

INTRODUCTION

Intra-state conflicts – the majority of contemporary conflicts in Africa – are generally characterised by multiple cease-fires and peace-accords, only to be followed by new rounds of fighting. Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (henceforth DDR) programmes that deal with under-age combatants are likely to begin before a peace-deal has been reached,¹ or to take place while pockets of fighters still remain under arms, leaving the door open to re-conscription. Youth combatants² bring up multiple reasons why they join, stay with, and sometimes rejoin, armed factions. To determine and understand the reasons stated and their consequences is an important step towards the prevention of conscription and re-conscription of youth in armed factions as well as informing the means to draw them out of their fighting life.

Based on the reasons put forward by young ex-combatants themselves, this study distinguishes between economic, educational and socio-political causes.

Not all youth ex-combatants indicate that their conscription was by pure force. Voluntary conscription implies that young people in conflict situations have different, although obviously limited, options to choose from, and that they are to some extent capable of making well-considered choices. If this is indeed the case, a more appropriate model would be to consider that these youths joined in the context of an environment in which they perceived conscription as the best option, or the best among worst.

One can argue that in this case voluntary conscription is not voluntary at all, but coerced by circumstances. Indeed, Wessels states that “children in war zones may have so few options that it is not clear whether it is meaningful to speak of free choice.”³ This is not the place to discuss the philosophical question of what is ‘free choice’; how many options one should have, and to what extent it is necessary that among these options there is something one likes, before one can speak of a making a free choice.

There is little need to argue whether youth in war-zones are limited in their options: they surely are and it is more likely that they will become involved in

militias than youth living in zones free of war. But do youths have so many fewer options than adults in the same situation? This is an important question because often young people have been represented as not having a free choice and thus being forcibly recruited, while adults in the same situation are often assumed to have joined voluntarily and thus have had a free choice. Furthermore, very little research has been done toward understanding the different ways youth have been able to prevent militia recruitment. For every combatant whose reasons for joining the fighting are documented by researchers it would be useful to also provide documentation on youths who might have joined but did not.⁴ In all conflict countries the majority of youth does not get involved in militia life, although many live in conflict areas for many years. It might be that those who do not perceive a fighter's life as the best option for survival during these difficult times often seem to prevent recruitment, even while they are among the target group for conscription by factions. It is not unthinkable that the same characteristics that make youth such good and wanted soldiers also make them more capable of preventing recruitment.

Goodwin-Gill & Cohn state that "a very fuzzy line is often all that separates voluntary from coerced participation, and it is impossible to know precisely at what age or development stage a young person is capable of 'volunteering' in the way we would accept of an adult."⁵ What we do know is "that ideas about when children become adults vary quite widely across cultures, and a practical (through not always *de jure*) 'adulthood' (i.e. material self reliance) often arrives early – especially for children from poor families, on a continent [Africa] where half the population is below eighteen."⁶

Looking to the following definition of 'agency' by Long, it is interesting to note that it includes situations of the "most extreme forms of coercion":

"The notion of agency attributes to the individual actor the capacity to process social experiences and to devise ways of coping with life, even under the most extreme forms of coercion. Within the limits of information, uncertainty and the other constraints (e.g. physical, normative or politico-economic) that exist, social actors are 'knowledgeable' and 'capable'. They attempt to solve problems, learn how to intervene in the flow of social events around them, and monitor continuously their own actions, observing how others react to their behaviour and taking note of the various contingent circumstances."⁷

Nothing is said about age in the above definition. Lack of social experiences (relatively speaking) of youth compared to adults, is possibly compensated for

by the high flexibility of youth and the capability to learn quickly from social experiences.

The impact of age in the actions and decisions of combatants is discussed by Honwana. She introduces the term ‘tactical agency’, based on Michel de Certeau’s distinction between strategies and tactics:

“He [Michel de Certeau] sees strategies as having long-term consequences or benefits, and tactics as means devised to cope with concrete circumstances, even though those means are likely to have deleterious long-term consequences. Using de Certeau’s distinction it seems that these young combatants exercised what could be called a ‘tactical agency’ in order to maximise the circumstances created by the constraints of the military environment in which they were forced to operate.⁸

Conflict situations demand *par excellence* short-term maximisation of circumstances. Long-term strategies are not particularly useful in a highly unstable and unpredictable world.

Having stated that youth have agency, it is a straightforward step to analyse the causes and motivations put forward by young combatants. The examples in each of the following chapters have been drawn from interviews conducted during fieldwork in 1996/97 and in 2001/02/03 by the author, unless stated differently. Interviewees were under-age (under 18) and youth ex-combatants from all different factions. The majority of the interviewees were boys but some interviews with girls were also conducted.

