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VOLUNTEER *CHILD* SOLDIERS AS REALITY: A DEVELOPMENT ISSUE FOR AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Cruel methods of forced recruitment of child soldiers are popular images often used in the academic literature and by the media. Child soldiers are usually portrayed as vulnerable victims and their agency in violent conflict is denied. In some contexts this is justified. Overall this picture is largely misleading. A number of recent studies from Sub-Saharan Africa show that the majority of children and young people join armed groups voluntarily, for a number of reasons. Taking up arms may be a sensible choice and an attractive option, even – and especially – for the young. After pointing to the benefits of children's participation in conflict, this paper analyses the reasons for widespread denial of their agency, suggesting a number of hidden agendas by various actors. The micro-level benefits of child soldiering (which become especially obvious where the common fallacy of comparing child soldiers with children in peaceful and prosperous societies is overcome) are nevertheless outweighed by the disadvantages on the macro-level when it comes to reintegration, economic growth and peace. Preventing children's participation in war is therefore crucial. However, this can only be effective if children's volunteerism and agency is recognized and addressed, for example through positive structural change.

I INTRODUCTION

Preventing the recruitment of children for war is a declared goal of the international community. However, the number of child soldiers seems to be growing and it is clear that child soldiering continues in countries that have made commitments to end this practice. Recruitment is the *sine qua non* of armed groups. There are a variety of approaches, including forced and voluntary recruitment, and conscription by government armies. Under-18s are employed by armed forces in at least 60 countries around the world. Some governments recruit children directly into their official armies and indirectly support this practice by backing proxy forces that use child soldiers. Furthermore, armed groups involved in peace processes have been reported to recruit children as bargaining counters (CSUCS 2004). Child soldiers are defined as any individual under the age of 18 who is a member of or attached to any regular or irregular armed group, whether or not an armed conflict exists[1].

In Sub-Saharan Africa it appears that state collapse and rebel insurgencies have contributed to rising numbers of child soldiers (Mjoset and van Holde 2002), estimated across Africa to be as high as 120,000 (Wessells 2002). According to UNICEF data (2004) 51 percent of all people living in Sub-Saharan Africa are children under the age of

18, meaning that 'children' represent an "absolute demographic majority". While this figure is significant, it conceals the cases of countries where demographic predominance of children is even stronger, such as in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) or Uganda, where they account for 54 percent and 57 percent of the population respectively. This contrasts with Western industrialized countries, where children only account for 22 percent of the population (UNICEF 2004)[2].

The phenomenon of abduction and otherwise forced recruitment of child soldiers has frequently been stressed in the literature as well as in the media. Northern Uganda, where abducted children constitute the vast majority of the LRA's (Lord's Resistance Army) fighters, might currently be the most notorious and publicized case of forced recruitment[3].

In Part 2, I will present an overview of recent research findings from Sub-Saharan Africa that contradicts the commonly held assumption that child soldiers participate in wars almost exclusively because of forcible recruitment. After outlining and challenging various definitions pertinent to the issue of child soldiers, such as childhood and forced versus voluntary recruitment in Part 3, I will use these findings to shed more light on young people's motivations for participation in war in Part 4. I will argue that a substantial part of volunteerism is 'real' rather than 'structurally forced' as is often suggested. Children can be seen as exercising free will, similar to adults.

I then turn to analyzing the reasons behind the widespread reluctance to recognize children's agency. Moreover, I will argue that on a micro-level, child soldiering may have benefits, especially when the common analytical fallacy of comparing child soldiers with children in peaceful and prosperous societies is overcome. In Part 5, I will analyze the relevance of recruitment realities for reintegration and peace. A failure to take these realities into account – as seems to be the case in current practice - and address the root causes which lead children to volunteer will easily result in them choosing to (re-)enlist. I will end with a concluding summary and some recommendations for child protection.

II RECRUITMENT REALITIES

Armed groups see a number of benefits in recruiting children rather than adults. For example, there is evidence that Renamo in Mozambique preferred children to adult combatants because they were thought to have more stamina, be better at surviving in the bush, did not complain and followed orders more readily. Furthermore, in many cases children are needed to fill in gaps between demand and supply of adult soldiers. In the Mozambican war recruitment of children increased over the years and was heaviest in areas from which adult men had migrated for work and in other areas where support for Renamo was low. Force is necessary to recruit fighters who otherwise would not be willing to join – this is true for both children and adults, even if the former are arguably less able to defend themselves against such practices (Cohn and Goodwin-Gill 1994).

a *Methodological issues*

Most findings presented here are the result of primary research based on in-depth country studies conducted in the post-Cold War era[4]. Nevertheless, some studies, most notably

those by Dumas and de Cock (2003) and Brett and Specht (2004), look at several countries in Sub-Saharan Africa[5] simultaneously. All studies look at the modes of recruitment and reasons for volunteering by children, either specifically or as part of wider research on issues relating to child soldiers. I have tried to gather as much data as possible and included all studies I managed to identify. While I have attempted not to present a picture biased towards volunteerism, I should mention that some of the studies included here do seem to be biased towards this end. Whether this accurately reflects realities in the respective violent conflicts analyzed or is because their authors, like me, took a particular interest in volunteerism I cannot say with certainty[6].

Whilst analyzing such research it is important to keep in mind that the biases and limitations associated with most kinds of social research are exacerbated when it comes to self-reports in the context of child soldiers. People who have suffered great hardship are less likely to talk about negative experiences, especially if these are related to subjects typically associated with shame, such as rape or killing, and they may affect children particularly strongly. Furthermore, interviewees might be fearful that what they say might be used against them. Alternatively, people in desperate circumstances may exaggerate their experiences to receive additional assistance (Wessells 1998). Based on his experience with young ex-combatants in Liberia Utas (2004) coins the term "*victimcy*" to denote the phenomenon of respondents representing themselves as powerless victims. He argues that such *victimcy* and other issues with research can only be overcome if researchers establish long-term relationships with their subjects. This may not have been the case in some of the studies presented here.

To some extent, the reluctance or inability of children to tell the truth may be measured. For example, in their research in Central Africa, Dumas and de Cock (2003) received rather different responses from current and former child soldiers, with the latter more likely to say that they had been abducted or recruited by force. They attribute these differences to fear of reprisals of those who remain with armed groups, the likelihood that they are staying because they joined voluntarily in the first place, and explanations of forced pride while still with armed groups and a realization of their hardships and suffering only once they have left. In any case it is important to remember, as Honwana (2006) points out, that only survivors can tell their stories. This might influence findings towards volunteerism as it is conceivable that those who were forcibly recruited are less likely to survive due to greater hardship, mistreatment by their commanders and the possibly lethal punishment for failed attempts to escape which have been reported from a number of armed groups.

b *Why children volunteer*

In their relatively large-scale study on Burundi, Congo-Brazzaville, DRC and Rwanda Dumas and de Cock (2003) found that two out of three present or former child soldiers took the initiative of joining armed groups themselves, i.e. they joined voluntarily. For many children in the sample, joining an armed group represented an escape from marginalization. 'Personal decisions'[7], i.e. voluntary participation, were found to be based on six major factors, namely material needs, ideology, prestige of the army, feeling of exclusion, desire for vengeance, and fear, in that order. In addition, living in the neighborhood of an armed group and mixing with them as well as family encouragement were two more reasons cited for joining. In some cases the reasons were cumulative.

Brett and Specht (2004), who interviewed a number of self-defined volunteers in Congo-Brazzaville, DRC, Sierra Leone and South Africa, identified three levels in each individual case that contributed to children's decision to take up arms.

