

Conclusion

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This book has set out to interrogate and broaden the discourse on children, youth and conflict. Acknowledging the moral repugnance of the reality of children under arms and describing their agency in times of peace and war are decidedly different tasks. The latter of these has received little attention from advocates, conflict theorists and policymakers alike. The collection of essays in this volume was motivated by the desire to make up for this deficit by extending the research horizon to include the ways in which child and youth agency impacts on human security.

The premise of this study, and an argument running through all of the chapters, is that defining the role of children and youth in conflict as victims presents an incomplete picture, with the net effect of depriving us of an accurate understanding of the dynamics of conflict. This book advocates reflection on the importance of children and youth as agents of change. We argue that child and youth participation in social transformation in general, and conflict in particular, extends beyond their roles as victims.

This concluding chapter hopes to comment on the different definitional and conceptual issues that have emerged, such as identity and participation, mobilisation and demobilisation, and the role of economic and political factors in child and youth agency.

Child and youth agency in this context has referred to the role of children and youth as agents of change and transformation. The systematic mobilisation of children and youth to serve political, military and economic agendas predates Africa's liberation struggles, but child and youth participation seems to be occurring in increasingly violent contexts. Moreover, children are not merely victims of the actions of older members of society. Children take decisions and make choices that impact on the nature and trajectories of war. In order to truly understand the role of young people in change, we need to describe them in terms broader than those of victims of human rights violations.

Part of the debate is whether, in fact, *children* and *youth* as two different categorisations can be collapsed into one bracket, if only for the purpose of

analysis. The former is associated with innocence and purity; and the latter, with exuberance and rebellion. In Chapter One, Afua Twum-Danso notes that definitions of childhood and youth are bound to encounter “pitfalls and complexity’. Many children are, indeed, adults by virtue of the fact that they perform responsibilities usually reserved for adults, yet many adults lack the responsibilities and privileges that are attributes of adulthood. In reality, concepts of childhood and youth are directly related to the socio-economic and political factors and environment, and are not necessarily linked to chronological age. In contrast to children, youth are often depicted as what Aki Stavrou calls “active agents of conflict”. Stavrou reminds us that the differences between children and youth can be overplayed; children are, on the whole, a better defined, better funded “policy issue” than youth, something that is reflected in the relatively greater strength of the child-welfare lobby, both locally and internationally. By internationally accepted definitions, children are under the age of 18, while youth designates 15-25 year olds. *Youth* is not a homogenous construct, but encapsulates many dimensions and diversities of gender and the socio-economic environment. One of those differences is between rural and urban youths, as demonstrated in the chapter on Uganda. In the final analysis, therefore, ‘real’ differences exist in terms of levels of discontent and the sources of exclusion and inclusion, opportunities and privileges, ethnic and regional identities, and livelihood choices that play upon the transformation from childhood to adulthood.

Intersections also occur between children, youth, women, and girls. Whether as a child or youth, there is a gender dimension to the role of young Africans in social transformation and change, both peaceful and violent. Angela Veale’s chapter on Ethiopia shows how young girls joined rebel forces, later to demobilise as women. Thus, the crucial process of growth, development and transition takes place under conditions of anomaly and social crisis. The combined role of woman/warrior creates at least as many ambiguities in identity as that of child/youth/soldier.

To be sure, assumptions of powerlessness and helplessness do not offer a complete explanation of the role of young people in conflict. The indiscriminate acceptance by the international community of the idea of the woman or child victim in need of assistance has its counterpart in the systematic exclusion of these groups from public participation and economic entitlements in their own societies.

A high price has been paid by young people in the forms of trauma, injuries and death, which have overshadowed the macro-effect of child and youth

agency, which is to challenge, and eventually transform, the social and political constructs within which they live. They have been affected by war, but have also affected war to a considerable extent. As Veale points out, “the host society has been pushed by them as they have been pushed by it”.

