

Introduction

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African children and youth have been absorbed into liberation struggles, political campaigns and insurgencies as surely as they constitute the majority of African citizens. Yet explanations for the presence of young people in battlefields have tended to be simplistic and overlook the political significance of this phenomenon. Children who participate in war are often represented as victims and forced to fight under the influence of drugs and brainwashing: a collective of irrational killing machines that is unaware of the moral implications and consequences of its actions. Alternately, young people have been glorified as the vanguards of African liberation struggles and as voices against colonial oppression and injustice.

These are vastly different discourses, but have an important thing in common. They are points of view that serve political agendas and do not always accurately describe the motives, choices, aspirations and actions of young people themselves. They leapfrog the context and the processes in which children become fighters, and imply either a profound commitment or a complete disconnect between the child and the struggle. The child's own political universe is more likely to be located between these two extremes. Yet the child as a political actor and conflict stakeholder (but not as victim) and the political significance of children are usually ignored. With this book, we hope to promote a better understanding of armed conflict in Africa by introducing the invisible stakeholders: children and youth.

In Chapter One of this book, Afua Twum-Danso gives an overview of the historical and political influences on child participation, demonstrating that young people are not always immune, or protected, from political upheaval and historical change, nor are they passive, innocent observers of a changing world. This is so much so that that the struggle to deny, promote or suppress their agency has, in itself, become politically important.

The presence of children in wars has been used, often very successfully, as political currency: to boost advocacy campaigns, to condemn the brutality of insurgents and to illustrate the righteousness of freedom struggles in having secured the loyalty of the innocent and pure of motive.

The adage about history being written by the victors most certainly applies in this case. In Chapter Two, written by Ana Leao, we see how historical accounts of Mozambique's independence struggle and civil war have selectively silenced or amplified the voices of children and youth.

There is no doubt that young people have been cajoled, forced and otherwise compelled to support political and military agendas that have rarely served their best interests. This does not make their participation politically insignificant. It simply means that Africa's children, many of whom have had understandable and even justifiable reasons to fight, have suffered and died with the words of others in their mouths.

It remains to be seen whether, after years of bitter war in Angola, into which children and youth were systematically and efficiently enticed and coerced, the welfare of that nation's children will become a sincere concern. Imogen Parson's account in Chapter Three of the political and military mobilisation of young Angolans offers a remarkable glimpse of how the constituency of children is in fact recognised for the purpose of supporting warfare, and warns of the danger of overlooking it once the fighting has stopped.

Every child and youth potentially has a political message. This may not be a vocal protest against human rights violations, an eloquent critique of Structural Adjustment Programmes or a treatise on state corruption. In fact, this message may be devoid entirely of any recognisable political ideal or sentiment. But the fact that a child's world is not populated with presidents, parties and policies does not mean that she is not affected and does not react when these are deeply flawed. The case of Sierra Leone, illustrated in Chapter Four by Angela McIntyre and Kwesi Aning, is a stark illustration of what we have come to see as a spectrum: the degrees of vulnerability of children that enable different recruitment tactics to be employed, from the voluntary to the coercive.

A child goes to war for his own reasons. These reasons often become obscured in the process of co-option. A war-displaced or refugee child surviving on minimum rations and fearing attacks day and night can find expression as a ruthless fighter. Joining an armed faction may be his only chance for survival. Conversely, rebel doctrines often include principles of emancipation and education that appeal directly to the sensibilities of young people, and little coercion is required. Material and emotional enticements – food, education, uniforms and camaraderie – also pick up where reality and, more importantly, rights, fall short. The divergence between children's motives and the agendas of their co-optors is breached by recruitment strategies that capitalise on susceptibilities, from the sheer physical

vulnerability of a hungry, displaced child, to the discontent of an aspiring student unable to secure a place among the elite at a university for simply being of the wrong ethnic group. Children's political agency, in the context of war, can become something unrecognisable. Perhaps this is because avenues of political expression for children are virtually non-existent. Aki Stavrou suggests in Chapter Five that ideas of citizenship, as they apply to youth, play a key role in shaping the political landscape by excluding young people.

While armed insurgents have certainly contributed to the undermining and violation of children's rights, it was never their job to guarantee them in the first place. Insurgency does not thrive in the midst of good governance. States that fail to answer to young people sow the seeds of rebellion. A fine line exists between a marginalised person and a potential recruit. Poverty, oppression, anger and hopelessness, insecurity and violence both push and pull children and youth across this line. The answers to the question "why do they fight?" are as variable as the circumstances of the people themselves. As wars and the hardships they inflict on children drag on and the mechanisms of family and community are undermined, the recruitment pool expands and the cycle grows more vicious.