The precise combination of factors is unique in every case. Firstly, there are environmental factors. In this regard the prevalence of war - as war has a multiplier effect because it leads to situations where many risk factors coincide, such as family members dying or joining armed groups, a lack of food and income, closure of schools, presence of armed groups in young people's immediate vicinity – and poverty[8] are most influential. The fact that very few young people go looking for a war to fight is so obvious that there is a tendency to overlook war as a factor in its own right (Brett 2003).

There are another five broad categories of *interlinked environmental factors* which frequently motivate children to volunteer. These are employment and education - while a lack of education can be crucial, the opposite may be true as educational institutions often advertise for armed groups[9]; family and friends can be important both as push factors, for example where there is a military history in the family or when peers join in groups, or as protective factors; politics and ideology; features specific to adolescence, including the search for identity and the perceived prestige of armed forces; and finally, culture and tradition.

Secondly there are factors relating to individual children's *personal characteristics and histories*. Building on the environmental conditions presented above, which are similar for all children in a given area, the authors then analyze personal experiences of children and explore why some are more likely to volunteer than others. The applicable categories are similar to the environmental conditions that favor volunteering, i.e. they include war and insecurity; economic motivation; education; family and friends; the appeal of and by armed groups; and politics and identity[10].

At a third level, there are *trigger* events. With the cited risk factors as a backdrop, these are more immediate situations that eventually determine whether a young person will sign up or not. Some children are able to recall a particular event that *triggered* their final decision, such as a sudden outbreak of violence, witnessing the massacre of family or events that might not be highly extraordinary in themselves but simply tip the balance from consideration to action. In other words, the trigger might not be "an isolated event so much as a specific moment in a chain of interrelated factors that have cumulatively put the young person at risk" (Brett 2003: 73). It is important to keep in mind that such events can only work as triggers in the presence of war, for without the existence of war, young people would find different ways to cope with structural and personal constraints.

In the case of Sierra Leone, Richards (2002) found that while most Revolutionary United Front (RUF) fighters were abductees, nearly all other combatants, including civil defence forces (CDF) and the government army, were volunteers. Another study from Sierra Leone revealed that close to half of child soldiers interviewed described their participation as voluntary, with revenge and community protection as their major motives (Aning and McIntyre 2005)[11]. A study on Sierra Leone and Liberia by Sesay (2003) found that almost three quarters of children joined voluntarily, especially on the side of pro-government forces[12]. Another study from Liberia showed that while all warring

factions have forcibly recruited some children the majority of children have joined voluntarily because they saw no realistic alternative to survival. Most children interviewed said they joined "because of the advantage" (Human Rights Watch 2004: 25). Specific reasons given were revenge, family protection, to get food for themselves and others as well as political motives, such as "to liberate our people" or to "fight for my country" (Human Rights Watch 2004: 26). Yet others were induced to fight through promises, such as "we'll take you to a football game" (ibid: 28) or promises of money, cars or houses. The glorified nature of the military may have provided a further incentive as well.

In a study of Ethiopian women who had been recruited into the Tigrean People's Liberation Front (TPLF) as children and were demobilized as adults in 1992/1993, a variety of reasons for volunteering were cited, including political motivations, inspiration by peers or family members, loss of family members due to droughts, escaping unwanted marriages, educational opportunities, or being brought up in the fighter camps (and attending kindergarten and school there). TPLF policies aimed at establishing social services secured the confidence of local communities and indirectly acted as a recruitment mechanism, possibly encouraging children to volunteer. Furthermore, and uniquely in the literature, songs, dramas and cultural shows are mentioned as mobilization tools that were particularly effective with girls and women (Veale 2005).

In Mozambique's war between Frelimo and Renamo, forced recruitment was predominant, not only among child soldiers. Based on his survey of ex-Renamo soldiers and some other sources, Minter (1989) estimates that in excess of 90 percent of all rank and file combatants of Renamo were recruited by force. These findings have to be put in perspective with later accounts, such as the more recent study by Schafer who found that the image of Renamo recruits typically being unwilling, coerced and uncomprehending children is incorrect (2004). Similarly, Honwana (2006) suggests that while coercion was the predominant recruitment tool for child participants in the wars in Mozambique and Angola, there were cases of child volunteers who were motivated by a variety of reasons, such as insecurity, vulnerability, lack of food, revenge, sheer adventurism or ideological reasons. She also found that some children 'volunteered' under social pressure from the community or because they felt that volunteers would be treated better than those forcibly recruited. Minter (1990), who also conducted interviews with ex-Unita-combatants in Angola, found that roughly a third had joined voluntarily, with the rest being forcibly recruited. He observed that while the first generation of Unita participants (1974-76) largely joined voluntarily, the second generation (especially after 1980) was principally recruited by force and among ordinary soldiers volunteers were rare.

At the same time, all available accounts from the ongoing conflict in Northern Uganda such as those presented by Human Rights Watch (1997) and Muhumuza (1995; 1998) indicate that volunteering is almost non-existent when it comes to children joining the LRA. Most children are abducted and forcibly recruited. This ongoing conflict between the Ugandan Government, the LRA as well as their respective supporters must not be confused with the war that led to Museveni and his National Resistance Army (NRA) taking power in 1986, where child soldiers were also infamously involved, and a significant number of them volunteered to join the NRA despite hardship and suffering (Keitetsi 2002).

A further reason for young people to take up arms stressed in the literature is that guns are often seen as keys to a world of modern wealth and power. The "emancipatory significance of militarization in the popular imagination of marginalized young men" is often significant (Argenti 2002: 148). Simply put, so long as violence is glorified and young people with guns are better off than those without guns - to get a girlfriend or free drinks, for example - young people will always join armed groups (Rabwoni 2002).

While disadvantaged children such as orphans or those from the poorest families generally seem more likely to volunteer (and are more vulnerable to forced recruitment as well) , this is not always the case. For example, in Sierra Leone Peters and Richards (1998) came across a girl soldier from a strong and supportive Freetown family background with good educational prospects. Her motive to join the military was love - she wanted to follow her soldier-boyfriend to the front. Furthermore, while orphanisation or family break-up may make children more vulnerable to recruitment, family members sometimes encourage children to participate in war out of hopes for money, increased protection, a better future, or in order to maintain or restore honor (Wessells 2000; Dumas and De Cock 2003).

c *Against popular sentiment*

Given the evidence, it seems justified to conclude that the majority of child-soldiers in Sub-Saharan Africa join voluntarily. This is especially true for Burundi, Congo-Brazzaville, DRC, Liberia, Rwanda and Sierra Leone but does not apply in other contexts such as the ongoing conflict in Northern Uganda. There is an indication that volunteerism in these contexts means that children choose to join armed groups despite having alternatives that – under the given circumstances – are acceptable. It goes without saying that compared with those available to young people in most of the Western world, these alternatives are hardly very attractive[14].

When it comes to the driving forces behind such voluntary recruitment, the studies come to similar conclusions and point to economic, educational and socio-political factors. This is true despite the fact that methods and categories used to classify and present those findings differ and vary in detail. I believe that what may look like differences in the findings are largely due to different use of terminology and possibly highly context-specific circumstances.

While analyzing what makes young people volunteer is very important, it may be equally or even more enlightening to find out what encourages resilience or rational choices against volunteering in others. Some children think about joining for years before they actually do so (Brett and Specht 2004). Therefore, more research is needed to find out why the majority of young people choose *not* to join, even though they are facing similar economic, educational and socio-political constraints as those who do.

