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## **Understanding and Addressing the Phenomenon of ‘Child Soldiers’:**

The Gap between the Global Humanitarian  
Discourse and the Local Understandings  
and Experiences of Young People’s Military  
Recruitment

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# 1 Introduction

In the past 10 years, the phenomenon of ‘child soldiers’ has attracted enormous media attention and has also become a policy priority in the humanitarian field. In the global policy discourse,<sup>1</sup> a ‘child soldier’ is commonly defined as ‘any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers, and those accompanying such groups, other than purely as family members’ (Cape Town Principles).<sup>2</sup> The central thesis of the global discourse is that children have no place in war under any circumstance and that child soldiering is an unambiguous violation of universal children’s rights.<sup>3</sup> With this belief, humanitarian organisations have lobbied for various international legal instruments that prohibit the military recruitment of under 18-year-olds and hold adults who recruit children criminally culpable for war crimes.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the images and tales of child soldiers have proliferated in such a way that ‘child soldiers’ has almost become a moral and emotional issue, with activists and organisations taking it on with almost missionary zeal.

However, if we examine this issue from a historical perspective, dominant perceptions and attitudes towards young people’s military recruitment have not always been such. For instance, the militant child and youth activists in the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa during the 1970s and 1980s were hailed as heroes who were ‘undoubtedly important to the broader struggle for liberation, democracy, and transformation’ (Bundy 1987). Likewise, thousands of under-18 British soldiers who fought in World War I were (and are still) regarded as ‘brave young men’ who responded to their historical call, as exemplified by the following inscriptions typical of many gravestones: ‘ONLY A BOY BUT A HERO; Killed in Action 30th August 1916, aged 17’ (van Emden 2005: 11) or ‘O SO YOUNG & YET SO BRAVE; Killed in Action 9th September 1916, aged 16’ (*Ibid.* 53). Indeed, South Africa’s young militants and the British ‘boy soldiers’ of World War I are conceptualised and discussed in a fundamentally different fashion from the contemporary discourse on child soldiers. In fact, they are not even called ‘child soldiers,’ although they may well fit into the contemporary category of ‘child soldiers’ as defined above.<sup>5</sup> This

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<sup>1</sup> By ‘global policy discourse’, I am referring to the ways in which the subject of ‘child soldiers’ is generally depicted and discussed by international organisations, NGOs, governments, as well as popular media.

<sup>2</sup> This definition was first drafted in 1997 at the Cape Town conference on child soldiers among international organisations and NGOs and became UNICEF’s official definition of a ‘child soldier’. Following UNICEF’s adoption, most humanitarian and human rights organisations began to use this definition, and it is now the standard universal definition in the discourse.

<sup>3</sup> Organisations that have played a predominant role in propagating this type of discourse include Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the Quaker United Nations Office, the International Save the Children Alliance, and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Many of these organisations also serve on the steering committee for the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers.

<sup>4</sup> Two most important legal instruments in this respect are the 1998 Rome Statute establishing an International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague in the Netherlands (United Nations 1998) and the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (United Nations 2000).

<sup>5</sup> In many respects, such appreciation of the complexity and delicate nature of the subject still exists today with respect to British boy soldiers. For instance, the UK Sunday Times writes: ‘Should [the military

clearly demonstrates that, while children's military participation *per se* is historically nothing new, our perceptions regarding the legitimacy and morality of children's military participation is a historical construct, shaped by particular social and political forces.

Now, if we accept that the discourse of 'child soldiers' exists as a historical construct, we can begin to ask some critical questions regarding this construct and explore the possible gap between the global discourse and local realities. In this context, this dissertation seeks to investigate how 'child soldiers' are constructed in the global humanitarian discourse and how that discourse on child soldiers might be distant from lived realities at the local level.

Despite the enormous popularity of the subject, recently even more so through the Hollywood film, *Blood Diamond*, serious academic inquiry into the issue of child soldiers has been scarce. While authors within the field of anthropology and the emerging discipline of child studies have emphasised the notion of children's agency (e.g. Hart 2006, 2007; Boyden and de Berry 2000, 2004; Boyden and Mann 2005) or have undertaken country-specific ethnographic studies on young combatants (Shepler 2005; Utas 2003; Honwana 1999, 2006), there still seems to be a lack of an explicit attempt to bring together the macro-levels of analysis (the global discourse) and the micro-analysis (ethnographic studies) on the issue of global 'child soldiers'. This has in turn created a situation where the emerging ethnographic studies that challenge the global discourse do not actually translate into changes in global policy. Therefore, this dissertation will take on both global and local levels of analysis and draw from a wide array of literature, including those from the fields of human rights, child development, political economy, anthropology, as well as various policy documents and reports of humanitarian and human rights organisations.

To be clear, it is not my intention to argue that military participation of under 18-year-olds is a desirable and positive practice. Young people do indeed suffer in armed conflict around the world. Nevertheless, they may fight and experience military recruitment in ways that the contemporary discourse on child soldiers does not capture or anticipate. Indeed, the aim of this dissertation is to investigate how the well-intentioned global humanitarian discourse on child soldiers may be disregarding the complex local understandings and experiences of military recruitment. In doing so, I seek to present a compelling case for a wholesale re-conceptualisation of the phenomenon of 'child soldiers' so as to devise aid programmes that can better reflect and respond to local understandings, priorities, and needs.

The first chapter will examine how the global discourse takes a rights-based approach to the issue of 'child soldiers' and conceptualises children and childhood in a way that renders all forms of children's military participation barbaric and abhorrent. To aid the readers' understanding, I will review the historical development, provide specific examples, and outline the key components and assumptions of the discourse. In Chapter 2, I will begin to challenge the global discourse by investigating the socio-cultural contexts of 'child soldiering.' I will show how the model of childhood in the global discourse

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recruitment of British children] have been allowed to happen? Richard van Emden's fascinating and distressing account ... shows how difficult it is to provide a simple answer' (van Emden 2005: back cover).

conflicts with local models and how certain forms of ‘child soldiering’ may have particular meanings as a war-time extension of peacetime socio-cultural norms and practices concerning children. Chapter 3 will further illustrate the gap between the discourse and local realities by examining how some under-18-year-olds have participated in military activities with a sense of legitimacy and with their eyes wide open. Here, I will highlight the social, political, and moral agency of ‘child soldiers’ and locate their ‘victimhood’ in broader socio-economic and political contexts, rather than in terms of their recruitment alone. In so doing, I shall show that while all types of underage military recruitment cannot be justified, many young people had understanding of the causes and stakes of their war and made conscious decisions to join fighting forces. Finally, I will draw from various field-based studies in post-war Sierra Leone to illustrate some of the negative consequences of the global discourse at the local level, for the ex-child combatants as well as their communities. I will thereby confirm a need for a wholesale re-configuration of the existing global framework for understanding and addressing the phenomenon of ‘child soldiers.’ The paper will conclude with a discussion of practical implications for new approaches to analysis and programming.

## 2 Critical Analysis of the Global Humanitarian Discourse on Child Soldiers

The use of children as soldiers has been universally condemned as abhorrent and unacceptable. Yet over the last ten years hundreds of thousands of children have fought and died in conflicts around the world.

(Website, Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers)

We are urging all governments and armed groups to end the military recruitment of children under 18 and to release those children already in service. There can be no excuse for arming children to fight adult wars.

(Statement by Mary Robinson, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, on February 12, 2002, cited in Keairns 2002: 1)

This chapter will critically examine the main components and assumptions of the global humanitarian discourse on child soldiers and account for the particular ways this discourse has developed.<sup>6</sup> To provide a wide range of examples, texts from the following sources were chosen for the analysis: 1) *Adult Wars, Child Soldiers* by UNICEF (2002); 2) *Special Report: Child Soldiers* by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) (2003); 3) *Child Soldiers: Care and Protection of Children in Emergencies* by Save the Children (2001); and finally 4) web-publications of the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers (hereafter the Coalition). To be clear, it is not my intention to provide a detailed analysis of each of these texts. Rather, the aim of this chapter is to lay

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<sup>6</sup> In undertaking a discourse analysis, I was much influenced by Escobar’s seminal essay, ‘Discourse and Power in Development: Michel Foucault and the Relevance to his Work’ (1985).

out the essence of the global humanitarian and human rights discourse on child soldiers, so as to provide a foundation for the following chapters in which I will investigate the gap between this global discourse and local understandings and experiences of ‘child soldiering’.

**A Typical Photographic Representation of a ‘Child Soldier’ in the Global Discourse**  
(Source: *Factsheet on Child Soldiers*, US State Department<sup>7</sup>)



*A child soldier victim in northern Uganda.*

**Development of the Contemporary Humanitarian Discourse on Child Soldiers**

In order to acquire a critical understanding of the global humanitarian discourse on ‘child soldiers,’ we must first examine how and why the mainstream discourse has developed in a particular fashion. The phenomenon of ‘child soldiers’ became a prominent issue in the international humanitarian and human rights field with the release of Machel’s *UN Study on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children* in 1996, which suggested that more than 300,000 under-eighteens were fighting in 31 conflicts around the world. This study prompted much international attention, advocacy, and programming on the phenomenon of child soldiers and also led to the creation of the Coalition, made up of prominent humanitarian and human rights organisations (Beirens n.d.).

The approach to understanding and addressing the issue of ‘child soldiers’ at the global level has been dominated by the rights-based approach; that is, humanitarian agencies conceptualise ‘child soldiering’ in terms of a clear violation of universal children’s rights and a breach of international humanitarian law (Seaman 2000; Rosen 2007; Francis 2007). Here, the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) has played a critical role. It declared that children ‘should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding’ and charged adults and governments to help fulfil various rights of children (CRC Preamble). The adoption and the near universal ratification of CRC<sup>8</sup> brought the issue of children’s rights and protection to the forefront of international development and the humanitarian agenda during the 1990s (Save the

<sup>7</sup> <<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/51160.pdf>>

<sup>8</sup> Only the US and Somalia have not ratified the convention.

