

Chapter Four

From Youth Rebellion to Child Abduction: The Anatomy of Recruitment in Sierra Leone

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Using a case study of Sierra Leone, this chapter aims to bring attention to the importance of youth as a constituency with a substantial stake in national and regional stability in Africa. We have attempted this by first giving a background to the conflict, followed by a discussion of the nature of youth recruitment and participation in the conflict, followed by a look at some influential perspectives on the issue of child and youth participation in violence, and the influences they have had on policy making.¹ We conclude with the idea that youth are of central concern to both national and regional stability in West Africa and suggest that, to make this important constituency visible to national and regional policymakers, researchers and conflict analysts, there should be better informed and more varied discourse on children and youth.

When Sierra Leone attained independence in 1961, it inherited the promise of a budding democracy and had prospects for human security and sustainable development.² There was a functioning parliamentary system, an independent judicial system, and efficient and popularly elected local government structures. The country was also endowed with very rich natural resources – diamonds, gold, iron ore, arable land for agriculture and abundant marine resources. In addition, it had one of the most developed educational infrastructures in sub-Saharan Africa, epitomised by Fourah Bay College, the first university in the region. But 30 years down the line, Sierra Leone's socio-economic condition has degenerated into an ironic tragedy characterised by widespread poverty, insecurity and poor human development. The worst manifestation of this scenario was the outbreak of a rebel war, which raged for more than a decade.

What went wrong? The deep roots of Sierra Leone's crisis lay in its history, particularly the 17 years of Siaka Steven's rule (1968-85) and, by extension, the 24 years of the All People's Congress (APC) rule (1968-1992). Over-centralisation of state machinery, rural isolation and ethnic politics, corruption and abuse of power as well as neglect and misuse of the youth characterised that period in Sierra Leone's history.³ A few of these deserve some detailed examination to throw more light on the dynamics of the crisis.

The deliberate concentration of power in the hands of a few people in the capital had many implications. Access to resources became virtually impossible for non-APC members, and membership of the APC became a necessary condition for access to jobs and state resources. Local government institutions were weakened, thereby hindering the development of participation at the grass-roots level. The needs of the provincial and rural areas were either marginally attended to or neglected outright. This created a feeling of deprivation and alienation among rural residents.⁴

Stevens, a witty and unpredictable leader, maintained his rule in part by violence through the Internal Security Unit (ISU), a paramilitary group comprised of an underclass of youth fed with drugs and promises of employment, that stifled political and civic opposition, a process which culminated in a dictatorship between 1978-1992. One result of this was a growing array of unemployed, disillusioned and drug-addicted youth, acculturated to violence, which later constituted the recruitment base for the rebellion.⁵

Under Stevens, corruption and mismanagement were rife, and an infamous dictum in local parlance "*usai yu tai kaw, na dae i dae eat*" (meaning "A cow grazes where it is tethered") was virtually raised to a national philosophy. Through a patrimonial system of rationed favours, theft of public funds, illicit payments and bribes and rent from economic distortions induced by price controls and administrative allocation of basic commodities like rice and fuel, corruption was institutionalised.

Stevens' attitude to the diamond trade was intriguing, considering the fact that illicit diamond mining has been a major factor in the lingering Sierra Leone crisis. Since his years in opposition, and as part of his strategy to capture power, Stevens had advocated for 'free-for-all mining'. Under his rule, therefore, illicit mining simply became the order of the day among the youth, and groups who were hired by expatriate groups exploded. This led to the reduction in Sierra Leone's official diamond exports from 2,000,000 carats in 1970 to less than 200,000 carats in 1984. On the other hand, it allowed Stevens and his cronies in government and his foreign (particularly

Lebanese) collaborators to benefit from the massive looting of state resources.

The progressive deterioration of the economy over the years had its most adverse effect on the youth. A hard core of young men and women emerged who were either without jobs or a reliable means of income. This marginalised youth felt dejected and excluded from the mainstream of society, and eventually lost faith in the state's capacity to respond to, and deal with, their expectations. Some become radical and rebellious, among them, school leavers, university graduates and unemployed ghetto dwellers.⁶

In rural areas, young people found themselves faced with shrinking opportunities as the prices of raw materials dropped, mining was subsumed by the shadow economy, and rural patronage systems weakened. Without sponsorship and protection, more and more youths found themselves unable to attend school and without income possibilities.