The results confirm that, while the perception of young people as victims of forced conscription and unscrupulous warlords might be correct for many of the very young children, the quantitatively more significant number of older child and youth combatants often do not fit this picture. Indeed, adolescents make up the vast majority of child soldiers worldwide (Peters 2004; Greitens 2001), yet they are neglected in research and programming (Swaine and Feeny 2004).

There are several conceivable ways of classifying risk factors that make children vulnerable to recruitment. I deliberately refrain from providing a typology of recruitment as the classification that would be required for such a typology would constitute an illusory simplification of reality, masking the complex interplay of factors and the blurred lines between different categories of recruitment and motivation.

d *A new phenomenon?*

Until recently, the view that children are necessarily innocent victims of war, much more so than adults, and that abduction and physical force are necessary to make them become soldiers was predominant. At least in popular opinion, this is still the case. This is true despite the fact that history has been rife with examples of children taking up arms voluntarily[15], including in western landmark wars such as the 30-year war (Brett and Specht 2004) and the American Civil War (Werner 1998). In the latter, between ten and twenty percent of all new recruits were underage. Similarly to some of today's young recruits, they volunteered to take part in an adventure that seemed like an exciting alternative to the routines of farm life and school. Young people who volunteered in the 30-year war listed similar reasons for joining as young people interviewed today in Sub-Saharan Africa, such as deteriorating living conditions, including hunger and unemployment, harassment by soldiers, adventurism, religious motives, and military tradition within the family (Brett and Specht 2004, citing Mjoset and van Holde 2002). From this I would argue that the increased interest in what causes children to volunteer has not evolved because such volunteerism is a new phenomenon. Rather, there have always been young people for whom taking up arms was an attractive option, for whatever reason.

One explanation for the reluctance to acknowledge the voluntary participation of children in war may be that until recently not much academic thought was given to the causes and motivations of individuals in general, and young people in particular, for joining armed conflict. It is possible that the growing analytic focus on reasons for recruitment has to do with the increased interest and strengthened debate on the causes of war as sparked and influenced to a significant extent by Paul Collier[16]. Explaining the causes of war necessarily involves analyzing the motivations and interests of actors engaged in them and therefore recruitment is tightly linked with not only the presence but also the nature of war. Another conceivable explanation is the recently very widespread interest in terrorism and with that in the motivations of its predominantly young suicide bombers.

In order to better understand the general reluctance to assign agency to children for participation in wars one needs to look at the understanding of forced versus voluntary recruitment as well as definitions of children both in the north and in the south.

III DEFINITION MATTERS: VICTIMS, AGENTS OR DEMONS?

Definitions of one phenomenon can differ widely, depending on who creates them and for what purpose. The meaning and use of the terms 'voluntary' and 'forced' recruitment as well as different definitions of childhood and how they relate to armed conflict are a case in point. Using polar opposites may not be a fruitful exercise, so I will suggest the idea of a recruitment spectrum as an analytical tool to understand various forms of

recruitment. Further the standard international definition of childhood predominant at least in the west conflicts with how childhood is defined in Sub-Saharan Africa. These definitions have heavy practical significance for this paper and beyond.

a *The recruitment spectrum*

When it comes to child soldiers, 'forced' recruitment is most often put in direct opposition to 'voluntary' recruitment, indicating a sharp dichotomy. Forced recruitment is commonly associated with abductions (individually or in groups), death threats (to the children themselves or their family and peers) as well as severe punishment for desertion, a logical step as forced recruitment would be pointless without such a deterrent. Voluntary recruitment refers to cases where children take the initiative of joining armed groups themselves, without being under immediate physical threat. There is continuous debate about whether the term 'voluntary' is appropriate and whether it is at all possible for children to volunteer, given that they may lack the ability to judge their situation correctly and that while they may not be forcibly recruited in a physical way, structural or emotional factors may force them to volunteer. It must be remembered that poverty and marginalization blur the lines between voluntary and involuntary by fuelling desperation and encouraging choices that the economically or socially better-off are insulated from (Wessells 2000). In my view, however, such a discussion is futile as it is premised on a view that recruitment is a dichotomy where everything that cannot be considered 'forced' recruitment automatically has to be 'voluntary'. If one accepts that there is no dichotomy but that recruitment rather happens along a spectrum, one can escape this apparent dilemma.

Some authors do mention more than two recruitment categories. For example, Dumas and De Cock (2003) distinguish between "abductions", i.e. situations in which children are taken forcibly or under threat of arms; "forced recruitment", which is used to refer to other cases in which children do not have a choice, either because of moral pressure or a legal obligation to enlist; and "personal decisions", to indicate cases where children themselves take the initiative to join. That such definitions and categories are not universal is also illustrated by one ex-Unita combatant interviewed by Minter (1990). He argued that apart from "abductions" and "voluntary recruitment", "drafting" from areas already controlled could be considered a third recruitment category. In other words, he compared "compulsory service" with Unita to conscription by Angolan government forces, which, in this context, could become a fourth category of recruitment.

Others, such as Wessells (2002), have already pointed to the fact that the boundaries between forced and voluntary recruitment are blurred, and Brett and McCallin (1996) have argued that the overlap between the categories of recruitment are more striking than the differences. The latter also suggest that rather than a clear dichotomy there is a continuum between forced and voluntary recruitment, thus implying that recruitment happens on a one-dimensional scale and is largely a matter of the extent of 'voluntary' or 'forced'.

However, I would suggest that recruitment takes place on a spectrum that allows for qualitative differences rather than a continuum, as not all forms of recruitment can be classified as showing a certain degree of volunteering or force. Rather there can be a mixture of both, with the overlap of categories adding a second dimension. For example,

conscription – which is commonly understood as lawful recruitment by government armies – while arguably being a form of forced recruitment, is not necessarily different from other types of forced recruitment in *extent* of force. Nevertheless, it is most likely different in *nature* of force, not least because, as Aning and McIntyre (2005) have pointed out, conscription is aided by governments that have the added advantage of state mechanisms such as the education system, youth leagues, and criminal justice systems to support their agendas.

While recognizing that conscription by government armies represents a form of forced recruitment and is practiced also by a number of western governments, it is key to acknowledge that it differs from other forms of forced recruitment also because a failure to comply with conscription – at least in theory – would lead to imprisonment but not direct physical harm or death. However, in contexts where 'government armies' are hardly different from 'rebel groups' in terms of coordination, military strength, size and political or financial backing, conscription becomes a rather curious category. Forced recruitment into opposition forces has also been framed as conscription, for example in Burundi where all members of a particular ethnic group were required to contribute to the armed struggle (Brett and McCallin 1998), or in Angola where the drafting from areas already controlled by Unita was also seen as a form of conscription.

The fact that recruitment categories are context-specific and recruitment of an individual may not properly fit into any given category at all, points to the need for viewing recruitment as taking place on a spectrum. While much recruitment is likely to happen on either end of this spectrum, a considerable number of cases will be situated somewhere in between and thus do not fit the commonly accepted dichotomy.

b *Who is a child soldier?*

Liberal views on childhood and the law

In liberal thought, chronological age draws a clear demarcating line between childhood and adulthood, most commonly at 18 years. Liberal views, which dominate at least the western, developed world, essentially see children as innocent, weak and in need of protection rather than as agents of their own and significant contributors to social and political life. It is important to realize that this currently predominant perception of children as vulnerable and innocent entered our mindsets only in the seventeenth century when it was pioneered by Rousseau (Twum-Danso 2005; Honwana 2006). Thus, rather than being a natural category, 'the child' is a "socially constructed idealization that reflects the values and agendas of particular researchers, cultures, and traditions" at a certain point in time (Wessells1998: 640).