Children 2003; Goodwin-Gill and Cohn 1994).<sup>9</sup> With the ascendancy of CRC, humanitarian organisations (particularly UNICEF, which was explicitly commissioned by CRC to spearhead the protection of children's rights) have reoriented themselves as rights-based organisations. In this context, the issue of 'child soldiers' gained its prominence and legitimacy as a child rights and protection priority.

However, although advocacy groups such as the Coalition refer to the CRC as clear evidence of a global consensus on the moral repugnance of and legal norms against underage recruitment, it should not be taken uncritically. Given the political nature of the CRC as the product of government negotiations at the international level, the unprecedented speed and scale of the ratification can be understood in light of this fact: children in all societies have a symbolic value and add to the credibility of politicians, and thus no government wishes to admit to their citizens and to the world that children are badly treated under their jurisdiction (Kuper 2000).

Furthermore, as Pupavac (1998, 2000, 2001) argues, the institutionalisation of children's rights in international law has taken place in response to a deep sense of moral, political, and social crisis during the 1990s in the international humanitarian community. Modern humanitarianism was born out of an aspiration to recognise and serve a common humanity beyond the differences of political, national, or social communities, and humanitarian activities in the past few decades massively expanded in their scope and operations. In the 1990s, however, humanitarianism went through a fundamental questioning of its mission and suffered declining legitimacy as a result of operations in Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (with Rwandese refugees), Northern Iraq (with Kurdish refugees), Bosnia and Kosovo. In this context, the child was elevated to being an integrative symbol for the world, and children's rights, as a unifying moral force, became an instrument for addressing this 'crisis' (Pupavac 2001; Duffield 2001a). Indeed, the Machel study (1996) itself declared that '[c]hildren present us with a uniquely compelling motivation for mobilisation' (89). In addition, the rise of a child protection regime based on child rights has been closely related to the increasing emphasis by Western liberals on law as the best instrument for securing liberty and empowerment and bringing about social change (Robertson 1999). In this respect, the prominence of 'child soldiers' as an international humanitarian concern as well as the dominance of a rights-based approach to the issue are owed to a particular development in the international humanitarian community.

#### **Four Key Elements of the Global Humanitarian Discourse on Child Soldiers**

Having examined how the global discourse on child soldiers has developed in the CRC framework, let me now specifically lay out the key elements of the global discourse on child soldiers.

#### **A 'Child' and a 'Child Soldier' as 'anyone under the age of 18'**

First of all, the global humanitarian and human rights discourse advances the so-called 'Straight-18' position, which defines a 'child' and a 'child soldier' in terms of the chronological age of 18. For instance, under the heading of 'Who are Child Soldiers', Save

the Children (2001) introduces the definition from the Cape Town Principles and explains the rationale of this definition by asserting that '[t]he upper age of eighteen as defined in the Cape Town Principles corresponds to the threshold between childhood and adulthood defined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child' (3). However, beyond the legal rationale, this explanation does not actually address why anyone under 18 should be considered to be a child and why military participation should be permitted to an 18-year-old while prohibited to a 17-year-old. In addition, while this report acknowledges at the beginning that 'the need and resources of adolescents and younger children may vary significantly and should be considered specifically when designing programmes' (1), it ultimately takes it as given that the term 'child' in the document will 'encompass all individuals under the age of 18' (*Ibid.*). As a result, the question remains unaddressed as to whether the age 18 in lived realities indeed 'marks the formal transition from childhood to adulthood' as it claims, and what people actually regard as an appropriate age for military participation at the local level. Furthermore, the report remarks that the local definitions of a 'child' must conform to the global one: 'In many cases, child soldiers are not perceived as children, but only as former combatants. In these cases, [Save the Children] works towards ensuring that all children's rights are known and their specific needs are taken into account in post-conflict settings' (13). In other words, the global humanitarian discourse on child soldiers not only assumes a universal definition of children but also seeks to institute this definition at the local level.

### **All Forms of Children's Military Involvement as 'Child Soldiering'**

Second, the global humanitarian discourse takes a very broad definition of a 'child soldier' and assumes that children's involvement with armed groups in any fashion or capacity constitutes an abhorrent abuse of children. For instance, after declaring that '[t]he use of children as soldiers has been universally condemned as abhorrent and unacceptable,<sup>10</sup> the Coalition explains what they mean by a 'child soldier' as the following:

While there is no precise definition, the Coalition considers a child soldier any person under the age of 18 who is a member of or attached to government armed forces or any other regular or irregular armed force or armed political group, whether or not an armed conflict exists. Child soldiers 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 labour; and sexual slavery or other recruitment for sexual purposes.<sup>11</sup>

Here, by listing 'spying' and 'sexual slavery' in a broad umbrella of 'child soldiering', this approach fails to differentiate the types and nature of work that children undertake in the military. As a result, a 'child soldier' can be anything from a cook to a fierce fighter, and all of those who are identified as a 'child soldier' are assumed to share essentially the same characteristics or experiences. It is left unacknowledged or unexplored that 'child soldiers' may perform various roles that have very different meanings in the local context.

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<sup>10</sup> <<http://www.child-soldiers.org/childsoldiers/>>

<sup>11</sup> <<http://www.child-soldiers.org/childsoldiers/questions-and-answers>>

### **Children as Vulnerable and Child Soldiers as Victims without Social and Political Agency**

Third, based on this definition of a ‘child’, the global humanitarian discourse assumes that children are vulnerable—that is, lacking moral, physical, and mental competence—and thereby conceptualise all child soldiers as victims. For instance, OCHA (2003) begins its report under the heading of ‘Too Small to be Fighting in Anyone’s War’ and locates the very cause of the phenomenon in children’s vulnerability:

Most observers agree that the practice continues because children make for cheap and obedient fighters, and are easier - because of their youth and inexperience - to mould into effective and expendable combatants (2).

Based on this assumption of vulnerability, child soldiers are also believed to have no real agency in their military participation. For instance, Save the Children (2001) cautions on the question of voluntary recruitment:

Although children may come forward to join an armed group without conscription or press-ganging, this type of recruitment is rarely truly voluntary. Children may have no other option for survival in a conflict where they have lost family members or access to other forms of protection. Finally, children do not yet have the cognitive developmental skills to fully assess risks and choices that they may make under these conditions (17).

In this framework, children are assumed to lack capacity to exercise any real social or political choice in their recruitment. Child soldiering thus remains an abhorrent instance of children’s victimisation in all circumstances and at all times.

Furthermore, the humanitarian discourse takes child soldiers’ assumed vulnerability to explain away the violence children commit during the war and abdicate their criminal responsibility. For instance, OCHA Special Report (2003) emphasises how many child soldiers ‘are given drugs and alcohol to agitate them and make it easier to break down their psychological barriers to fighting or committing atrocities’ (2). Then, it later presents the following model to address the issue of their criminality:

Though child soldiers have committed and continue to commit some terrible crimes in wartime, they are still entitled, as children, to special provision and protection. Somehow, the differing needs for justice and the reintegration in society of former child soldiers have to be accommodated. Children of sufficient age to be charged with criminal responsibility demand special procedures to take account of their youth and developmental state, while those under the age of criminal responsibility require appropriate measures to promote their psychological recovery and social reintegration (4).

Again, age is taken as a universal indicator of a child’s moral agency, and the supposed children’s vulnerability is assumed to require fundamentally different needs and models of addressing the issue of culpability.

The assumption of vulnerability of children has been so dominant that it has even led some organisations to craft their narrative to support the theme of victimisation in the face of counter-evidence. For instance, UNICEF's study, *Adult Wars, Child Soldiers* (2002), claims to represent the 'voices of children' based on interviews with 69 current and former child combatants and yet only highlights such quotes as:

They went from house to house and when they found people who had helped the Falintil, they beat them. Later they came to my house and threatened my parents. My father was very scared and he asked me to join them, otherwise they would kill all of us (24).

They ordered us to rape ... They beat me with a piece of wood everyday ... I wake up still from bad dreams. I am still constantly afraid (43).

To be sure, a few quotes in the report hint at the complexity of the issue. For instance, an ex-child soldier from the Philippines writes:

I joined to serve the people in the mountains. We protected them from violence and harm, from the government soldiers. These soldiers, they were abusive; that's why we kept watch. That was how we helped the people in the mountains (26).

Nevertheless, such alternative voices are ultimately lost in the report, as the needs alluded to of protecting one's community are not elaborated but are only followed by accounts of the horror of child soldiering. The report has been subsequently cited in the media only to support a victim narrative. For instance, a CBS (2002) article on this report was entitled, 'Adult Wars, Child Soldiers, UN: Asian Kids Often Forced To Join Militias To Murder, Rape'. The then UNICEF Executive Director Carol Bellamy declared in a press release on the report that the use of child soldiers should be considered 'an illegal and morally reprehensible practice that has no place in civilised societies' (quoted in CBS 2002).

A similar dynamic exists also in what I call the 'Beah Phenomenon'. Ismael Beah, an ex-child soldier from Sierra Leone, has written his memoir (2007) and has since received a sponsorship from the Starbucks Company and spoken on behalf of 'child soldiers' at the UN as well as on the Jon Stewart Show in the US. Here, Beah's book actually shows an ample example of his bravery, agency, resilience, and active participation in the war, powerfully illustrating that he was not a 'vulnerable little child victim' but a war survivor. However, Beah's book has been appropriated and held up as 'evidence' by UNICEF as the 'traumatised child soldier who reclaimed his humanity'<sup>12</sup>, while those parts of his book that actually counter a simplistic 'saved victim' narrative have been largely excluded from the media coverage and discussions of Beah.

