

# Children Associated with Armed Forces CAAF



Kuol is 19 years old, but he often refers to himself as a child. That is what he was when he joined the army, which he left two years ago.

“I left the army because I wanted to be an educated person,” said Kuol, who is currently in Senior One at Kuajok Secondary School, the same school President Salva Kiir attended in the 1960s.

“If I work hard, I will get a job in parliament,” he said.

Some of Kuol’s friends are still in the army and he had some advice for them. “You are still young... go back to school (and get) your education,” he said.

Kuol may have left the military but he still respects the institution so much that he would consider re-joining it after completing high school. This is contrary to the advice given to demobilized children associated with armed forces, but Kuol pointed out – quite rightly – that it is his right to choose his own destiny.

He still has a few years of school left and that’s enough time to change his mind again, if he so chooses.

**KUOL: motivation through ambition**

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Madeline was never in the military. In fact, it was uncommon for girls to be accepted into the army unless it was urgent.

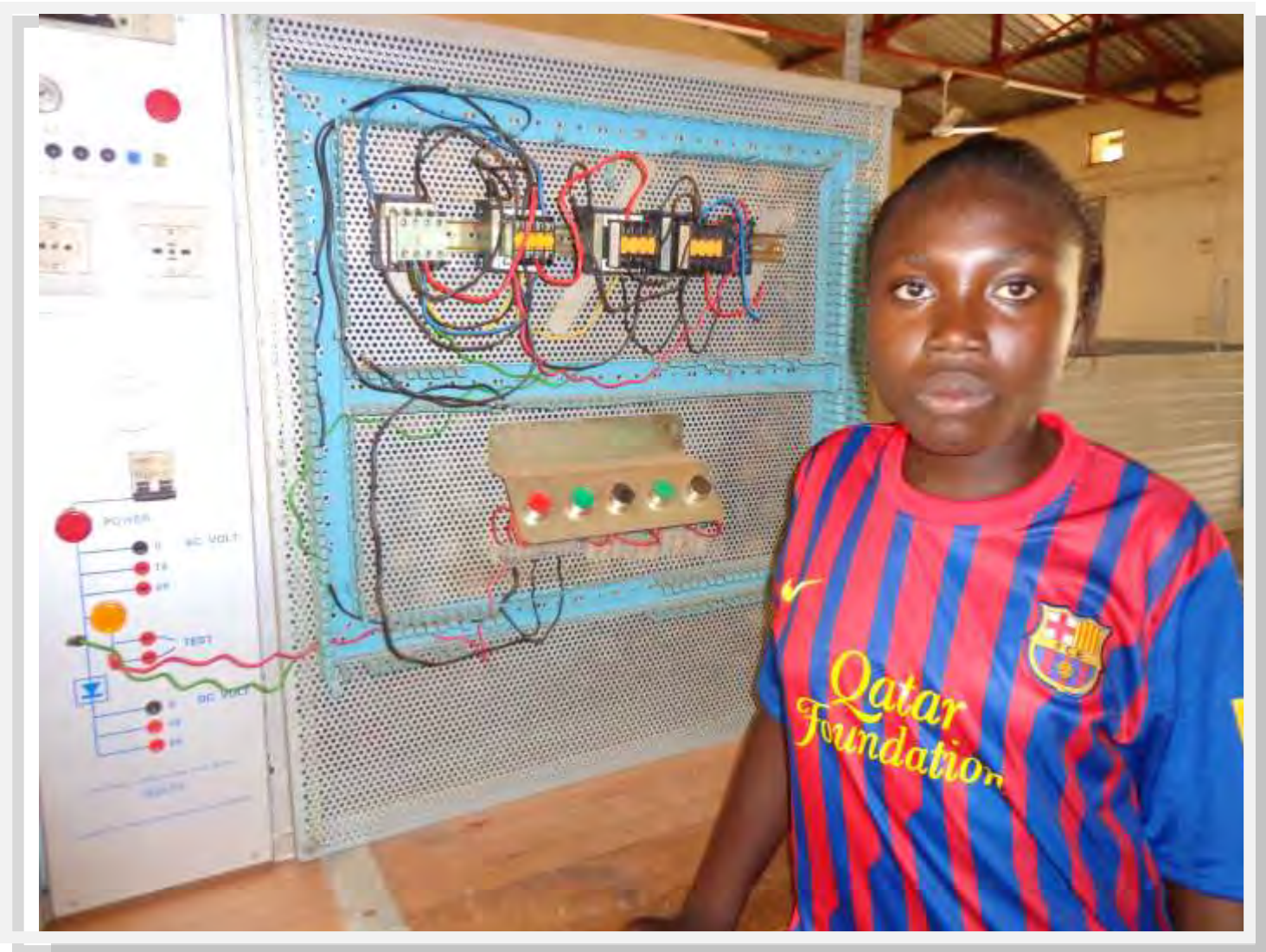
“Girls were not allowed to participate in the war... Maybe if there (was) something urgent, they could help with ... activities like caring for the wounded...” explained Benjamin, a Child Protection Officer with the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) Commission.