While the liberal definition of children is aimed at their protection, it is not very helpful to explain their vulnerabilities. The liberal view of children as being vulnerable and in need of protection in contrast to strong and protective adults may be justified in politically stable and prosperous societies that offer extensive educational opportunities and long life expectancies. However, it is less applicable to contexts where poverty is the norm, reasonable-quality education only exists for an elite and lives are short. For example, in 1999 the average life expectancy at birth in Sierra Leone was 25.9 years (WHO 2000), making the treatment of under-18s as particularly young and vulnerable

members of society difficult to justify[17]. In other words, in many of Sub-Saharan Africa's most war-torn societies drawing a line between childhood and adulthood at the age of 18 strikes one as even more inappropriate than in other contexts.

Liberal ideas about who is considered a child needing to be protected and prevented from participation in warfare are largely reflected in international legal standards. Child soldiers are defined by the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers (CSUCS) as "any person under the age of 18 who is member of or attached to government armed forces or any other regular or irregular armed force or armed group, whether or not an armed conflict exists" (2004: 15), which reflects the view of childhood as defined by chronological age. However, definitions of what constitutes a child soldier and international legal standards in regard to age limits for participation in armed conflict are inconsistent[18]. This goes to show the difficulties involved in defining and thereby protecting children, even in relatively homogenous cultural contexts.

Southern definitions and realities

The liberal and largely western concept described above collides with the definitions of children in other cultures, which are only rarely based on chronological age in such clear terms. Chronological boundaries between childhood, youth, and adulthood are highly varied and rooted in the historical experience of each society and culture (Rosen 2005). Persons under 18 may well be considered adults and ready for marriage, to provide for their wider family or indeed to fight.

Some African societies regard young people in their early teenage years as adults once they have participated in cultural rites of passage. In other societies, childhood, youth, and adolescence may not even be regarded as separate stages of life. What counts rather than children's age is often their size (Wessells 2002). In Africa, children seem to have more duties than in the west and they share responsibility for welfare of their families and wider communities. Childhood can thus be seen as shorter than in the west. However, one can also argue that it lasts much longer or is never-ending since the concepts of being someone's child, or childhood related to social status, matter significantly. Moreover, in some societies women never cease to be considered as minors (Twum-Danso 2005).

The following examples from Liberia, Mozambique and Uganda illustrate different cultural approaches to childhood that relate to participation in war. In Liberia, participation in war could be seen as a kind of fast track into adulthood. Utas (2005) explains that since the category of youth in Liberia is constructed upon notions of social age, social markers such as marriage are required to move out of the youth category and into adulthood. However, young men's access to stable relationships and marriage was traditionally limited by a lack of financial resources and status. Men between the ages of 20 and 45 who participated in the war were in effect youth in social terms, i.e. they lacked the wealth and power required to cross the border into adulthood. Their participation in war can therefore be seen as a "means of strategic upward mobility" aimed among other things at obtaining respect and status. The Liberian war turned society's power structure upside down by lowering the dividing line between childhood and adulthood, and ex-combatants were getting married and able to acquire land much earlier than was the norm in pre-war times.

In cases such as the war between Frelimo and Renamo in Mozambique, childhood was entirely free from age-based distinctions and constructed to signify belonging instead. It was linked to the concept of being the child of someone, i.e. part of a family. Military leaders were portrayed as father figures, which provided motivation and comfort to young recruits and ensured their loyalty and obedience. This proved to be very effective with young fighters who despite having to cope with a wide range of deprivations and hardship, identified their worst suffering as being separated from their families and far from home (Schafer 2004). Similarly, in Angola, 'children' on the side of Unita were to address faction leader Savimbi as 'father' and Unita was seen as family. The MPLA also tried to establish itself as family, albeit with less success (Parsons 2005). This identification of fighting forces as family had two other noteworthy effects: firstly, it allowed ex-combatants from both sides of the conflict to be reconciled with their former opponents as "brothers and sisters" and disavow responsibility for their actions, thus fostering peace building and reintegration[19]. Secondly, within Renamo, patriarchal imagery was used to portray relationships between male and female soldiers as incest, thereby possibly limiting sexual violence against female combatants (Schafer 2004).

In the case of Northern Uganda, childhood is defined and functionalized in a different non-chronological way. Acholi society bases its definition of children on physical maturity, social expectations, peer group seniority and position within the family. As far as returned abductees are concerned, "virtually anyone who has been with the LRA and gives themselves up or is captured in combat has characteristics that enable them to be defined as a child" (Mawson 2004:136). Not only are most abductees children under the state's legal definition, i.e. under 18, but almost all are children under Acholi notions of what constitutes a child. This collective fiction allows for a degree of freedom from responsibility of child soldiers and thus facilitates social reintegration.

While the practice of conscripting child soldiers has been justified as an African cultural tradition by some (Bennet 1998), it must be stressed that the view of children as 'adult enough' to participate in war is not a southern phenomenon. Children have participated in several very recent conflicts in Europe, for example in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo and Macedonia (CSUCS 2001). Moreover, child soldiers were ubiquitous in the landmark wars of western powers, and under-18s are part of today's national armies in many countries of the highly developed north, including the US and the UK, who regularly send individuals under the age of 18 into armed conflict (Wessells 2002; Brett and Specht 2004). It seems therefore that liberal notions of childhood are applied at will by some or at least whenever it is convenient, for example, for the north to patronize the south.

Who is a soldier?

Soldiers may be male and female members of paramilitaries, rebel groups, warlord-led bands of youth, or groups of stone-throwing adolescents engaged in liberation struggles (Wessells 2002). Child soldiers may perform a range of tasks, including participation in combat, laying mines and explosives, scouting, spying, acting as decoys, couriers or guards; training, drill or other preparations; logistics and support functions, portering, cooking and domestic labor; and sexual slavery or performance of other sexual tasks (CSUCS 2004). Caution is necessary in the use of terminology, as categorization of child soldiers may set the stage for stigmatization and marginalization (Wessells 1998).

c *Why definitions matter*

That definitions matter is evidenced by the fact that they can be decisive in determining punishment, including death. Bearing in mind that many RUF fighters were abducted and locked within the movement and thus themselves victims of human rights abuse due to forced recruitment, the Attorney General of Sierra Leone suggested in June 2000 that no underage RUF abductee was to be charged with war crimes but would be facing a Truth and Reconciliation Commission instead (Richards 2002). This has created some controversy, reflecting the differing views of child soldiers as victims, agents or even demons. Moreover, issues, such as whether underage status is determined by the age of abduction, or the age when the alleged crime was committed, have become practically important. The definition of young people during apartheid in South Africa is another example of childhood becoming a profoundly controversial and contested category as it had practical implications for punishment. Young political activists were defined by the authorities as "youth" to establish their legal culpability, while the activists referred to themselves as "children" in order to avoid adult penalties (Boyden 2000).