The virtually handpicked successor government of Momoh did very little to change the situation when it assumed power in 1985. It is therefore not surprising that the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF) claimed that the rebellion was aimed at overthrowing the centralised, repressive and inefficient APC government and at revamping the economy by wresting control of the national mineral wealth from foreigners.⁷ It is also noteworthy that the rebel incursion of 23 March 1991 was timed to coincide with the 20th anniversary of a failed coup attempt against the APC in which the rebel leader, Corporal Foday Sankoh, had been implicated, imprisoned, and subsequently dishonourably discharged from the army.

The insurrection by the RUF later developed into a full-scale civil war when it entered Sierra Leone from Liberia at Bomaru in Kailahun District and Mano River Bridge in Pujehun District on 23 March 1991. The civil war, more than others in the sub-region, was characterised by widespread violence and gross abuse of human rights, raising many questions both within Sierra Leone and on the international scene on the rationales behind the war. After waging a brutal, destructive and protracted war against three successive regimes,⁸ the RUF captured Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone on 25 May 1997, taking over power from the constitutional government of Ahmed Tejjan Kabbah. After this development, efforts were made by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Cease-fire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) to reinstate the constitutional government to power. This paved the way for subsequent attempts by the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL), to disarm and settle/reintegrate combatants who had taken part in the war.

Root Causes, Rebellion and Recruitment

If any one of West Africa's numerous conflicts deserves characterisation as a 'crisis of youth',⁹ then it is the conflict in Sierra Leone. Youth recruitment and mobilisation into war activities represented the failure of the state and, by extension, the community and family, to respond to the needs and challenges posed by an inordinately high percentage of youth in Sierra Leonean society.

The phenomenon of youth¹⁰ participation in African conflicts is deeply rooted in the crisis of governance that characterizes most post-colonial African states. This crisis has over the years been manifested in various forms, including conflicts over power sharing; incapacity of the state to provide for and protect its citizens; the solitary exercise of political power; mismanagement of state resources, abuse of power and in the collapse of economic and social structures and institutions.¹¹

The expansive age category of youth to 35 in many African contexts describes a group caught in the chasm between childhood and the sometimes-unattainable social, political and economic status that would define them as adults. The official Sierra Leonean definition of youth is:

...any Sierra Leonean (female and male) within the 15-35 age bracket. This does not exclude any Sierra Leonean liable to youth related needs, concerns and influences...¹²

In political and armed struggle, youth have not been overlooked as valuable allies or potential adversaries. Regimes and rebels alike have risen to the occasion in using mobilisation strategies that appeal to, or prey upon, the developmental, social and economic needs of this particular group, which often cuts across different socio-economic strata and ethnic, linguistic or geographical identities. Incentives, which are neither always positive nor in the best interests of young people, lie at the core of mobilisation strategies. These can range from the fight-or-die ultimatums offered in forced recruitment, to more sophisticated mechanisms of political, social and economic inclusion. While the specific age definition might be fluid and informal, youth identity itself has been actively constructed as a politically prescriptive role for young people, expressed in political dogma and mobilisation campaigns, which support change or reinforce existing orders.

Rebel recruitment campaigns that rely on terror and abduction are usually mirrored by governments, though the latter have the added advantage of

mechanisms of the state – education systems, political youth leagues and criminal justice systems that channel ‘delinquents’ into military service, for example – to support their agendas. As pressure builds, recruitment measures become drastic. When state mechanisms are no longer functional enough, new strategies are required, and governments, like rebel forces, have also resorted to forced recruitment.

There are other factors that make youth worth targeting. Educated youth pose ideological challenges, often publicly. Precocious young entrepreneurs threaten monopolies. Young people demand huge investments of public money – health care, education, social services – expenditures that demand transparency and cut into the ruthless accumulation of personal fortunes. And the rest, the unskilled *lumpen*¹³ - according to some - are inclined to resort to violence at any given moment, and should be put to use or suppressed in order to contain their inherent unruliness.

