

From Weapons to Trust:
Social Capital and Community Acceptance in the Reintegration of Former Child
Soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

Across eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, the reintegration of children formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups remains one of the most difficult tasks of post-conflict recovery.¹ Successive conflicts in the two Kivu provinces have drawn thousands of boys and girls into armed groups through coercion, abduction, survival strategies, and quests for protection or status. In response, national authorities, international organizations, and nongovernmental actors have built Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) interventions that emphasize demobilization, vocational training, and short-term economic support. Yet many former child soldiers continue to return to communities where they are feared, morally suspect, or treated as permanent outsiders.²

Contemporary insecurity in eastern DRC must be located in the longer history of the Congo Wars and their aftermaths. The 1994 Rwandan genocide and the movement of refugees, former Rwandan armed forces, and Interahamwe elements into eastern Zaire (former name of the DRC) destabilized the Kivu provinces and helped precipitate the First Congo War, which brought Laurent-Désiré Kabila to power in 1997. The Second Congo War then drew in neighboring states and Congolese rebel movements, including Rwanda- and Uganda-backed armed groups, local Mai-Mai militias, and foreign armed groups such as the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR). Even after formal peace agreements, eastern Congo remained militarized as national army units, foreign armed groups, community self-defense forces, and resource-linked militias competed for territory, protection rents, minerals, and local authority. In South Kivu,

these overlapping conflicts meant that civilians often experienced war not as a single national event but as a shifting local field of raids, recruitment, displacement, taxation, and suspicion.³

Children were drawn into these armed formations through multiple pathways. Some were abducted, threatened, or forcibly recruited; others joined after family separation, poverty, school interruption, or the search for protection in communities where armed actors controlled movement and resources. Once associated with an armed group, children might be expected to carry weapons or ammunition, serve as guards, cooks, porters, messengers, spies, or escorts, loot food, collect intelligence, work in camps, or accompany fighters during attacks. Girls and young women could also be forced into domestic labor, sexual exploitation, or coerced unions, while still being treated by communities as morally responsible for their association with fighters. Life as a child soldier therefore involved not only exposure to violence but the gradual substitution of armed-group discipline, hierarchy, fear, and survival routines for the ordinary social roles of childhood.⁴

This article argues that reintegration in eastern DRC is best understood as a problem of social capital as much as a problem of poverty or trauma. Returnees do not simply need tools, training, or counseling; they also need to be recognized again as sons, daughters, neighbors, students, worshippers, and citizens. Where those relationships are weak, conditional, or absent, economic support alone does not produce durable civilian belonging.⁵

Social capital is used here not as a celebratory term but as a relational lens for understanding how trust, reciprocity, and access are distributed after conflict. In the case of former child soldiers, the question is not merely whether networks exist, but whether those networks receive the returnee as a member in good standing, treat the child as morally recoverable, and connect that child to institutions capable of securing a civilian future.⁶

The analysis centers on qualitative fieldwork conducted in the Uvira region of South Kivu. Uvira offers a valuable case because it combines prolonged armed mobilization, cross-border insecurity, dense local social networks, and a long history of community-based attempts to absorb returning youth. The article asks three related questions: How do bonding, bridging, and linking forms of social capital shape reintegration? How do trust and stigma operate in everyday interactions? And how are these processes altered by gendered expectations surrounding violence, sexuality, and family honor?

The article proceeds in six parts. It first situates social capital within the child-soldier reintegration literature, then outlines the research design, presents the findings through three numbered themes, analyzes their interrelations, and concludes by reflecting on the implications for DDR policy and scholarship in the DRC.

Social Capital, Stigma, and Reintegration

Research on former child soldiers has consistently shown that postwar outcomes depend not only on wartime exposure but also on the social environment into which children return. Longitudinal studies from Sierra Leone, northern Uganda, and Liberia demonstrate that stigma, household support, and community acceptance are often more predictive of long-term adjustment than receipt of DDR benefits alone.⁷ This literature has made it increasingly difficult to treat reintegration as a narrow technical sequence of disarmament and service provision.