War erodes the rights of children to survival, to education, proper nutrition and health care, leaving them vulnerable to all of the forms of militarisation – from the persuasive to the coercive – that will be illustrated in this book. Whether she faces a political youth movement, a criminal gang, a rebel insurgency, a religious extremist group, a child, or youth without basic rights is one without choices. Does this constitute a conflict risk factor?

It is the collective agency of children and youth, an idea explored by Angela Veale in Chapter Six on Ethiopia, which puts wars on Africa's troubled political map. Regardless of their individual reasons for joining armed factions, children and especially youth have constituted the manpower behind most, if not all, of the violent transformations witnessed in Africa from the era of the independence struggles onwards. This book attempts to show the myriad ways in which children, acting as individuals, with motives as diverse as escaping early marriages, accessing education or revenge, find expression in warfare and ultimately come to contribute to catastrophic political change.

This book illustrates that the choice to join a party youth league, a militia, an insurgency or, indeed, an army, has nearly always presented itself as a precursor to accessing rights. A child who is forced to join a militia may be fighting for his right to survival, just as a student joining an ideological struggle might be fighting for her right to education or her right to equality.

The reality is that violence becomes a viable option for young people whose choices have run out, and both states and insurgents bear responsibility.

Violence will continue to be a form of expression for the politically voiceless until African states recognise that guaranteeing the rights of children is a measure toward preventing conflict, quite simply by shrinking the recruitment pool. The beauty of this is that addressing the needs and grievances of young people before they arise is far better than giving in to the demands of a group of violent rebels or, more commonly, crushing them along with the children and youth that inevitably make up their ranks.

One of the powerful motivations for this book was the editor's concern with what, in international circles, were passing for the 'voices of children', or more precisely, with their disembodiment. Horror stories of rape, abduction and systemic violence from the mouths of children did serve their purpose – to mobilise and galvanise sentiments against the use of children as soldiers. But delivered by child-victims, far from home, to groups of policy-makers and activists, they became irrational emotional appeals, stripped of their political meaning, and ultimately alienating an important issue from broader discussions of human security. This approach omitted fundamental truths about children's involvement in war: that child recruitment is not solely the responsibility of the Sankohs, Konys and Taylors; that African states are failing to guarantee the rights of their children and youth; that poor governance and policies that do not answer to the majority - children and youth in this case – contribute to conflict.

The involvement of young people in political upheaval is an inevitability that is not accurately represented by the image of the child-abductee holding an AK-47 and dressed in cast-off scraps of uniform. Images, which, in any case, do not hold the same meaning for African citizens and policymakers, many of whom played roles as young people in their country's liberation struggles, that they do for the rest of the global community. This does not mean that recruiting children to fight is an acceptable practice in Africa. It simply means that the meaning of children fighting is as variable as the contexts in which it occurs, and that the inventory of conflict stakeholders, and not just that of victims, must, especially in Africa, include young people.

What is perhaps most alarming is that the ways in which bad policies impact on children are not even fully understood. Little effort is made to monitor the impact of political decisions on young people after laws are passed, conventions are signed and policies implemented. This is a worrying tendency, for as this book cannot overstate, children and youth are the majority of African citizens. There is also the uncomfortable reality that every

African famine, rebellion and genocide can be linked to some past configuration of policies and an unhealthy dose of outside intervention, however well-meaning or cynical these may have been.

Not surprisingly, longitudinal studies of policy impact are not popular, although 'lessons learned' has become a catch phrase in humanitarian and development circles. For example, grown women living in times of peace seem to have far less appeal to our brief, media-driven attention spans than the broken child-victims they once were. But how are we to know whether efforts to promote the welfare of girls affected by war, for example, are having positive outcomes, or indeed the absence of these is having negative outcomes, if we do not re-visit the women who fought as children decades ago? We cannot afford to have a fleeting interest in children's issues, nor should we package them in a way that serves a fleeting purpose.

As international engagement in the child soldier issue wanes, researchers, advocates and policymakers must find innovative new approaches to promote the rights of children, particularly those at risk of becoming involved in conflict. This should be done by linking them more firmly to other fields of human security and replacing the rather tenuous relevance of the stereotypical child-abductee-soldier with a solid understanding of the political agency of Africa's young people.

Understanding demographics, particularly in light of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and adjusting policies and expenditures to be accountable to younger populations is becoming critical. The failure to prioritise education, health care and other social welfare issues that form the core of children's socio-economic rights will heavily impact on political stability and economic progress in the long term. Where there is existing political instability, the impact of child and youth neglect may be immediate. The complacent notion that the welfare of children and youth is of little political consequence, or at best a nice collateral benefit of a distant future, has proved to be a dangerous one. As this book shows, children will fight for their own rights, given no alternative.

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