNICEF, 2018; United Nations Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, 2024).

In the case of CAR, international organizations and NGOs operate under UNICEF's coordination through the Child Protection program to provide child-friendly spaces, recreational activities, vocational training, and technical support to enhance the quality of education in emergency areas. It demonstrates how international organizations and social groups can express their will and play a crucial role in addressing global issues, such as protecting children in conflict situations. Coordination and collaboration in support of children affected by conflict in the Central African Republic involve various strategic

partners, including international organizations, local NGOs, and other agencies. UNICEF collaborates with its partners to support the release of child soldiers from military groups/armed groups, providing psychosocial support, education, and socio-economic reintegration to thousands of children, including girls, affected by violence and conflict. Key activities include providing child-friendly spaces, implementing recreational activities, and providing vocational training and technical support to enhance the quality of education in emergency areas. Some UNICEF partners in addressing issues in Central Africa: Association des Femmes Rurales de Batangafo pour le Développement (AFRBD), Enfants Sans Frontières (ESF), War Child, Plan International, Esperance, Dekoa Social Affairs Service, CARITAS Bouar, International Rescue Committee (IRC), COOPI, Intersos, Ministry of Education CAR, MINUSCA PR United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic, Caritas Bangui, dan ODESCA (Barnaba, 2024; Norelius, 2023; UNICEF, 2019; UNICEF Middle East and North Africa, 2019).

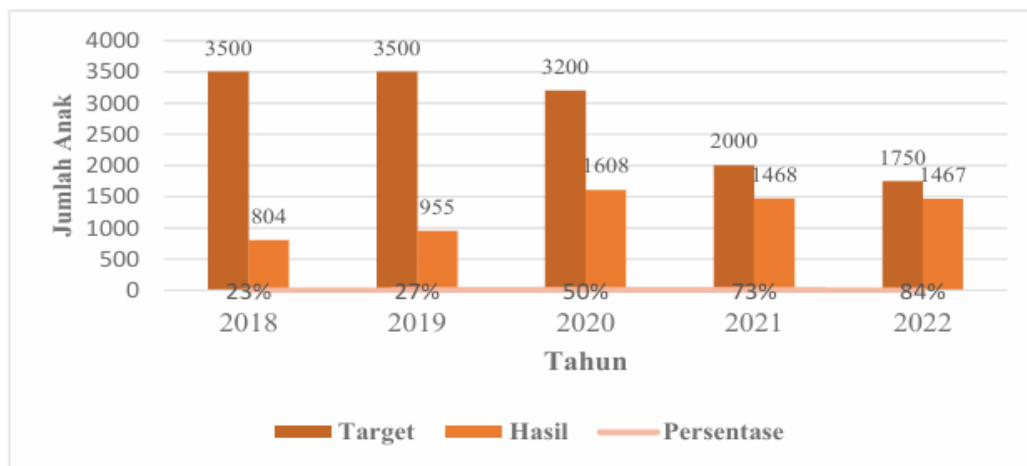
UNICEF's Negotiation Management Process

The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) in the Central African Republic has adopted negotiation as a strategic approach to prevent the recruitment of children into armed conflict. The initial step entails a thorough examination of the underlying causes, wherein UNICEF identifies child recruitment as a result of protracted conflict and an absence of child protection mechanisms (Bahter, 2020). In the context of William Ury's third-party negotiation theory, UNICEF functions as an "investigator," tasked with collecting factual information to comprehend the expectations and interests of all stakeholders (Cristian, 2024). This process was carried out through intensive dialogue with the Central African Republic government, armed groups, and non-governmental organizations to build a credible data foundation and map points of common interest. Consequently, the conflicting parties became more aware of the urgency of child protection, which then became the basis for further negotiations (Cristian, 2024; Glaser, 2016).

Furthermore, in addition to the efforts mentioned in the previous section, UNICEF has facilitated consensus-building among the Central African Republic government, armed groups, and partner organizations by collecting and analyzing data to build trust

among the parties. As Ury (1991) explains, a third party should be able to create a neutral environment in which conflicting parties can focus on common interests. As a result, UNICEF facilitated the release of thousands of children and promoted child protection advocacy through strategic partnerships (UNICEF, 2018, 2022; UNICEF Middle East and North Africa, 2022; United Nations Children's Fund, 2022). It is shown in the following figure;

Figure 2. Number of children in the Central African Republic liberated from armed groups by UNICEF



Source: Prepared by the author based on data from UNICEF's Humanitarian Action for Children Report 2018-2022.

