

Recruiting Children for Armed Conflict

Jens Christopher Andvig and Scott Gates

Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, June 22, 2006

Comments by Philip Nauwelaerts, University of Antwerp - IOB

Much has been written about child soldiers, but we have seen here different new approaches; the economic aspects are certainly underestimated and deserve our attention. On the other hand, our counterparts in this debate, the “warlords” do not read our studies and this makes it all too “academic” and perhaps wishful thinking.

- Under the age of 18, you are a child soldier; this is generally accepted but indeed not always realistic. Here we consider the children below 15 years old; perhaps it is still better to follow the international agreements and legislation. The UK was condemned during the Falkland war because they sent soldiers under 18 years. You are not adult and not allowed to vote, but you can go to war and be killed, that’s no problem.
- Some reasons to recruit young children are certainly economic: if you pay them, it will not be very much; they are economically spoken not strong, not organised and thus cheap labour
- The proliferation of small and light weapons makes it easy to provide weapons to child soldiers; weapons are not a scarce product anymore
- Many reasons for having child soldiers have been mentioned, but economic reasons are obvious:
 - for the military / the leaders:
 1. child soldiers are cheap, boys and girls
 2. they can do most of the tasks
 3. if they are paid, it will not be much; they are often more interested in prestige or they are forced labour and have no choice
 - for the young soldiers:
 1. since there is no work and no possibilities for “normal” life, the army is a good alternative
 2. we have seen this also in Europe, many years ago, if you are poor, go to the army and you can make progress; it is the only issue

3. in many African States, there is no State, no organisation and no jobs; the only organisation is the army or rebel group; you don't have child soldiers (in Africa) for ideological reasons, but for reasons of survival

- We certainly have to make a difference between forced labour and voluntary soldiers. Child labour is often viewed as the alternative of child soldiers in peacetime; therefore the International Labour Office has made a convention to oblige every member state to consider every person under 18 years of age as a child and this is also valid for children in conflict areas. This convention became effective on June 16th, 1999. For the first time the activities of child soldiers are considered in an international agreement as “forced labour” and the rights of children in conflict situations are considered in an international agreement of labour.
- In Western and Central Africa, the complete lack of “government” or “state” is probably the most important factor that pushes children into army activities. In their search for revenues, children used to work on farms, in agriculture; but due to the lack of organisation and stability, lack of State structure, also agriculture offers no economic outcome and children will choose for the army or the war lords. There they will be involved in the basic jobs that everyone can do.
- Travelling with the army or rebel movement with the expectation of finding better places to stay or better jobs is also a motivation for many children: the non scientific books of Amadou Kourouma (*Allah n'est pas obligé – prix Renaudot*) present an excellent view seen from the children's point of view.
- Many motivations for children to join the army or rebel group are not economic but related to prestige, fascination...on the other hand, for the rebel groups leaders, the motivation to employ children is probably economic: they will provide income in many different ways and this contradiction is of course very good for them.
- In West and Central Africa, economic organisation is so poor that warfare is not a costly business, this in contradiction with other regions in the world. Usually we assume that warfare is a costly business and you need strong sponsors to make war, but this is not the case in Africa. Conflicts in Rwanda 1994, but recently in Liberia, Sierra Leone and today in Congo, are not expensive conflicts and small armies can be recruited without large investments. On the other hand, the one who has the money has a step forward: natural resources in the hands of rebel groups can be a cause of

conflict. Companies controlling natural resources can recruit rebel groups or ethnic groups as a security company for their activities, but the rebel group then will use its influence to fight others and control much more than natural resources only.

- For rebel leaders it might be more interesting to focus on ethnic and religious arguments to recruit children, what will enable them to make personal financial benefits.
- In more advanced societies, there will indeed be less child soldiers, since they will not be given responsibility for sophisticated arms systems. Armies in more developed societies will be organised more and more in a way that also soldiers and military do not take many risks: they control weapons on distance and then again, civil casualties will be higher than military. This is an important evolution in warfare, compared with some hundred or hundred and fifty years ago, where soldiers met and fought on the battlefield: I think at Ieper in Belgium, during the first World War thousands of soldiers from everywhere were killed. It will be very difficult today to motivate our youth to do so. Today, the military stay very far away from the battlefield and prefer to attack civil goals.
- Some military specialists have doubts about the effectiveness of using child soldiers. There is of course a strong moral opposition against child abuse, but they have doubts with regard to the so called advantages: children will reduce the speed of troop's movements; they are not skilled and make many mistakes, what cost money and delays in transportation... They will have to be punished, what causes again delays. During hostilities, they are not careful and will put everyone in danger. They are too young to take the necessary decisions in conflict situations.
- Poverty is certainly an element for recruitment. Poverty reduction would then automatically reduce the number of child soldiers; poverty reduction however is a long term issue, very much linked to "good governance" and stability and this is not in the interest of warlords. What is then the right answer: is it the use of force by government??
- Warlords and smaller rebel groups do not aim to take over political power nor to work in the direction of a peace environment. They have short term views with regard to regional power or easy money. Their unorganized and "adventurous" behaviour is a cause of long lasting conflicts; they do not see any benefit in peace.

Conclusion

Children have to go to school. This is a general accepted idea that we proclaim it since Emperor Charles started to organise education in the 16th century. Schools and education is the investment for the future.

Basically the discussion is not: child soldiers' yes or no, but good governance. States are responsible for the development and the well being of their population; war and conflict are in contradiction with this goal. So, what do we need to make incapable leaders change their views or behaviour? The imprisonment of Charles Taylor today is a signal to warlords that impunity does not exist any longer, although there is still a very long way to go: Hissine Habré escaped from an international Court, just as many others. This international justice is certainly a good track, but different initiatives to make it more effective, have been countered; and what if a leader from a large country or with more influence has to be brought to court? We have indeed experienced that the so called developed world opposed to the international regulations (the so-called genocide law, not approved in Belgium due to external pressure)

Very much in the line of the ideas of Jan Tinbergen many years ago, the actual poverty reduction projects and millennium goals are the answers; but are there today more chances to realise them than thirty years ago?