Overview of the war in Sierra Leone

In March 1991 a small group of about a hundred guerrilla fighters entered eastern Sierra Leone from Liberia. The larger part of the group was made up of Sierra Leoneans, called vanguards. These vanguards were composed of two groups, Sierra Leoneans who had received guerrilla training in Libya in 1987/88 and those who were recruited in Liberia just before the incursion. Some had fighting experience from the war in Liberia.⁹ The majority of these vanguards had an urban background or lived in urban centres before their fighting careers began.

Other than Sierra Leoneans, the initial insurgents included some Liberian fighters, ‘special forces’ on loan from Charles Taylor’s NPFL and a few

mercenaries from Burkina Faso. The guerrilla forces named themselves the Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone (henceforth RUF). Its proclaimed aim was to overthrow President Major General Joseph Momoh of the All People's Congress (henceforth APC), of which the previous president, Siaka Stevens, had in 1978 declared Sierra Leone a one-party state.

The ranks of the guerrilla forces swelled rapidly through a mixture of coerced and voluntary recruitment among primary school pupils and secondary school drop-outs in the Sierra Leone/Liberia border region, of whom many found themselves working at small scale alluvial diamond mining. Some joined the RUF because they considered it as a Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) – a political party which has its support base mainly in the South and East of the country among the Mende people – uprising¹⁰ against the APC party with its supporters mainly in the North of Sierra Leone among the Temne people. Many youths considered it a good opportunity to escape from the political, social and economic marginalisation of young people in Sierra Leone, something that played both on the national as well as the village level.¹¹

The Sierra Leonean army was ill-prepared to challenge the incursion. With a total number of troops of not more than 3000, equipped with out-dated weaponry¹² and with most of its senior officers residing in Freetown, the government forces lost ground rapidly. The RUF met its first serious resistance when it tried to take over the eastern town of Daru, home of the Third Army Battalion. Lacking the support of Freetown and sufficient logistics, warfront army officers realised that they were fighting the battle virtually by themselves and changed tactics. In response to the threat of the RUF's youthful combatants, army officers at the warfront started to recruit and train youths as fighters and personal bodyguards, tapping into the same pool of local, patronless war-zone youngsters as the RUF.¹³ These young fighters, loyal to their recruiting commanders and without official army numbers, were referred to as 'irregulars'.

A new phase in the conflict started in April 1992, when Capt. Valentine Strasser became the new head of state after a successful military coup. Together with other young soldiers – Strasser was 27 years of age at the time of the coup – most of whom came from the third Daru battalion, he established the National Provisional Ruling Council (henceforth NPRC). This event did not only remove the RUF's proclaimed reason for fighting – to overthrow the APC government – but it also deprived the RUF of its main source of recruits: marginalized and excluded youths. The youthful leaders of the NPRC were successfully recruiting in the provincial towns and capital among young

people without jobs or better prospects, street children and petty criminals. With access to this vast reservoir of young people the NPRC was able to expand the army from a pre-war 3–4,000 to a 1993–4 total of some 15–20,000 recruits.¹⁴ Many of these new recruits received only very limited military training and serious problems arose in controlling them. Large groups involved themselves in looting, and some of these became known as ‘sobels’; soldiers by day, rebels by night. However, the expanded army succeeded in driving back the RUF, which by the time of the coup had been able to take over most parts of the eastern region, to the far eastern tip of the country. The RUF saw its routes of retreat into Liberia blocked by hostile ULIMO forces and decided to disappear into the deep jungle of the Gola Forest on the Liberian/Sierra Leonean border by the end of 1993. It abandoned what little heavy military equipment it had and retreated in the high forest to regroup, and, as became evident in 1994, re-launch a new round of fighting.

With the war apparently at an end and as a result of international pressure by non-governmental organisations and international agencies, the NPRC made a start to demobilise their considerable numbers of under-age combatants. However, from ‘94 onwards the RUF began a new campaign and by this time not only the eastern part of the country was affected. From its safe camps in the jungle it used the small bush paths to launch quick hit-and-run attacks all over the country, after which it disappeared into the forest once again. Isolated from the wider society, it was also cut off from the vast reservoir of youthful potential conscripts. Thus the RUF did not only change its military tactics, it also found it necessary to raid villages in search of consumer items, medicines and new conscripts.