Writers such as Alex DeWaal and Nicholas Argenti¹⁴ argue that sustaining hierarchies headed by ‘gerontocracies’ requires the suppression and containment of young people within paternalistic, sometimes ‘traditional’, social frameworks that can be manipulated to serve the ends of clientelism. They also argue that education systems, insofar as they are effective, serve the purpose of:

Reinventing the role of village elders, the political elite have commonly adopted the same attitude of didactic condescension. At all levels of the education system, students are therefore compelled to memorize, to repeat, to recite, and thus to embody their subjection to the authority of the master.¹⁵

Interestingly, one way of discrediting armed opposition groups such as Angola’s Union for the Total Independence of Angola, Uganda’s Lord’s Resistance Army and Sierra Leone’s Revolutionary United Front has been to draw attention to their similar lack of coherent critiques of the existing order.

What passes for education in youth mobilisation or suppression campaigns serves to sustain the illusion of the opportunity of gaining education. In this respect, educational offerings need only appear better than the alternative of no education at all.

In the end, what motivates young peoples’ decisions to join armed groups is as varied as the huge variety of economic, familial, personal, and political influences in their lives. Awareness of the needs and vulnerabilities of young people, non-existent most of the time, seems magically to surface when the time comes to raise armies. Recruitment potential might be seen as arising from vulnerability, as opposed to resilience.

For a society to be resilient, Leaning and Arie argue that it need not be rich: “Instead, what is required is a core bundle of basic resources - material, psychological and social - which together ensure a minimum level of survival.”¹⁶ The suggestion is that “individuals and communities have greater resilience when their core attachments to home, community and the future remain intact”. When these attachments are undone, individuals may turn to other sources of participation, recognition, and empowerment, usually ‘identity groups’ established around race, religion, geography or age, and characterised by an aggressive stance toward established institutions and practices. Leaning and Arie implicitly criticise the “developmentalist” thrust of many “human security” proponents, as well as the “resources” argument of the “political economy of violence” school. In their view, “a narrow focus on material resources” has prevented analysts from identifying the true sources of vulnerability or resilience in a society.

Although the RUF had a large youth component, this youth membership comprised different ethnic and cultural backgrounds going beyond the borders of Sierra Leone.¹⁷ This questions the assertion that the particular nature of urban youth culture in Sierra Leone explains the origin and dynamics of the war, expressed in the notion that a ‘*lumpen*’ and ‘subaltern’ youth factor in the conflict influenced and contributed to the violent trajectories that the war in Sierra Leone has taken. This analytical framework focuses on the centrality of youth culture and its determination of specific behaviours during the civil war.¹⁸

In analysing the Sierra Leone case, the introduction of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) and economic recovery programmes (ERPs) by both the Siaka Stevens and Momoh governments was a reaction not so much to capitalist transformation but to state inability to perform its assigned functions. What took place in Sierra Leone was a confused economic re-engineering process in which corruption had become a hallmark of national politics. During this process, the economic elite manipulated the economy to get more access to resources backed by shallow and empty rhetorical political phrases like ‘constructive nationalism’.

Ibrahim Abdullah, in his seminal essay, *Bush path to destruction*,¹⁹ also used the term “*lumpen*” to refer to the large group of unemployed and unemployable youths, mostly male, who live by their wits or who have one foot in what is generally referred to as the informal or underground economy.²⁰ Abdullah regards such youth groups as having defective education, ill-formed political consciousness and being composed predominantly of second-generation city residents. Their popular resorts are peri-urban spaces known

as the *pote*, peri-urban spaces constructed around the *odelay* or masquerades. These formed the cultural and organisational *foci* or site of the city's *lumpen* youth. According to the argument, those associated with the term are known for their anti-social behaviour of smoking marijuana, and indulging in petty theft and violence among other things. This Freetown *lumpen* population is seen as a function of the colonial political economy of the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries.²¹ Escaped and freed rural slaves and peasants were believed to have drifted into the city in search of employment and settled largely in peri-urban enclaves. The steady growth in their numbers was seen as inversely proportionate to the performance of the Sierra Leonean economy.

