

# Reintegration of Former Child Soldiers Into Society

– *Life Does Not Lose Its Value* (2012)

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Daniel C. Nebzer". The signature is written in a cursive style and is underlined.

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## Introduction

I saw how strong these images were, and words alone would not have been enough to document this extraordinary work of Father Berton (Wilma Massucco). *Life Does Not Lose Its Value* (2012) is a documentary film which tells the story of Father Giuseppe Berton and his Family Homes Movement project which helps former child soldiers to reintegrate into society. This paper seeks to argue that former child soldiers have enormous difficulties to live a normal life after war, and problems to reintegrate into society due to several factors. I am going to argue this by analyzing the documentary film *Life Does Not Lose Its Value* (2012). I will analyze the utterances of psychologist Roberto Ravera and Father Giuseppe Berton. Furthermore, I will include some original information provided by director Wilma Massucco.

### 1. *Life Does Not Lose Its Value* – A Short Description of the Plot

Even though it might seem as if this movie is about child soldiers, it mainly retells the story of some of them and what they experienced after Sierra Leone's civil war which lasted from 1991 to 2002 (*Life Does Not Lose Its Value*). The Italian Missionary Father Giuseppe Berton is the founder of the Family Homes Movement which is an organization which helps former child soldiers by "giving parental care and education" to them (ibid.). In fact, Father Giuseppe Berton was able to help about 3.000 former child soldiers to get back to a normal social life (ibid.). Wilma Massucco created this movie by filming some interviews with some of the former child soldiers who were members of the Family Homes Movement; furthermore, she talked with them about past experience and how their lives changed after Father Berton had helped them (ibid.). In brief, this documentary movie shows some really touching and authentic stories of

poor children who suffered from cruelties in war but managed to get back to a normal social life.

## 2. Interview with the director Wilma Massucco

As mentioned above, Wilma Massucco is the creator (and director) of the documentary movie *Life Does Not Lose Its Value* (2012). In order to receive some original and unique information, Wilma Massucco was ready to send some previously unpublished information about her experience in Africa via email. The original interview was written in Italian and can be found at the end of the term paper (appendix); however, in order to include the interviews' content in this chapter, it was translated to English. Everything that is contained in the next paragraph, is information provided by Wilma Massucco herself.

Wilma Massucco was originally in Sierra Leone for a different project. Back then, she was responsible for the project's website, which means she had to manage the news and interview parts. Due to this project, she went as a journalist to Sierra Leone as a member of the Italian television and due to the fact that she went there, she met Father Giuseppe Berton. She recalls how she always asked Father Giuseppe Berton how he managed the situation in terms of establishing trust between him and the former child soldiers. In other words, she continually asked him how it was possible to get the former child soldiers to trust you again after everything that occurred to them. Considering the fact that child soldiers were always victims of adults, she was wondering how it was possible to receive trust as a grown-up person. They become victims several times. The first time, the child soldiers were brought to the bush and forced to commit atrocities. The second time, which is basically after the war, the child soldiers are often isolated and distanced from their families because of the horrific deeds and atrocities they committed. So, she strongly was wondering how Father Giuseppe Berton was able to rebuild