When 15-year old Madeline was recently repatriated from Khartoum, however, she became one of the beneficiaries of UNICEF-funded vocational training for children associated with armed forces.

This was because the home to which she had relocated was very close to military barracks. Tracing agents who found her about a year ago identified her as “vulnerable”, strongly believing she was susceptible to being absorbed into the military in the near future.

Although she is an outsider through repatriation, for Madeline it was a welcome link.

“If UNICEF had not made this association with the army through DDR, the first thing that I would miss out on is education and my life would be difficult for me,” she said.



**MADLINE: where are all the girls?**

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Demobilized children like 18 year-old William can be found in all 10 states of South Sudan. Many are attending high school or receiving training in practical vocational skills. Several are now adults with successful professional careers.

William was 12 years old when he joined the military. He stayed there for three years before he was demobilized. Now, he is receiving vocational training and hopes to one day become an English professor.

All children associated with the armed forces have their personal stories of how they joined the army. Many were escaping dire poverty in their homes, while others were looking for adventure. For all of them, the results were similar -- a tough life with no education and no parental guidance.

In March 2012, the South Sudanese government signed an agreement with the United Nations, renewing an earlier commitment signed in 2009, to release all children within its ranks.

The government, the Sudan People's Liberation Army, UNMISS, UNICEF, South Sudan Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Commission work together with other implementing partners and training centres to help these children restart life in their communities.

Without this support, the future of these children might have been much bleaker.

*William: painting a brighter picture*

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When John joined the army at the age of 14, he had only begun to obtain some formal education.

“I was only learning how to count 1-2-3 and (read) A-B-C,” he said. Once he joined the army, he received no more education.

In 2010, John was demobilized and received another opportunity to gain literary and numeracy skills. An eager learner, he was also able to attend a UNICEF-funded vocational training course in Wau.

John is about to complete the first of the two-year training to become an auto-mechanic and looking forward to the future.

“I will also do academics,” he said. “I am already a mechanical engineer and (will learn) to drive.”

It’s not all smooth-sailing, though. Life continues to be tough for some of the children associated with armed forces, even when they leave the army.

John, for instance, received five goats from *Veterinaires Sans Frontières* but by the time



**JOHN: training changes lives**

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John, 23, believes everyone should have the opportunity to go to school.

He lives by the mantra, “School improves (an) individual’s life” and every day of his life is proof.

In 2005, when he was 14 years old, John joined the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA). He was deployed in Jonglei and Unity states and went through many hardships.

After three years, he was demobilized by the DDR Commission.

Since then, the shy and reserved boy has grown into a confident hard-working man, striving to achieve the goals he has set for himself.

Two years ago, he could barely write the alphabet. Now, he is starting the final level of a one-year English course in Juba, but already confidently writing short stories in English.

“I like English because if you need new job you can (get one) using English... It has given me a chance in my life,” he said.

**JOHN: from shy to confident**

# Children Associated with Armed Forces CAAF

Every time Benjamin comes into contact with children associated with the armed forces, he has an infectious smile, radiating happiness.

The Child Protection Officer at the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Commission understands perfectly well what it means to be demobilized from the army. He himself, not so long ago, was such a child.

Benjamin relates to the children on a level they understand and speaks their language in more than just the literal sense.

Although he is very patient, he finds that getting information from the children can be challenging.

“The first factor is to (verify) that the child is (giving) you the right information. It is not simple,” he said. “... Some times it takes three days for a child to tell you exactly where the parents are.”

Benjamin finds, though, that a gentle approach to the children helps, perhaps because of his own experience.



**BENJAMIN: big brother**