Appeals to children and youth to take up arms somehow unify the aspirations of many – some are sophisticated, others coercive. The last of these, forced recruitment, ironically lacks the duplicity of the others, without the pretence of political agendas that promise to improve the lot of youth, only to abandon them once the struggle is over.

The concept of the ‘recruitment pool’ describes the unity in vulnerability of a frustrated, disempowered, harassed and angry population of young Africans. However diverse the sources of discontent, young people are eager for change and ready to effect it, and freedom fighters, political campaigners and insurgents have not overlooked this strategically important group. The ease with which youth are mobilised, however, stands in sharp contrast to the complexities of demobilisation or, more broadly, disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR), which has thus far failed to lessen the burdens, trauma, loss of education and livelihood possibilities, and ongoing ethnic, political and religious tensions borne principally by young people in post-conflict African societies. The ‘recruitment pool’ produces not only child soldiers. It also feeds crime and organised violence at many levels, which readily absorb youths facing the slamming door of opportunities brought about by the structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) of the 1980s.

Indeed, since the end of the Cold War, the nature of war has undergone fundamental transformation, with dire implications for children and youth. Most wars are no longer between states, but within them. Civil wars in Africa have erased the boundaries between soldiers and civilians. Against the realities of child soldiering, forced conscription and systematic sexual violence, the boundaries between children and adults have become even more blurred. A version of armed militancy has evolved in which rebel forces have deployed ethnic cleansing, mutilation, rape, and other methods of terrorising civilian populations into total submission. Rather than being protected as demanded by the Geneva Convention and all other instruments of International Humanitarian Law, civilians have, in fact, become deliberate targets. As with other social groups traditionally considered vulnerable (such as women and the aged), the role of children and, to an extent, youth in armed conflict has changed considerably. Like the other resources that fuel conflicts – minerals and oil, for example – childhood has been subject to plunder.

This is not, however, to evoke any sentiment of nostalgia based on the

mistaken premise that traditional African societies are intrinsically protective of the young. While children were accommodated, there is sufficient evidence of the abuse of children under traditional African practices, including the use of children for human sacrifices, which has been adapted in more recent times to form a perverted intersection of tradition and modernity.¹ Nonetheless, the positive traditional function of the child as an economically productive member of the household and society has, in the context of modern, resource-driven warfare, twisted itself into the form of the child combatant.

Advocacy programmes and policies on children (including available legal frameworks) do not reflect both global and national population structures that are overwhelmingly dominated by children. In simple demographic terms, much conflict analysis and policy development has little bearing on the fact that more than half the population of the continent are children (under 18 years of age). There is, therefore, an asymmetry between population structure and participation (power relations). This asymmetry goes a long way in explaining the increasingly violent character of child and youth agency in Africa.

McIntyre and her team of researchers use this volume to caution against reductionism: the diminution of child and youth to victims, which is at least as dangerous as equating gender with anatomy. To be sure, the study is not an attempt to trivialise the commendable achievements in child and youth issues, and the practical gains of agencies battling to secure the protection of children affected by war, often one child at a time. We accept and celebrate these achievements, but caution against the dangers of 'generic' policy approaches and frameworks existing outside the political and socio-economic realities within which child and youth agency functions.

Children and youth have been consistently on the frontlines in recent African conflicts. Events in Angola, Liberia, Mozambique, Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo illustrate this point. Even in 'peaceful' states, the social upheavals (often violent) are populated with, and defined by, young Africans. Young men (in this case denoting those outside the gerontocracy) have also participated directly in ruling their countries, a task normally reserved for 'adults'. Joseph Kabila (DRC), Valentine Strasser and the NPRC (Sierra Leone), Thomas Sankara (Burkina Faso) and Yayah Jammeh (the Gambia) are only some of the examples. The record of their performance is a mixed one, and further confirms that behavioural characteristics of youth are neither generic nor intrinsically violent.

