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Policy Practicum Report: Dallaire Institute for Children, Peace and Security

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About My Practicum Position:

For my practicum placement this semester, I worked at the Dallaire Institute for Children, Peace and Security, an international organization founded by Romeo Dallaire following his experience working with the United Nations in Rwanda during the genocide of the Tutsi people in 1994 (Dallaire Institute, n.d.). The organization conducts research and works with outside partners to help grow the understanding of how children are recruited into armed conflict and what puts children at risk for this recruitment. Their approach to prevention focuses on children's safety, as well as the moral dilemmas security sector actors can face when working in conflict zones where children are being recruited and used for armed violence. The Institute is housed at Dalhousie University, but works with partners and team members across the country and around the world.

For this placement, I was specifically working with Dallaire's Research and Knowledge Mobilization team, which works on scholarly research informing Dallaire's initiatives overall. The organization's philosophy is that theory can inform action, leading to better results which bring us closer to ending the cycle of violence, so research is a fundamental part of what the organization does and how it approaches its work. Currently, the Research and Knowledge Mobilization team has three main research priorities. First, they are exploring the connection

between morally injurious events (traumatic events occurring to those in the security sector) and the recruitment and use of children. Second, they are exploring Early Warning to Early Action, which is focused on finding early indicators or risk factors which can inform how and where to prevent the recruitment and use of children. This second research priority is most relevant to the work I ended up doing in my placement. Third, they are examining the gendered aspects of recruitment and use, including the differences of how men, women, boys and girls are affected by conflict and recruited into it.

Dallaire's Mission and Work:

Dallaire's mission is "To prevent the recruitment and use of children in armed violence and transform cycles of violence" (Dallaire Institute, n.d.). In order to do so, the Institute works to bridge policy and research gaps on children's recruitment and use. It also takes part in developing policy initiatives themselves, such as the 2017 Vancouver Principles, a framework which approaches peace initiatives and peacekeeping by recognizing challenges posed specifically to children in this process.

As previously mentioned, one of the organization's current focuses and research priorities is creating the Early Warning to Early Action (EW2EA) system. Currently, there is no early warning framework or system for states, community actors or international organizations like Dallaire to use in the case of a state or area becoming a pathway to children's recruitment and use in conflict. EW2EA is a project that the organization has been working on for a long time, meant to better understand the indicators which suggest children are being recruited or used for armed violence. EW2EA is also being combined with the other work Dallaire does, such as their community partnership and engagement work. As Dallaire is not primarily located in the

communities in which recruitment and use are taking place, the organization partners with community actors to better understand the situation and implement research-informed policy responses. Community actors are significant in actually implementing any strategies found by EW2EA research regarding a specific area.

Workplace Details and Environment:

During my placement, I conducted all of my work remotely. While I believe others have conducted in person work at Dallaire in the past (so it is likely possible that this can be done), this is what worked best for my project as my supervisor also worked remotely and was out of the country for a long period of time. The remote and often asynchronous work also meant that to take on this position, I needed to exercise a lot of work ethic and initiative to get tasks going and make sure my seven hours were getting fulfilled each week. I had one direct supervisor during my placement, and conducted primarily desk-based work. I met with my supervisor once per week over Teams, and occasionally had another staff member from the research team on our calls. However, I also had the opportunity to meet other staff members and partners on some extra calls, including those currently based in the country I was researching, who were familiar with the country's current situation.

My Project:

My work at Dallaire was focused entirely on completing several aspects of one larger project, meant to assist with the EW2EA process. While Dallaire is very focused on preventing children's recruitment into armed violence, the organization is also studying early warning indicators in non-conflict zones, or states not currently involved in conflicts. These states, while

not involved in conflict currently, may have weak legal protections or specific vulnerabilities regarding children, which puts these children at risk for recruitment when violence does arise or when there is an opportunity for children to be recruited to armed violence outside of their own state or community. Additionally, even in states or areas in which there is no identified conflict, there are still opportunities for children to be used in armed violence. For example, in a report completed by another student prior to my placement, the student found that children and youth were being used for political vigilantism, which was not technically being identified as armed violence by the broader literature, but did involve recruitment of children for violent acts.