IV BETWEEN VICTIMISATION AND AGENCY[20]

Resulting among other things from liberal definitions of childhood, children are almost exclusively presented as victims and their agency is often ignored[21]. In this part I will relate back to the findings and discussion presented in Part 2 to argue that 'children' are agents and participates in war out of free will. Given the conditions prevalent in areas of armed conflict, this might be to their benefit. I will then discuss the benefits the victimization of children may have for certain actors and thereby attempt to explain why children's agency has been ignored so far.

a *The agency of children*

It is important to recognize that some of the conventional wisdom related to the subject of child soldiers may represent adult perceptions from the outside rather than the reality experienced by the young people themselves (Brett and Specht 2004). Certainly, children are victims of war and most likely more so than adults. However, there are children who, faced with a variety of grievances and/or opportunities, make conscious decisions to take up arms and fight, just like adults do. This has generally not been acknowledged by academics who, even when stressing the phenomenon of voluntary participation of children in wars as do Machel (1996) or Brett and McCallin (1996), tend to portray such volunteerism as being the only option available in a desperate situation, i.e. something like a 'coerced choice' and therefore not 'real' volunteerism. In other words, children are denied agency. This is very different from the way in which adults are often portrayed as rational utility-maximizing actors in wars (Keen 1997).

While the idea of rational choice in contemporary wars can be overemphasized and reality is usually more complex (Cramer 2002), it nevertheless needs to be acknowledged that many actors do make rational choices in their attempt to maximize utility. Within the usual constraints that affect such choices, such as imperfect information, this is not only true for adults but also for children. In other words, children have to be recognized as actors exercising free will, even if they differ from adults in so far as the information they possess and their ability to weigh one choice against another may be more limited.

Furthermore, in questioning choice and volunteerism, it is important to ask, as Peters (2004) does, whether adults necessarily have more options to choose from than children and whether 'voluntary' is a better-fitted term to describe adults' reasons to join.

In this context, it is important to note that children have considerable resources for coping with hardship and it seems that fears of permanent psychosocial stunting by change, confusion and misfortune have been somewhat exaggerated. Some studies even suggest that children in conflict zones may be especially able to accommodate dissonance and change, and that they are capable of greater personal resilience than adults (Boyden 2000).

The nature and benefits of agency

Children's agency can be seen as being of a specific type called "tactical agency", employed to "cope with and maximize the concrete, immediate circumstances of the military environment in which they have to operate" (Honwana 2006: 73). Tactical agency is different from strategic agency, which, in its purest form, requires a position of power, full consciousness of the ultimate goals of actions and an ability to anticipate long-term gains or benefits. Tactical agency is an "agency of the weak, which is sporadic and mobile and seizes opportunities" that allow young soldiers to cope with the constraints imposed upon them (Honwana 2006: 73). This also means that, possibly with few exceptions such as the often referred to "crisis of youth" in West Africa, children must not be seen as agents in the origins of conflict but rather as sensibly acting individuals maximising their opportunities to help themselves and their families when faced with violent conflict. Generally children do not actively look for wars.

There are numerous examples of child soldiers in Mozambique, Angola and other places creatively engaging with their situation and constructively managing their risk: Children found ways of protecting themselves and coping with the hardships of war by deceiving their commanders through outright lying, playing tricks or obscuring the truth and thus minimising risk for themselves and their families. One boy gave a false name when he was kidnapped in order to prevent his superiors from being able to do harm to his family. Others would feign illness to avoid combat or pretend to be retarded or weak in order to evade onerous and dangerous as well as particularly morally questionable duties (Honwana 2006; Boyden 2004).

Children's motivations to participate in war also seem to matter when it comes to rehabilitation. For example, strong ideological commitment is associated with reduced anxiety and depression as it assigns meaning to a person's environment and actions and thus lessens psychological damage. Similarly, children's agency was found to be conducive to rehabilitation and dealing with trauma and fear (Wessells 1998; Boyden 2000; Greitens 2001).

Children are also able to exert agency by using the popular image of their victimisation. By portraying themselves as vulnerable victims they may help themselves to better access to rehabilitation and reintegration programmes. This is exemplified by cases from Liberia where Utas (2004) identified the phenomenon he called "*victimcy*" to denote young ex-fighters representing themselves as powerless victims, in part as a political response to

real security threats and an economic strategy in order to access benefits provided by aid projects.

A vulnerability-focussed view of 'children' ignores the specific capabilities and strengths that children may have (Galperin 2002). There is some evidence that children, who try to actively overcome adversity – by attempting to resolve the problems they face, regulate their emotions, protect their self-esteem and manage their social interactions – are likely to be more resilient than children who passively accept their fate (Boyden 2000). In other words, being active agents rather than passive victims can be beneficial for children.

b *Benefits of child soldiering*

Child protection activists, program managers and policy makers often ignore that participating in war can yield a number of benefits for children in areas of violent conflict. It goes without saying that while participating in war, children may be wounded, raped, maimed, emotionally scarred, stigmatized, deprived of education, and "wrapped in warrior identities that make it difficult to re-enter civilian life" (Wessells 2002: 248). However, such harmful effects must not be taken as absolute but have to be judged against the wounding, raping, maiming, emotional scarring, and deprivation of education of civilian children. It seems to be a common fallacy to compare child soldiers to children in peaceful and prosperous settings and conclude from this that soldiering is entirely negative and therefore undesirable for children. Unsurprisingly, in general, the life of a child soldier in a poor African country does not compare well with the life of a child from a reasonably well-off family background attending school in an industrialized nation of the west. Therefore, it is more pertinent to compare child soldiers with civilian children within the same socio-political and economic context. Materially at least, child soldiers are likely to be better off than their civilian counterparts in most cases. The same is true to some extent when it comes to health and education.

From this, it should be clear that I see as beneficial what is relatively more likely to ensure children's survival in a given situation and helps fulfill their basic needs in the short-term, as opposed to adhering to certain moral or ethical standards. This is not least because survival is a necessary condition for concerning oneself with morals and ethics in the longer-term. In a sense, this reflects Maslow's now standard idea of a hierarchy of needs: The appearance of one need usually rests on the prior satisfaction of another, more "pre-potent" need (Maslow 1943). Children in areas of violent conflict tend to find themselves on the lower levels of the pyramid - whether as a cause or as a result of such conflict. Striving for education and "self-actualization" may not be a priority if physiological and security needs are not satisfied. In other words, joining war might be beneficial for those whose basic need levels are not satisfied, but will most likely be harmful for those who find themselves faced with higher-order needs. Nevertheless, benefits to child participants in wars might also go beyond helping with the fulfillment of basic needs. In the following I will look at examples of positive war experiences, i.e. experiences that were seen as positive and beneficial by the actors concerned, in a number of recent African conflicts.

Positive war experiences

All women interviewed by Veale (2005) in Ethiopia who had joined the TPLF as children felt that their experience in the fighting forces had empowered them and influenced them in a positive way compared to civilian women, thus challenging common assumptions about children's risks and resilience in wars. They felt that they had learnt to speak out, be assertive, strong and confident, received education, learned to be (economically) independent and equal in domestic decision-making and had been educated about family planning and reproductive health. On the other hand, demobilization represented a challenge and was an experience of loss, at least initially, which is why many preferred military life. What these women missed most in civilian life was camaraderie, social life and the sense of a common purpose. Civilian life also involved coming to grips with inequality with men[23]. Furthermore, they found practical tasks of civilian life difficult. Similarly, a study by Bruchhaus and Mehreteab (2000) on combatants in Eritrea found that on demobilization, 64 percent of fighting forces would have preferred to stay in the army. This compares well with some former child soldiers of Museveni's NRA in Uganda for whom the impact of civilian life had been "almost traumatic" (Colletta et al 1996).

According to Utas (2005), ex-combatants in Ganta, Liberia, found skills they had acquired in the war to be very useful in the civilian economy. They had learned to conduct business, and their war-network made up most of their social ties. Thus the brick-making gild in Ganta consisted mostly of ex-combatants who were applying the organizing skills they had gained through military activity. In many cases their former commanders worked as their contractors or brokers.