Within the broader social-science literature, social capital typically refers to the norms, networks, and trust that enable coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit.⁸ In post-conflict environments, those relationships are never neutral. They can sustain mutual aid and shared protection, but they can also solidify exclusion, reproduce local hierarchies, and keep former child soldiers marked as dangerous or morally tainted. This ambivalence is especially important

in settings where communities themselves have experienced displacement, betrayal, and violence.

The distinction among bonding, bridging, and linking social capital is especially useful for understanding reintegration in eastern Congo.⁹ Bonding social capital refers to close ties within families, kinship groups, and trusted peer circles. Bridging social capital captures horizontal ties across neighborhoods, congregations, age groups, and local associations. Linking social capital refers to vertical ties between individuals or communities and formal institutions such as schools, local administrators, police, courts, NGOs, and DDR structures. These layers do not operate in isolation; rather, they shape one another continuously.

In eastern DRC, prolonged conflict has weakened all three forms. Families have been separated by displacement and recruitment; communities have been fractured by ethnic polarization, fear, and competition over scarce resources; and institutions are often experienced as distant, predatory, or inconsistent.¹⁰ For returning children, reintegration is therefore never a simple return to a stable social order. It is an attempt to re-enter a social field that has itself been transformed by war.

The child-soldier literature provides several comparative insights that help frame the Uvira case. Betancourt and colleagues show that psychosocial distress among former child soldiers in Sierra Leone was shaped heavily by postwar stigma and caregiver support.¹¹ Humphreys and Weinstein similarly found that community acceptance and local participation explained reintegration outcomes better than DDR benefits alone.¹² In Uganda, Annan, Blattman, and colleagues likewise demonstrated that family acceptance, livelihood options, and gendered experiences of violence mediated the long-term consequences of abduction and armed association.¹³

At the same time, much of the DDR literature still privileges economic insertion as the main benchmark of success. The dominant questions become how many children entered training, received start-up materials, or enrolled in schooling. Those indicators matter, but they often flatten a more difficult reality: a child may possess a training certificate or tool kit and still remain socially unaccepted, bureaucratically invisible, and emotionally isolated.¹⁴ The issue is not simply what resources are distributed, but whether those resources are embedded in relationships that make civilian life livable and legible.

This article therefore treats reintegration as a social and moral process rather than merely an administrative one. It also contributes to the literature by making gender central to the analysis. Girls and young women often return not only with the burden of armed association but also with pregnancies, children born of forced unions, or reputations that mark them as sexually compromised. In such cases, reintegration cannot be understood without attention to the gendered norms that organize household authority, marriageability, public visibility, and access to institutions.¹⁵

The conceptual payoff of the social-capital approach is that it links intimate care, community recognition, and institutional access within one framework. Bonding ties show whether a child is welcomed upon returning home. Bridging ties show whether the wider community allows the child to participate in collective life. Linking ties show whether formal systems recognize the child as a rights-bearing civilian. Durable reintegration depends on the interaction of all three.¹⁶

The argument advanced here thus far differs from trauma-centered and purely economic accounts in two ways. First, it foregrounds the social relationships that mediate whether children can actually use material resources or therapeutic support. Second, it explains why reintegration

remains incomplete when formal programs ignore the everyday moral worlds in which returnees must live. In contexts of weak governance and persistent insecurity, the household, the congregation, the neighborhood, and the local school may matter as much as any official DDR package.