My project was focused on Rwanda. Currently, Rwanda itself is not a conflict zone. However, children in the area still have the potential to be recruited and used in armed violence, and studying the area allows for better understanding of these early warning indicators. I began my work by reviewing a previous report completed on Ghana, and doing initial scans of the academic literature, to see what had already been found. According to my supervisor, one of the biggest struggles with conducting this type of research is that the information is all out there, however, it has not been gathered for this specific purpose before. This means that while there is a lot of information available, it is difficult to find what is relevant to Dallaire and what is not.

After initial scans, I created a search strategy to be reviewed by Dallaire's research teams and partners. In this strategy, I outlined the objectives of my research, my primary research questions, what types of sources I would be looking for and where I would be finding them, key themes I was concerned with, how I would determine whether sources could be included or excluded, and my planned research deliverables. One thing I struggled with in creating this search strategy was being very intentional with my wording, as my supervisor highlighted areas where she didn't understand the difference between highlighted themes. This taught me a lot

about creating reports vs academic papers, and the importance of using very intentional terms which highlighted the scope of an issue, as I did not have the space to keep explaining myself in different terms.

The report I ended up writing and submitting contained a few key sections, including an overview of Rwanda's legal framework as it pertained to the use and recruitment of children in armed conflict and violence, an analysis of key themes and pathways to recruitment and use, an intersectional analysis of key vulnerable groups and identities which increased vulnerability, and a list of potential protective processes for children. Some of the interesting pathways I ended up identifying pertained to children's street life, stigmatization of specific groups (such as HIV affected children and children from the Twa ethnic group), cross-border trafficking and involvement in the illegal mining sector. These pathways were identified through scans of the available academic literature, and NGO research and reporting.

I then got to conduct an intersectional analysis of the vulnerable groups I identified with additional factors which might create vulnerabilities. These factors included gender, ethnicity, disability or mental health status, and socioeconomic status. It was interesting to see both in this section and in the pathways to recruitment section how these factors overlap, and how specific members of groups identified as vulnerable, such as women who are also Twa, became more likely to lack opportunities and be recruited. I continued on to point out gaps in the research, issues with enforcement of government laws and policy, and definition issues which were having an impact on prevention. I also identified some protective factors and processes for children in Rwanda which should be built on to combat recruitment and use. Finally, I worked on creating a map of key stakeholders on the issue, which researchers at Dallaire could perhaps contact in the future.

One thing I found difficult about working in this position was dealing with the subject matter. Dallaire conducts really great and important work, which I was happy to participate in and contribute to; however, the topics can be extremely upsetting to think about and long periods of researching them was sometimes a bit difficult. Another learning curve I had was figuring out the best places to search for the information I was looking for. I ended up using a combination of searches through databases like the Dal Library and Google Scholar, as well as regular google searching to find NGO reporting and organizations. I think doing this work helped in aiding and improving my understanding of the research process for topics which are currently relevant and where relevant information may not initially be stated as such by whoever published it.

Overall Recommendations and Conclusions:

Overall, I would recommend this placement and think this was an excellent experience for me as a student. I think I have gained a lot of transferable skills that will assist me in the future, in school and in any sort of research based jobs. However, I would highly suggest this as a placement for political science/LJSO students who already have an interest in conducting security studies and human rights research. I think this placement and writing my literature review would have been more difficult if I did not already have some basic understanding of African politics, security studies and human rights, and conducting research through previous coursework and my own fourth-year honours project. That said, I think this placement has a lot of opportunities to make your work your own. The team at Dallaire really tried to help tailor the project and the department they paired me with to my skills and interests, and while I felt out of my depth a couple of times, my supervisor was helpful in assisting me with figuring out the tasks

I should prioritize and the directions I should pursue in my research. I think anyone does have the potential to succeed here.

References

Dallaire Institute for Children, Peace and Security. (n.d.). *Research*. Dallaire Institute for Children, Peace and Security. <https://www.dallaireinstitute.org/research>