Similarly, young combatants in Sierra Leone said that they had acquired detailed knowledge about certain geographical areas, technical skills, survival techniques, an extensive network of contacts and "open eyes". Moreover, armed groups - as alternative authorities - sometimes provided reasonable social systems, including free education, transport and health services, constituting further benefits. Economically, there were few attractive alternatives to combatant life. While rank and file soldiers rarely shared in the profits enjoyed by their superiors, combatants were almost always better off than civilians in the same area. In terms of education, joining an armed group may also have paid off. The war had led to the closure of schools, but some armed groups, such as the RUF, offered free bush-schools in their camps (Peters 2004).

When it comes to politics, democracy has a different meaning in a context where most of the population is under 18 and thus excluded from voting. If this is the case, even the freest and fairest 'universal' elections will necessarily lead to minority rule. The abuse of power by chiefs and elders against youth is partly to blame for the latter's taking up of arms. Many young people who are given a gun feel that they are taken seriously and listened to for the first time (Peters 2004).

The study by Dumas and de Cock (2003) revealed that child soldiers who were forcibly recruited were treated much more harshly and sent into combat more rapidly than those who volunteered. Similarly, evidence from Mozambique shows that some children chose to volunteer in order to avoid being forcibly recruited, expecting to be treated better as volunteers (Honwana 2006). This provides further evidence that in the presence of armed

conflict, volunteering to join armed groups may be a rationally justifiable option for children, especially in areas or times where forced recruitment is common.

There are examples of young people not seeing any prospects beyond soldiering and hiding or escaping so as not to be demobilized (Brett and Specht 2004). While reluctance to return to civilian life can be overemphasized and it is clear that some of the problems with (re)settling into civilian life were caused by participation in war in the first place, there are indications that participation in war can have a number of positive effects which, in some cases, outweigh the negative aspects and may therefore be seen as representing a sensible and commendable choice. So far, this fact has been largely ignored in the literature.

Rabwoni (2002), who was a child soldier with Museveni's NRA in Uganda and followed a military career before going into politics, argues that the key issue is not whether young people join armed groups or not, but how they are treated, what training they receive and what opportunities they are faced with after demobilization. Dumas and de Cock (2003) support this with findings from Central Africa which showed that there are important differences between the situations of children depending on which armed group they belonged to. They report that living conditions are harder and relations between adult and child soldiers more violent in rebel groups than in the armed forces or militias.

c *Benefits of children's victimization*

The victimization of child soldiers, i.e. their portrayal as vulnerable victims, is in line with the fact that children tend to be seen as innocent, at least in the west. Such portrayal of children as victims goes well with the image of abduction and cruelly forced recruitment, frequently seen as the result of child-specific powerlessness. In order to understand why child soldiers have been victimized to such an extent one must not only look at definitions but also ask what kind of benefits such victimization might bring to the variety of stakeholders contributing to this image and work out what agendas might possibly be behind such an approach. To paraphrase Keen (1997)[23], in order to end child soldiering, one has to understand its functions and not only its costs. The traditional view of children as victims of forced recruitment can have a number of benefits.

Firstly, presenting weak and vulnerable 'children' can help to mobilize resources, as both institutional and private donors are known to be disproportionately generous when it comes to relieving the suffering of children. Some interim care centers in Sierra Leone had to institute "no-journalist" policies to prevent exploitation of children for media purposes. While such attention was a nuisance to the centers' work, the children's testimonies were nevertheless crucial in amassing political and financial support for war-affected children (Aning and McIntyre 2005).

Secondly, increased political attention and support for the case of child soldiers is a second benefit derived from children's victimization. As a result, it might help international actors and peacemakers to put pressure on government and other armed forces to discontinue violent conflict and the practice of recruiting children. The aid industry, media and relief agencies all have good reasons for using "images of vulnerable children to sell their products, promote their stories, and enhance the profile of their organization" (Greitens 2001: 157).

Thirdly, armed groups such as government armies have used the recruitment of child soldiers by their opponents as a tool for denouncing the latter and generating negative publicity for them. This has often happened despite the fact that the finger-pointing faction was using child soldiers itself. For example, Frelimo in Mozambique frequently accused Renamo of employing forcibly recruited child soldiers but was reported to have engaged in similar practices (Schafer 2004; Mausse 1999).

Fourthly, children's victimization can facilitate demobilization and improve the provision of programs. Demobilization while armed conflict is *ongoin*g is a feature peculiar to the issue of child soldiers (Brett and Specht 2004) arising from local, national, regional and international pressure, largely due to the view of children as innocent and particularly vulnerable. In Northern Uganda, being seen as underage victims of abduction helped returnees to access rehabilitation and reintegration programs while those seen as adults are often excluded (Mawson 2004).

Fifthly, the portrayal of child soldiers as innocent victims can have positive effects when it comes to social reintegration as it may help communities to accept former members back without too many repercussions. Northern Uganda, where the concept of childhood is to some extent based on negotiation and used loosely to encourage reconciliation and community forgiveness for LRA abductees, even when they are well above 18 years of age (Mawson 2004), is a case in point.

Sixthly, victimization facilitates understanding and tolerance between former opponents as it helps relieving ex-combatants of responsibility for their actions, such as in the case of Frelimo and Renamo in Mozambique (Schafer 2004). In this regard, it makes the life of agencies working in the field of DDRR (Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration) of soldiers easier as only few, both on the donor as well as on the community side, will argue against helping those who involuntarily have suffered through tremendous atrocities.

Finally, a victim-focused approach does indeed seem to facilitate child protection, at least in the short-term, partly for reasons mentioned above such as facilitating fund flows, political pressure as well as demobilization and reintegration. In the longer term, however, such an approach risks relieving symptoms rather than actually making a substantial difference.

In sum, it becomes clear that the victimization of child soldiers bears a number of benefits that go well beyond protecting those children. However, despite the value of these benefits, ignoring children's agency and putting a blanket of victimization over them can be harmful as it leads to misunderstanding of the reasons for and nature of children's involvement in wars and thus makes their protection through prevention and mitigation of child recruitment more difficult in the long term.

V CONSEQUENCES FOR REINTEGRATION AND PEACE

Modes of recruitment and motivations of children for participation in war matter a great deal if they are to be successfully reintegrated and prevented from re-enlisting or participating in war in the first place, especially where DDRR exercises are implemented

in situations of ongoing conflict. The reasons for joining armed groups can make or break the success of young people's reintegration and, by extension, the chances for peace. If the conditions that led young people into war have not changed and structural and other risk factors are not addressed they are likely to return to war if an opportunity arises. The economic, educational and socio-political constraints that cause young people to volunteer contribute also to a prolonged stay with armed groups and, after demobilization, make re-enlistment more likely (Peters 2005; Utas 2005; ILO 2003).

Reintegration is essential to prevent re-recruitment. For example, in Northern Uganda, children who have managed to escape from the LRA are highly vulnerable to re-abduction, as they face a number of difficulties in reintegration, such as community hostility, problems with concentration at school and difficulties in tolerating authority (Wessells 2002). Dumas and de Cock (2003) found that more than 80 per cent of a group of parents of both child soldiers and civilian children interviewed in Central Africa thought that former child soldiers represent a danger for the population. This clearly constitutes an obstacle to reintegration. Furthermore, even in contexts where child volunteering is almost non-existent, such as in Northern Uganda, there have been accounts of children who see participation in war as the lesser evil given their failure to be reintegrated into society as well as domestic abuse and deprivation encountered after their return from LRA captivity[24].