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<sup>12</sup> <[http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/usa\\_38360.html](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/usa_38360.html)>

(Fig. 1: Table of Contents, *Adult Wars, Child Soldiers* (UNICEF 2002))

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### **Military Recruitment as an Antithesis to a Childhood of Innocence**

Fourth, the global humanitarian discourse on child soldiers assumes and embodies a particular vision of a ‘normal’ childhood and places military recruitment outside the domain of children. Consider the following accounts:

Children ... belong in schools and in their families. It is our responsibility that they are protected from the horrors of warfare’ (OCHA 2003: 6).

Every child has the right to a normal childhood... Former child soldiers must be helped to pick up the pieces of their shattered childhoods ... ((ICRC 2003: 4, 14).

In these accounts, childhood is assumed as a period of innocence, education, and adult care. As a result, military recruitment conceptually becomes an antithesis to a ‘normal’ or ‘ideal’ childhood’. This logic is indeed evident in many of the common titles found in child soldier discourse: ‘Innocent Lost: When Child Soldiers Go to War’ (Briggs 2005); or ‘No Childhood at All: Child Soldiers in Burma’ (Image Asia 1996).

### **Child Soldiers as Victims of ‘New’ and Barbaric Wars**

Finally, in the global humanitarian discourse on child soldiers, authors take it for granted that the phenomenon of child soldiers is something new, owing to the development of ‘New Wars’ in the post-Cold War era (e.g. Machel 1996; UNICEF Fact Sheet; ICRC 1999). A typical account runs:

At the beginning of this century, wars were fought primarily on defined battlefields between men in governmental armed forces. Today, dozens of wars specifically target civilians—now 90% of all war casualties—and their communities’ social institutions. Children have become increasingly involved in these wars, both as civilian victims and as combatants. Poverty, the social disruption and destruction stemming from these wars, and the proliferation of small and cheap weapons are major factors in making child soldiers a growing phenomenon (McManimon 1999).

This type of account exists virtually in every piece of contemporary literature on child soldiers, usually in the first or second paragraphs—but almost always without any investigation of or elaboration on such meta-explanation of the phenomenon. As a result, child soldiers are immediately conceptualised as victims of the new modes of warfare, and their agency gets lost in the macro-context of political and social crisis.

In addition, the global discourse of ‘new wars’ in relation to child soldiers tends to demonise the conflict in which children participate and thereby render their very participation as irrational and illegitimate. For instance, Graca Machel, whose 1997 UN report became the template for all humanitarian and human rights reporting on the child soldiers, defined modern warfare in postcolonial states in terms of the ‘abandonment of all standards’ and a ‘sense of dislocation and chaos’, and argued that the emergence of such new wars has led to unprecedented levels of human rights violations against women

and children.<sup>13</sup> In doing so, Machel effectively located the phenomenon of child soldiers in the so-called 'New Barbarism Thesis' of Robert Kaplan (1994), whose influential essay, which was circulated to every US Embassy around the world after its publication, depicted new African conflicts, particularly in the Sierra Leone context, as having neither logic nor legitimacy, but constituting 'a kind of perversion of culture', 'epidemic', or 'plague' (Kaplan 1994: 44-76). Furthermore, the global humanitarian discourse on child soldiers came to support a certain political rhetoric. For instance, US President George W. Bush declared:

Our enemies send other people's children on missions of suicide and murder. They embrace tyranny and death as a cause and a creed. We stand for a different choice, made long ago, on the day of our founding. We affirm it again today. We choose freedom and the dignity of every life (State of Union Speech, January 29, 2002).

Here, the 'use' of children in armed conflict is presented as a sign or symbol of the barbarity of the 'other' in contrast to the liberal values of 'us'. As such, children who fight in a 'barbaric' war cannot be conceptualised as anything but victims.

### **The Need for a Critical Scrutiny of the Discourse**

This chapter has thus far examined the development as well as the main components and assumptions of the global humanitarian discourse on child soldiers. Upon critical scrutiny, this discourse rests on the fundamental assumption of a universal notion of childhood and children's lack of social and political agency. However, critical studies increasingly challenge these pillar assumptions of the global discourse on child soldiers. Scholars have begun arguing that different societies have different models of childhood, and that children are often encouraged to consciously develop their social and political agency and to fulfil their duties and responsibilities (Mason and Steadman 2007; Boyden and Mann 2005; Read 2002). Furthermore, ethnographic studies such as Peters and Richards (1998) in Sierra Leone show that young combatants have a remarkable understanding of the political causes of the war they fight. In this context, it becomes possible that the global humanitarian discourse on child soldiers may not accurately reflect the lived realities at the local level. Thus, in the following two chapters, I will test the validity of the claims of the global discourse by investigating the local norms, understandings, and experiences of childhood as well as the socio-economic and political agency of young people in relation to military recruitment, linking the global and national levels with local level analysis.

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<sup>13</sup> However, such descriptions seem to be at odds with Machel's personal background as an ex-guerrilla fighter and as the wife of Nelson Mandela (Rosen 2005: 14). Machel received her training from FRELIMO in Tanzania and fought against the Portuguese for the independence of Mozambique. During the war, FRELIMO was known for its routine military recruitment of children. In fact, FRELIMO at that time was quite known for its 'barbaric' war tactics (Conversation with Peter Ndebele on May 31, 2007, Oxford). On Mandela's side, the ANC had a youth military wing in the struggle against the apartheid regime in South Africa. Yet, the 'children' who fought in FRELIMO and the ANC are not called 'child soldiers' but 'political activists', 'freedom fighters' or 'national heroes'. In other words, underlying the language of the 'New War' and 'child soldiers,' there seems to be a legitimisation of colonial struggles and the denial of legitimacy for postcolonial struggles, despite the presence of enduring grievances and governance failures in many postcolonial states. Thus it could be argued that this moral outcry against 'child soldiering' in post-colonial conflicts is constructed and utilised, in part, in the interests of the leaders and elites of the post-colonial states.

### 3 Socio-cultural contexts of ‘child soldiering’

The present chapter will draw from various ethnographic studies to demonstrate how the global discourse of child soldiers fails to take into account the local understandings and experiences of ‘child soldiering’. I shall thereby argue for a more serious and critical engagement with the complex interplay between cultural norms and practices in peacetime and the circumstances of war, which may render children’s participation in war meaningful rather than barbaric. The structure of the chapter is as follows. First, as the international child soldier discourse rests upon the CRC definition of a child as ‘anyone under the age of 18’ and a particular conception of a ‘normal childhood’, I will investigate the local norms and practices of childhood from a cross-cultural perspective. Then, using the cases of Sierra Leone and Liberia as examples, I will discuss how children’s participation in war may have continuities with the existing local norms and practices of child labour, fosterage, and apprenticeship. Finally, I will discuss what this recognition of socio-cultural meanings of ‘child soldiering’ would mean for our understanding of the phenomenon. Overall, this chapter will go beyond victim discourse and normative judgment regarding ‘child soldiers’ and will seek to acquire a more critical and complex understanding of the phenomenon from the local perspectives.

#### **Socio-cultural Norms and Practice of Childhood**

The previous chapter showed that the mainstream discourse on child soldiers takes the Straight-18 approach to defining childhood as a period of innocence, dependency, and immaturity and assumes that no political-military participation is appropriate for those under the age of 18. However, cross-cultural ethnographic studies challenge such assumptions about children and childhood in several ways.

First, many societies define the boundaries of childhood and adulthood in social terms rather than by a chronological age (Honwana 1999; James and Prout 1997; Francis 2007). In Afghanistan, for instance, a girl becomes an adult with her marriage and particularly after the birth of her first child, while a young man may not attain his social adulthood until he becomes the head of a family after the death of his father and assumes responsibility for relatives and households (de Berry 2003: 6). Furthermore, the transition to adulthood in many African societies takes place gradually through rites and practices that mark and confirm one’s social status (Tefferi 2007). Part of this social definition comes from practical circumstances in many societies. For instance, many Sierra Leoneans are not registered at birth and so may not know their exact age. Thus, UNICEF estimates that among the children born between 1999 and 2000, 66% of those born in the urban areas and 40% born in the rural areas were registered (Stovel 2006: 140). Therefore, the idea of a child suddenly reaching adulthood at the age of 18 does not make sense for most Sierra Leoneans (Shepler 2005; Stovel 2006).

Second, children are often regarded as competent ‘young adults’ and bear significant social, economic, and political responsibilities for their families and communities. This is particularly so for the older sub-section of under-18-year-olds, who may be categorised as ‘adolescents’. Adolescence is commonly understood in local contexts as a period between the end of childhood and the full entry into adulthood, and, as such, is a profoundly social

category, ranging from anywhere between age 10 to 19 (World Bank 2007).<sup>14</sup> In affluent Western societies, adolescence is usually a period of liminality, lack of responsibility, and education. In that case, it makes certain sense to collapse younger children with adolescents in the single category of ‘children,’ as the global humanitarian discourse does. However, elsewhere in the globe, adolescence can be a period of responsibility, and thus to conceptualise adolescents as vulnerable children in need of adult protection is to disregard the lived realities.

In Afghanistan, for instance, 24 years of war, crushing poverty, and absence of investment in social infrastructure beyond family mechanisms have made the labour of young people an increasingly crucial coping and survival strategy for Afghan households (de Berry 2003: 8). Boys have been sent to work at everything from carpet weaving to street selling, and young men from the age of 14 often travel to Pakistan, Iran, and India to find work in the refugee money economies (*Ibid.* 9). As the Global Movement for Children (2001) report notes:

[A]dolescence is a function of a literate pluralistic society which can afford to waste half a man’s life in socialisation or preparing him to live as productive member of his society ... life in Afghanistan is too short and resources too scarce to allow such a luxury (quoted in de Berry 2003 : 31).