Research Context and Methodology

The article draws on qualitative fieldwork conducted in the Uvira region of South Kivu as part of a broader doctoral study on identity and reintegration among former child soldiers in eastern DRC. Uvira is a strategically significant border region shaped by repeated armed mobilization, cross-border movement, and strong local religious and customary institutions. These features make it a particularly instructive site for examining how trust is broken, negotiated, and partially restored after conflict.¹⁷

The research follows a social-constructivist, narrative approach. Rather than measuring reintegration through predefined indicators alone, it examines how returnees and those around them interpreted recruitment, return, stigma, belonging, and civilian identity. Semi-structured interviews made it possible to trace how different actors described the same process from different vantage points: former child soldiers, parents and caregivers, local leaders, and NGO practitioners.¹⁸

Participants were identified through a snowball strategy initiated with local NGOs and child-protection networks that had preexisting relationships with war-affected youth and families. For the purposes of this article, the analysis focuses on interviews with approximately nineteen former child soldiers who had all been recruited as minors, ten parents or caregivers, ten community leaders and local authorities, and eight NGO practitioners. The sample is not

statistically representative, but it is analytically rich and allows triangulation across perspectives.¹⁹

Interviews were conducted primarily in Swahili and French, with translation support where necessary. They were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed, translated into English, and coded thematically. Ethical procedures prioritized informed consent or assent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and a do-no-harm approach attentive to distress. Pseudonyms are used throughout, and identifying details have been generalized where needed.²⁰ The broader doctoral study received Institutional Review Board approval through George Mason University before fieldwork began.

The coding process combined thematic and relational analysis. Initial coding focused on family relationships, neighbor interactions, participation in rituals and community activities, encounters with institutions, and references to trust, stigma, and acceptance. These codes were then clustered into the bonding-bridging-linking framework. Throughout the analysis, special attention was given to gender differences, including how female returnees described silence, shame, motherhood, and exclusion from public spaces.²¹

The goal was not to test hypotheses statistically but to develop a grounded account of how social relations shape reintegration on the ground. The evidence is therefore interpretive and mechanism-oriented: it identifies recurring patterns and meanings rather than estimating prevalence. This approach is well suited to a context where reintegration is experienced through narratives, relationships, and ordinary interactions that are difficult to capture through administrative measures alone.

Findings: Social Capital, Trust, and Community Acceptance

The findings are organized around three interrelated themes that emerged from the interviews. These themes are not separate stages of reintegration, but overlapping dimensions of how former child soldiers experience return, belonging, and recognition in everyday life. Numbering them clarifies the structure of the evidence and highlights how each theme captures a distinct layer of social reintegration.

Theme 1. Bonding social capital: family, caregiving, and peer support. This theme refers to the close interpersonal ties—especially with parents, caregivers, siblings, and peers—that can provide emotional security, recognition, and practical support, but can also reproduce fear, judgment, and conditional acceptance.

Theme 2. Bridging social capital: community rituals, participation, and everyday acceptance. This theme captures the wider horizontal relationships through which returnees are publicly received, included, or excluded in community life, including rituals, faith spaces, shared activities, and everyday interactions with neighbors and local leaders.

Theme 3. Linking social capital: institutions, recognition, and access to rights. This theme concerns returnees' relationships with formal institutions such as schools, local authorities, police, DDR structures, and NGOs, and the extent to which these institutions provide recognition, protection, documentation, and access to civilian opportunities.

Theme 1. Bonding Social Capital: Families, Caregivers, and Peer Networks

For many former child soldiers, the household was the first and most emotionally charged site of reintegration. Some participants described profoundly affirming reunions in which mothers, grandmothers, or other caregivers publicly reclaimed them as children of the family. These moments mattered because they did more than provide shelter. They reintroduced

returnees to nonmilitary identities by restoring routines of care, kinship language, and domestic obligation. To be called “my son” or “my daughter” again was often described as the first sign that life outside the armed group might be possible.

Yet the household was also a site of ambivalence and injury. Other participants described cold welcomes, probationary acceptance, or open accusation. Some relatives questioned whether the returning child had killed people, brought danger with them, or become morally unrecognizable. In these accounts, reintegration began not with reunion but with suspicion. Several returnees said that even when they were allowed back into the compound, everyday conversations continued to remind them that they were no longer fully trusted.

In one case from the broader study, a boy who had returned from armed association was labeled a “killer” by people in the village, a term that condensed fear, accusation, and moral distance into a single social identity. The label mattered because it showed how stigma could follow a child even after demobilization or training, preventing household return from becoming full moral restoration.