The figure illustrates the efficacy of UNICEF's initiative in addressing the phenomenon of child recruitment into the military in the Central African Republic. In this context, UNICEF is a neutral third party under William Ury's "The Third Side" theory. As a mediator, UNICEF is pivotal in facilitating constructive dialogue between the government, armed groups, and local communities. This collaborative effort aims to develop sustainable, inclusive solutions that address the underlying causes of conflict and promote long-term peace and development. UNICEF employs an open negotiation strategy that not only mitigates differences in positions but also directs attention to common interests in child protection and social stability, thereby engendering an atmosphere of mutual trust, which is critical to the success of rehabilitation programs (Olsson, 2018; UNICEF, 2022). The annual data trend significantly increases, indicating that UNICEF's mediation efforts have built positive momentum. This success illustrates the importance of involving neutral actors with international legitimacy and technical capabilities in armed conflict. The initial steps of UNICEF, such as the formulation of a

multi-stakeholder framework and the establishment of clear outcome indicators, have laid the foundation for implementing a more systematic and measurable child reintegration program in protection and education.

In more detail, Figure 2 shows an increase in the success rate from 23% in 2018 to 84% in 2022, which marks a crucial transformation in handling child recruitment cases (UNICEF, 2018; UNICEF Middle East and North Africa, 2022; United Nations Children's Fund, 2022). In the process, UNICEF applies a "bargaining with principles" approach, negotiating agreements not only on short-term terms but also grounded in humanitarian values and children's rights. By using this method, UNICEF has built reintegration programs that include skills training, psychosocial support, and access to formal education. In addition, UNICEF also catalyzes all parties to accept and support the program design by building consensus among stakeholders. This systematic approach provides a strong foundation for increasing the effectiveness and sustainability of the results, as seen in relevant empirical data that is then supported by continuous monitoring and periodic evaluation (Cristian, 2024; UNICEF, 2022).

Furthermore, the emphasis on human rights principles following the Convention on the Rights of the Child is one of UNICEF's negotiation strategies that has an impact on ensuring that each agreement not only resolves the conflict but also protects the fundamental rights of vulnerable children. Ury's concept of "negotiating with principles" is upheld by emphasizing morals and the international legal framework at every stage of mediation (Cristian, 2024; Ury, 2015). This process involves an in-depth study of the local context and national regulations, so the solution is adaptive and sustainable. UNICEF integrates a child rights approach into the reintegration curriculum, making the fulfillment of education, health, and protection rights a measure of program success. Thus, the mediation carried out not only reduces conflict but also prepares the children of former combatants to become productive members of society, thereby strengthening long-term stability in conflict areas.

Accordingly, the measures undertaken by UNICEF can be delineated by Ury's conceptual framework, which is based on four fundamental tenets that facilitate problem-solving by distinguishing between the negotiated issue and the personal relationships and emotions involved. Separating these elements makes it possible to prevent personal conflicts from impeding the resolution of the problem. In the context of UNICEF, the

negotiation process enabled the organization to distinguish between the issue of child recruitment and the actors involved. UNICEF adopted a child rights-based approach in its engagement with the government, armed groups, and communities. Consequently, UNICEF does not portray certain parties as adversaries but instead advocates for collaboration for the benefit of children (Lignier, 2024; UNICEF, 2013). In practice, however, UNICEF has engaged local leaders and armed groups in dialogue without emphasizing their past mistakes to foster a collective responsibility to protect children. Nevertheless, obstacles persist due to distrust between the government and rebel groups, which has impeded the negotiation process and demonstrated that personal issues continue to influence its outcome. Despite this, UNICEF persisted in pursuing a humanitarian approach, ensuring that the parties involved felt valued while maintaining focus on the primary issue (UNICEF, 2020).

The second key element in the Ury framework adopted by UNICEF is prioritizing fundamental interests over rigid positions. Rather than emphasizing the territorial demands or power of armed groups, UNICEF identified the need for a safe environment for children as a common interest. Over the past five years, UNICEF has campaigned that child protection is a moral imperative and a prerequisite for long-term stability in CAR. Using this principle has had a tangible impact on the field conditions where several armed groups have decided to change from initially refusing to agreeing to release children gradually. This is because these armed groups realize that ending child recruitment can increase their legitimacy in international forums (Mlambo et al., 2019). This approach shifts perceptions of conflict actors and shows how interest-based negotiations can create opportunities for more sustainable solutions.

Then, the principle of exploring options before agreement has encouraged UNICEF and international partners, such as UNHCR and WHO, to design creative and effective alternative solutions. For example, programs that offer educational and skills training for released children and psychosocial rehabilitation services in a socio-economic reintegration program aimed at overcoming trauma are concrete examples of this effort (Barnaba, 2024; MINUSCA, 2014; Wekerle, 2024). By providing a portfolio of options, UNICEF provides a more flexible negotiating space, where armed parties can hand over children without losing face in the community. Through this multi-solution approach,

negotiations are no longer a struggle for compromise positions, but rather a collaborative process to find the most appropriate and acceptable form of child protection for all parties.