Indeed, in contrast to the global humanitarian conception of childhood innocence, the life experience of Afghan adolescents involves a heavy burden of responsibility.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, having responsibilities is culturally regarded as beneficial to children’s moral and social development. As de Berry (2003) found in her field work:

Afghans believe that such responsibilities seal relationships between family members and that through them young people exhibit respect to their parents and elders, respect which is a vital part of Afghan understandings of morality and sociality. In addition, the responsibilities are seen as good training for unmarried girls and boys leading to the skills that they will bring to their own household on marriage (7).

Likewise, adolescents express pride in their ability to make an economic contribution, as the following quote from an interview in Kabul illustrates: ‘I sell my embroidery and I contribute to my family and this makes me glad because my father’s salary is not enough’ (Save the Children USA 2003, quoted in de Berry 2003: 7). Indeed, Afghans have a different socio-cultural model of what it means to be a developing young person, and thereby regard many under-18-year-olds as ‘young adults’ rather than ‘vulnerable and innocent children’.

With regards to ‘child soldiering’, joining militia groups within such a socio-cultural context naturally became one way for Afghan boys to assume their responsibility, as the

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<sup>14</sup> I am giving the age range here only to capture the flexibility of the category. It is neither possible nor meaningful to define adolescence as encompassing those who fall into a certain age category.

<sup>15</sup> For an excellent discussion of the economic role of children in international political economy, see Watson (2004).

local warlords continued to be the greatest source of political and community authority and military recruitment afforded higher levels of security for their families and communities in the midst of political violence. Research by the Christian Children's Fund (CCF) (2002), for instance, confirmed that, despite instances of abductions by the Northern Alliance, most young recruits joined a militia in order to defend their villages and families. According to de Berry (2003), boys in militias were aware of the risks that military recruitment entailed. However, they understood and accepted, like their peers and adults in their community, that it was necessary to compromise their personal safety for family survival and wellbeing (9). All in all, the Afghan case powerfully illustrates how military recruitment of children can be an outcome of the intersection between the existing norms of social responsibility for adolescent boys and the socio-economic and security demands of the war.<sup>16</sup>

Thirdly, many societies conceptualise military participation as a part of becoming an adult and thus encourage many under-18-year-olds to take on military activities. Again, the concept of adolescence as a transition as well as trial period is crucial. According to Tefferi (2007)'s field experience, courage and the capacity for aggression are strongly associated with the attainment of adult masculine status in many eastern African communities. Thus, as part of the transition to adulthood, boys are often required to display physical strength and tolerance for pain and hardship and are trained in various military activities. For example, the Dinka of Sudan traditionally initiated adolescent boys into warriorhood between ages 16 and 18, and proving oneself as a competent warrior has been a requirement for attaining social adulthood (Deng 1972: 68–73). Indeed, as Rosen (2007) cogently notes, 'in many instances, childhood and military life are not understood as either incompatible or contradictory' (297).

Within such socio-cultural norms and practice, we can therefore understand how many societies may regard military recruitment of adolescent boys, particularly of those who have already attained their social adulthood through initiation ceremonies, as understandable and even natural *in the context of war*. In this case, the global humanitarian discourse which portrays recruitment of anyone under the age of 18 as a barbaric and universal violation of human rights may conflict with the local perceptions of 'young adults' and their responsibilities. Indeed, the very definition of a 'child' and the vision of a 'normal childhood' embodied in the global discourse on 'child soldiers' seem to be distant from the lived local realities.

### **Socio-Cultural Contexts of 'Child Soldiering': the Case of Sierra Leone and Liberia**

Having examined how those identified as 'children' in the global discourse may well be regarded as 'young adults', let us now examine how the practice of 'child soldiering' may be understood differently in the local socio-cultural contexts drawing from ethnographic studies on Sierra Leone and Liberia. My choice of Sierra Leone and Liberia comes from the fact that these are two most 'popular' cases of child soldiers (as most recently captured in the Hollywood film, *Blood Diamond*), and yet discussions of their socio-cultural dynamics are almost absent in mainstream discourse. For the purpose of analytical clarity,

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<sup>16</sup> Even within American society, many immigrant populations reject the ideals of childhood that discourage work or marriage until the age of 18 (Read 2002: 399).

I will use the term 'children' in the following section as 'under-18' in conformity with the global definition, while using the term 'adolescents' when necessary.

### **Child Labour**

Ethnographic studies on Sierra Leone show that, in contrast to the Western conception of childhood as a time of play and school education, childhood in Sierra Leone is almost defined by various types of labour (Little 1951; Stovel 2006; Francis 2007; Shepler 2004; Ferme 2001; Bledsoe 1990). Children are expected to perform domestic labour from an early age and to help adults with whatever work they are doing. In poor rural areas, in particular, children are seen as part of the valuable workforce, and people are very open about their need for children's labour. As Shepler (2005) recounts from her fieldwork:

My palm wine tapper in Goderich, told me, 'The only reason one has kids is so they can work for you. Especially up-country. It is easier to have your children make the farm rather than hire people to do the work. Like now, when I come from work I find my children have cooked and cleaned, and they dish rice for me. At times people can send one kid to school, but the rest should be home to work' (86-7).

Similarly, Stovel's study (2006) also notes how it is commonplace in Sierra Leone, where most parts of the country do not have telephones or modern transportation, to send children on long and difficult errands for older people without even asking what the child is doing at the moment or whether he feels like running the errands (135).

In addition to the socio-economic practicality, child labour is also based on cultural norms regarding children's development. Parents who fail to get their children to perform labour are condemned as 'spoiling' their children (Utas 2003), and one who does not work is considered to be a 'bad child' (Shepler 2005: 86). Here, the Sierra Leonean maxim of 'No Success without Struggle' seems to play a critical role. According to Caroline Bledsoe (1990), Sierra Leoneans traditionally believe that 'children cannot simply learn knowledge through intensive study... [but] must work hard, endure beatings and suffer sickness to mould their characters and earn knowledge' (71). Indeed, as Boyden and Mann (2005) note, 'many societies deliberately create painful and even potentially dangerous situations for children ... to promote their development by teaching them to embrace discomfort as opportunity rather than turning it into adversity' (9). Evidence of this practice is present across various regional, ethnic, and class groups, demonstrating that children in Sierra Leone are raised as active socio-economic agents from an early age and are taught the value of hard work and discipline.

During the war, this socio-cultural context of child labour most likely influenced the way people understood military recruitment; children were regarded as necessary 'peripheral participants' who perform various types of 'domestic' labour for the military community (Ferme 2001; Francis 2007; Shepler 2005). For instance, since work such as fetching water or doing laundry has been locally established as 'children's work' the rebels and government armies alike recruited children to undertake these tasks. Likewise, the work of 'spying' fitted into the pattern of child labour within the peacetime practice of running adults' errands. Even though some did participate in military activities, they did so 'within

a system in which it made sense for children to be part of adult activity' (Shepler 2005: 88). Indeed, Shepler's doctoral work found that the majority of the younger 'child soldier' population in Sierra Leone spent their war years performing this type of 'children's work' (as cooks, porters, cleaners, messengers, spies, etc.) and regarded these activities as nothing special or abhorrent within their local contexts. In this regard, the local meanings of what is identified as 'child soldiering' were different from the meanings ascribed in the global discourse.

### **Fosterage and Patronage**

Although the global discourse on child soldiers assumes the separation from families and communities as a part of the abnormal and traumatic experience of child soldiering, ethnographic studies show that this may not be the case. According to Bledsoe's study in southern Sierra Leone (1990a), '1/3 of children below the age of 16 lived away from their mothers, and in some areas more than 50% of the children between the age of 15 and 19 lived in foster homes' (quoted in Utas 2003: 134). Children were not only fostered for the purpose of education with the help of more well-off relatives but also for the purpose of training or apprenticeship. Furthermore, fosterage is governed by the predominant norms of patronage in West Africa, which, according to Marian Ferme (2001), stipulate that 'everyone must be accounted for by someone else' (106) and labels unattached people as 'elusive and noncompliant agents' (107).

Such a prevalent practice of fosterage and norms of patronage shaped the understandings and dynamics of children's military recruitment during the war. For instance, when the rebels or government forces abducted children, they often did so by going through the motions of 'asking' for the child, even if at gunpoint, and thereby upheld locally accepted forms of fosterage arrangements. (Shepler 2004: 94). It also made sense for orphaned and displaced children, particularly girls, to find a patron during the war for basic necessities as well as social protection (Stovel 2006: 132). Indeed, Shepler's field work (2005) found that many communities and children understood military recruitment as a type of fosterage and patronage (94). As a result, despite the often gruesome experiences they underwent during the war, demobilised child soldiers often maintained a bond with their commanders and went back to their commanders to ask for assistance (*Ibid.*). Girls in particular usually sought to stay with strong 'husband' patrons (Utas 2004). In this context, what the global discourse calls 'child soldiering' was regarded as a socially-sanctioned means of acquiring social protection in the volatile context of ongoing war.

### **Apprenticeship**

Finally, military recruitment of children was construed and understood as a form of apprenticeship in the context of war (Shepler 2005). While the global humanitarian discourse assumes school education as a part of a 'normal childhood', schooling is just one (and the most elite) form of education in Sierra Leone (*Ibid.* 96). As Paul Richards (1996) explains, based on his field research:

In a patrimonial polity, where clientelism is a major means through which intergenerational transfers of knowledge and assets are achieved, young are always on

the look out for new sources of patronage. Where they joined the rebels with any degree of enthusiasm it was to see training. The arts of war are better than no arts at all. The army was simply seen as a new form of schooling (24).