Economic hardship intensified these tensions. Households already stretched by poverty had to absorb an additional member who needed food, clothing, school fees, or help starting a livelihood. Caregivers often expressed love and obligation, but also anxiety about what would happen if they could not meet those needs. A recurrent fear was that frustration might drive the child back toward armed actors or toward forms of violence and theft. Bonding social capital therefore depended not only on moral willingness to receive a child, but also on material capacity to sustain that reception.²²

Peer networks played a similarly double role. Friendships with other returnees often provided emotional solidarity and a rare space where memories of war, fear, and nightmares

could be spoken without immediate judgment. Such ties sometimes functioned as informal support groups that buffered loneliness and shame. At the same time, peer circles could become spaces where militarized identity lingered. Participants sometimes recalled joking that life with a gun had brought more status or predictability than civilian life. Those comments were often framed as humor, but they also revealed how fragile civilian belonging could remain when youth were unemployed, stigmatized, or socially idle.

The experiences of girls and young women showed the limits of bonding ties even more starkly. Many described partial acceptance: welcomed by mothers or grandmothers but judged by brothers, uncles, or other male relatives. Where girls returned with children born in the bush, the child itself could become a visible marker of stigma. Some families accepted the daughter but not the baby; others imposed silence around rape, forced unions, or pregnancy so as to protect household honor or future marriage prospects. In such contexts, kinship did not automatically generate healing. It could require girls to remain physically present yet emotionally mute.²³

Bonding social capital also depended on ordinary repetition. Cooking together, sharing sleeping space, assigning chores, and participating in family prayer or meals were not trivial details; they were the repeated practices through which returnees were re-inscribed into kinship. Where those practices were sustained, young people more readily described themselves as belonging somewhere. Where they were withheld, the home itself remained provisional.

What emerges from this first theme is that bonding social capital is necessary but not sufficient. It can anchor reintegration by offering daily care, moral recognition, and practical support. When household acceptance is conditional, economically strained, or gendered by shame, bonding ties remain fragile and may reproduce the very insecurity they are expected to resolve.

Theme 2. Bridging Social Capital: Rituals, Dialogues, and Everyday Coexistence

Beyond the household, reintegration depended on how communities interpreted and publicly managed return. In several interviews, local leaders and returnees described rituals of welcome, cleansing, or prayer intended to mark a transition from armed life back to civilian belonging. These could include washing, public blessing, the laying on of hands, or simple verbal declarations by chiefs and pastors that the returning youth should again be treated as a child of the community. Such practices mattered because they shifted reintegration from a private household matter to a collective moral act.²⁴

Participants who experienced these rituals often said that everyday interactions changed afterward. Neighbors who had previously avoided them began greeting them again; church members became more willing to sit beside them; and invitations to communal labor or youth activities slowly resumed. The rituals did not erase memory, but they created a sanctioned language through which people could interact without constantly restaging the child's armed past. In that sense, bridging social capital worked through public reclassification: the returnee was no longer addressed first as a rebel but as a member of the community.

Where no such public processes occurred, coexistence was usually more tentative. Several returnees described a social atmosphere of silence rather than reconciliation. They were not physically expelled, but they also were not invited into the ordinary circuits of communal life. Weddings, sports teams, savings groups, and neighborhood meetings became subtle tests of whether reintegration was genuine. Exclusion from these spaces often carried more emotional force than formal denunciation because it signaled that acceptance remained incomplete.²⁵

Local leaders were often decisive in these processes. Chiefs, pastors, imams, teachers, and leaders of women's groups could either widen or narrow the community's moral boundaries. In

villages where leaders explicitly urged people to see returning youth as victims of war rather than permanent threats, participants reported greater confidence and more visible signs of inclusion. Where leaders remained silent or skeptical, stigma persisted. Their silence was often interpreted as a tacit refusal to certify the returnee's transformation.

