

CONCLUSION

There is a general awareness that the number of children and youth actively taking part in African armed conflicts is increasing. Although greater attention is paid to the phenomenon of under-aged fighters (although less to the older but still youthful fighters), the reactions to the problem have, in themselves, been somewhat limiting. One reaction is to stigmatize youth as evil (as ‘bandits’ and ‘barbarians’). Another reaction is to see young fighters as victims of undemocratic military regimes or brutally exploitive warlords, a viewpoint regularly espoused by agencies working with children.⁴⁵ Both are true to an extent – some child combatants commit terrible atrocities, often under influence of drugs, and others have been conscripted against their will – but these are only partial perspectives.

Many youthful combatants have joined up voluntarily, as this study illustrates. Some have sought revenge for family members killed, while others have pointed to the lack of livelihood opportunities prevalent in conditions of economic collapse, given their poor educational background and poor livelihood prospects. Economic failure, political corruption and structural adjustment have wreaked havoc on education systems, and formal education in many war-afflicted countries in Africa has been ineffective in preparing young people for the economic realities of modern life.⁴⁶ To join a militia is quite often seen as a route to some kind of training and employment. The pay is often very poor, but learning to use a weapon is another type of education; one that is seen to be of high utility in the prevailing circumstances. There are social attractions as well; combat group comradeship frequently eases the pain of lost home and family.

This monograph has attempted to illustrate some of the factors responsible for the high numbers of youths joining militias, and to demonstrate that these causes play on three levels: they make youths join, stay with and re-join armed factions. This is by no means a group of ‘brainwashed’ or severely indoctrinated youngsters whose accounts do not make sense and can therefore be dismissed. These are, for the most part, knowledgeable young people who take rational and active decisions to maximise their situations under difficult circumstances.

An environment in which short-term tactics can be transformed into long-term constructive ones should be an important consideration in building lasting peace in Sierra Leone.

Consideration of their own explanations for why under-age ex-combatants join militias, persist in fighting and why some of them still decide to rejoin their militias after having demobilised can offer some important lessons and contribute to best practices for reversing the trend toward younger and younger fighters. Perhaps the most important lesson in this case is that it is dangerous to overlook the agency of youth; it has clearly played a critical role in the Sierra Leone conflict.