In recent times, it has been observed all over the African continent that young people are the major participants in most wars, and that they are used as combatants in most cases.²² Their involvement or participation comes about not only as a result of cultural traits, but also as a result of the denial of certain needs, be they political, economic or social. It is within this context that youth, literate or illiterate, are enticed or forced to engage in these conflicts.

Peters and Richards argue that:

There are two main adult reactions to *youth involvement in civil wars*... The first is to stigmatise youth combatants as evil (as 'bandits' and 'vermin').... Many under-age recruits are from remote rural regions. Poorly educated, they are readily despised by urbanised elites. Elites always fear 'unwashed' youth. Africa is no exception. Sometimes, as in Liberia and Sierra Leone, colonially rooted attitudes to interior peoples reinforce the stigmatisation of young rural combatants as 'barbarians'....²³

Peters and Richards adequately capture an elitist perception of the 'rural' youth in which they are consistently described in negative terms. The youth found within Freetown and its outskirts after independence in 1961 were perceived as illiterates, unenlightened, rebellious and ruled by primitive instincts. These youth, it was asserted, had nothing positive to offer the society. This representation of *lumpen* culture, however, began to change in the 1970s, particularly when middle-class youths and other respectable groups became key players, as a result of mutually reinforcing dynamics.²⁴ One feature of these was the increasing pauperisation of the population as a result of the worsening economic crisis, which had its roots in the economic greed of the elites.

One argument suggests that 'war and poverty are in a dynamic and

mutually reinforcing relationship'. When people are poor, and irrespective of whether they have *lumpen* or 'subaltern' backgrounds, the propensity for conflict will be high.²⁵ Furthermore, given the nature of the family system in Sierra Leone, it is difficult if not impossible to isolate allegedly unruly youth from their more fortunate family members since the cultural sites that have been blamed for fostering these anti-social vices and behaviour are also public/family meeting sites that create enough opportunities for reciprocal influence. What has happened in Sierra Leone was an unstructured process of elite manipulation gone dangerously wrong.

That political and economic elites wanted to exploit the so-called 'violence-prone' nature of these youths (here and elsewhere in Africa) for their own ends cannot be denied. But this manipulation process did not work out according to the script. Cultural moderation occurred mainly as a result of benefits from the expansion of educational facilities. Middle-class youth were regarded as more conscious of the country's problems and more critical of its political leadership. Their unfulfilled higher aspirations with respect to the national political project nevertheless predisposed them to the tendency of being strongly anti-establishment and rebellious against authority. The failure of the radical student project similarly neglected to account for deep-rooted socio-economic and political dysfunctions in society, and eventually resulted in what has been characterised as the instrumentalisation of violence or political disorder.²⁶

The youth of Sierra Leone had an interest in joining any process that in their worldview would contribute to improving their living conditions. In this sense, the political rhetoric of the RUF presented in their political tract, *Footpath to democracy*, and the initiation of their war activities were interpreted in a context of choices narrowed by growing violence, displacement and instability. Over time, however, the tactics of the RUF spanned the whole of the 'recruitment spectrum'. With growing disorder, poverty, insecurity, violence and displacement comes a heightened vulnerability to forced recruitment by rebel forces and, in the case of Sierra Leone, the armed forces and civil defence forces as well. While testimonies recounting the experiences of child abductees are well documented elsewhere, one striking feature is worth commenting on. Testimonies of child combatants collected in 2002 revealed that children had, in fact, fought for several different factions, including the SLA, the RUF, RUF/AFRC and the CDF. Some had served in Liberia. Of 34 young people who were legally children at the time of their participation, 14 changed factions at some point during the war.