Indeed, RUF commanders often took the children as personal ‘apprentices’ and gave basic training in bush warfare (Richards 1996: 29). Likewise, the CDF enrolled their recruits in military training only after an initiation into a guild as kamajoi, meaning ‘expert hunter’ in Mande, and this practice promoted the notion of military training as a valuable craft (Archibald and Richards 2002: 355). Furthermore, from the perspective of military commanders of all factions, young recruits had symbolic value, as having a large number of apprentices traditionally meant a high standing of the ‘master’ (Shepler 2005: 98). In sum, military recruitment within this socio-cultural setting was regarded by recruiters and recruited alike as having a certain logic and continuity of apprenticeship in the context of war. It was not seen as an abhorrent ‘child soldiering’ as a result of ‘exploitation’ or ‘abuse of rights,’ as the global humanitarian discourse suggests.

### **Implication of the Analysis: ‘Child Soldiering’ as Meaningful**

This chapter has thus far discussed how ‘child soldiering’ may have particular meanings in the local socio-cultural contexts. In doing so, I have demonstrated the gap between the mainstream discourse on child soldiers and the complex local contexts and dynamics of ‘child soldiering.’ To be clear, this discussion was in no way intended to suggest that Sierra Leonean or Liberian ‘culture’ *per se* is violent and abusive of children; rather, I sought to illustrate how ethnographic studies can show aspects of children’s participation in armed forces that are not anticipated or acknowledged in the global humanitarian discourse. This analysis demonstrates that it is insufficient to talk about the ‘use of child soldiers’ simply as a clear case of barbarity and abuse of children. Of course, to say that child soldiering may be ‘meaningful’ does not necessarily mean that it is a legitimate or ‘good’ practice for children. It rather means that we need to look beyond a set of laws in understanding and addressing the phenomenon. As I shall explain in Chapter 4, relying on the global discourse and failing to employ this kind of local engagement in programming may lead to negative consequences for the intended beneficiaries. Before discussing the consequences, however, let us first investigate the causes of ‘voluntary’ military recruitment of young people so as to explore how ‘child soldiering’ in certain contexts may be even regarded as legitimate by its participants.

## **4 Making Sense of the ‘Voluntary’ Recruitment of Child Soldiers**

In the previous chapter, I discussed how children’s military participation may make sense within local understandings of childhood. In the present chapter, I will move from this consideration of cultural context to focus on the motivations and circumstances that may spur children to join military groups. As discussed in Chapter I, the global humanitarian discourse dismisses children’s political and social agency by explaining away ‘voluntary’ recruitment in terms of poverty, desperation, and separation from family. Certainly, forced recruitment of children is common, particularly for girls. For instance, in two-

thirds of the 39 countries surveyed, McKay and Mazurana (2004) found evidence of female recruits being press-ganged or abducted. However, this constitutes only a part of the whole picture—for girls as well as boys. Various ethnographic studies show that under-18 combatants in fact play an active and critical role in political and military movements with little direct coercion from adults (Utas 2003; Peters and Richards 1998; de Berry 2001). In this context, this chapter will examine the experiences, perspectives, and motivations of underage combatants by drawing on material on El Salvador, Nepal, Sierra Leone, and Liberia. Using these case studies as an illustration, I identify three main reasons for voluntary recruitment of young people: 1) to fight for justice, 2) to address their socio-economic grievances and aspirations (or the ‘crisis of youth’), and finally 3) to take advantage of the benefits of military recruitment in circumstances of war. While I do not intend to glorify young people’s military recruitment in any way, I shall argue that the ‘voluntary’ factor must be taken more seriously by humanitarian agencies, as it can serve as a window into young people’s underlying concerns, grievances, needs, and aspirations, which may otherwise be ignored in the ‘all-are-victims’ discourse.

### **Fighting for justice and community**

First, young people under the age of 18 have participated in political and military struggles to seek justice for their communities. For instance, the civil war in El Salvador (1980-1991) had its origin in historical socio-economic inequality and brutal government oppression on behalf of elite sectors of society. In 1979, while less than 1 percent of all landowners in the country possessed 77.3 percent of the land, 80 percent of the population lived in abject poverty, and 73 percent of the children suffered from malnutrition (Read 2002: 393-4). In this situation, peasants, locked into a cycle of poverty and suffering from structural violence, called for change through peaceful protests. The Salvadorian government then responded by massacring the protesters with military aid from the US, and this development led to the creation of guerrilla troops and the beginning of civil war in 1980. In this context, many young people (who would be categorised as ‘children’ in the humanitarian discourse) judged the military struggle as the best and perhaps the only means of effecting social change and thus willingly fought on the side of the guerrillas. Indeed, they did not fight merely out of poverty or desperation, but because of their desire to fight for socio-economic and political justice in the country (Read 2002: 392). As one former child combatant explained:

We had forgotten the things of childhood like playing. We had achieved such a high morale, that we weren’t children anymore. We felt ourselves rightfully to be men. We didn’t think that we would be happy in parties, but rather we thought about a better future, with [our] participation, a future we would forge, a future to fight against weaknesses and vices (Ibid. 397).

The point here is not whether fighting a war is ‘good for children’; the point is that given their social, political, and historical constraints, young people in El Salvador regarded joining the insurgency movement as a rational and perhaps the best way of creating their future.

For a more recent case, Roz Evans’s doctoral fieldwork in Nepal with Bhutanese refugees (2007) provides a fascinating example of how young people in protracted refugee

situations may regard military participation as the best means to address the structural disempowerment of their communities. Bhutanese refugees have been living in refugee camps in Eastern Nepal for more than 15 years with no prospect of repatriation and with no citizenship or viable socio-economic opportunities in Nepal. In this situation, the Maoist communist movement (hereafter Maoist refugees) was established by the camp refugees. They are fighting a guerrilla war in Southern Bhutan, calling for democracy, freedom and rights, health care, free education, women's equality, land distribution and a minimum wage in Bhutan, as well as their repatriation to Bhutan with dignity and honour.<sup>17</sup> Aware that their predicament as refugees is a fundamentally political problem, some children have begun to involve themselves with the Maoist groups who argue that political and military struggle is the only way to break the current impasse. As Evans remarks:

Young people were able to explain why they have decided to take part in political activities. These reasons related to their desire to transform the political and economic problems in Bhutan, which had led to their becoming refugees. As the [humanitarian] agencies hoped, many young project participants do express their conviction that they can positively contribute to the development of their community, but they wish to do so through ensuring their right to return and to securing the rights of both the refugees and those Nepali Bhutanese remaining inside Bhutan (Evans 2007: 6).

Indeed, far from being coerced and brainwashed to fight in a barbaric war, many Bhutanese refugee children and adolescents consciously think about how they can empower their communities and seem to regard political and military engagement as a legitimate means to address their grievances.

### **Fighting for Social Revolution and Freedom**

Secondly, young people may volunteer for military recruitment to break through the structural confinements of the existing social hierarchy. As the Sierra Leone TRC Report (2004) notes:

The offenders [ex-child soldiers] were not allowed to speak in their own defense and became embittered at the exceedingly onerous punishments often imposed on them by the Chiefs and elders for denying this custom ... Many discontented youth fled their villages in order to avoid such punishments and when the conflict broke out became easy converts to the cause of RUF. Their embitterment also manifested itself in acts of revenge against elders and Chiefs during the conflict (vol. 3b, chap.4. para 38).

In the face of growing economic uncertainty, gerontocratic elites held onto their monopoly over the scarce resources rather than passing them on to the next generation, and this generated much resentment among the adolescents who needed those resources to attain their social adulthood (Utas 2003; Shepler 2004). Indeed, Richards (1996) and Shepler (2005) both found in their field research that ex-child combatants in Sierra Leone reiterated the theme of being angry at their 'wicked' elders as a motivation for their recruitment. Noting a similar situation in Liberia, Mats Utas (2003) also

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<sup>17</sup> For more information on their demands and aims, refer to the Maoist website at: <<http://www.saag.org/notes2/note183.html>>

concluded that young combatants during the civil war sought to appropriate and control every possible means of violence as a way of securing total control of the social space and transforming their identities from 'victims of gerontocratic violence' to 'social masters' (Utas 2003: 39).

The desire for freedom from the existing social order was also important for many female underage combatants. For instance, studies in Nepal show that recruitment to or association with the Maoist insurgency appears to have given young women a sense of empowerment from the Maoist ideology of equality which addresses structural inequalities based on age, gender, and ethnic groups (Pettigrew 2003: 319; Onesto 1999). Likewise, Harry West's (2000) study on the ex-female soldiers of FRELIMO in Mozambique and Angela Veale's (2003) study on female ex-child combatants in Ethiopia both found that these women, who joined the movement as children, continued to see their war experiences as meaningful and empowering in terms of the freedom it offered from colonial rule as well as from the male-dominance in the society. In this respect, military recruitment for some young people presented an understandable means of fulfilling their social aspirations rather than a clear violation of their rights.

**Fighting for Socio-economic Status and Future** Young people may also volunteer for military recruitment in order to address their particular social and economic predicaments in the context of the state crisis. Here, the notion of 'youth' serves a useful analytical category. In the global policy discourse (e.g. World Bank 2007), 'youth' is commonly defined as young people between the ages of 12-24. According to UNICEF's *Factsheet on Child Soldiers*, the majority of the world's 'child soldiers' are between the ages of 14-18. Therefore, we end up with a large section of 'child soldiers' of the global humanitarian discourse who can be categorised as 'youth'. In this respect, it is relevant to examine the literature on the relationship between youth and conflict, so as to investigate why some young people under 18 may voluntarily become 'child soldiers'. Here, I will focus my analysis on Africa, where there has been much debate on the youth-conflict nexus and where the majority of the world's 'child soldiers' also live.