As early as 1991 the government army started to make use of local game hunters as scouts during their patrols. From 1993 onwards, in response to the continued attacks of the RUF and the inadequate protection of the rapidly expanded and increasingly badly disciplined army, local communities started to organise citizen civil defence groups to protect their villages. Drawing its organisational modalities from the hunter tradition known in the South and East as *kamajo* and in the North as *tamaboro* and *kapra*, these local defence forces were comprised of a leader or initiator, a *kami* and a group of apprentices. Although coming from rural communities, similar to many of the RUF conscripts and army irregulars, most of the Kamajor youth fighters were not alienated from their villages and differed greatly from the footloose RUF and NPRC recruits. They were to a large extent under the control of the village or town chiefs, who were playing a key role in recruitment.¹⁵ According to Muana, the Kamajor movement was more or less organised as a guild.¹⁶

The combined forces of the army and the Kamajors were not able to prevent the RUF, which by that time had established jungle camps in poorly accessible terrain all over the country, from coming close to the capital city Freetown early in 1995. With the RUF neither able to take over the capital and claim total victory, nor weak enough to be defeated by the combined power of the military forces and rapidly expanded Kamajor militia, peace negotiations started. A provisional cease-fire was agreed to in January 1996. In February 1996 the first democratic elections in decades were held and Capt. Julius Maada Bio (who was installed after a palace-coup in the previous month) saw himself handing over power to Ahmad Tejan-Kabbah of the SLPP. The government's new policy was to continue peace negotiations with the RUF and to sideline the army, of whose loyalty it was uncertain, and to depend increasingly on the Kamajor movement for its defence against the rebels.

While the 1996 peace negotiations went on, key RUF bases were attacked by Kamajo militias, with the support of mercenaries of the security-cum-mining company Executive Outcomes. The government argued that it was not in control of the Kamajor movement and thus unable to stop them. In November 1996 the Abidjan peace accord was signed between the Sierra Leonean government and Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone. Officially the war was over but mutual distrust between the former enemies made none of them willing to begin disarmament and demobilisation of their fighters on any significant scale.

In May 1997 a third coup by the army, disgruntled because of their sidelining by the government, took place. Most of the demobilised ex-child combatants re-enlisted and joined their former comrades once again. The new regime, the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) headed by Major Johnny-Paul Koroma, invited the RUF to join the military junta. For more than eight months the AFRC and RUF were in control of Freetown and the major towns in the country. In February 1998 the West-African peacekeeping force ECOMOG, together with a few hundred loyal government soldiers, launched an attack to drive the junta out of the capital.

The Kabbah government took seat in Freetown in March 1998. Although some 5000 AFRC troops surrendered, many of the AFRC soldiers and most of the RUF units did not and retreated into the north of the country, where the civil defence movement was at its weakest. Contrary to the announcements of the newly installed government that the rebels were now on their last legs, the RUF started to regroup and rapidly expanded again. Major towns were taken over by the RUF and by the end of 1998 AFRC and rebel fighters infiltrated the capital.

On January 6, 1999, the battle for Freetown began. More than two weeks of street fighting resulted in 5–6,000 people dead, countless people mutilated by machete attacks and hundreds of houses destroyed. The AFRC and RUF were pushed back to the hinterland, but on their retreat many civilians were forced to join them to carry loads and/or join as new recruits. Again it became clear that a military victory was not possible for either of the two sides.

New peace negotiations started in May 1999 in the Togolese capital of Lomé. After two months of talks a peace-accord was signed offering the rebels a blanket amnesty, RUF leader Foday Sankoh the status of vice-president and the deployment of a UN-peace-keeping force in Sierra Leone. Disarmament and demobilisation, as outlined in the peace-accord, made a start but was painfully slow. The RUF's second man, Sam 'Maskita' Bockarie, unwilling to disarm, fled to Liberia with a group of hard-core fighters. After a dispute between UN-military observers and RUF commanders over the return of disarmed combatants to the RUF, the RUF seized about 500 UN peacekeepers. Protests by women in front of Sankoh's residence led to gunfire, the subsequent flight of the former rebel leader and his capture a few days later. With Sankoh in custody and tensions rising, the UN began to expand its peace-keeping force from 9,250 to 13,000 and later to about 17,500, thereby becoming the largest UN mission in the world. RUF commander Issa Sessay took over command. Meanwhile, special commando forces from the UK showed their readiness to fight in a hostage-freeing operation in September 2000 against a splinter group of the former AFRC called the 'West Side Boys'. To prevent the real prospect of annihilation, the RUF had few options open but to continue the disarmament process.

It was only by the end of 2001 that disarmament started in RUF strongholds such as the Kailahun, Kono and Kenema districts. By March 2002 the disarmament process was officially declared as completed. The reintegration process of ex-combatants into civilian society was still going on by that time and in many parts of the country it had only just begun. The official date for the closing-down of the whole DDR programme, including the various reintegration programmes, was December 2003. Presently there are no more 'ex-combatants' in Sierra Leone; everyone is alleged to be an ordinary citizen.

The chapters of this monograph are organized quite simply; the phenomena of conscription, participation and re-conscription are illustrated with interview segments and grouped and analysed as either economic (chapter 1), educational (chapter 2) or political (chapter 3) constraints. Numbers within the text refer to subsequent illustrative interview segments.