Table 1 – child soldiers fighting for multiple factions²⁷

Age (2002)	SLA	RUF	RUF / AFRC	CDF	Liberia (ULIMO)
17		x			
Not known		x		x	
16	x				
17		x	x		
16	x	x			
16		x	x		
17	x				
14		x			
16	x	x	x		
10	x				
16				x	
17				x	
17	x				
16				x	x
16				x	
16				x	
15	x				
15	x				
18				x	x
18				x	
16	x				
17				x	x
18	x		x		
13(f)		x			
15				x	x
16	x				
16	x				
10	x				
16	x	x			
16	x	x			
16		x	x		
17		x			
16 (f)	x				
17 (f)		x			

Of these children, 14 described their recruitment as ‘voluntary’ (which in 13 cases meant joining the CDF), nearly always explaining their motive as getting revenge or protecting their communities. In one case, a child explained that he had joined the RUF after he saw “what they did” to his family. All of the children who fought for the SLA claimed to have been “abducted” or “forced to join”.

This small cross-section suggests a state of chaos in which children could find themselves recruited during attacks on their communities, then counter-recruited during retaliation by an opposing party. The most common move seems to have been from the RUF to the CDF or the SLA. For these young people, life choices reached what must have been a terrifying bottleneck. While their situation looks to be in sharp contrast to that of university students rallying against corruption and exclusion years earlier, the pressures of state collapse and ongoing violence made for a seamless expansion of, and fluidity within, the recruitment pool. Decisions made by young people, inevitably under duress but not always ‘forced’, nonetheless affected the nature and trajectory of the Sierra Leone conflict from beginning to end.

Representations of Young People in Conflict: Global, Local and Individual

As for me, for a long time I have had no care for village tradition. I have been to Liberia to kill using AK-47 and with a knife. I have eaten human flesh and taken drugs as well. I am a cursed child because I have caused harm to my mother who died with that sorrow in her heart... Now I am not sure if I can go back to my community again and whether they will accept me.²⁸

The accounts of extreme brutality committed by forces in Sierra Leone were a powerful tool of the advocacy community for raising awareness of the plight of child soldiers as well as awareness of the conflict. Child soldiers have, in fact, become media shorthand for all that is inhumane and brutal about African warfare and the RUF in this particular case. Finding real political meaning in the testimony above, on the other hand, is difficult. The media’s practice of gathering graphic testimonies has been questioned. Graça Machel’s *The impact of war on children* calls attention to situations where journalists in Sierra Leone searched for “younger children” who had been victims of the worst atrocities to give testimony.²⁹ Eventually, in Sierra Leone, Interim Care Centres (ICCs) housing demobilised children had to institute a

no-journalist policy in an attempt to control what was beginning to resemble exploitation. These kinds of testimonies have, however, been invaluable in amassing political and financial support among the donor community for programmes benefiting war-affected children. They have also been fodder for those who seek to present African warfare as inexplicable, brutal and disconnected from the 'civilised' world order. Indeed, at a distance, it is difficult to imagine how the life-path of a child could be so fraught with violence and inhumanity, and even more difficult to put oneself in the position of a child making the decision to kill or face death. This leaves the subject matter free-for-all, lending itself to the moral outrage of advocates and the racist speculation of ultra-conservatives alike. But like the notion of innate African brutality, the idea that youth are somehow predisposed to violence permits distance, as does the belief that a few abhorrently evil warlords can be solely responsibly for armed conflict. Accounts of human experiences out of context can easily become political currency. Governments fighting off insurgencies indict their enemies for the use of children, hastily discarding their own underage combatants as soon as peace negotiations appear on the horizon. Insurgents release small numbers of child soldiers as a way of accessing dialogue, securing supplies and boosting their own credibility. The use of child soldiers, among the other atrocities committed by the RUF and other insurgents, has served to bring international attention to conflicts and to press the United Nations into intervention. But the limited portrayals of young people as victims of war have not contributed to understandings of conflict, nor do they serve in drawing attention to the multiple levels of conflict that persist after the fighting has stopped.

Within their own communities, children and youth involved in warfare are viewed with ambiguity, as both victims and perpetrators of violence, with fear, sympathy and trepidation.³⁰ The relationships between young people and their communities are being re-negotiated after the war, as a series of interviews and focus group discussions conducted shortly before the 2002 elections reveals.³¹

They know the jungle law. To get the child to feel back for himself is not easy. He thinks no one should boss him around. When they came out from the jungle they feel we are all equal. We tell them we have our own laws here, we have our own norms that should be recognized. You should respect your elders. There are a lot of these issues. It takes time. These are the challenges we are facing.³²

The sense that some youth have of their own positions after the war can be equally uncertain:

Q: How do the elders see the youth?

