

Exploring Small Arms Demand A Youth Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

“When you carry a gun, you feel like you are a human being.” – South African youth¹

The purpose of this paper is to begin exploring the complex relationships between arms proliferation, youth and security in the African context. While all three elements in the relationship stand alone as research, policy and advocacy issues, all can benefit from cross cutting analysis. The aim here is not to attempt to establish ‘youth and small arms’ as yet another niche. It is to lend a youth-centred perspective to small arms demand, taking into account enabling social, economic and political factors in arms proliferation, specifically on the demand side.² There is a profound need for youth and child centred perspectives on human security issues if the term “human security” is to have any real meaning. The state of child and youth rights must be treated as more than just an indicator of government performance in traditional sectors such as health, education and social services. This paper will attempt to demonstrate the relationships between child and youth participation in armed violence, the failure to protect of children’s and youth’s rights and the demand for small arms.

By the United Nations definition, Small Arms include revolvers and self loading pistols, rifles and carbines, sub-machine guns, assault rifles and light machine guns, while light weapons include heavy machine guns, hand-held under barrel and mounted grenade launchers, portable anti-aircraft guns, portable anti-tank guns, recoilless rifles (sometimes mounted), portable launchers of anti-aircraft missile systems (sometimes mounted) and mortars of calibres less than 100mm; ammunition and explosives includes cartridges from small arms, shells and missiles for light weapons, mobile containers with missiles or shells for single action anti-aircraft and anti-tank systems, anti-personnel and anti-tank hand grenades, landmines and explosives.³

The fact that the weapons in question are light, durable and technically operable by children is widely recognized:

The exponential increase in the use of child and adolescent soldiers is directly related to changes in the value chain of weapons technologies, or, in other words, the proliferation of small arms... For much of the 20th century, weaponry was either too expensive and/or too heavy for children to handle. Technological developments, facilitated by sophisticated information and communications technology-enabled design tools, have enabled the manufacture of simpler and lighter weapons. The second is an availability of supply issue. The post-Cold War era has resulted in the wholesale flooding of redundant, cheap but efficient weapons in Africa.⁴

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Results of an ISS survey (see Table 1) of former child combatants in Sierra Leone gives some insight into the weapons evidently accessed and used by children, most of whom have been associated with two or more of the three distinct armed groups involved in the ten-year civil conflict there, namely the Sierra Leone Army, the Civil Defense Force and the Revolutionary United Front.

Approaches to Children and Violence

To date approaches to children affected by armed conflict have centred heavily on the child as victim. Advocacy efforts have concentrated on the prohibition of the use of children as soldiers and culminated in the entry into force of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child in early 2002.⁶ Some researchers have argued that the fixation on child abductee/combatants has in fact, diverted attention away from hundreds of thousands of displaced and marginalized people, including youth, who are chronically persecuted, displaced, and deprived of access to services. It will be argued later that these people may also constitute the

Table1 – Weapons Expertise Among Child Combatants in Sierra Leone⁵

Weapon	Children Trained (out of 48 interviewed)	Percentage of Sample
Pistol	17	28.2
Sub machine gun	10	20.8
AK47 and other assault rifles	36	75
Light machine gun	4	0.8
Heavy machine gun	3	0.6
Rocket-propelled grenade launcher (RPG)	8	16.6
Mortar	1	0.02
Flame thrower	2	0.04

Source: Institute for Security Studies, field research conducted in Sierra Leone, January 2002.

recruitment potential for armed groups operating at varying scales.

