

The Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative

By Clara P. Leney

The Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative is an internationally renowned NGO which is based institutionally in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Aimed at promoting the importance of prevention through a progressive, three-tiered system approach, the Initiative was founded by its namesake, Roméo Dallaire. Dallaire is a retired Canadian lieutenant general with a focus on humanitarian efforts. Serving as a peacekeeper for the United Nations, Dallaire was experienced first-hand the atrocities of war. As a result, he suffers from posttraumatic stress disorder – however this was not the lieutenant-general's only takeaway. Dallaire has continued his humanitarian efforts through the founding of his Child Soldiers Initiative.

There are currently over a quarter of a million child soldiers who are active in global conflict today. The age of these child soldiers ranges from as young as eight years old to eighteen – when they become active adult soldiers. The effects of war are felt even by experienced soldiers who have been through extensive training and psychological preparation – the detrimental psychological and physical outcomes are unavoidable when exposed to such violent atrocities. Children are especially prone to victimization via violent conflict as they are more easily influenced by external factors and have not yet developed the skills necessary to cope with such stress.

Child soldiers are used in several ways: as combatants, on suicide missions, act as spies or lookouts, or even be used as slaves. Girls are often sexually exploited and forced into the sex trade, or raped by higher ranking soldiers. Essentially, children are

expected to conduct themselves as adult soldiers, however are seen as more dispensable and more easily recruited. The Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative believes that the key to being able to prevent future recruitment and abuse is understanding why it is that child soldiers are so appealing to warlords and international combat groups in the first place.

The focus of the Initiative is threefold: prevention-oriented training to military forces and security sector actors both domestically and internationally, partnerships concerned with advocacy for policy change oriented towards children's rights and their protection, and finally interdisciplinary research intended for the sharing of knowledge.

Task Assignment Within the Placement

In all aspects of its approach, the Initiative relies heavily on collaborative partnerships, be it with international organizations, fellow NGOs, or student interns. My placement was solely based on conducting research with an ultimate end goal of creating an effective and useful annotated bibliography to be used in future literary reviews completed by the initiative.

The topic of my research was the creation of peace agreements – specifically bilateral peace agreements, and related documents which have been implemented since the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, as well as the inclusion of children in those documents.

Both peer reviewed academic and 'grey' literature were sourced in the final annotated bibliography which I created for the organization. I utilized databases like Novanet, EBSCO, and JSTOR, as well as media transcripts and news articles. The placement reinforced the skills learned and utilized throughout my three previous years as an Arts and Social Sciences student.

In my research, I focused on the importance of prioritizing the needs and the voice of the child in the creation of related peace documents. I related the content of the bilateral peace agreements to the first working paper created by the United Nations' Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children in Armed Conflict. This working paper outlines the legal foundations of the Six Grave Violations Against Children in Armed Conflict. The Six Violations include the recruitment and use of children, the killing and maiming of children, sexual violence against children, attacks against schools and hospitals, the abduction of children, and the denial of humanitarian access.

For Students Who Are Considering This Placement...

As previously mentioned, the focus of my practicum placement was research-oriented. With the exception of several meetings with a representative working at the organization, this research was completed independently and off-site. Because of this, efficacious time management is an essential quality for a student wishing to be placed with this organization to have. In addition, the ability to self-direct is extremely important. While a general research topic was provided, the sources available which pertain to this

topic are vast. This means that with an abundance of resources and potential directions, the ability to centralize the research around one or several key themes is important.

As for the location of the placement, the office of the Initiative is located on Dalhousie University's campus. This makes the placement attractive to those students who are near campus or otherwise based primarily on Dalhousie's Studley campus. However, as mentioned before, the work is almost entirely completed out of office, therefore making the placement appropriate for those living or working anywhere in the HRM.

Experiential Takeaways

My experience with the Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative was extremely valuable for several reasons. Firstly, it instilled a sense of importance – the idea of working for such a noble – and essential, cause. The evolution of warfare tactics and motives is constant, thus creating a need for the constant adaptation of responses to these motives and tactics. The Child Soldiers Initiative is an exemplary organization which is paving the way for similar, initiatives rooted in dynamic peacekeeping efforts. In addition, as an International Development student with a minor in Political Science, experience in a field related to my degree was an asset to both my perceptions of the field as well as to my resume. The research-oriented element of this practicum was more prevalent than I had originally anticipated.

To critique the placement, while the skills synthesized throughout the research process are valuable, I had hoped for a more intensive placement – the opportunity to sit in on meetings and observe the daily function of an NGO of The Child Soldiers Initiative's candor. While interdisciplinary research is an essential pillar supporting their overarching mission, I believe that a more comprehensive approach to other key elements and practices of the organization could have been incorporated into the placement. However, as much of the work completed by the Initiative is done overseas and in collaboration with internationally recognized legislative bodies such as the UN, the assignment of research projects is admittedly a realistic and attainable endeavour to request a student undertake.

All in all, I would recommend this placement to any student with a self-directed motivation for research, as well as a desire to affiliate themselves with an organization concerned with affecting tangible socio-political change.

References

The Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative. (2017). The Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative. Retrieved from <http://childsoldiers.org>