A: ...they see the role youths have played during the civil war and they know that we are the able body people. In order to see this country forge ahead the government thought it fit that they should and must consider us.

Q: Do you think the elders of this town are doing things you don't like?

A: Yes, the youths want to stay together and undertake some agricultural ventures but the elders don't usually agree with us.

Q: Do you think the elders are scared of you, the youth?

A: It is our natural hatredness; they don't want to see us forge ahead.

Q: Do you refuse the elders on their decision here or do you listen to them?

A: No, we listen to them because we considered them to be our elders and in Africa we respect them.³³

This suggests the lack of a clearly perceived social and political role for youth, and their frustration at being considered adversaries for simply knowing what needs to be done and having the initiative to pursue it; at the same time they hold respect for the traditional order of things.

In another focus group, one youth made the following comment, suggesting a sense of urgency or a window of opportunity that should be grasped before the 'old ways' had a chance to re-calcify:

(We need elections) ...now. An interim government would not have been better. Because if an interim government was set in place, that government would want to continue to stay in power through dubious means and may also want to lengthen their time of staying in power. The sooner someone tastes the trappings of power, he may not want to leave office again. ...those who are fortunate to be part of the interim government would be there to enrich themselves.. We give chance to present to make sure there is an early election. They have also contributed to the peace process and don't want another person to divert us from this point.³⁴

The re-instatement of traditional and government authority has the potential to create new (or perpetuate old) conflict over land, resources, status and customs. Many young people may not have clear, positive recollections of the functioning of these institutions that could serve as incentives to support their restoration, while others have an outright distrust.

Yet the war has most certainly brought about a sense of stakeholderhip

among young people, who are not unaware of the sacrifices they have made, and altered the perceptions of communities, who now see that they are a group to be reckoned with. Yet the stakeholdership of young people in the Lomé peace negotiation process was lost on uncertain terrain:

World Vision and UNDP gave funds for me and three others to go to Lome. Just a few days prior to departure, USAID, which funded World Vision, wanted to know our [the youths'] mandate. We promptly explained that we would simply be observers at Lome, and would only provide input when necessary. USAID was not comfortable with youth and student participation. On the last day, on which we were to leave, they had not approved funding. This was a clear example of youth exclusion.³⁵

In each example above, power and authority, changing hands in the transformation to peace, are being re-negotiated, from the identity of the individual child soldier to the representation of youth as a constituency at the upper echelons of the peace process: young people's agency is exerting itself on all levels.

Encouragingly, the government of Sierra Leone is not unaware of the need for meaningful youth stakeholdership in its recovery agenda, and on 30 June 2003, the country adopted a new youth policy.³⁶

The policy pledges to 'level the playing field' for young people's interests, and to create responsible citizenship among, and new commitment to, young people. It acknowledges the impact of war on youth among its goals and objectives, *inter alia*:

To create a fast track process for the self-realisation of youths and their overall development as a strategy for coping with the economic, social and psychological damages of the war.³⁷

And:

To mobilize youths of all ages to replace the culture of violence with a culture of peace, dialogue and responsible citizenry through intensive campaigns; value education programmes and life skills training.³⁸

Yet the *Youth Profile* section of the policy sustains some of the ambiguity towards youth, with particular reference to former combatants:

A sizeable proportion of them were combatants who currently live/make a living on the streets. Majority of these youths who were forced to flee their communities trooped to Freetown, and other

major cities like Bo and Kenema, and have become accustomed to city life. They are largely illiterate, school dropouts eking a living from petty trading, narcotic drug peddling, prostitution and theft. These youths are bunched in poor sections of cities, and the rising number of slums in the city centre, where they hourly feed western violence-prone/pornographic movies in ubiquitous video cinema houses. The 'new mind opium' is the regular viewing of European soccer on satellite TV. Nearly every other youth in urban Sierra Leone is an avid fan of one European football club, with school-going youth devoting very little time for studies.³⁹

In the eyes of the state, youth are still an unknown quantity, walking a fine line between adversary and ally in the recovery project. Should the state fail in its incentivisation of youth, their unpredictable nature might yet be brought to blame in helping the state to shed accountability for problems that fall under governance. The uneducated youth-rabble is deemed to have a natural affinity for the warlords and other bogeymen predisposed to rebellion, disorder and violence. The idea of youth-as-barbarians fills an uncomfortable political void for governments anxious to distance themselves from the root causes of rebellion, yet uncertain about how to approach the youth issue.