The Optional Protocol is not intended to address the root causes of conflict, nor does it refer to the innumerable smaller-scale violent conflicts into which children are frequently drawn. Furthermore, it does not address the fundamental reasons why children seem to be so susceptible to recruitment. The near-universally ratified parent Convention on the Rights of the Child does. The link between *rights* and *recruitment potential* will be highlighted later in this paper. Most currently, the declaration from the recent World Summit on Children, held in New York in May of 2002, entitled “A World Fit for Children”, adopted by the UN general assembly in its Twenty Seventh Special Session, offers some clues to recognizing the links between rights, development and poverty. Explicit references to violence, however, again tends to view children solely as victims:

The childhood of millions continues to be devastated by hazardous and exploitive labour; the sale and trafficking of children, including adolescents, and other forms of abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence.⁷

The Plan of Action recognizes in Section III that “chronic poverty remains the single biggest obstacle to meeting the needs and protecting and promoting the rights of children”, and that “discrimination gives rise to a self-perpetuating cycle of social and economic exclusion that undermines children’s ability to develop to the fullest”.

Within the ten-point declaration, point nine states: “Listen to children and ensure their participation. Children and adolescents are resourceful citizens capable of helping to build a better future for all.”

This paper presupposes the following:

- That *social and economic exclusion* occurs in a generational fashion and not only on racial and

ethnolinguistic lines and that the failure to provide rights to children is, in itself, a form of exclusion;

- That children and youth, in their *resourcefulness*, develop survival strategies that make use of violence in accordance with the social, economic and political pressures and opportunities presented in their environments;
- That *exploitation* includes political exploitation, evident in the histories of states and armed groups of mobilizing youth in economic, political and military conquest.

The youth-perspective on arms proliferation and specifically demand arises chiefly from the last of these. It has been broadly recognized that the phenomenon of child soldiering is linked to arms proliferation and the portability and operational simplicity of small arms and light weapons, but the estimated 300 000 child soldiers globally constitute only a fraction of child and youth users. It is therefore necessary to look at armed violence at different scales, including gangsterism and organized armed violence to understand both the scale of the problem of armed youth as well as the complex social, economic and political aspects of demand in these different contexts.

APPROACHES TO SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS

Global concern for the problem of small arms and light weapons gained significant momentum in 2001 with the United Nations Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in all its Aspects.⁸ The programme of action from that conference laid the groundwork for the current SALW policy emphasis, which is on supply-side analysis and response (manufacturers and suppliers, legal and illicit transfers, and emergency rather than long-term response to conflict). Demand issues have been mentioned and acknowledged in theory, but not solidified into concrete policies and programs of action beyond a

local, grassroots level. Calls to mainstream gender and youth perspectives into peace research and policy making are similar to frameworks that suggest demand triggers and reduction measures be incorporated across policy areas. Examining the connections between the use of children in armed conflict and the demand for small arms is crucial to effective policy-making.

Current policy emphasis is narrowly supply oriented, focusing on manufacturers and suppliers at one end and crisis conflict response on the other. By isolating the debate at these poles, there is a failure to see all possible interventions in between. As the conception of national security issues expands beyond traditional military and state-centred analysis, demand issues are coming to the fore and being acknowledged in theory, if not in concrete programs of action. The same regional and international instruments that relegate youth issues to a line or two also fail to solidify the demand side of the arms control debate in a way that is relevant to active policy-making.

The 2001 UN Conference mentions children in a reference to “consequences,” together with women and the elderly. Nonetheless, it is achievement that the Small Arms Programme of Action recognises the impact and consequences of small arms, a hard fought battle where many countries wanted to focus only on the ‘hardware’ side of the issue.

The Programme of Action does refer to some general areas of demand reduction: security, conflict prevention and resolution, crime prevention, and humanitarian, health and development dimensions. However, the majority of recommendations fall on the supply side, focusing on manufacturing, export laws and end-user certificates, legislation relating to possession, stockpile security and destruction, and record keeping. References to demand reduction are elusive because they are so broad.

The December 2000 Organization of African Unity Bamako Declaration,⁹ formulated to represent an African common position on SALW at the UN Conference, indicated a clear need for strategies that include a demand perspective:

It is vital to address the problem of the illicit proliferation, circulation and trafficking of small arms and light weapons in a comprehensive, integrated, sustainable, and efficient manner through... the promotion of comprehensive solutions... that include both control and reduction, as well as supply and demand aspects...