trust in them after everything that happened to the child soldiers. He did, in fact, answer her question, but she was not completely able to understand what he was trying to explain; consequently, she continued with the same question over and over again – how did you bring the child soldiers to trust you again? After a certain amount of time, Wilma Massucco arrived at the Family Homes Movement. The images and impressions that she saw there explained more than 1000 words could ever do. She saw those children, without arms, without legs, and with crutches. However, when the former child soldiers realized Father Giuseppe Berton's arrival, they came to him – running. They hugged and greeted him with huge joy and happiness, and it was at this moment when Wilma Massucco realized that Father Giuseppe Berton was really able to rebuild trust in them. Still, the question “how?” was unanswered for her; so, she asked herself how he was able to achieve this amazing result, but she remained in silence for the rest of the day, because she tried to observe every detail while other journalists were interviewing Father Giuseppe Berton. After a few days, when the project, which was mentioned at the beginning, was about to end, she decided to return to Father Giuseppe Berton in order to receive finally an answer to her still existing question: How did you get the children to trust you again? She sat down in his small office inside the Family Homes Movement and Father Giuseppe Berton immediately asked her when she was leaving? She responded that she was going to leave in two days, and at this point he asked her if she wanted to stay for a little while in order to see in detail his work with the child soldiers. She was over the moon and yelled immediately “yes” because this was a really rare occasion which was offered to her. In the beginning, Wilma Massucco wanted to write a book, and the interviews were initially only there to testify what was being said in order to write it down later; consequently, she wanted to transcribe the interviews and create a book. However, back in Italy, she re-watched her videos and realized how potent and strong those interviews and images were. Words alone could never describe what those videos could. This is why the documentary movie *Life Does Not Lose Its Value* was created. Wilma Massucco decided to talk to the child soldiers in English. The native

language of the child soldiers was Krio, as she explained. However, they were perfectly able to speak and hold a conversation in English because they attended Father Giuseppe Berton's school. Wilma Massucco explained, that English gave her, and the children, the opportunity to talk to each other without an interpreter. An interpreter might have changed the message or the meaning a little bit; however, due to the fact that they used English for the interviews, the conversations were much more spontaneous and real. Furthermore, Wilma Massucco always talked alone to the former child soldiers, always in confidence, and she explained that this was crucial because it saved the spontaneous dialogue. Wilma Massucco stated, that the experience regarding Father Giuseppe Berton and the child soldiers changed her life. It was at this point when she started to become a filmmaker and today, she has made seven documentary movies but not every movie was added to her page because of time issues. She has been working as a teacher at a high school for a few years now and Father Giuseppe Berton influenced her in terms of education.

### 3. Psychologist Roberto Ravera – Factors Which Make Reintegration Difficult

Roberto Ravera is included many times during the documentary movie *Life Does Not Lose Its Value* (2012) and in the following chapter, his explanations about several critical issues regarding former child soldiers and reintegration will be analyzed and discussed.

During an interview with Wilma Massucco, Roberto Ravera explained that unfortunately there are basically no psychiatrists to be found in Sierra Leone, in fact, just one single psychiatrist can be found throughout the whole country (*Life Does Not Lose Its Value*). This is consequently a really grave and serious issue as many former child soldiers suffer from strong mental or psychological disorders; moreover, a huge issue which needs to be mentioned

is that psychological problems are mainly not even recognized in Sierra Leone (ibid.). There are in fact various studies which show the “risk for poor mental health outcomes” which can be realized among a lot of former child soldiers; however, it needs also to be mentioned that not merely the war experience itself has a potent influence on the mental health, but also post-conflict aspects might influence the “long-term psychosocial adjustment” (Betancourt et al. 18). And this long-term psychosocial adjustment is a huge and problematic issue throughout Sierra Leone (ibid.). When former child soldiers receive the opportunity to return home to their families or communities, they often might “experience lowered social status” due to certain “prejudice and fear” from their families or their community (Betancourt et al. 19). This is a stigma which might consequently lead to even stronger mental and psychological problems as this situation could create stress (ibid.). Many studies in the past years discovered that former child soldiers might suffer from different mental problems such as “post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), other anxiety disorder, and also depression” (Betancourt et al. 18). Former child soldiers also explained that they sometimes feel as if they are “being haunted by memories of brutalization and violence” (Denov 797). In brief, psychological problems are a huge issue when it comes to former child soldiers.