Mainstream representations of Sierra Leonean children and youth in war leave us with the question 'where do child victims end and youth perpetrators begin'? Constructions of children and youth have served policy agendas, but have they served young people themselves?

Regional Dimensions: Disenfranchised Youth without Borders

West Africa's politics are characterised by state weakness and insurgencies, including Liberia (1989 – 1997; and 2001 -), Sierra Leone (1991 – 2002), Guinea (sporadic), and La Côte d'Ivoire (ongoing since September 2002). None of these conflicts has occurred in isolation from the rest. The 'interests' of different warring factions, their capabilities and motivations, the synergistic relationship between political, military and economic calculations have given rise to what would appear to be a network of 'youth mercenaries' in the sub-region. The 2004 Coalition to Stop the use of Child Soldiers Reports that, among children originally co-opted to fight with Charles Taylor's Small Boys Units, some went on to fight in Sierra Leone, then went back to Liberia,

then on to Côte d'Ivoire and claim to have 'contracts' to fight in Togo.⁴⁰

Economic opportunities have become an important factor in reproducing conflict and in undermining the prospects for peace in West Africa. Over time, economic calculations have exerted a decisive leverage on the pattern taken by the conflict. Factions have constantly sabotaged transitions from war to peace, as they perceived it, as detrimental to their political, military and economic interests.⁴¹ Rebel group interests are not static, but respond to the specific stage and level of successes of their war. It is only when their positions weaken either politically or militarily that such groups express interest in, negotiate and/or comply with, requests for regulation and conflict resolution. More often than not, this is a tactic used to create a window of opportunity either to re-arm or to win new political allies.

It can also afford opportunities to recruit, a task made easier by the general tendency of the population to resort to extreme coping strategies, including movement and joining armed factions. In this context, politically motivated violence turns to criminal violence. Disruptions in state revenues and the growing power of sub-state actors lead to the successive personalisation of the state apparatus, and to the complete paralysis of social services, which further undermines the ability of people to cope. This is a cycle in which 'recruitment potential' regenerates itself.

The interconnectedness among key actors and players in West Africa's conflicts is characterised by sub-regional economic networks that support conflict complexes in direct and indirect ways, by the exploitation and sale of natural resources (diamonds, timber, cocoa, cotton, coffee), and by the facilitation, transportation and sale of these commodities that the lack of adequate state regulatory frameworks makes possible. These coexist and cooperate with region-wide military networks that are both implicit and explicit in terms of mercenary networks⁴² and arms supplies⁴³. Region-wide political networks facilitate economic predation and the provision of training facilities to those that are willing to destabilise the sub-region. Finally, there are professional networks that comprise illicit smuggling activities and networks, cross-border family networks and cross-diaspora networks that facilitate trade in valuable goods. This provides a wide spectrum of economic possibilities - and not only for those skilled in combat.

A report of the UN Secretary General to the Security Council released in March 2004 on ways to combat sub-regional and cross-border problems in West Africa (S/2004/200) states:

The increasing use and proliferation of mercenaries, child soldiers and small arms account for much of the instability in the West

African subregion. This is not an exhaustive list of such problems. The culture of impunity, the spread of HIV/AIDS, the continued weakening of the security sector, the proliferation of roadblocks, youth unemployment, environmental degradation, social exclusion, remnants of war, mass refugee movements and other forced displacement, inequitable and illicit exploitation of natural resources, weak national institutions and civil society structures, and violations of human rights, including the rights of women, are some of the other serious cross-border problems afflicting many parts of the subregion.⁴⁴

This nexus between young people, the political economy of war and wider sub-regional dynamics poses questions about youth cultures and ideologies, about youth and their aspirations and about the opportunities for advancement in the 'shadow economy'. This alone suggests some compelling reasons for youth to be at the centre of conflict analysis in sub-Saharan Africa and West Africa in particular.