It also specifies the need to “strengthen democracy, the observance of human rights, the rule of law and good governance, as well as economic recovery and growth,” but does not offer any policy initiatives to do

so. Again, the youth perspective is relegated to one line about “devastating consequences,” following a brief reference to the negative impacts of SALW proliferation on “women, refugees, and other vulnerable groups, as well as... property.”

The 1997 UN Panel of Experts Report¹⁰ touches on the important issue of insecurity and choice by acknowledging that “When the State loses control over its security functions and fails to maintain the security of its citizens, the subsequent growth of armed violence, banditry, and organized crime increases the demand for weapons by citizens seeking to protect themselves and their property.” The more recent UN report, “Development Held Hostage,” puts the economic consequences of SALW proliferation in perspective: “every round of ammunition fired by a child soldier represents an economic transaction involving commodity exchanges with international markets in those countries where arms are not manufactured domestically.”¹¹

Changing the political, economic, and social circumstances that fuel demand is daunting, and it is unrealistic to expect, at least in the near future, the development of specific, governing international norms and conventions. The demand approach, for now, must draw on other bodies of policy and legislation, such as humanitarian law, human rights and governance.

Despite the lack of a systematic approach at the policy level, however, many community-based organizations (CBOs) are working at a grassroots level to reduce the demand for small arms (an example of this is in East Africa and the Horn, where cattle rustling and clan warfare in areas outside of government control have fuelled unchecked proliferation). This is a positive indication that responses to demand are already occurring in a way that addresses the particular problems and needs of communities.

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ARMED VIOLENCE, YOUTH AND RIGHTS

The human side of small arms violence that is lacking in the UN Programme of Action has come to attention in studies that attempt to quantify their impact on human development. The 2002 United Nations Development Programme study “Development Held Hostage”¹² recognizes the role of small arms in economies :

Criminal syndicates and informal gangs operating in economies weakened by conflict are trading in commodities such as diamonds, timber and illegal drugs and also procuring and selling weapons that quickly diffuse into civil society. From the local to the global level, small arms are frequently substituted as convertible currencies.

The report also lays out current thinking on the relationship between armed conflict and development in three common approaches, namely:

- The expansion of traditional concepts of security – a shift from military and state defined notions of security to a view that posits humans, with their multiple needs and capacities, at the centre of the picture.
- Security is a pre-requisite to development, and that the absence of equitable and sustainable development often exacerbates social conflict and insecurity. This approach reflects current thinking on the root causes of conflict such as horizontal inequality, exclusive politics, poor governance and weak public authority among states—and notes how these constitute insecurities that lead to violence.
- Small arms undermine development and contribute to widespread human insecurity and unvirtuous cycles of violence.

Each of these approaches can and must be enriched by a youth perspective, as follows, in brief.

The *expanded notion of security* needs to explicitly include the needs and entitlements of children and youth. The imperative to make child- and youth-centred security policy arises from international legal frameworks such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Convention on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. Demographics, which will be discussed later in this paper, also indicate that the burden of care on states whose populations consist overwhelmingly of children and youth requires attention to policy areas not traditionally associated with children. Trade and industry, natural resources, and energy must be managed without discounting the futures of the majority.¹³

The “youth factor” has been consistently overlooked in the categories of *exclusive politics and poor governance*. State failure to provide health care, education, and livelihoods to young people result not in “horizontal inequality” but in vertical inequality. Growing numbers of disenfranchised young people with a critical mass of discontent are a contributing factor to intergenerational conflict. Harnessing such conflict is a common tactic used by states and non-state actors, as well as organized criminals and gangsters. Governments respond by signing international agreements aimed at protecting

children, but apologize for their inability to deliver critical services due to insecurity. Fighting rebel wars, controlling gangsterism and enforcing the law thus becomes a backlash against youth.

Cycles of violence, where youth are concerned, are enabled by the creation and expansion of *recruitment potential*, which could arguably be added to the impacts of small arms summarized in the UNDP study as:

- Criminal violence;
- Collapse of health and education services;
- Displacement of people;
- Declining economic activity;
- Reduced government resources;
- Damage to the social structure;
- Withdrawal of development assistance.