As formal state avenues close up, alternative and additional accommodation mechanisms have emerged that increasingly define child and

youth agency in many African states. These are tribal, ethnic and religious. Afua Twum-Danso makes particular reference to 'Pentecostal movements and Muslim brotherhoods'. Citing the work of Argenti, she emphasises that "pentecostal churches, some of which are entirely run by young people, provide opportunities for participation in civil society, something that political structures and established churches deny them". Indeed, contemporary child and youth agency in many African states demonstrates a fragmented child and youth identity on ethnic and/or religious basis. In Nigeria, for example, the introduction of *Sharia* law in most northern parts of the federation has resulted in what has become known as the 'Jesus Army', standing in contradistinction to the 'Mujahadeen', a dangerous mix of youthful energy, ethnic origin, and religious dogma.²

Regardless of the configurations, the emerging trend is that young Africans are inventing and adapting their own mechanisms for participation in social transformation processes. Political and socio-economic structures exclude youth from active, positive participation, and they are finding alternative ways of participation.

This does not imply that the involvement of children and youth in conflict as child soldiers is entirely due to the attractive options that armed insurgencies represent to children and youth. While groups such as UNITA had relatively sophisticated and coherent political structures and ideology, the political agenda of other groups, such as the RUF in Sierra Leone, was much less clear. The choice that children and youth often have to make is not between good and bad, or an oppressive government versus a benevolent militia. In any event, the choices are often made for them by circumstances far beyond their control. Child and youth agency in conflict situations derives from survival strategies that young people unavoidably adopt in the quest to deal with their insecurity, and in attempts to outlive real or potential violence. The role of children and youth in conflict presents a good laboratory within which to study the relationship between the young and the powerful in Africa. Within a political economy of decline and decay in many African states, children and youth are located as a recruitment pool for various elements and actors competing for power.

The vulnerability of children and youth to the manipulation of 'the elders' has been described as *instrumentalisation*.³ However, the situation is much more dynamic than advocacy groups and 'victim theorists' may care to admit. Children and youth are increasingly hijacking the agenda, functioning as actors in their own right. Indeed, the study demonstrated that youth have become stakeholders and actors in their own right, taking decisions in their

interest to advance their agency and secure their space in the socio-economic and political structure.

The studies in Sierra Leone, Angola, and Mozambique particularly affirm that serving governments systematically engage children, employing the mechanisms and resources of the state to condition the loyalty of children and youth. Membership of youth leagues became requirements for securing employment and education. In Angola, for example, both the government and UNITA engaged in complex cooption systems and networks, described by Imogen Parsons as both "bottom-up" and "top-down". In the case of Sierra Leone, youth were employed as thugs to unleash terror and intimidate political opponents.⁴ In Mozambique there has been little acknowledgement of the role of children and youth in the civil war, despite evidence of elaborate recruitment systems that involved the use of 'scholarships' to study abroad as well as the press-ganging of young people in public places.

In the grander scheme, Africa exists and functions as a part of a wider but single global system of production and exchange, and African states together form a loose conglomerate of fragmented neo-colonies whose economies are separately more sensitive to London, Paris and New York, than to Lagos, Abidjan or Johannesburg. Indeed, it can be argued that many conflicts are but violent manifestations of the multi-faceted crisis of (under) development that has enveloped most of the continent. This suffocating crisis can be traced to mutually reinforcing external and internal factors. The structure of the global political economy is such that 15% of the world's population consume 85% of global resources while, conversely, 85% of the population depend on 15% of the resources: hence conflict is inevitable among the deprived majority over the crumbs falling from the table of the privileged minority. This inverse relationship is sustained unfair 'fair trade' and a heavy debt burden.

Africa's development crisis, which provides the enabling environment for incessant conflicts and exerts pressure on child and youth agency, can partly be traced to the well-meaning but misguided policies that have been championed by international financial institutions (particularly the World Bank and IMF) in an effort to resolve the crisis. The benefits of such 'structural adjustment' programmes are, at best, mixed, but they have tended generally to have a compounding effect. Despite increasingly feeble attempts by the Bretton Woods institutions to argue to the contrary, SAPs have had the net effect of decreasing rather than increasing the productivity of African economies. The overwhelming evidence and consensus is that SAPs have had a disempowering and impoverishing effect on the majority of African citizens.