Successful reintegration largely depends on opportunities. Such opportunities may come from the outside in the form of aid projects[25] or be created by ex-combatants themselves, as has happened in Sierra Leone where self-demobilized ex-combatants used skills and networks built in war times and set up the highly successful Bo Town Bike Renters association. This motorbike renting business capitalized on the fact that many cars had broken down in the war and roads were torn and filled an important market gap thus helping activate the local economy (Fithen and Richards 2005).

Failed reintegration prolongs conflict. As children and young people have the power to perpetuate the cycle of violence, their successful rehabilitation and reintegration is crucial to help prevent further violence in war-affected societies. Benefits arising to children from participation in armed conflict prolong war for a number of reasons, including by increasing the flow of willing recruits and thus adding to structural change favoring war economies and insecurity, thereby contributing to a perpetuation of poverty. Accounts of former child soldiers in Sierra Leone repeatedly stress that it makes little sense to stand down voluntarily without any real promise of social reintegration, education and training, or civilian job prospects, and that failure to address this complex of aspirations caused and now prolongs the conflict (Peters and Richards 1998).

I concur with Brett and Specht (2004) who suggest that where children are not abducted or otherwise physically forced to join, demobilization and reintegration are unlikely to be successful and sustainable unless the reasons why they became involved in the first place are addressed[26]. I would like to take this further and propose that – ceteris paribus - volunteers are more likely to stay with armed groups and thus contribute to a continuation of war than those who were forcibly recruited[27]. While volunteering as a recruitment mode can yield benefits to individuals on a micro-level, it decreases the opportunities for reintegration and peace on a macro level.

VI CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is impossible to specify the ratio between those who are recruited by force and those who volunteer, due not only to obvious difficulties in research but also because many cases of recruitment do not fit neatly into either category. However, an analysis of the available evidence does permit the conclusion that the phenomenon of volunteerism among child soldiers has been underestimated so far and indicates that in Sub-Saharan Africa the majority of children join armed groups for reasons that are on the volunteer rather than the forced end of the recruitment spectrum. In their variety, reasons for volunteering seem relatively consistent across the continent. As such, they do not differ greatly from reasons commonly cited by adults and cover a wide array of motivations ranging from greed, feelings of revenge, a craving for power and status, to protection of self and others, ideological reasons, subsistence needs and even love. There is no conclusive evidence that adults are significantly better at ex-ante evaluation of the consequences of participation in war and thus better able than children to make informed decisions to volunteer.

While clearly acknowledging the harm violent conflict causes to both children and adults, I argue that, in the presence of war, becoming a child soldier is the best available option for some children. There are numerous cases of children who, rather than being forced by structural or other factors, recognize this and make sensible and well-founded decisions to participate in war. In other words, they display ‘true’ volunteerism. Such agency deserves much greater attention if further recruitment of children is to be prevented and reintegration is to be successful, facilitating peace in the long-term. The question why some choose to volunteer while others do not, even if they face similar circumstances and constraints, remains an important one requiring further research.

The benefits that arise to children due to their participation in war make reintegration more difficult and therefore prevent sustainable peace. While volunteering may be commendable and beneficial for some individuals, it therefore does not pay off on a macro-level. What might be beneficial for an individual’s survival and satisfaction of basic needs in the short term does not translate into benefits for wider society in the longer term. In this sense, volunteering might be a way to relieve symptoms but in the long run only contributes to a prolongation of the condition[28] of war. As a result, it can only be prescribed with reservation and to remedy immediate consequences rather than as a long term cure for the suffering of children in war zones.

The finding that the majority of children and young people voluntarily join armed conflict, for one reason or another must not be mistaken for a universal law. Significant exceptions, such as the conflict in Northern Uganda, exist. Moreover, even if volunteering, including ‘true’ volunteering is an Africa- or even worldwide phenomenon, in as much as structural and relational conditions differ from conflict to conflict, children’s motivations to join wars will inevitably differ as well. Therefore, detailed analysis of individual conflict parameters is necessary for prevention, mitigation and cessation of violence, including through the involvement of child soldiers. This means that no general statements as to the prevention of child participation in wars can be made that go beyond rather obvious recommendations to improve structural conditions in terms of material, educational and socio-political factors and a call for thorough and unbiased attempts at understanding such participation in every conflict individually.

As children and young people are such significant contributors to armed conflict in many countries of Sub-Saharan Africa, they need to be involved in peace processes as well. So far, their involvement has been insufficient. For example, stakeholdership of young people in the Lome peace process in Sierra Leone was not taken seriously, including by the international community (Aning and McIntyre 2005).

'Children' constitute a moving target as they are constantly getting older, both in chronological and in social terms, thus blurring lines and making identification of and response to their needs more difficult. Therefore, in regard to programming it might be useful to apply the term 'child' in a way that encompasses all different cultural approaches and is sufficiently broad to capture the wide range of phenomena commonly assigned to it. I believe that by using the term 'child' rather than resorting to more vague terminology such as 'youth' or 'young people' as is frequently done one can keep the buzzword character of the notion of 'child soldiers' - generated by its implication of a syncretisation of the innocent with the evil – and thus realize a number of political and financial benefits which ultimately facilitate child protection.

Lastly, long-term peace building needs to give sufficient priority to socio-economic factors since, as McMullin (2004:630) notes, "post-conflict states with impoverished economies offer little to reintegrate into". To the extent that former child soldiers represent such a quantitatively significant part of Africa's future, it is crucial and rational to specifically address them – not only to ensure lasting peace but also to improve social and economic development.

END NOTES

[1] For this paper and in line with international standards.

[2] Percentage figures given in this paragraph are based on author's calculations using absolute numbers provided by UNICEF (2004).

[3] It is worth mentioning that despite widespread international condemnation this conflict and with it forced recruitment of children as soldiers has been ongoing for almost two decades. Very recently, peace negotiations have resulted in a cessation of hostilities. However, the longer term impact of this initiative remains to be seen.

[4] While these studies were conducted after the end of the Cold War, the wars that some of them are looking at were of course taking place before or ongoing in 1989.

[5] Dumas and de Cook look at four Central African countries; the study by Brett and Specht is based on interviews with children in nine different countries around the world, including four in Sub-Saharan Africa.

[6] For an overview of the studies and their major findings consult the table in the appendix.

[7] "Personal decisions" in this study are put in opposition to "abductions" and "forced recruitment" and mean those cases where children themselves took the initiative to join, without being under physical, moral or legal pressure to do so.

[8] Poverty, it would seem, here is narrowly defined as material poverty.

[9] This is true both for developing countries as well as Western countries, such as the UK.

[10] It is worth noting that the main difference between boys' and girls' motivation to join is that the latter most often cite domestic violence and abuse as a determining factor. Furthermore, some girls volunteered to assert their equality with boys, thus opening up an interesting gender dimension.

[11] The latter study found that all children in the sample who were with the government army claimed that they had been abducted or forced to join. This contradicts findings of the study by Richards as presented above but may be due to the small sample size and the fact that most study subjects had participated on several sides, with the most common move having been from the RUF to the CDF or the government army.

[12] In this context, it is interesting to note that for the case of violent conflict in Ireland, Israel and Palestine it has been argued (by Rosenblatt 1983, cited in Cohn and Goodwin-Gill 1994) that opposition groups hold a special appeal for children because they are wild and conservative at the same time and thus combine a response to children's need for stability with their interest in excitement and adventure.