The 2001 Small Arms Survey contextualizes the use of small arms by stating that

We live in a world where even the poorest and most marginalized communities have access to military-style weapons capable of transforming a localized dispute into a bloodbath.¹⁴

The implication is that conflicts that absorb and otherwise affect children and youth could have entirely different dynamics in the absence of small arms and light weapons. In fact, non-violent conflict is an essential part of transformation and one in which youth engage universally as they challenge authority and values and seek identity and independence. But children and youth need safe spaces in which to do so. Children’s spaces are invaded by arms in two distinctive but closely linked ways. The first goes back to the impact of small arms on development – the economic impacts, displacement and damage to the social fabric. Understanding the second demands that, in accordance with the call to recognize children as participants and resilient innovators, we see children as actors and decision makers in violent environments, responding to the pressures, opportunities, norms and values of their societies.

CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN THE SECURITY DEBATE

Children under 18 comprise, in some countries, over half the population.

Country	% population under 14	life expectancy at birth (years)
Angola	43.31	38.95
DRC	48.24	48.94
Mozambique	42.72	36.45
Sierra Leone	44.73	45.6
Uganda	51.08	43.37

Source: <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/>

Despite the statistics, children continue to be treated as a “soft” issue and left on the periphery of national security issues. The marginalisation of youth from the security debate is paralleled by their absence from political and economic agendas beyond the traditional sectors of health, education and social services. Furthermore, In war-affected nations in particular, the priority of social sectors plummets while governments attend to the business of war, leaving health and education in the hands of humanitarian agencies. In the absence of physical security, social services, education and livelihoods, children and youth are forced to take their places in economies and societies where they eventually become victims, perpetrators or both, of violence.¹⁵

Beyond inter- or intra-state warfare, however, lower-level conflicts are just as devastating from both a youth and arms demand perspective. Advocacy for children and youth affected by violence has been dominated by the processes surrounding the Optional Protocol, a legal instrument whose parameters are strictly circumscribed, and the only one that makes explicit reference to children as agents of violence. This is perhaps because addressing youth co-option into different scales of violence is hardly conducive to an international juridical/legalistic approach. Yet crime and banditry, urban gang-related violence and terrorism create environments in which youth are exposed to instability and physical danger and where communities face long-term consequences similar to those in wartime.

There is a huge conceptual leap between child rights provision and thinking on what are conventionally considered security issues, precisely because of the diversity of legislation within the latter: organized crime and corruption, arms control, national criminal legislation – the list goes on. Few, if any of these, even in the African context where the majority is young, have been endowed with any youth perspective. One facet of this problem is the fact that child rights have become a niche characterized by emotive discourse, by viewing children solely as victims (supported by endless heart wrenching imagery and graphic accounts of suffering) and the magnification of existing paternalistic attitudes toward Africans through the lens of western expectations of childhood.

Fortunately, SALW debate and legislation have not been constrained by references to certain scales of conflict, nor has the debate assumed the emotive nature that has perhaps inhibited the acceptance of child rights into security policy circles.

The subsequent section begins to narrow the gap between hardware and humanity and to form the basis for a cross cutting, rather than a “niched” approach to small arms demand.

THE DYNAMICS OF VULNERABILITY

According to the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, children vulnerable to recruitment are nearly always:

- Children separated from their families or with disrupted family backgrounds (e.g. orphans, unaccompanied children, children from single-parent families or families headed by children);
- Economically and socially deprived children (the poor, both rural and urban, and those without access to education, vocational training, or a reasonable standard of living);
- Other marginalised groups (e.g. street children, minorities, refugees, and the internally displaced);
- Children from conflict zones.¹⁶

The globally recognized imperative to protect children due to their physical and psychological vulnerability is strongly reflected in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. For young people at risk, there is a spectrum of control and degrees of vulnerability to getting involved in violence. The decision can appear to be conscious and voluntary at one end of the spectrum; at the other, it is simply the choice made by abductees to fight or die. Combinations of conflict, poverty, social instability, and cultures embracing violence serve to limit choices. It is precisely this limiting of choices that stands in the way of children and youth exercising political will. Despite their vulnerability, children are political beings entitled to make decisions: the only question is what

options their care providers (states, communities, families) will offer or deny.

