Master student in the NOHA programme in international humanitarian action, I have conducted an internship from July to September 2017 with a local NGO specialised in child and women protection in Goma, Northern Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo.

Writing a master thesis on the reintegration of former girl soldiers in DR Congo, I had the objective to conduct a field study in DRC on the topic to be able to gather relevant data and see the reality of the phenomenon by myself. In fact, the issue of girl soldiers remains a taboo and an almost invisible phenomenon, even though girls are estimated to 40% among all children filling the ranks of armed groups in DRC. However, only 7% are being officially demobilised. Such a gap has triggered my attention, not only because I aim at specialising in child protection and response to GBV (gender-based violence) against women, but also because programmes combating child soldiering are run since several decades and girls are still the biggest losers of intervention programmes for child soldiers. Therefore, I decided to start writing a thesis on this topic to dig into the main reasons behind the marginalisation of girls in DDR (Disarmament, Demobilisation, Reintegration) process for children in DRC, even though they face the same, if not way bigger challenges boy soldiers face, i.e. sexual exploitation and abuse, discrimination, hostilities, stigmatisation and family and community rejection, especially when coming back home with a baby.

I then started to search for local Congolese NGOs working in child protection programmes for child soldiers. My decision to focus on local NGOs is not hazardous. In fact, I wanted especially to work with local NGOs as they most of the time fulfil the “field job”, hence working directly with relevant local actors such as child soldiers, families of the children, host families, communities, armed groups and relevant local and national authorities. Local participation through the community-based approach was an essential point I wanted to focus on in my research as it enables to better meet affected people’s needs and interests, hence the CHS (Core Humanitarian Standards)’s commitment for local participation to enhance better quality of humanitarian interventions. Moreover, I searched for a local NGO being financed by an International NGO in order to analyse how the coordination and cooperation between INGOs and local NGOs in conflict settings is managed. I then found the organisation Observatoire des Droits Humains, based in Goma, eastern province of the DRC, in North Kivu. This organisation, financed by UNICEF, run sensitisation programmes for the prevention of child military recruitment and use and for the rights of women. After contacting them by sending my motivation letter and explaining my research, the programme coordinator, has accepted to host me for an internship.

I then looked into my network and contacted persons who had been to Goma for work in order to find accommodation. I had the chance to be hosted by a local Congolese family living in the nearby of my work, ten minutes walk. I have been warmly welcomed and hosted, enabling me to discover the local culture, to learn on a daily basis from them and neighbours about the crisis situation in Congo. Rather than living in comfort as most expats do in Goma, I was also better sensitised to the difficult living conditions by staying in the host family (15 minutes electricity by week, not running water). However, considering the prominent insecurity in the city, it was quite dangerous to live there, as there was no security at all, as I wasn’t living in a compound or a rich local family. Not only for my own security, I had to make sure to not be outside when it was dark (not after 6 pm on my own), I had to change every three days my daily routine to my work so that thieves or kidnappers wouldn’t know my way (kidnapping has become a growing trend in the last few months in the city that has pushed INGOs to impose a curfew to its expat staff). The family’s security wasn’t also ensured. In fact, by generously hosting me, they ran the risk of being attacked by thieves or kidnappers at home for hosting a person coming from a Western country, thus believing the family was rich.
In general, my experience in DRC has been a great opportunity personal wise and professional-wise. During my internship, I have been in contact with another local NGO, financed by UNICEF, the PAMI. PAMI deals only with DDR process for children and has a particular attention for girls who have been associated with armed forces or armed groups. I have spent most of my days and weekends with them, and thus run my internship both at ODH and the PAMI in coordination with each partner. At the PAMI, I was granted a total access to all their activities. Its senior staff have trained me everyday in their daily work, allowing me to accompany them in all their activities, whenever possible. The main activities of PAMI consist in verifying if minors are among the ranks of combatants detained by the FARDC (DRC armed forces) or in military prisons. Once certified minors after an interview with children, they are taken and placed in their transit and orientation centre. In this centre, while the staff is tasked with tracing the child’s families ties, the child normally pursues a professional training or education and is hosted in a host family. Once the family has been identified, the child can be reunited and reintegrate within his family and community. When difficulties arise, mediation activities are led with the family who can reject the child because of his/her acts with the armed forces or armed groups during his/her association. I had the chance to accompany them to military detention centres and observe how they proceeded to verification and certification of minority. At the transit centre, I conducted a small-scale project with children. Having to collect data on children’s experience with armed groups, I had to gain their trust so that children would communicate with me on this topic without that I remind them of traumas but instead increase their resilience rather than their vulnerability. I suggested them to set up together a theatre play in which they would freely witness their lives. Life is put in the plural because I wanted them to witness of their life with their families before their association with armed forces or armed groups, of their life in the bush with armed forces/groups, of their life after being demobilised and in the centre, of their life in the future, i.e. aspirations and hopes, and finally to address a message to other children in order to prevent them from joining armed groups. This theatre play would be filmed without showing their faces for their protection, and I would transcript their witnesses within a book that we would distribute in their communities for better sensitisation and combat the stigmatisation they face when returning home. Children have been really motivated by the proposal and have all asked to tell me one by one their story. I spent a week listening to all of them in a room where they would feel comfortable to confide. During the theatre play, all children felt comfortable to tell their story and what armed groups forced them to do. It was as a domino effect, that all children would create a “confident and trustful” ambiance where all of them could freely talk about what they had lived, about their fears and hopes. I felt it was the first time they could express their voice and felt relieved after they talked in the presence of all other children in order to prevent them from joining armed groups. This theatre play would be a way to transmit their experiences to the wider community. The focus group was one of the most fructuous exchange I had during my whole field observation. All girls have answered all my questions: how they have been associated to armed forces/armed groups, their life in the bush, how they fled, how they have been demobilised, if they had received assistance support, what were their recommendations for intervention programmes and how was their reintegration within their community. They were so much talkative. Again, I had the strong feeling, as they told me after the focus group, that their perspectives aren’t taken into account nor are they regularly, even once, listened to. Among the 32 girls who came, 32 had been raped then directly abducted by armed forces and armed groups. Some saw their parents being massacred in front of their eyes because of opposing the abductions of their daughters. Directly after their parents’ deaths, they were raped in the bush and then turned into sexual slaves and combatants. Stories I have hear where beyond horrific acts I could have even imagined. During this focus group, I could only but admire those girls who were so strong and fought to improve their lives and prove their
communities they could have a positive value within their community. My main observation was that all girls are being marginalised and rejected from their communities, called “bisigara” which literally means “garbage, rubbish” because they “had known men”. Most of them had to stop their education because organisations’ budgets could no longer afford for their school fees or to provide them with a professional training. Same goes for boys and all children at the transit and orientation centre. Only a minority of them benefit from intervention programmes in terms of education or training because of donors’ fatigue to fund child programmes, especially in DRC. A vicious circle then starts, where children after being reintegrated in their communities are rejected and considered as a lost value, particularly girls, and can’t afford for school or a professional training. They often have then no other choice than re-joining up armed groups to ensure that they can meet their livelihoods (food, water, shelter).

