

ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of under-age and youthful soldiers in violent conflicts receives much international attention, and the participation of young people in Sierra Leone's ten-year conflict was no exception. Here and elsewhere, agencies working with children in demobilisation and reintegration programmes tend to view these young people mainly as victims of forced conscription by exploitive and unscrupulous warlords. This view might be correct for many of the very young child combatants. The older child and youth combatants, who together make up a large part of the total number of combatants in armed factions, do not entirely fit in this picture. Not seldom, practitioners are surprised by the more or less voluntary choice of these youngsters to join militias, by their commitment and loyalty to the groups and by their readiness to rejoin militias if new fighting begins or reintegration support is not forthcoming. This monograph will discuss the most important reasons, according to Sierra Leonean youth ex-combatants, leading to their decisions to join the army or rebel forces. These reasons are directly related to economic, educational and socio-political constraints, which receive little attention in the "victim" model. It is shown that the same constraints leading to the decision of many youths to join an armed faction also contribute to their prolonged stay, and, after demobilisation, make them more likely to re-conscript. If these 'root causes' are not properly addressed in the post-war reconstruction phase and peaceful alternatives are not available, youths may have little choice but to pursue violent options once again.