Apart from the abductions for which groups like the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone and the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda have become known, children may ‘voluntarily’ join armed groups in response to their own experiences of state repression or leave home to relieve the burden on their families and follow the promise of a livelihood. In urban contexts, young people seek identity and economic security in gangs.

The presence of small arms affects these decisions at each stage. They can be used to threaten, coerce, or offer a sense of empowerment. More importantly, they fuel the conflicts that keep violent groups in business, spur widespread displacement that can leave children vulnerable to recruitment, and sustain local civilian demand for guns valued as hard currency. The dynamics of poverty and social instability cut across contexts. Whether in urban or rural areas, inter-state conflict or gang violence, young peoples’ survival options are limited by their exclusion from social services, education and livelihoods. As more youth are drawn into violence and the influence of violent

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groups increases, alternatives disappear. The collapse of social structure, reduced government resources and declining economies mentioned in the UNDP study offer less stability, opportunity and recourse to citizens.

The Optional Protocol¹⁷ condemns the targeting of institutions significant to children and youth:

The targeting of children in situations of armed conflict and direct attacks on objects protected under international law, including places generally having a significant presence of children such as schools and hospitals.

The destruction of infrastructures holds more than deadly consequences for the children present at the time of attack. It also contributes in a broader way to the escalation of conflict by rendering children more vulnerable to recruitment. Rebel movements such as the LRA and the RUF caught on to this method of boosting recruiting potential by targeting teachers, health workers, law enforcement officers, and associated infrastructures for the purpose of spreading terror. Communities rendered fragmented and vulnerable face an ultimatum: fight for or against them.

In northern Uganda, where warfare has resulted in the abduction of an estimated 11,000 Ugandan and South Sudanese children and youth,

Adolescents believe that the effects of physical insecurity bear primary responsibility for preventing them from completing school. Many schools have been destroyed, teachers killed and adolescents abducted directly from schools. Schools are often far from home, dangerous to get to and lacking qualified teachers, classrooms, supplies and equipment. Adolescents also report that, with limited resources, they often have to choose between eating and formal education.¹⁸

Although long-standing rebel opposition groups are often seen to enjoy popular support at their inception, they inevitably come to rely on the forced recruitment of civilians to expand ranks as violence escalates. They choose the most vulnerable recruitment pools for the highest yield. This phenomenon, in some cases, has been mirrored in state armies, who may resort to rounding up unaccompanied children for forced recruitment. The children targeted are generally those not in schools, without proof of age or identity, and without caregivers to sponsor a way out of military service. A similar military tactic was employed in the war in Mozambique, which ended in 1992, which had

... a destabilising character, illustrated by the massacres and kidnapping of civilians and by the destruction of the social and economic infrastructures, namely factories, plantations, social structures, bridges, means of transport,

energy conductors and others. As a result of this war, more than a million people were killed and 4,5 million were dislocated internally or sought refuge in neighbouring countries such as Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Swaziland and South Africa.¹⁹

Movement between cities and provinces in Mozambique was virtually impossible as various stages. This rendered rural populations in particular vulnerable to starvation and disease and made them easy targets for predatory recruitment by both government and rebel forces. Unaccompanied children and youth, particularly in urban areas, were press-ganged into fighting for the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO).