Because religious affiliation shaped the social spaces through which reintegration occurred, the analysis also attended to the religious backgrounds of participants and their families. Most returnees and households in the field sites were connected to Christian communities, including Catholic, Protestant, revival/Pentecostal, and other local churches, while a smaller number were connected to Muslim families and mosque-based networks. Customary practices and local spiritual understandings also informed rituals of cleansing, prayer, and public reclassification. These religious identities intersected with a predominantly patriarchal social structure in which men often exercised formal household and community authority, even as women, including mothers, grandmothers, market women, church women, and leaders of women's associations, frequently held substantial economic and community influence. This combination matters because girls' reintegration was often judged through patriarchal ideas of sexuality and family honor, while women also served as crucial mediators of care, acceptance, and survival.²⁶

Faith institutions occupied a particularly important place. Churches and mosques offered not only ritual but repeated association: worship, youth fellowships, women's groups, and shared moral language. When religious leaders preached forgiveness and restoration, they helped widen bridging capital. However, some congregations also reproduced exclusion, especially for girls and young mothers whose return was interpreted through sexualized moral codes rather than through the language of coercion, survival, or victimization.

Gender shaped bridging capital profoundly. Male returnees could often re-enter public life through football, youth associations, cooperative farming, or visible manual work. Female returnees encountered a much narrower social field. Some were excluded from public rituals altogether; others found that churches or community groups welcomed them only in highly controlled ways. The reputational burden attached to being a former “bush wife” or a young mother made it harder to occupy public space without gossip or moral suspicion. As a result, girls frequently relied on small, semi-private circles of other women or former returnees rather than on broad community inclusion.²⁷

Bridging social capital therefore depended on ordinary participation as much as on formal reconciliation. To be greeted, invited, trusted with tasks, and seen in shared spaces mattered because these acts communicated that the returnee could again be imagined as part of a collective future. Their absence communicated the opposite.

Theme 3. Linking Social Capital: Institutions, Documentation, and DDR Structures

If bonding ties restore intimate belonging and bridging ties restore public belonging, linking social capital concerns whether institutions recognize and protect that belonging. In Uvira, this was often the weakest layer of reintegration. Many returnees expressed deep mistrust toward police, local administrators, and security actors, citing extortion, harassment, or the fear of being re-labeled as criminals if their past became known. Institutional recognition was thus not assumed; it had to be earned in a context where state authority was often experienced as punitive rather than protective.²⁸

Documentation emerged as a recurring issue. Demobilization papers, school records, and identity documents had practical value because they enabled enrollment, movement, and access to programs, but they also had symbolic value. They marked the returnee as a civilian whose

status could be verified outside the household or village. Youth who lacked documents often described feeling suspended between categories: no longer in the armed group, yet not fully recognized by civilian institutions. This bureaucratic invisibility intensified insecurity and undermined other reintegration gains.²⁹

Schools were especially important sites of linking social capital. Enrollment could restore routine, confer legitimacy, and place the returnee in a recognizable social role. But access was uneven. Some participants described supportive teachers or school directors willing to facilitate re-entry. Others encountered school fees they could not pay, documentation requirements they could not meet, or staff who feared the presence of former child soldiers. Young mothers faced additional barriers when school authorities implied they were too old, morally unsuitable, or disruptive to other pupils.³⁰

One NGO practitioner, Muzungu, the Executive Director of *Agissons Ensemble pour le Développement Durable* (AEDD)—a local organization in Uvira, described this flexibility in institutional support: “For those who desired to continue their studies, we facilitated their enrollment in educational institutions. Children were allowed to select their preferred orientation. Some opted to resume formal education, while others chose to pursue vocational training programs.” The comment illustrates how linking social capital operated not only through formal enrollment, but through the practical work of translating a returnee’s interrupted childhood into a feasible civilian pathway.