In the literature of African political economy and security studies, conflicts in Africa have often been attributed to the 'crisis of youth' (McIntyre 2003; Richards 1995; 1996; Ebo 2004; Abdullah *et al.* 1997; Fayemi 2004). In this view, the deep political and economic crises of African states which led to a lack of education and employment opportunities for young people generated a 'crisis of youth' and thereby compelled the youth to participate in political violence. On a macro-level analysis, there certainly exist enormous and deeply-entrenched socio-economic challenges facing African youth. Since the late 1970s, the formal global economy (that is, quantifiable economy regulated by law) has increasingly been concentrated within and between Northern countries and the debt burden in most African nations has continued to rise (Castells 1996; Reno 1997). During the 1980s, the structural adjustment policies (SAPs) imposed by international financial institutions entailed severe cutbacks in public expenditure, and this hit the young populations particularly hard, as they were dependent on public education, health and other social services (Ismail and Alao 2007; Duffield 2001; Ebo 2004). In response, young people across Africa participated in numerous public protests against the process of economic adjustment (Ismail and Alao 2007). Nevertheless, matters of economic

governance continued to be driven by the donor agenda, and postcolonial regimes continued to distribute wealth and power through a system of patrimonial politics along the lines of ethnicity, geography, or simply personal connections (Ebo 2004; Aning and McIntyre 2004). Young people thus came to lose faith in the promise of ‘development’ as well as ‘democracy’ that post-colonial regimes had espoused during the previous decades (Ismail and Alao 2007: 14). In this situation, joining anti-government forces for young Africans became an expression of their disillusionment and anger.

Nevertheless, we must not assume an automatic causal relationship between economic and political crisis within certain African states and extensive military recruitment of young people. Most young people have taken up arms only when this macro-level crisis personally impacted them and impressed a particular social meaning upon them. This took place in at least two ways.

First, the state crisis made it increasingly difficult for young people to make a transition to social adulthood. As discussed in Chapter 2, the attainment of adulthood in many societies is defined in social terms—through fulfilling social responsibilities and attaining economic independence (Shepler 2005: 80-3; Tefferi 2007; James and Prout 1997). In this context, the economic downturn and SAPs which increasingly left young people without reliable means of income thus brought about the prospect of perpetual delay of their social transition to adulthood (Twum-Danso 2004: 18-9). In this situation, young Liberians and Sierra Leoneans chose military recruitment as an alternative route for attaining social adulthood, as it offered opportunities to establish their social status and adult dignity (Utas 2003; Shepler 2005). Indeed, Utas (2003) observed in his doctoral research that youth combatants in the Liberian Civil War sought to mimic the peacetime adulthood establishments through seizing houses, wives, and land (115-6).

Second, the crisis of the state economy also frustrated young people’s desire to acquire the social status of being ‘modern’ and thereby motivated their military participation. According to Utas (2003), for instance, a key motivation for the high levels of military participation of Liberian youth was the sentiment of ‘abjection’, which connotes the experience of being thrown down to be humiliated and degraded in the context of the failed expectations and promises of modernity and ‘development’. In Liberia, the popular conception of development had a linear path of progression, and ‘being modern’ (primarily understood in terms of the possession of material goods from abroad or a Western form of education) had a great significance for the status of an individual (*Ibid.* 43, 107).<sup>18</sup> However, socio-economic decline and growing inequalities from the late 1970s and onwards shrank the urban middle-class populations and thus made modern commodities increasingly inaccessible to young people (107). In this situation, two paths to modernity were available according to popular imagination and understanding: migration to Europe or the US where modern facilities are available to all, or the use of violence and rebellion to force themselves into the national elite space (*Ibid.*: 41-44, 110-2). However, as the Northern countries increased their restrictions on immigration throughout the 1980s and 1990s, young people in Liberia came to regard participation in the civil war as the only viable opportunity to gain prized modern commodities and

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<sup>18</sup> In analytical terms, there is no clear distinction between ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’. Nevertheless, what Utas and I emphasise here is the significance of the popular perception and ideals of modernity.

thereby acquire the socio-cultural status and pride of having been modernised. As Utas (2003) notes, '[t]o some, the gun itself symbolised their reconnection to the modern world, something with which they previously felt disconnected' (116). Indeed, Utas's interviewees recounted how they washed their cars with beer (a symbolic Western commodity) during the war to show off their new wealth (*Ibid.*: 116-7).<sup>19</sup>

### **Making a Strategic Choice in the Context of War**

Finally, we must consider the context of war itself, as many young people decide to join an armed force long after a war begins. In Chapter 1, I discussed how the global humanitarian discourse on child soldiers tends to see contemporary wars as a state of chaos and barbarism and locates the issue in this totalising context. This is why 'voluntary recruitment' of children is never taken truly seriously and is usually explained away in terms of 'desperation' and 'manipulation'. However, war often creates new social, economic, and political systems and relations and compels people to constantly negotiate, adapt, and strategise their options and relationships, however difficult their circumstances might be. In this context, young people as well as their families often choose military recruitment as the best way of meeting their socio-economic needs during the war. For instance, families in war-ravaged Southern Sudan sent off some 15,000 of their adolescent boys to the Pignudo refugee camp in western Ethiopia, which was under *de facto* control of the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement (SPLM). According to Tefferi's (2007) study, these families did so because they were convinced that their children would be reared and educated by the SPLM in a better environment than back home. The boys in the Pignudo camp themselves saw their lives with SPLM as a better alternative and believed they benefited from learning such valuable skills as building their own huts and schools, along with military training (*Ibid.*). Indeed, their level of education and living environment were generally higher than that of children left behind in Southern Sudan. Of course, such upbringing was not without problems. For instance, they were consistently exposed to war propaganda and were also formally encouraged to replace their fallen 'relatives' in the armed struggle (*Ibid.*). Nevertheless, in the context of war and displacement, the fact remains that children and their families saw military recruitment as providing the best opportunities, when neither their government nor the international community was able or willing to provide them with any alternatives.

Likewise in Sierra Leone, joining the government army became the most viable and even popular alternative to a subsistence way of life in the context of war (Stavrou 2004: 94). During the civil war, the government dedicated an increasing amount of the state revenue to the army, while the society and economy as a whole further degenerated. In this situation, association with the military became a lifeline not only for young male combatants but also for the rest of the society, particularly in the urban areas like Freetown (Rosen 2005: 85). Joining the army became so popular that by 1992, young people were even holding protest marches against the government for rejecting their enlistment applications (Shaw 2002: 196). In response to such protests, the Sierra Leonean government further expanded the army to absorb more unemployed children and youth,

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<sup>19</sup> Therefore, I find the notion of 'lumpen' youth by Abdullah (1997) as an insufficient explanation for the development of such violent groups as the RUF in Sierra Leone, as the term, 'lumpen,' connotes emptiness (by presenting the young people as something to be filled, manipulated, and mobilised) and thereby diminishes the socio-cultural meaning of military recruitment and the agency of the young people at the micro-level.

and by 1995 the army accounted for 75 percent of all state revenues (*Ibid.*). In this regard, recruitment of large numbers of ‘child soldiers’ in the Sierra Leone army took place in the context of an increasing militarisation of the Sierra Leone society and economy as a whole, and many young people involved themselves with the military in order to make the best out of this war environment.

### **Children’s Agency from a Critical Perspective**

By investigating the aspects of ‘voluntariness’ of underage military recruitment, this chapter has highlighted the moral, social, and political agency of young people. Before I conclude, however, I must clarify that I do not wish to minimise the grim realities of life or the extremely limited options that children have in many parts of the world. Young people usually play what Honwana (2005; 2006) calls a ‘tactical agency,’ which is the agency of the weak within structural confinements. Nevertheless, I contend that the concept of agency is a critical one in understanding the phenomenon of ‘child soldiers,’ as it refers to one’s active engagement with the world and their own efforts to cope with adversity. As this chapter has demonstrated, young people often consciously and effectively devise ways to make the best of their adverse life situations, and such efforts must be taken seriously, even if they entail grievous risks or lead to committing crimes that hurt other people. As Utas (2003) remarks on the case of Liberia:

... [T]he Liberian Civil War created new opportunities for earlier, otherwise marginalised peoples. Young men from marginal backgrounds became field commanders and strongmen of society. Young women too left their homes and ventured out into the public sphere. It was a high-risk game ... but it also offered high-yield gains (251).

In other words, what may seem to an outsider an abhorrent violation of rights may have been understood by the participants as a life-adventure and even a once-in-a-life time opportunity. As I shall discuss in the next chapter, understanding of young people’s agency is also crucial in accounting for the unintended consequences of humanitarian programmes to assist ‘child soldiers’ at the local level.

## **5 Addressing the Phenomenon of Child Soldiers: Consequences of the Global Humanitarian Discourse at the Local Level**

This dissertation has thus far discussed how ‘child soldiering’ may have particular meanings in local socio-cultural contexts. I have also considered how and why children and youth voluntarily participate in political and military actions in relation to their political, social, and economic circumstances. In doing so, I have demonstrated the gap between mainstream discourse on child soldiers and the complex local contexts and dynamics of ‘child soldiering,’ emphasising how young people exercise their agency even within structural confinements. Such a gap would seem to open up the possibility of programmes based on the universal discourse which are inappropriate when

implemented at the local level. This chapter will draw from various field-based studies and investigate some of the negative consequences of this mismatch. In doing so, I will demonstrate how well-intentioned programmes for ‘child soldiers’ may actually do disservice to their intended beneficiaries and to their societies as a whole. To illustrate, I will take a case study of Sierra Leone. While Sierra Leone is certainly not to be considered as the most representative case of the global situation of ‘child soldiers’, I believe it is a meaningful choice as it appears as a prime example of the ‘child soldier crisis’ in the global discourse and media.<sup>20</sup> The structure of the analysis is as follows. First, I will briefly outline the main components of the humanitarian assistance programmes on child soldiers, as shaped by the global discourse outlined in Chapter 1. Then, I will take the perspective of ex-child combatants and examine how assistance programmes ended up denying their social, economic, and political needs and aspirations under the assumption of their vulnerability and lack of real agency in recruitment. Finally, I will draw from research that has been done at the local community level to examine how assistance programmes on ‘child soldiers’ as a special group of concern displaced the local priorities and conflicted with the local norms regarding their ‘child soldiers’, particularly the local beliefs regarding their criminal culpability. While this chapter is in no way intended to ‘name and shame’ any particular agency, it points to the need for a reconfiguration of the global discourse and aid programmes for child soldiers.