Much has been written about the disappearing distinctions between civilians and soldiers in modern conflict. What is perhaps most remarkable about the recruitment of children and youth into armed movements in recent years is how the mode of warfare appears to not only capitalize on a disenfranchised segment of the population, but to guarantee that population's ongoing availability by destroying the very social fabric, institutions and infrastructures that offer protection and alternatives. Paul Richards has explored the apparent nihilism of Sierra Leone's RUF in "Fighting for the Rainforest." He attempts to

explain why a movement founded on student protest degenerated into one of this decade's bloodiest conflicts:

For many seized youngsters in the diamond districts, functional schooling had broken down long before the RUF arrived. The rebellion was a chance to resume their education. Captives report being schooled in RUF camps, using fragments and scraps of revolutionary texts for books, and receiving good basic training in the arts of bush warfare. Many captive children adapt quickly, and exult in their new-found skills, and the chance, perhaps the first in their lives, to show what they can do.²⁰

Ironically, a parallel can be drawn between states that do not prioritize child and youth entitlements and armed groups who target them: they both reinforce recruitment potential, one through destruction and the other through neglect. Thus child rights should be seen as a security issue, for without potential youth power, waging warfare in Africa would certainly become more difficult.

Pressure on young people to take up arms occurs in different forms in children's interlinked socio-cultural, economic and political spaces. Most often this pressure is caused or exacerbated by a lack of access to basic rights in one or more of these spaces. Recruiters of

Both states and armed groups reinforce recruitment potential, one through neglect, the other through destruction

children and youth tend to fill the rights vacuum. The demand for rights and the demand for arms can occupy the same circles.

In September of 2002, UNICEF gathered together country office representatives and partner agencies from twelve African countries to draft a strategy for "Raising Awareness and Addressing the Impact of Small Arms on Children and Youth."²¹ Participants were asked to identify the problems they saw as most related to both the supply of and demand for small arms among children and youth. They were then asked to categorize each problem as social, political or economic.

Social factors were considered to be, by definition, the prevention of access to certain social systems, specifically

- The status conferred on children by possession of firearms;
- Tradition and culture that embrace firearms;
- Association with armed groups and the status gained by belonging to them;
- Self-defence or the protection of others;
- "Resolving" conflicts.

Economic factors were defined as those related to livelihood, including:

- Food shortages;
- Child labour (including child soldiering);
- Socio-economic status;
- Association with drug cartels and other organized crime groups;
- Firearms becoming a part of livelihood strategies.

Political factors were defined as situations where young people's armed participation is required in political strategies, for example:

- The recruitment of children into armed movements, including both voluntary and mandatory conscription;
- Political instability and coups d'etat;
- Militarised culture;
- Existence of civil defence forces;
- War;
- Association with non-state actors and others attempting to seize power.

The broad range of problem factors demonstrates several things. First, that armed conflict is by no means the only situation in which youth are armed or arm themselves. Research on youth in a diversity of violent contexts supports the idea that the presence of arms is an indicator not only of uncontrolled proliferation, but also of perceived need. Where there is armed violence, there are inevitably "recruitment pools" of vulnerable youth, some of whom are products themselves of successive generations socialized in violent environments.

Second, that there are different, albeit connected incentives offered – from immediate danger and the threat of violence, to economic gain, to identity and belonging.

From the perspective of children and youth, strategies to counter the proliferation of small arms need to address the most prominent demand features.

GUNS VS. RIGHTS: WHAT GOVERNS CHILDREN'S SPACES

Social spaces: urban gang violence

An invasion of children's social space occurs when children are forced to seek status, identity and protection within armed groups, where peaceful means of conflict resolution are lacking, and where cultures of violence prevail.

In South Africa, the apartheid system's legacy of social and economic inequality and human rights abuse has created an embedded culture of violence. High rates of firearms-related deaths occur in diverse contexts: crime and banditry, factional violence, and gang activity. Forced displacement of people and fragmentation of communities under the apartheid Group Areas Act exacerbated the alienation of youth, and has eventually led young people to seek political and social identity as well as livelihoods in street gangs.