Besides the serious mental health issues, former child soldiers also often have to deal with problems regarding their families as mentioned already above. Throughout the whole civil war in Sierra Leone, an enormous number of children had to participate in those cruel and horrific conflicts (Denov 791). Some of them “were recruited for labor or sexual exploitation in armed groups” (ibid.). A lot of former child soldiers saw with their own eyes the killing of people, or sometimes they might have even killed people on their own, as Roberto Ravera explains (*Life Does Not Lose Its Value*). When they lose their family, they lose their reference points and as Sierra Leone is a country where family has a very relevant and crucial role, living in this place without any family member might also lead to lability in terms of emotions or social factors (ibid.). A lot of former child soldiers have in fact been disconnected from family



members during war and sometimes they still do not know anything about their location or situation (Denov 797). Some participants of the war explained that they feel a very deep “sense of loss, anxiety, and sadness as a result of not knowing whether their families were living” (ibid.). Losing one’s family is for some former child soldiers basically “the most devastating aspect of the war” (ibid.). However, when they actually get the possibility to go home, they are often confronted and labeled with a certain stigma because people in their surroundings might have the notion that the former child soldiers are dangerous, and human beings without any morals (Betancourt et al. 18). Roberto Ravera stated, that those former child soldiers suffer in fact from being rootless in a place where having a family or belonging to a community is fundamental in order to feel good (Life Does Not Lose Its Value). Losing one’s roots might create a deep source of grief (ibid.). As mentioned in the beginning, child soldiers often suffer from certain mental problems; however, one major reason for these problems, according to certain studies, is in fact connected to the issue that they lost their family, and killing the own family is, according to Roberto Ravera, the real primary trauma (ibid.). Guilt, disturbing past memories, and other similar feelings might occur as a grave consequence (Denov 796).

Besides mental health problems and lost families, there is another crucial factor which influences the reintegration process. Roberto Ravera explained that one of the most challenging and hardest problems for former child soldiers is often the future, especially when it comes to rebuilding social and family networks and ties (Life Does Not Lose Its Value). A main obstacle and problem is that their skills and abilities to create and establish emotional bonds is destroyed (ibid.). The horrific events and the war had a potent influence on relationships between community members and of course also between families, and in the end, re-building such relationships and emotional bonds needs a very long period of time for most former child soldiers, as Roberto Ravera explained (ibid.). In fact, the most difficult and complicated processes which occur due to war is in this case reintegration, but also rehabilitation (Betancourt et al. 18). Roberto Ravera also mentioned that Father Giuseppe Berton, and his good intuition,

helped former child soldiers to create and establish such social bonds again after what happened to them in war (Life Does Not Lose Its Value). Furthermore, he claims that a nation without such social networks is likely to have a negative development (ibid.). To conclude, one major problem is that a lot of child soldiers lose their families which makes reintegration even harder; however, a lot of child soldiers also struggle when it comes to recreating social networks.

#### 4. Father Giuseppe Berton – Founder of the Family Homes Movement

In the final chapter, Father Giuseppe Berton, who is the founder of the Family Homes Movement, will be introduced and his utterances in terms of former child soldiers and reintegration will be analyzed and discussed.

First of all, Father Giuseppe Berton explained how the horrific past of former child soldiers influences their whole life. He stated that most of the child soldiers suffered from severe and gruesome brainwashing and they basically had no choice but to kill, because if they had decided not to murder, they would have been killed themselves (Life Does Not Lose Its Value). However, he described that former child soldiers have some sort of “moral shock absorbers” which means that they are able to behave completely normally even though they experienced horrific things (ibid.). Nevertheless, he said that he never asked anything about the things they committed during war because he is not inclined to judge them (ibid.). In fact, children all across the world have been forced to participate in war (Denov 791). In case that child soldiers do not do “well” their duty in war, they have to cope with horrific and gruesome consequences, because “failing to carry out their duties often meant enduring extreme forms of punishment, including brutal physical and sexual assaults, starvation, and even death” (Denov 794). However, child soldiers do not always experience the same things (Betancourt et al. 17). In conclusion, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the lives after the war are challenging for

most child soldiers; however, by considering their experiences during such horrific conflicts, it becomes clearer why this is the case. Father Giuseppe Berton explained that those former child soldiers are not the typical bad guys who some people would assume, because they were basically forced to live this horrific life and they had at the end of the day absolutely no choice (Life Does Not Lose Its Value). This is, in the end, why Father Giuseppe Berton stated that it is so important to give them the chance to have a new start in life (ibid.).