NGOs and DDR-related actors partially filled these gaps. They often provided the most immediate institutional recognition available through counseling, training, mediation with families, or advocacy before local authorities. Several participants remembered NGO workers as the first people who treated them “like human beings” after demobilization. Yet these

relationships were often temporary and project-bound. When funding cycles ended, the institutional bridge could disappear, leaving communities to manage long-term reintegration with limited state support.

The weakness of linking capital also shaped how returnees imagined the state. In several narratives, the state appeared not as a guarantor of rights but as a distant entity intermittently encountered through police roadblocks, administrative demands, or school fees. That fragile relationship matters because durable reintegration requires more than community tolerance. It requires that former child soldiers be legible to institutions that allocate documentation, education, health access, and legal protection.

Linking social capital therefore cannot be reduced to service delivery alone. It is about whether institutions translate social acceptance into durable rights and opportunities. A child who is welcomed by family and neighbors but denied papers, schooling, or protection remains vulnerable. Conversely, formal recognition without household or community support rarely stabilizes reintegration. This is why the three themes must be read relationally rather than sequentially.

Discussion

Although presented separately for analytic clarity, the three themes were closely interconnected in participants' narratives. Family acceptance often shaped whether returnees felt secure enough to re-enter community life; community recognition influenced whether households sustained support or remained ambivalent; and institutional recognition either reinforced or undermined both. A returnee who was welcomed at home but denied school access or identity papers remained vulnerable, just as one who received training or official recognition

but continued to face rejection from relatives and neighbors struggled to experience reintegration as complete.

A central implication of the findings is that bonding, bridging, and linking social capital should not be read as isolated categories. Rather, they operate as mutually reinforcing layers of reintegration. Bonding ties within families often provide the first basis for emotional stabilization and renewed self-worth, but these ties remain fragile when returnees continue to encounter stigma in the broader community. Bridging social capital can widen acceptance through rituals, public recognition, and participation in everyday social life, yet its effects are often limited when institutions fail to provide documentation, schooling, or legal protection. Linking social capital can formalize civilian status and grant access to rights and services, but institutional recognition alone is rarely sufficient when family and community relationships remain distrustful.³¹

The evidence further suggests that these interrelations are cumulative and recursive. Weakness in one domain often spills into the others. When poverty strained family relationships, returnees were more likely to withdraw from community activities, which in turn reinforced public suspicion and reduced opportunities to build trust. Similarly, exclusion from school or the inability to obtain official documents often deepened household frustration and confirmed community perceptions that the returnee remained outside normal civilian life. By contrast, when a young person was welcomed at home, publicly included in community rituals or shared activities, and supported by institutions, each layer validated the others and made reintegration more durable.

The findings also sharpen how society thinks about identity. The militarized self is not undone simply because the weapon is removed or training is provided. Participants repeatedly described the gun as a source of protection, recognition, income, and routine. In this sense, the

weapon functioned as what might be called an identity prosthetic: it condensed material and symbolic resources that civilian life often failed to provide. Reintegration therefore required more than economic substitution. It required social relationships capable of making a new identity believable and sustainable.³²

This point helps explain why livelihoods mattered most when they were accompanied by recognition. Work became meaningful when it allowed a returnee to be known publicly as a student, tailor, trader, farmer, apprentice, or parent rather than primarily as a former fighter. Economic support detached from social recognition remained thin. Several interview narratives made clear that a training certificate alone did not transform status if neighbors still whispered, employers still distrusted, or families still treated the youth as morally suspect. Livelihoods were most effective when embedded in a wider ecology of acceptance.³³

Ladi, a former child soldier who completed vocational training and opened a small couture salon, connected livelihood directly to public recognition: “Since I left the armed groups, there has been positive development... I’ve regained my dignity in the community, and I’m able to make a living with my small business.” Her account shows why economic reinsertion mattered most when it also changed how others recognized the returnee.