Furthermore, UNICEF emphasizes the use of objective criteria as a basis for negotiations, ensuring a fair and resilient agreement. The Convention on the Rights of the Child and other international guidelines serve as references, so each deal does not depend on pressure or power from any one party (UNICEF, 2020). In CAR, an independent monitoring mechanism was developed to ensure that there was no re-recruitment of children, even when initial resistance emerged from some armed groups. The pressure from the international community and development assistance incentives eventually paved the way for the implementation of these objective standards. Since 2019, more than 5,000 children have been released, providing quantitative evidence of the effectiveness of data-driven, goal-oriented strategies (UNICEF, 2019, 2022; UNICEF Middle East and North Africa, 2019, 2022).

Despite evident progress, UNICEF encountered substantial difficulties in achieving its objective of rehabilitating children recruited as soldiers during the initial phase of 2018–2020. This is evidenced by the data presented in Figure 2, which show an increase in the percentage of results obtained each year. The failure to meet this target indicates deeply entrenched structural and psychological barriers within the negotiation process. Armed groups and governments, as parties to the conflict, often have positions and interests that are difficult to reconcile and tend to adhere to their arguments, following the third-party negotiation theory developed by William Ury, UNICEF endeavors to encourage the parties involved to "move to the balcony," thereby facilitating the establishment of emotional distance that enables them to perceive the conflict objectively and be receptive to collaborative solutions (Glaser, 2016). However, the prevailing lack of trust among the parties involved intensifies their resistance to this approach, impeding effective communication and making agreements difficult to achieve (Paris Peace Forum, 2023; Smyth, 2003). This underscores the need to strengthen the foundation of trust and mutual understanding between the parties before implementing negotiation strategies. It can be achieved through intensive dialogue and facilitation that is sensitive to local dynamics.

Budget and logistical constraints are often significant barriers to achieving child protection and reintegration targets, alongside psychological and structural challenges.

These programs require adequate infrastructure, competent experts, and access to frequently hostile and security-prone conflict areas. Furthermore, cultural norms and social stigma against former child soldiers slow down their reintegration into society. From Ury's perspective, third parties, such as UNICEF, should strengthen a principles-based negotiation approach, putting the basic needs of all stakeholders, including local communities, at the forefront. This strategy designs inclusive and sustainable solutions by identifying common interests, such as security, psychosocial well-being and legal certainty. Engaging community leaders, strengthening local capacity, and combating stigma are essential to bridging the gap between international policy and realities.

Although third-party negotiations have not completely eradicated the practice of child recruitment in the Central African Republic, UNICEF's role has shown encouraging results. Building on Ury's theory, UNICEF has successfully facilitated the release of thousands of child soldiers and supported their reintegration into civilian life. Close collaboration with the government, local NGOs, and traditional leaders has had a dual impact: short-term rehabilitation efforts and structural changes in the child protection system. This systematic approach, grounded in justice and humanity, has proven that third-party involvement can trigger real change. Moving forward, lessons learned from the CAR experience can serve as an essential reference for honing negotiation mechanisms, increasing accountability, and ensuring that every child has the right to protection and a decent future.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that UNICEF's success in addressing child recruitment in the Central African Republic is not solely determined by its role as a facilitator of dialogue, but also by the systematic application of a third-party negotiation framework. Drawing on William Ury's theory of third-party negotiation management, UNICEF operationalized four key principles: separating issues from personal relationships, prioritizing shared interests, exploring various options before reaching an agreement, and adhering to objective criteria. This approach enables conflict actors—the government, armed groups, and local communities—to step back from their respective positions (“go to the balcony”) and build collective awareness regarding the urgency of child protection. Empirically, these findings demonstrate that a principle-based approach can yield tangible results, including the release and reintegration of thousands of children.

The theoretical contribution of this research lies in reinforcing the relevance of a principle-based negotiation approach in the context of armed conflict involving non-state actors and complex humanitarian issues. Meanwhile, empirically, this study demonstrates that, despite structural, psychological, and resource constraints during the early 2018–2020 period, a systematic negotiation framework still enabled trust-building among actors. This trust then served as the foundation for implementing long-term programs, such as skills training, psychosocial support, and access to education for children affected by the conflict. Thus, a child-justice-oriented mediation approach proved more inclusive and sustainable than conventional position-based negotiation.

Moving forward, further research needs to delve deeper into the role of local communities, particularly by considering gender and cultural dynamics in supporting the implementation of child reintegration agreements. Cross-national comparative studies with similar conflict characteristics are also crucial for identifying contextual factors that influence the effectiveness of negotiation management. Furthermore, research on the long-term impact of reintegration programs on the psychosocial well-being and economic independence of former child soldiers remains critically needed. The use of digital technology to monitor the implementation of agreements and to encourage the participation of children and civil society is also a relevant research agenda in the development of studies on conflict resolution and child protection.

DECLARATIONS

During the preparation of this article, the authors used Scopus AI to obtain valid academic content and enrich the literature review in our articles, ChatGPT (OpenAI GPT-4), Grammarly, and DeepL Writer were used to help refine the writing style and correct the grammar of the manuscript, Vosviewer to analyse literature to find out the gap of research and Mendeley to organize citations. After using these tools/services, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and took full responsibility for the publication's content.

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