When it comes to reintegration, there is another very crucial aspects which needs to be addressed – coming together as a foreigner with locals. Father Giuseppe Berton explained that there are various ways in order to get in touch with local people in Sierra Leone (Life Does Not Lose Its Value). On the one hand, you can remain as you are and keep your own behaviors and traditions, which then means that you approach local people as “others” because in this case you are a foreigner basically forever (ibid.). However, he explained that you can also decide to accept life and endeavor to live together with local people; consequently, you receive the opportunity to come together (ibid.). Of course, there is a certain aspect of danger and risk; however, these aspects become secondary if you really feel a strong motivation inside of you, and in the end, one will accept every risk which might appear (ibid.). These bonds, which were mentioned already above, urgently needs to be repaired and rebuild (ibid.). In fact, there are a lot of former child soldiers who are able to return home in order to reunite with their families because they have the wish to start a new chapter of life (Denov 798). Nevertheless, reintegration is an enormous obstacle and problem because a huge number of former child soldiers received a feeling of rejection (ibid.). In brief, there are different ways in order to facilitate reintegration and coming together with people in Sierra Leone, even though it sometimes might be challenging for former child soldiers due to “stigmatization” (ibid.).

Finally, an ultimate and really crucial and potent factor when it comes to reintegration will be included – education and care. Father Giuseppe Berton found a perfect way to educate people in classroom. Father Giuseppe Berton did not treat Christian culture in classroom nor

did he talk about the Christian culture inside his school; however, he practiced it (Life Does Not Lose Its Value). In fact, Father Giuseppe Berton's school leaves freedom for everybody, and everybody is able to believe what s/he wants; however, his school is led by Christian culture and also Christian values (ibid.). Fact is, that an enormous number of former child soldiers do not have any skills except those which are needed in order to fight in war (Denov 799). After the war, many former child soldiers do not have the opportunity to attend a school or any sort of education (Denov 800). This might lead to horrific consequences. Many former child soldiers who did not have the possibility to receive education, struggled and ended up in streets living there (Denov 792). Father Giuseppe Berton pleaded for an atmosphere and civilization of peace and love (Life Does Not Lose Its Value). In the end, he mentioned that something good can be found in every person and situation, even though it seems as if there are just bad things (ibid.). In brief, without education, life can be challenging for former child soldiers; however, Father Giuseppe Berton helped them by offering lessons.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper, the aspects and factors of reintegration of former child soldiers were discussed. There are several factors which influence successful reintegration of children who fought in war such as psychological problems, the loss of family, social bonds, their past in general, coming together with locals, and in the end also education and care. This was discussed by analyzing the utterances of the psychologist Roberto Ravera and Father Giuseppe Berton.

## Appendix

Interview with Wilma Massucco in Italian:

1) Perché Lei ha scelto inglese come lingua per le interviste? Ci sono state alternative?

*I ragazzi parlavano sierraleonese (Krio) come lingua madre, e conoscevano abbastanza l'inglese, anche perché avevano frequentato la scuola di Padre Berton. Usare l'inglese per i dialoghi ha permesso uno scambio diretto tra me e loro, senza intervento di un interprete (la cui presenza, e anche la cui traduzione, avrebbe potuto alterare la genuinità e spontaneità del messaggio).*

*Le interviste sono state sempre svolte a quattr'occhi (io e il soggetto intervistato) e questo penso sia stato un fattore determinante per salvaguardare la spontaneità e immediatezza delle loro risposte.*

2) Perché Lei ha deciso di fare questa documentazione?