### **Main Components of International Humanitarian Efforts to Address the Phenomenon of Child Soldiers and to Assist Child Soldiers**

Based on the global definition of a ‘child soldier’ and the understanding of child soldiers as a special group of vulnerable children and victims of forced military recruitment, international humanitarian agencies have campaigned for prioritising the demobilisation and disarmament of combatants under the age of 18 as well as for legally punishing the armed groups and military leaders that recruit children (Rosen 2007). In their field operations for child soldiers, agencies have implemented programmes aimed at securing the release of under-age combatants in detention centres, providing special rehabilitation programmes at care facilities, offering education and training, reuniting them with their families, and finally helping ex-child soldiers to be reintegrated into their communities through the provision of material assistance and child rights education to the wider community (Zack-Williams 2006; de Berry 2003; Shepler 2005; Stovel 2006; Ferme and Hoffman 2004). UNICEF in particular has been collaborating with national or UN authorities in post-conflict situations to provide separate prevention, disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (PDDR) programmes for underage combatants in the capacity of its Child Protection units (OCHA 2003; UNICEF Fact Sheet). Overall, humanitarian agencies have sought to restore a ‘normal childhood’ to child soldiers, as commissioned by the CRC, which declared that children ‘should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding’ (UNCRC Preamble). These programmes have been designed to help those categorised as ‘child soldiers’ and contribute to the reconstruction and healing of their war-torn countries. When implemented at the local level, however, these programmes often led to some unintended consequences.

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<sup>20</sup> For the general public, Sierra Leone has become the best-known location of child soldiers due to the recent Hollywood film, ‘Blood Diamonds’, starring Leonardo DiCaprio.

## **Pitfalls of Assistance Programmes: the Perspective of Ex-Child Soldiers**

### **Overlooking Economic Benefits and Social Respect**

First, a separate demobilisation and community reintegration programme for ‘child soldiers’ denied the young combatants the economic benefits and social respect that they believed they rightfully deserved. As discussed in Chapter 2 and 3, many under-18-year-olds may be regarded or regard themselves as competent and brave ‘young adults’ in their socio-cultural contexts (de Berry 2003; Read 2002). Indeed, Peters and Richards (1998) found in their interviews that many ex-child combatants in Sierra Leone saw themselves as fully adult since they had been fending entirely for themselves for a number of years. However, informed by the global policy guidelines, the demobilisation programme in Sierra Leone created two parallel programmes, one for ‘adults’ and one for ‘children’ (defined as any person under eighteen at the time of demobilisation). Once defined as a ‘child soldier’, the demobilised individual was referred to interim care centres (ICCs) run by various child protection agencies. Here, the child soldiers would be rehabilitated and cared for until the agency could unite them with their families.

However, such a programme turned out to conflict with the expectations and wants of many child combatants. In particular, many ‘child soldiers’ felt betrayed and angered by the fact that they were denied a \$300 resettlement allowance, which was included in the ‘adult’ demobilisation package, in exchange for ‘counselling’ and ‘reunification’ (Shepler 2005: 189). Some of them thus even went back to the bush to find a weapon and tried again for the adult programme. However, given the absence of birth certificates, there emerged many 15-year-old ‘adults’ and 20-year-old ‘children’ in the demobilisation programmes (Shepler 2005: 191). As a result, entry into the former child soldier demobilisation programme dramatically declined from 31% out of the total demobilised combatants in October 1999 to less than 7% in April 2000 (Brooks Unpublished Report, quoted in Shepler 2005: 190). In other words, programmes that were intended to address the special ‘vulnerability’ of ‘child soldiers’ as assumed in the global discourse were not welcomed by their intended beneficiaries whose primary needs were economic and social in nature.

### **Social and Political Disempowerment**

Second, demobilisation programmes based on the global discourse on child soldiers helped to strengthen the young combatants’ reliance on the ‘big men’ in the military and in their villages and thereby contributed to their social and political disempowerment. For instance, based on the prevailing assumption of ‘children’ as dependent on adults, the UN forces in Sierra Leone often relied on local commanders to help administer the demobilisation exercise. As a result, the UN forces ended up making whom they defined as ‘child soldiers’ become institutionally dependent on their commanders, as the commanders were asked to submit lists of persons eligible for demobilisation benefits (HRW 2005). As Hoffman (2003) describes:

... [O]nly those who made the necessary bargains with their commanders had any hope of passing through the locked gate to the inside of the stadium. What’s more, only those commanders who themselves made the proper gestures toward the highest-ranking

elders in the militia—usually men of standing and means in the community—were likely to have their men selected by gatekeepers ... In sum, to be admitted past the gate at DDR was to illustrate the second synonym of youth—its ‘vertical’ dependence on those with greater access to patronage resources (297-8).

In addition, the mass influx of international aid programmes for the local reintegration and rehabilitation of child soldiers has contributed to strengthening local patrimonialism. For instance, Shepler (2005) and Stovel (2006) both documented in their doctoral research that defining and registering a ‘child soldier’ has become a political exercise in Sierra Leonean villages, since that identity carried benefits of humanitarian aid in the context of extremely scarce material resources in most parts of the country. Many communities in the aftermath of the war commonly drew up their lists of ‘child soldiers’ so that they could maximise their benefits when an NGO came along with a ‘child soldier’ programme. Such exercises, however, usually took place along the existing lines of power and influence within the villages. For instance, the lists often included the sons of the village chief, former commander of the local militia, or imam, even if these children were not ex-combatants and were already attending a school in a relatively comfortable socio-economic environment (Shepler 2003: 212).

However, informed by the tenet of the child rights framework which emphasises the role of ‘duty-bearers’ or primary caregivers of ‘children’, humanitarian agencies usually consulted local people of influence in their programming and used their lists to identify the beneficiaries of the aid. As a result, reintegration benefits for ‘child soldiers’ often went to those who were already better off and most connected to the local power networks and ended up re-marginalising those ‘genuine’ child soldiers who lack such social resources (Shepler 2004; 2005; Utas 2003; Archibald and Richards 2002; Hoffman 2003). The irony, of course, is that many of these ex-child combatants, as discussed in Chapter 3, had voluntarily joined a military force precisely because they saw the recruitment as an ‘enticing opportunity to subvert the systems of patronage and its gerontocratic masters’ (Hoffman 2003: 305). Yet, humanitarian assistance ended up strengthening these very patronage systems and brought the young ex-combatants back to the bottom of their social hierarchy.

### **Disregarding the Challenges of Giving up Power and Influence**

Thirdly, the assumption of ‘vulnerable children’ that underpinned the community reintegration programmes only anticipated the challenges of ‘community acceptance’ (whereby the agency is on the part of the adult community members) and failed to address the enormous challenges of giving up power and influence which many ex-child combatants faced. As a Sierra Leonean reintegration officer describes ex-child soldiers, many had become accustomed to having power and influence and thus found the reintegration process frustrating:

Some of these guys were big guns. They’re big honchos during the regime ... I mean, during the regime, when they were there as kind of top brass, top guys. They have their vehicles. I won’t talk of money. It’s something they just dish out as and when they like. Not to count the number of women they used to have and they don’t have now a dime

or a cent to occupy their status which they've created for themselves during the war period. How are they going to live in the same community? (Stovel 2006: 38).

Likewise, China Keitetsi (2004), an ex-female child combatant from western Uganda, recounted in her autobiography:

I could not really feel at home there, it seemed as if everybody in the village was sloppy, never knowing what to do, and always talking before thinking. Despite that, I wanted to stay, but people failed to recognise me as the one I wanted them to see. I believed that I was above any civilian, making me to have the final say, but no one seemed willing to let me (146).

Nevertheless, humanitarian agencies only sought to reunite these 'children' with their families and encouraged them to trade away their social and political power for education and vocational training, while leaving these challenges unaddressed (Stovel 2006; Shepler 2005). As a result, ex-child soldiers found many reintegration programmes unhelpful and even useless (*Ibid.*; Utas 2003).

#### **'Child Soldiers' Strike Back: Re-Recruitment**

In response to such social, economic, and political predicaments following their demobilisation, which humanitarian agencies only helped to exacerbate, many ex-child combatants have chosen to become 'regional warriors'. According to a report by Human Rights Watch (HRW) (2005), for instance, around 2,000 of 72,490 combatants disarmed in Sierra Leone are believed to have joined armed groups in other countries. This study, based on 60 in-depth interviews with these 'regional warriors' from Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, and the Ivory Coast, showed that the demobilised ex-child soldiers chose military re-recruitment primarily for socio-economic reasons, arising from their ongoing unemployment and destitution after the war and demobilisation. To be sure, humanitarian agencies had offered vocational training programmes (e.g. carpentry, construction, hairdressing, soap making) to help their economic independence, but, based on the global discourse of child soldiers as victims without agency, they often did so as part of the psychosocial programmes (e.g. 'giving them something to do so as to forget about the past') and did not actually seek to create their socio-economic empowerment in their society (Shepler 2005; Utas 2004). As a result, most ex-child combatants remained socio-economically destitute after the war. Such situations in turn generated much disillusionment and frustration for many ex-combatants who, as discussed in Chapter 3, had voluntarily joined armed forces to address their social and economic predicaments and had indeed benefited from their recruitment in that regard.