Children, and particularly the youth in Africa, suffer the consequences of the increasing lack of choice in African elections (especially on issues of economic governance) as a direct result of the fact that what constitutes 'sound economic policies' is predetermined by international financial institutions, regardless of the political victors. Such 'sound' policies are characteristically and consistently neo-liberal, concerned more with global economic stability than with the national economic interests of the respective African countries. This predetermination of economic policies represents a new 'conditionality', and a source of frustration and disempowerment for Africans. That the majority of these Africans are children and youth may raise questions about their relevance, alongside the relevance of national policies that presuppose a particular demographic.

The violent character of youth participation derives in part from a sense of frustration arising from the failure of the 'democracy' to satisfy their needs, and the net effect of their agency is to re-define power relations and their role in these. The notion of mechanisms existing in these environments to protect the rights and entitlements of children and youth has therefore become an economic impossibility, in addition to a demographic and political one. There exists, therefore, a parallel between the exclusion of children and youth from socio-economic and political participation, and Africa's exclusion from participation in the core of global production and exchange, which has led to the crisis of development in most of Africa.

The operational environment for child and youth agency in Africa is defined and constrained by the evolution of a neo-conservative international environment characterised by compassion fatigue, plunder, and asymmetry in power relations. The relationship between children/youth and society is indeed a microcosm of the structural imbalances that exist at all levels of the global system, with both internal and external dimensions.

Naturally, differences in political and socio-economic environments mean that the challenges facing children and youth differ substantially from those of their counterparts in the developed countries. The socialisation and politicisation process starts earlier in Africa. African children and youth are not intrinsically any more violent than children and youth in other parts of the world, but do face life-altering challenges earlier in life, including civil wars, unemployment, crime, child soldiering, hunger, poverty and, increasingly, the murderous spread of HIV/AIDS. As Benett has argued, the responsibilities of adulthood begin early in an environment of subsistence existence.⁵ These challenges have a profound impact on the socialisation process. A gun-toting, 14-year-old 'colonel' in a rebel militia group has, in his or her way,

devised coping mechanisms for an extremely violent environment.

Youth and child agency is not globally generic, but is rather a function of the particular country in the global system of production and exchange and, thus, its level of economic advancement. Therefore, while war and poverty have distorted the transition from childhood to adulthood in Africa, mechanisms exist in developed countries for coping with this crucial transition, and for positively harnessing child and youth energy for socio-economic development and the perpetuation of family, community and state. Western societies accommodate 'youthful rebellion' in much more benign ways. Indeed, delinquency is acknowledged in the west as a collective social problem, while the reactionary notion that youth are unpredictable and predisposed to violence and a threat to stability has begun to embed itself in policy in Africa. Sierra Leone's post-war youth policy, for example, discussed in Chapter Two, seems to emphasise the volatility of youth as amoral raw material to be moulded into responsible citizens.

The nature of new and emerging threats in Africa has made child and youth agency even more significant and strategic to the resolution of the continent's development crisis. Given the demographic structure and Africa's vast young population, engaging children and youth is also a necessary condition for the battle against HIV/AIDS, which has been described as Africa's own 'weapon of mass destruction'. In addition, children and youth must be at the centre of efforts to control the illicit flow of small arms; the demand for weapons is contingent on the disposition and availability of people to use and carry them; the combination of bottomless recruitment pools and free traffic of weapons invites predation by insurgents.

It is therefore important that the legal and policy frameworks for addressing these threats give due recognition to the role of young people. In this regard, it must be noted that adherence to legal frameworks by African states has been poor and, at best, inconsistent.