The gendered patterning of reintegration is equally important. For girls and young women, bonding, bridging, and linking ties were all shaped by moral judgments about sexuality, respectability, and motherhood. The issue was not only that girls had different wartime experiences; it was that their return challenged gendered norms governing kinship and public reputation. A girl who returned with a child born of rape often encountered a layered stigma in which the household, the congregation, and the school system each reproduced exclusion in

different ways. This meant that social capital could be protective for some and exclusionary for others.³⁴

The article therefore contributes to DDR scholarship by treating social-capital restoration as a core outcome rather than a secondary byproduct of successful programming. The implication is both analytical and practical. Analytically, it directs attention to the relationships that make civilian identity socially intelligible. Practically, it suggests that DDR programs should be designed not only to transfer goods or services but also to strengthen family accompaniment, support community rituals of reclassification, widen ordinary participation, and secure documentation, schooling, and legal recognition. Durable reintegration is not achieved when a child leaves the armed group; it is achieved when that child can live, move, and be recognized as a civilian across household, community, and institutional spaces.

This relational argument also has policy significance for how success is measured. Numerical outputs such as numbers demobilized, youths trained, or kits distributed are not useless, but they are incomplete. They say little about whether a returnee has been welcomed into a household, entrusted by neighbors, admitted into school, or protected from extortion. A social-capital perspective encourages practitioners to ask what forms of belonging have actually been restored, and for whom.

Finally, the article suggests a shift in how DDR success is narrated. Successful reintegration should not be imagined only as the movement of children out of armed groups and into economic activity. It should also be understood as the rebuilding of trustful, rights-bearing, and socially recognized membership. That framing matters because it changes what practitioners seek to restore. The point is not merely to replace the gun with a tool; it is to replace a militarized identity with relationships and institutions capable of sustaining civilian life over time.

There is also a broader state-building implication. Where local institutions remain predatory or inaccessible, community acceptance may soften exclusion but cannot secure long-term citizenship. Reintegration policy in the DRC should therefore be linked to wider governance questions: the accessibility of schools, the cost and availability of documentation, the conduct of police and local administrators, and the responsiveness of justice mechanisms to exploitation and abuse. Without these institutional reforms, former child soldiers may be welcomed socially yet remain insecure as citizens.

Gender-responsive programming is especially urgent. Girls and young women face forms of stigma that cannot be addressed through generic reintegration packages alone. They may require childcare support, tailored educational re-entry, livelihood options compatible with caregiving, and discreet psychosocial services that do not expose them to further shame. Just as important, reintegration programs must work with families and communities to challenge the moral narratives that cast these young women primarily through the lens of sexual dishonor rather than coercion, survival, or rights violation.

The evidence also has implications for monitoring and evaluation. Conventional indicators - numbers demobilized, trainings completed, kits distributed—capture outputs but not the restoration of belonging. Programs should therefore consider supplementary indicators tied to social-capital restoration: whether a child resides stably with caregivers, has re-entered school or apprenticeship, participates in community groups, possesses core identity documents, and reports trust in at least some institutional actors. Such indicators would not eliminate complexity, but they would better reflect the actual conditions of durable reintegration.

Third, the findings point to the need for stronger institutional pathways. School admission, civil registration, identity papers, and referral mechanisms should be built into reintegration

planning from the beginning rather than treated as downstream concerns. Linking social capital is often weakest precisely because institutions intervene late, inconsistently, or only through temporary NGO projects. A more durable approach would align DDR with education authorities, local administrations, and child-protection mechanisms so that returnees are not left in bureaucratic limbo after initial demobilization.

A second implication concerns the public dimension of reintegration. Rituals, prayers, mediated dialogues, and community acknowledgement should not be treated as culturally decorative additions to DDR. The evidence suggests that they are often the mechanisms through which returnees are publicly reclassified as members of the community rather than as latent threats. Programs that ignore these forms of community work may achieve demobilization without acceptance. By contrast, even modest support for local religious and customary actors can widen the space for trust-building if it is done with sensitivity to local power relations and to the risks of exclusion.