My main finding was that there is a real lack of sensitisation at the community and local level. If sensitisation activities are led in the long term on the prevention of child military recruitment, re-recruitment of children would decrease and organisations would be able to fight stigmatisation of returning children by their own family and community. Local participation is therefore highly important and vital to run sensitisation activities and advocacy to relevant local and national authorities. However, INGOs really lack such programmes within their interventions and local participation deeply recommended by them is almost non-existent.

With the agreement of all participant children, including girls in Nyiragongo, I have started to make a comic, in coordination with PAMI and ODH, in which I tell about stigmatisation former girl soldiers face and what all child soldiers have lived. The aim is to sensitize other children to refrain them from joining up armed groups, but also to sensitise families and communities against stigmatisation and hostilities towards returning children, and finally to sensitise the Congolese civil population at a larger-scale on the phenomenon to mobilise against child soldiering, and at last to reach out the international public to trigger international attention on the phenomenon of girl soldiers barely known. The decision to make it under a comic form was in order to better reach out communities, children and illiterates.

My internship has then proved to be beyond my expectations with the rich data I could collect, but also by having the chance to directly work with the children and establish a relation of trust with them, as well as the staff of ODH and PAMI. It considerably enabled me to produce a quality thesis research.

On the personal level, I have learned a lot. I have been more independent, also I have improved my critical analysis competences and learned a lot from locals on the DRC’s conflict, on their culture and lives. I could build a professional network that I’m sure will greatly help me in the future. It wasn’t an easy experience on a daily basis because of the difficulty of the topic of my research and the instability in the country, especially during the transition for presidential elections. But this experience has really strengthened me and encouraged me in the specialisation I want to pursue, ie child protection and GBV response in conflict settings.

I’m more than grateful to the Ruhr Universität Bochum for their grant, without which I wouldn’t have been able to make such an experience. I thank them sincerely for their trust in my project and research, but also for having enabled me to discover the Congolese culture and a magnificent country ruined by conflicts because of its natural resources. This experience has confirmed me that peace consolidation will never be possible if children are not supported or given a voice, as they are the future builders of tomorrow’s society and should therefore be completely involved in intervention programmes, where they should play an essential role as decision-makers to improve and adapt programmes to better meet their needs.
Two children at PAMI transit centre posing in front of a drawing made by a child to prohibit child military use and recruitment.
Draft of the comics to relate girls’ witnesses from Nyiragongo.