As Afua Twum-Danso aptly pointed out, the enthusiasm with which African states joined the Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989 (CRC) stands in sharp contradistinction to their lukewarm attitude to the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of Children (ACRWC) which was introduced less than a year later, despite the fact that no major differences exist between the two legal instruments.⁶ It is worth noting that lack of adherence by African governments to the instruments that they themselves have signed is not limited to child and youth issues alone, but is arguably characteristic of the post-colonial African state. International efforts on controlling the illicit proliferation of small arms and light weapons betray the

same reality.⁷ In the case of child and youth issues, it would appear that at least part of the inconsistency can be accounted for by the fact that the concepts upon which international instruments are predicated lack meaning within African contexts. The adoption of 18 as the cut-off age for childhood reflects more the Euro-Atlantic historical criterion for military conscription than the socio-economic basis of childhood in Africa. It could, indeed, be argued that the rush by African states to sign the CRC (while the ACRWC was ignored) may be explained by the superficiality of image and respect that are associated with being party to global legislation. In any event, the end result is what Afua Twum-Danso refers to as a *hierarchy* of legal instruments. What follows, therefore, are concentric circles of commitment, often for cosmetic, rather than genuine, reasons.

The reality that research, advocacy and policy must address is that, despite the litany of international instruments on child rights, including the CRC, the Optional Protocol, the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, the Rome Statute, and the ACRWC, it has been concluded that on most accounts, the world has become a worse place to be a child.⁸ There remains a wide gap between promises and action.

This study has made it clear that advocacy for ending victimisation is far from being sufficient for, or even tangential to, taking into account the role of young people in social change and transformation.

We suggest that in order to comprehensively understand and address the role of children and youth in conflict, energies must be targeted at the structural conditions that facilitate and contribute to the militarisation of Africa's children and youth, and that generate and sustain the 'recruitment pool'. As McIntyre cogently put it, "a failure to guarantee the rights of children and youth before armed conflict occurs cannot be remedied by laws designed to protect victims during warfare". Moreover, the failure to guarantee the rights of children and youth, as the chapters in this book vividly illustrate, is one of the important root causes of conflict.

Endnotes

- 1 This 'dark side' of Africa has proved resilient, propelled by the contradiction between the material attractions of modern life and decreasing opportunities to realise them, creating the need for short-cuts to material comfort often through criminal and diabolical means. The widely

reported discovery in the River Thames (London) in September 2001 of the headless body of a Nigerian child (aged between four and six and named 'Adam' by investigating Police Officers) is a sad reminder of the continuing violent exploitation of the innocence of children in Africa, even in times of 'peace'. 'Adam' had been taken to the UK from Nigeria for the purpose of a ritual. See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/london/3108805.stm>.

- 2 The 'Jesus Army' are militant Christian youth resisting *Sharia Law* and asserting the Christian religious rights. The '*Mujahadeen*' are their Islamic counterparts.
- 3 P Richards, *Fighting for the rain forest: War youth resources in Sierra Leone*, James Currey, Oxford, 1996.
- 4 A McIntyre, E Aning, P Addo, Politics, war and youth culture in Sierra Leone: An alternative interpretation, *African Security Review*, Vol 11, No. 3
- 5 T W Benett, *Using children in armed conflict: A legitimate African tradition?*, Monograph No. 32, ISS, Pretoria, 1998.
- 6 Burundi, Central African Republic, the Comoros, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea Bissau, Mauritania, Sao Tome and Principe and Sudan have yet to sign the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. The Republic of Congo, Djibouti, Gabon, Ghana, Liberia, Namibia, Somalia, Swaziland, Tanzania and Zambia have signed, but not yet ratified the Charter (ACRWC) as at 16 June, 2003.
- 7 See E Adedeji, small arms control in West Africa, *International Alert, MISAC West Africa series* No. 1, London, 2003
- 8 UNICEF, A World Fit for Children: Outcome of the Declaration of the 2002 General assembly's Special Session on Children, 2003.