A first implication concerns program design at the household level. Reintegration support should not assume that family reunification is self-executing once a child is transported home. Many households need mediation, material support, and follow-up to absorb the emotional and economic shock of return. Small interventions such as food support, school-fee assistance, or regular case visits may have outsized effects because they prevent economic strain from undermining fragile moral acceptance. In contexts where kinship ties are strong but resources are scarce, such accompaniment can help transform goodwill into sustained care.

The findings have direct implications for how DDR programs in the DRC are designed, sequenced, and evaluated. If reintegration is relational, then programs cannot stop at demobilization packages or short training cycles. They must invest in the social conditions that

allow those interventions to matter: household accompaniment, community dialogue, school re-entry, civil documentation, and protection from harassment. In practical terms, this means that social workers, local leaders, and educational institutions should be treated as central reintegration actors rather than as peripheral partners.

Implications for DDR Practice and Policy

Seen in this way, social-capital restoration functions as the missing middle between individual healing and institutional reform. It links the micro-level work of emotional recovery to the macro-level work of governance and rights. That is why the concept is useful for DDR scholarship: it keeps attention on the social mechanisms through which peace is lived or blocked in everyday life. Reintegration succeeds not when a child simply exits armed mobilization, but when civilian belonging becomes credible across the relationships that structure ordinary life.

The argument also refines how identity transformation should be understood in post-conflict settings. Identity change is often discussed as a psychological shift, but the findings here show that it is equally a relational and institutional achievement. Young people could imagine themselves differently only when others interacted with them differently—when caregivers resumed ordinary care, when neighbors invited them into collective activities, and when institutions recognized them as students or citizens rather than as residual combatants. Identity transformation was therefore enacted, not merely felt.

This distinction matters theoretically because it resists overly holistic uses of the term community. Communities are rarely unified actors with a single stance toward former child soldiers. They are internally differentiated by gender, generation, authority, religion, and material interest. A mother, a chief, a teacher, a pastor, and a police officer may each evaluate the same returnee differently and exercise different forms of gatekeeping. The social-capital framework

helps illuminate those differentiated arenas of judgment instead of collapsing them into a single category of “community acceptance.”

The Uvira evidence also speaks to comparative DDR debates beyond the DRC. Across Sierra Leone, Uganda, Liberia, and Mozambique, scholars have shown that social acceptance and local recognition shape postwar outcomes in ways that formal program metrics often miss. The present study reinforces that insight but also adds greater conceptual precision by disaggregating social reintegration into bonding, bridging, and linking dimensions. Doing so helps explain why a child may appear reintegrated in one setting and not in another: a returnee may be welcomed privately or publicly tolerated but institutionally unrecognized.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. Because participants were identified through NGO and child-protection networks, the sample likely underrepresents highly mobile youth, those most socially isolated, and those no longer connected to services. The research is also geographically concentrated in Uvira, a setting whose conflict dynamics and social institutions cannot stand for all of eastern DRC. The findings should therefore be read as analytically transferable rather than statistically generalizable.³⁵

The evidence is also based on retrospective narratives shaped by translation, memory, and the social situation of the interview. Although triangulation across participant groups strengthens confidence in the patterns identified here, future research could extend this work through longitudinal designs, cross-provincial comparison, and mixed methods that pair narrative evidence with social-network mapping or structured measures of stigma, trust, and institutional access.

Conclusion

Disarmament can remove the weapon from the child, but reintegration must remove the weapon from the self. The evidence from Uvira shows that durable reintegration depends on the restoration of social capital across three interdependent themes: bonding ties that restore intimate belonging, bridging ties that enable public acceptance, and linking ties that secure recognition from institutions. Where any one of these layers remains weak, reintegration is more likely to be partial, fragile, or reversible.

The article therefore argues for a relational model of DDR in the DRC. Reintegration is not only a technical task of demobilization, counseling, and vocational insertion. It is also a moral and political process of rebuilding trust, reclassifying former child soldiers as members of a shared community, and ensuring that institutions recognize them as rights-bearing civilians. Programs that invest in those relational and institutional dimensions are more likely to convert fragile exits from war into durable civilian belonging.

ENDNOTES

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