Conclusion

The notion of 'youth' indicates a population group with its own vulnerabilities, identities and agency. Data from sub-Saharan African countries suggests that over half of the population is under the age of 18.⁴⁵ The problems of economic hardship, political exclusion, competition for resources, and ethnic and religious intolerance are experienced by majorities who are relatively young, as well as by their caregivers - those who manage the child-adult transition in the interest of perpetuating families and communities. The burden of care on states, communities and families, already a heavy one for a peaceful state, is made unbearable by state weakness and violent conflict.

There are compelling reasons why young people ought not to be considered a 'side issue' in peace processes and policy making, to be dealt with in a single peace accord clause and followed up solely by NGOs and special interest groups. Youth-based indicators in conflict early warning could be of huge importance for conflict prevention. It is probably safe to say that the collective agency of children and youth must surely be more than the sum of its parts, and that this has some interplay with the causes, trajectories and recurrences of conflict. Ignoring such a large constituency is unthinkable. Social indicators should be given due importance, such as employment and literacy and access to education and health care. Access to education continues to be one of the principal concerns of former combatants in Sierra Leone.

This is reflected in the reality that children and youth have unfailingly been the targets of the campaigns of liberation movements, electioneers and insurgents, an indication of the widespread recognition of their strategic value in political change. Youth occupied centre stage in post-colonial nationalist agendas, where they were sought to be the generation that both preserve tradition and spearhead a new kind of African democracy.⁴⁶ The subsequent post-cold-war re-orientation to the west, its culture and fiscal policies, however, coincided in a loss of status for youth - a redefinition of youth as "dangerous, criminal [and] decadent" - which is now "reflected in the physical and institutional collapse of the institutions of supervision and education..."⁴⁷ There are lessons to be learned from the consequences of roles and characteristics prescribed to youth in different historical contexts.

There is evidence that youth who have 'fallen through the cracks' or simply rejected formal demobilisation processes have gone on to pursue the opportunities of warfare beyond their own borders. This presents an ominous scenario: the prospect of war as an economic opportunity for youth prompts thinking of the size and capacity of the experienced war-economy labour force resulting from decades of conflict in the West African region. Youth should therefore be seen not only in the broader context of Sierra Leone's conflict, but as a stakeholder group placed within a conflict-complex approach.

Meanwhile, Sierra Leone's development of a national youth policy is an important step toward breaking down the parameters of policy discourse on children and youth. These groups should not be relegated to discussions of education, sport and culture, nor should their concerns be addressed simply through victim support mechanisms. While academia has found fertile ground for anthropological, historical and political research in child-adult transitions with the idea of generational conflict, bringing this information to the attention of policy makers and conflict analysts will be a sustained exercise in translation; and, in turn, it will subject the work of policy makers and analysts to youth perspectives. On-going monitoring of policies and programmes should track peace dividends for children and youth, and try to gauge the success of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes in addressing the needs of this particular sector of the population. Such a bottom-up approach is necessary in view of the current lack of understanding within policy circles of young people as a constituency; this is a field that has been dominated by rights-based advocacy, very often geared (effectively so) toward fundraising and emergency-context intervention on behalf of child combatants. If this work

is to be more than symbolic, it must be underscored by the recognition that the presence of young people in militias, state militaries and rebel movements is a symptom of serious and pervasive governance flaws.

Endnotes

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- 22 K Peters, P Richards (eds), *Why we fight: Voices of youth combatants in Sierra Leone*, *Africa*, 68 (2), 1998, p 183.
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- 32 Interview with Caritas Makeni, official, Makeni, April 2002.
- 33 Former combatant in focus group at Kailahun, April 2002.
- 34 Comment at focus group discussion at Kannia village in Kono, April 2002.
- 35 Interview with Charles Lahai, leader of National Youth Organization, Freetown, April 2002.
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