Sarah Healy of the University of Cape Town's Social Justice Resource Project writes:

Various socio-economic and political factors have historically contributed to a perceived and often real situation in which youth have little or no control over the direction which their lives are to take... yet media contortions of gang life and the characteristics of gang members in combination with the pressures of the social reality of many South Africans, create a situation in which young people view gangsterism with an idealised lens.²²

The presence of arms is an indicator not only of uncontrolled proliferation, but also of perceived need

While young people are not unaware of the danger and risks of involvement, education and employment opportunities are insufficient counter-incentives for youth not to become involved in gangs. Guns are a focal point of the sub-culture. Young gang members interviewed by researcher Don Pinnock, working in the Western Cape's Cape Flats area, reveals the centrality of arms to the subculture:

The gang youth's favourite topic of conversation is about the gang fights. The stories are about battles, guns or styles of fighting, demonstrating their toughness and daring. Central to this language is the gun... "it makes the enemy

scared and it makes you feel brave when you see the enemy running from you".²³

Pinnock views gang culture as a surrogate for stable family and community life, one in which the ritual entry from childhood to adulthood repeats itself in a twisted, infinite cycle of violence.

Economic spaces: children's coping strategies

People may perceive a need to own and use arms to protect their livelihoods. In wartime, survival strategies can involve routine violence, such as looting, banditry and pillaging. Where state arms expenditures are disproportionately higher than those for child and youth welfare, the potential for recruiting disenfranchised young people is greater. Explain and substantiate. The mobilisation of children and youth into various forms of armed violence indicates the lack of opportunities offered to young people in a war economy.

In other cases, state collapse, sanctions and factional warfare render social services and legitimate economic activity all but non-existent. In Somalia, the freezing of assets held by companies alleged to be associated with extremist Osama Bin Laden's terrorist network has wreaked havoc on an already precarious economy, with children and youth again bearing the brunt of the sanctions.

In the years leading up to September 11, 2001, remittances from family members working abroad provided the main income source for millions of Somali households. Direct beneficiaries, about 50 percent of family households were the worst hit.

Many families are unable to feed their children or provide them with health care. Moreover, parents can not send their children to schools because they are unable to pay monthly school fees, of between US\$1 and US\$ 1.50. The exact number of school dropouts is unknown, but it is believed that significant number of children are being denied the right to education. It is known that almost 80% of children in primary school age in Somalia are out of school and without access to basic services. Many children spend their free time at home or in streets doing nothing, and left exposed to social ills and in danger of becoming dependent on drugs or becoming involvement in antisocial activities. More children are becoming involved in gang activities such as robbery, check point operations, and are joining freelance militias. The security of Mogadishu has worsened, car theft, kidnapping, and other forms of gang activities have

increased sharply. It is very common to see in the streets in major urban areas young children carrying guns or sitting around armoured vehicles. Increased recruitment of youth into factional militias has been reported. Militia services are considered to be the only employment opportunity for youth to support themselves and their families. Lack of other alternative meaningful ways becomes an incentive for further recruitment of young children into various forms of militia.²⁴

While the extent of factional violence spurred on by unresolved disputes and the seemingly endless division on clans in Somalia is somewhat unique, the efforts of young people to survive in wartime economies is not. In both Angola and Sierra Leone, youth were an important source of labour in the lucrative illegal diamond trades that supported opposition movements in the acquisition of weapons. Young people are resilient. When faced with insecurity, instability, and economic hardship, they develop strategies for survival that involve taking advantage of whatever scant opportunities are available. If that means using guns as currency, finding work for rebel groups or in the drug trade, or other alternative sources of livelihood, they will choose to participate according to necessity. It is the responsibility of states and communities to identify and break cycles of hardship that fuel conflict.

Power brokers facilitate militarisation by drawing on concepts of youth and coming of age

Political spaces: exclusion and exploitation

Groups relying on armed violence are able to motivate marginalised youth into movements that bring political change through violence. Governments that do not prioritise children's welfare, education and livelihoods leave youth politically vulnerable. Where the youth voice is not heard through established channels for redressing grievance, it will be heard in more violent and destructive ways.