[13] A case study from Ethiopia shows that the relatively wealthy were better able to protect themselves from press-ganging as people riding in cars were usually safe, and employers, friends or relatives with cars would pick boys and young men up from school or work if there was imminent danger of press-ganging. Furthermore, bribery is another channel open to those with money to evade recruitment (Brett and McCallin 1996).

[14] Just how attractive alternatives to spending time with armed forces can be is evidenced by the many young men in the west as well as children from social and financial elites in parts of the south (cf Brett and McCallin 1996) who go to great lengths to escape conscription into compulsory military service, feeling that their time and health is too valuable to be spent with armed forces.

[15] Military philosopher Carl von Clausewitz, who entered the Prussian Army in 1792 at the tender age of 12 (Howard 1983), is among the more famous former child soldiers.

[16] See for example his 2000 paper, "Doing Well out of War: an Economic Perspective"

[17] In many parts of Africa, insufficient birth registration systems make it difficult to accurately establish the age of children in the first place (CSUCS 2004; Machel 1996; Brett and McCallin 1996).

[18] The issue of child soldiers relates to human rights law, humanitarian law, criminal law and labor law and is regulated by a number of international treaties. Both the 1977 Additional Protocols to the four Geneva Conventions and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) use a 15-year minimum age for recruitment and participation in hostilities. It is noteworthy that in all other respects, the Convention on the Rights of the Child defines children generally as persons under 18. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (1998) calls the conscription or enlisting of children under 15 into national armed forces or other armed groups a war crime. The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1999), the only regional treaty in the world which addresses the issue of child soldiers, uses a "straight-18" position. Furthermore, the ILO Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention 182 (2000) and The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (2002) also use the age of 18 as determinant factor. The Optional Protocol distinguishes between government armed forces and other armed groups in that the latter may not recruit under 18s even on a voluntary basis, something which is allowed, under certain circumstances, to government forces (HRW 2006). While it becomes clear from the above that there is no uniform international consensus prohibiting the participation of under 18-year olds in war, it may be argued that a shift seems to be underway towards a comprehensive ban on the participation in armed conflict of children under the age of 18 (Kuper 2005).

[19] It must be stressed that this approach later backfired somewhat given that former Frelimo and Renamo soldiers are not treated equally as "brothers and sisters" as the latter are not entitled to pensions like their Frelimo counterparts and that the new government did not fulfill many other expectations created in wartime, leaving many former fighters disillusioned (Schafer 2004).

[20] In this paper I attempt to unpack certain issues that are commonly taken for granted, and some of my conclusions might be uncomfortable, especially when it comes to the benefits of child soldiering and

children's agency rather than victim-status. By no means do I seek to downplay the risks involved in children's participation in war, neither for themselves nor for wider societal development.

[21] A parallel to the victimization of children and child soldiers is the often-cited "*infantilisation*" of the South, which is commonly portrayed as weak and dependent on a strong north (Greitens 2001).

[22] This can be compared to the Mozambican war of independence, where the experience of women fighters was often framed by a heroic Frelimo narrative that portrayed women as being equal to men but, as their expectations were not fulfilled in the post-war period, led to such narratives later being replaced by cynicism and resentment (cf West 2004).

[23] Keen essentially argues that to end wars, one has to understand not only their costs but also their functions, including very specific groups of actors.

[24] For example in the film documentary by Ahadi and Stoltz (2005).

[25] However, there are a number of examples of reintegration projects causing more harm then good, for example when training an abundance of mechanics in places with hardly any cars (Utas 2005) or electricians in villages without electricity (McMullin 2004).

[26] In this context it is important to note that what matters is not whether external observers define children as voluntary participants in war but rather whether young people see themselves as having volunteered or not (Brett 2003).

[27] To my knowledge there is no systematic research on the link between mode of recruitment and success of reintegration. Such research would be needed to see if my hypothesis is correct.

[28] Whether one likes to see war as a disease or more a chronic condition that naturally goes with humankind and might even help society progress is not for this paper to answer.

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Films

Ahadi, A. and Stoltz, O., 2005, *Lost Children*", Germany, 98 minutes.

APPENDIX

Author	**Year**	**Country**	**Sample**	**Theme**	**Findings**	**Remarks**
Aning and McIntyre (2005)	2002	**Sierra Leone**	34 child soldiers (under 18 at time of interview), including 3 females	Youth as a constituency with a stake in African stability	14 out of 34 joined voluntarily, mostly motivated by revenge and community protection	
Veale (2005)	2002	**Ethiopia**	11 women recruited as children to fight with the TPLF	Gender-specific issues of demobilisation and reintegration	Variety of reasons for joining, including escaping early marriage, education, belonging, etc.	Possibly volunteer-focused sampling
Brett and Specht (2004)	May 2002 – February 2003	9 countries on 4 continents; including **DRC, Congo-Brazzaville, Sierra Leone and South Africa**	53 self-defined volunteer boy and girl child soldiers (7 from DRC, 5 from C-B, 5 from SL, 6 from SA)	Risk factors and trigger events leading to voluntary recruitment of young people	Key risk factors are war, education, employment, poverty, and family	Volunteer-focused sampling
Peters (2004)	1996/1997 and 2001, 2002, 2003	**Sierra Leone**	Unspecified number of child and youth-ex-combatants from all fractions, mostly males	Reasons for youth to join army or rebel forces	Direct relation to economic, educational and socio-political constraints; same constraints cause prolonged stay and re-conscription	Volunteer-focused sampling
Dumas and de Cock/ILO (2003)	2002	**Burundi, Congo-Brazzaville, DRC, Rwanda**	>1,000 former child soldiers, children never recruited, as well as their parents	The use of child soldiers in Central Africa	Two-thirds of child soldiers enrolled voluntarily	

Sesay (2003)	Not indicated	**Liberia and Sierra Leone**	50 child soldiers, plus government officials, donor agencies, NGO workers	Role of children in wars and impact of war on children	The majority of children (72 %) joined voluntarily, especially pro-government factions (only half for RUF)	Sample size (child soldiers) probably 50
Muhumuza (1998)	Not specified, but probably 1995-1997	**Uganda**	Selection of 11 former abductee child soldiers with the LRA undergoing counselling	Experiences of recovery and rehabilitation	All were recruited by force	
Peters and Richards (1998)	1996	**Sierra Leone**	22 underage ex-combatants in rehabilitation programmes (plus self-demobilised conscripts up-country)	Young people's motivations to fight	Many young people make very conscious decisions to join and proudly defend their choices	Findings might be included in the later Peters study presented here
HRW (1997)	May-June 1997	**Uganda**	30 LRA escapee-abductees plus government, NGO, military	Abductions of children and experiences of life with and escape from the LRA	All children abducted; adults may join voluntarily	
HRW (1994)	April 1994	**Liberia**	Unspecified number of child soldiers as well as counselors, social workers, child care workers, relief workers, etc.	Child soldiers in Liberia	Only a small percentage of child soldiers were forced to join; many did so for "the advantage", ie. revenge, protection, and subsistence	No indication of whether current or former child soldiers were interviewed
Minter (1990)	September-October 1989	**Angola**	16 male ex-UNITA combatants	UNITA described by ex-combatants and foreign visitors	5 joined voluntarily; in later recruitment phases force became the norm.	Does not specifically look at child soldiers but many interviewees were under 18 during the war or even at the time of interview
Minter (1989)	November-December 1988	**Mozambique**	32 male ex-Renamo participants	Renamo as described by ex-participants	90 percent or more recruited by force	Does not look specifically at children; but majority of interviewees fit the youth category (teenagers or under 25 when joined)