In this context, these dissatisfied ex-child soldiers concluded that joining a regional war offered them the best chance of earning a respectable income through financial compensations from recruiters, which were paid often up-front, as well as through the opportunity to loot (HRW 2005: 3). Indeed, most of the regional warriors interviewed by the HRW responded that they used the money they earned through such military activity to pay for rent, school, or hospital fees for their immediate as well as extended family; others used the money to set up a petty business in their villages (*Ibid.*). On the whole,

this case of ex-child soldiers becoming ‘regional warriors’ in West Africa powerfully confirms young people’s agency, which I highlighted in Chapter 3, as it shows that young people would take matters into their own hands if they are treated as ‘vulnerable children’ and given no socio-economic and political empowerment.

### **Negative Consequences of the Programmes and Policies on Child Soldiers: Views of Community Members**

Having examined how the global discourse, when transferred into local assistance programmes, may fail to reflect the needs and aspirations of ex-child soldiers, let us now examine how the global discourse and the programmes based on it have affected the local communities in ways that compounded their distress in the aftermath of war.

#### **Violating the local norms regarding children and ex-child combatants**

As previously explained, humanitarian agencies have employed the notion of innocence and victimhood for all child soldiers and thus sought to provide care and protection for these ‘child victims’ in the best way they can based on the CRC guidelines. When communities did not welcome certain ex-child soldiers (e.g. those who fought with the rebels), agencies then sought to convince the community to change their attitudes, rather than evaluating their own framework. They produced booklets outlining the CRC articles (the right to an education, the right to self-expression, the right to birth registry, the right to family life, and many others) and preached that child soldiers were forced to commit crimes during the war and that children had a right to be reunified with their family (Shepler 2007: 201).

However, such discourse as well as the material assistance to child soldiers at times conflicted with the local norms and generated resentment among the members of their communities. In particular, programmes intended to restore a ‘normal childhood’ for ex-child soldiers have been seen in the local socio-cultural context as an unjust privilege. For instance, an American Human Rights Watch employee remarked how watching ex-child soldiers playing on the beach in Lakka in Sierra Leone made her feel that ‘at last they can have a normal childhood’ (Shepler 2005: 161-2). However, as Shepler (2005) rightly notes, a ‘normal childhood in Sierra Leone’ does not include playing on the beach all day (162). Here, what seemed ‘normal’ to the activist violated the local norms regarding children’s labour and responsibility. Likewise, communities had a difficulty with programmes that encouraged child soldiers to speak for themselves in community consultation meetings (which was based on the ‘right to self-expression’ in CRC), as they had expected their ex-combatants to show humility as evidence of their repentance and regarded such repentance as a precondition for forgiveness and acceptance (Shepler 2007: 205-6). As a result, many ‘adults’ found it distressing to accept an alien notion of what a ‘child should be entitled to’, particularly given what they themselves had suffered through the war and continue to suffer after it.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> This is not the case across the entire country, however. For instance, Archibald and Richards (2002) report on local debates where members of the local community accept a degree of responsibility for young people who became fighters, since it was the community that drove them out in the first place.

### **Obstructing the Process of Seeking Truth and Justice**

Finally, the global humanitarian discourse on child soldiers as ‘innocent victims’ without criminal culpability generated anger among local populations and thereby obstructed the process of seeking truth and justice. In Sierra Leone, the establishment of the Special Court and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) ended up letting most under-18 combatants walk free under the presumption of innocence and victimhood. The criminal culpability of children and youth was the subject of intense lobbying and negotiation between the United Nations, Sierra Leone government, and international humanitarian groups (Rosen 2007). Having suffered enormously at the hands of the underage combatants, who made up more than 50 % of the RUF, the government and numerous Sierra Leoneans felt that justice could not be served unless some of these combatants were put on trial for their crimes.<sup>22</sup> In local Sierra Leonean discourse on underage combatants, commentators indeed call them rebels, bandits, or criminals, irrespective of age, and thus highlighted the individual agency of ‘child soldiers’ (Peters and Richards 1998; Peters 1998).

However, adopting the Straight-18 position, most humanitarian groups (including HRW, UNICEF, Cause Canada, Save the Children, and the Coalition) vehemently lobbied against prosecuting anyone who was below the age of 18 at the time they committed a war crime. As a result, the mixed UN/national court for war crimes in Sierra Leone has ruled that no one below the age of 18 will appear before it (Wilson 2001). Furthermore, although the TRC did have child soldiers as witnesses, it was structured in such a way that only victim narratives were elicited. As Rosen (2007) observes:

The children and their representatives were entitled to determine for themselves what issues they were willing to discuss with the statement takers. Unlike a court of law, the witnesses were not cross-examined ... In essence, those who appeared before the TRC were permitted to shape the content and structure of their own testimony. Truth is fashioned by the victims, even if many of the official ‘victims’ were among the worst perpetrators of violence (304).

Indeed, although the humanitarian groups hailed the TRC as ‘therapeutic’ and as promoting a ‘culture of forgiveness’ (Physicians for Human Rights 2000, quoted in Rosen 2007: 304), most Sierra Leoneans are reported to be sceptical that the ‘truth’ was actually told (Kelsall 2005).

Now, going back to our discussions in Chapter 2 and 3, it is only understandable that many Sierra Leoneans feel such abdication of criminal responsibility of child soldiers problematic. Given their understanding of adolescents as ‘young adults’ with rights and responsibilities as well as the historical participation of youth in political violence, it is a foreign concept that anyone under the age of 18 is an innocent child and thus must be forgiven and provided with socio-economic resources for rehabilitation and reintegration. Furthermore, people at the local level may have seen how many young people willingly joined a rebel force to reap social and economic benefits and thus found it difficult to accept that the crimes they perpetrated to benefit themselves were not their fault because

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<sup>22</sup> A similar situation exists in Uganda as well; see Mawson (2004).

of their age. In this situation, the question remains 1) whether it is ethical and appropriate to impose a particular vision of justice embodied in the global child soldier discourse on those who have endured enormous suffering; and 2) how local people themselves are to achieve social coherence and stability when they do not feel that justice is done. Here, the global humanitarian discourse on child soldiers to date has failed to provide any critical insight into either of these disturbing questions, but rather silenced them under the ideology of ‘vulnerable children’ and thereby only perpetuated the gap between global and local understandings of young people’s participation in armed conflict.

## 6 Conclusion: Re-thinking the Phenomenon of ‘Child Soldiers’

This paper has critically examined the global humanitarian discourse on child soldiers and demonstrated the gap between this discourse and the lived realities at the local level. In the first chapter, I showed how the global discourse universalises children as being vulnerable and conceptualises a ‘normal childhood’ in a way that renders *all* forms of children’s military participation as an abhorrent violation of universal children’s rights. I also emphasised that the global discourse depicts ‘child soldiers’ as innocent victims and dismisses their agency in recruitment. Then, by drawing from various ethnographic studies, I challenged this discourse in Chapter 2 and 3, by examining various socio-cultural contexts of ‘child soldiering’ and the circumstances in which young people may voluntarily and even enthusiastically join an armed force. Here, I demonstrated the meaningfulness of ‘child soldiering’ and the rationality of ‘child soldiers’ in certain local contexts and thereby refuted the global notion of ‘child soldiering’ as a clear and universal case of barbarity and abuse of children. Finally in Chapter 4, I investigated the consequences of the global discourse at the local level and illustrated how well-intentioned programmes based on the assumption of vulnerability and innocence of child soldiers not only failed to address the local concerns and aspirations but actually did disservice to their intended beneficiaries. In effect, I have argued that we can neither critically understand nor effectively address the phenomenon of ‘child soldiers’ through the existing global humanitarian discourse of ‘child soldiers’.

Then, what would an alternative conceptual framework of ‘child soldiers’ look like? While it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a detailed discussion, I make two suggestions based on my research and analysis. First, we need to do away with the age definition of a ‘child soldier’ as anyone under the age of 18 who is associated with armed forces. As demonstrated throughout the paper, the question of who is a ‘child’ and who should be allowed to take up arms is a very complex one. As it stands, the global definition of a child soldier pre-defines an answer to this question, and when it conflicts with local norms and practices, organisations are trying to persuade (or ‘sensitise’) the local populations to change their views and attitudes. However, as I demonstrated in Chapter 4, this approach is likely to either generate resentment or lead to political manipulations among those who do not share the global discourse. Indeed, as David Francis (2007) rightly asked, the contemporary humanitarian framework of child soldiers is trapped in the following dilemma: ‘How do you enforce a law when the very people the

law is designed to protect do not see themselves as belonging to such a category?’ (228). In this regard, I suggest that we change the terminology to ‘young combatants’ or ‘young military participants’, so as to avoid the Straight-18 definition of a ‘child soldier’ but still address the issue of young people’s military recruitment in general, which indeed deserves attention and assistance in many parts of the world.

Second, we need to place local contexts and young people’s agency at the very *beginning* and *centre* of the situational analysis and programming for assistance. Taking context and agency seriously does not mean that we regard all forms of children’s military participation as legitimate or disregard the grievous suffering that many young people are undergoing every day around the globe. In certain situations, children may indeed be abducted, tortured, enslaved by armed forces, and this is not a desirable or acceptable practice. Nevertheless, this paper has demonstrated that young people often consciously and effectively devise ways to make the best of their adverse life situations, and simplistic efforts to remove children from the single source of risk (i.e. the military) may be ineffective in addressing their underlying predicaments and aspirations. In other words, without pre-judging children’s presence in the military as a clear instance of child abuse and manipulation by adults, we need to investigate the overall socio-economic and political conditions, particular meanings that they may attach to those conditions, and finally the tactics and strategies young people adopt in those circumstances. To be sure, this would require considerable re-thinking and re-configuration on the part of humanitarian organisations and will present many challenges to their work, particularly in the area of advocacy. However, I contend that such efforts are absolutely necessary if we indeed seek to acquire a better understanding of why young people participate in seemingly dangerous activities and to support them and their communities in ways that they themselves find helpful and meaningful.

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