The scale of youth violence seen in Sierra Leone was ultimately due the absence of social and economic buffers. To challenge authority and seek independence is part of a natural development process, which, if not contained at socially acceptable levels within an orderly society can be instrumentalized for any number of ends.²⁵

Conceptions of children and youth are not static. Just like other identity markers such as gender, race, and class, power brokers facilitate militarisation by drawing on concepts of youth and coming of age. Youth identity changes with historical, political, and economic circumstances. The utility of identity has often been argued with "ethnicity," which adapts easily to different circumstances;²⁶ so-called tribal and racial divisions

have been exaggerated or eliminated under colonial regimes for political ends. The most striking example of this was in the divide and control rationale of apartheid, which codified and instrumentalised racial differences in ways that benefited a white economic elite while excluding the majority. To a lesser extent, all conflict creates limited economic opportunities for a minority (such as rebel groups or gangs) while the majority is squeezed into poverty.

In times of war and the build-up to war, politicians and other leaders assign particular characteristics like defense, strength, care taking, and support to men and women respectively. These boundaries are often enforced with reference to religion, tradition, and what is believed to be women's inherent nature. Gender, like youth, can be a tool of both emancipation and co-option. Feminist historians have long pointed to the co-option of women's movements into political agendas. Political leaders sometimes confer equality on women as liberation fighters, even insisting on the emancipation of women as a precursor to true liberation. Women are usually relegated to subservience when order is restored and their presence no longer serves a political agenda. Like the use of gender roles in facilitating conflict, the co-option and mobilization of youth has long served political and economic agendas.

CONCLUSION

A confluence of different factors contributes to the vulnerability of children and youth to co-option into armed violence: poverty, profiteering from warfare, poor governance, absent social services, political mobilization and the uncontrolled proliferation of arms. Each of these plays a role in the fuelling of conflict and in maintaining the demand for weapons.

Controlling just one of these elements may temporarily change the dynamic of vulnerability, but ultimately, policies must call for adequate economic, social, and political support for plans of action that hold governments responsible for demand reduction measures targeting youth. The demographic reality of the African continent dictates that peace and security relies on good governance and access to rights for the unseen numbers of children and youth living with or at risk of becoming involved in armed violence.

All human security-related policy pertaining to Africa should be subject to youth-centered analysis, but in the context of the SALW policy area, certain questions bear further investigation:

- 1) Military expenditure versus child and youth entitlements: are states building recruitment potential through neglect of services?
- 2) Demographics, economic productivity, labor and employment: is the "care-giving" generation capable of providing for the young majority?
- 3) Organized crime and trafficking: from where does

the potential for economic exploitation involving children and youth arise? How are children and youth involved?

- 4) Arms proliferation: to what extent have guns become cultural fixtures, socially acceptable and a perceived economic necessity?
- 5) Chronic tension between ethno-linguistic, political or racial groups: how does resentment transcend generations, and how is it manipulated by political and military actors?
- 6) Lessons learned from the successful or unsuccessful disarmament of youth: what ensures sustainability?

Further research correlating arms proliferation, gun violence and child welfare indicators might reveal trends, not only in the obvious, cataclysmic disruption that occurs in armed conflict, but also in rates of gun ownership and various levels of organized violent activity.

The status of child and youth rights in a given society is an indicator of the overall functioning of the state, of governance, and of the management of strategic resources. Child and youth demands for protection, education, opportunities, if not met by the family, community and state, can shift over brief or extended periods, to demand for arms. Within this transition comes the economic reliance on, social acceptance of and increasing proliferation of guns, along with higher human tolls incurred in conflicts.

END NOTES

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About this paper

This paper represents a collaboration between two of the Institute for Security Studies' research areas: small arms and light weapons and children in armed conflict. The proliferation of small arms throughout Africa since the cold war has not, in itself been the cause of conflict. The accessibility of weapons easily operable by children and youth has however, raised the stakes and magnified the devastation of wars. The cyclical effect of impeded socio-economic development and the socialization of young people in violence have made small arms a part of social, economic and political survival for children and youth. This paper begins to unravel the complex notion of demand for small arms and light weapons through the lens of children's rights in an attempt to enrich current analysis of the problem of arms proliferation.

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