*Mi trovavo in Sierra Leone per un progetto di Cooperazione Internazionale dal titolo EUGAD, finanziato dalla Comunità europea, il cui obiettivo era quello di promuovere una CULTURA a supporto degli Obiettivi del Millennio presso gli Opinion leaders (educatori, media, istituzioni).*

*Io mi occupavo principalmente del sito web Eugad, con news e interviste varie.*

*Nell'ambito di questo Progetto sono andata in Sierra Leone: ero al seguito di uno staff di giornalisti della TV nazionale italiana, e insieme a loro, tra i vari soggetti intervistati, ho incontrato Padre Giuseppe Berton.*

*Ricordo che quel giorno chiedevo insistentemente a Padre Berton: "È possibile recuperare la fiducia di questi ex bambini soldato? Sono stati due volte vittime degli adulti: una prima volta, quando sono stati rapiti e portati nella foresta e costretti a commettere tutte le atrocità che*

*hanno commesso; e poi traditi una seconda volta dagli adulti quando, al termine della guerra civile, sono stati isolati, rifiutati dalle loro famiglie e da tutto il contesto civile, proprio a causa delle atrocita' che avevano commesso ....*

*Chiedevo insistentemente: "si puo' recuperare la fiducia di questi ragazzi?". Padre Berton mi rispondeva, ma io non capivo, e continuavo a ripetere la stessa domanda.*

*Finche', arrivati al Centro del Family Home Movement fondato ad Padre Berton, si e' aperta la porta e io ho assistito ad una scena che mi ha comunicato piu' di mille parole. Ho visto questi ragazzi, senza braccia, senza gambe, con le stampelle ecc. che, come hanno visto Padre Berton, gli sono corsi incontro, lo abbracciavano, lo salutavano con una tale felicita' nello sguardo e nei gesti che per me e' stato evidente in un attimo che quella fiducia lui davvero era riuscito a conquistarla!!*

*A quel punto, la mia domanda e' diventata un'altra: "Come e' riuscito ad ottenere quel risultato?".*

*Sono rimasta in silenzio per il resto della giornata, osservando tutti i dettagli, mentre i giornalisti conducevano in prima persona l'intervista a Padre Berton.*

*Dopo qualche giorno, al termine delle attivita' del Progetto, ho deciso di ritornare da Padre Berton, appunto per approfondire quello che ancora non mi era chiaro.*

*Quando mi sono seduta davanti a lui, nel suo piccolo ufficio all'interno della sede del Family Homes Movement, Bepi mi ha subito chiesto: "Quando parti?". Ho risposto : "Tra due giorni".*

*A quel punto lui mi ha detto: " Mi piacerebbe che restassi qui ancora qualche giorno, e facessi un approfondimento sulla mia attivita' con i bambini soldato". Ho risposto senza alcuna esitazione: "SI", ringraziandolo da subito per la straordinaria opportunita' che mi stava concedendo.*

*Pensavo di scrivere un libro, e le registrazioni video che ho fatto durante le interviste avevano lo scopo di registrare le testimonianze. Al ritorno, avrei trascritto il tutto in forma di testo.*

*Quando pero', rientrata in Italia, ho osservato i video, ho visto che la forza delle immagini era dirimpente, e che le sole parole non sarebbero state sufficienti a documentare lo straordinario operato di Padre Berton. Da li' e' nata l'idea di realizzare il docu-film.*

3) Ci sono delle cose che non sono state dette nel film ma che ci potrebbe dire per la presentazione?

*L'esperienza con padre Berton e gli ex bambini soldato della Sierra Leone mi ha cambiato la vita.*

*Da li' in poi ho iniziato la mia attivita' come filmmaker, ad oggi ho realizzato 7 documentari (alcuni dei quali non ancora inseriti sul mio sito per mancanza di tempo).*

*Da qualche anno faccio anche la docente in Scuole Secondarie Superiori. L'esempio di Padre Berton in qualita' di Educatore mi ha plasmato anche in tal senso.*

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