Child soldiers and poverty

Child Soldiers in Africa

What accounts for the phenomenon of child soldiers in Africa?

The primary cause contributing to the recruitment of child soldiers in Africa is poverty. While other factors such as ' war' itself, proliferation of small arms, lack of education, displacement all inevitably lead to child soldier recruitment, it is however poverty at the root of these circumstances. Therefore this essay shall argue this case by examining how Africa has come to have such high levels of poverty and by showing the association between other factors and that of poverty. To establish what is meant by the term ' child soldier' it must first be defined and a brief description offered that explains the recruitment practices used. This in turn allows the reader to better comprehend the devastating outcomes when underlying causes such as extreme poverty are not addressed. Subsequently this essay examines the factors that account for the phenomenon of child soldiers in Africa and through this examination of causal factors it will become apparent that poverty is a recurring theme. Once it has been established that poverty is indeed the major cause of child soldier recruitment attention is then given to what is being done to stop it. Finally consideration must be given to the problems that arise when addressing the issues of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of the child soldier back into the community, to avoid a replication of the whole cycle. This focus on stopping child soldier recruitment and difficulties faced after hostilities cease, demonstrate an attempt to eradicate the practice at the causal level and show a commitment to assisting children who have already endured and survived this reprehensible process.

A Definition of the ' Child Soldier'

According to UNICEF: " A ' child soldier' is defined as any child – boy or girl – 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 anyone accompanying such groups other than family members. It includes girls and boys recruited for sexual purposes and/or forced marriage. The definition, therefore, does not only refer to a child who is carrying, or has carried weapons" (Cape Town Principals, 1997).

Recruitment

Children are commonly taken from their homes, their schools, orphanages and refugee camps for displaced persons, directly to military camps for training. Many children are abducted by force while military offences are taking place on a child's village. In contrast others actually volunteer and join the army (both government and rebel) to receive perceived benefits such as protection, food, opportunities to loot and a sense of power with a gun in their hands.

The training commences very shortly after the children are abducted and its main focus is to quickly prepare the children to fight a war. Intense psychological pressure is placed on them whereby the links of the children with society are broken and a programming process is commenced to think of war and only war. This in turn is aimed at dehumanising the children and turning them into killing machines. The discipline is extremely hard and if a child is caught trying to escape often the penalty would be death and more than likely this would be carried out by another child soldier as a deterrent to

others. It is also not uncommon to order these children to kill their own relatives, neighbors and to attack and steal from their own villages. This is a deliberate ploy by armed groups to destroy any chance of the child being accepted back into their village (Honwana, 2002).

The Primary Cause

The Children within African countries are generally at a higher risk of poverty, disease, malnutrition, becoming an orphan and have a higher mortality rate than seen in western developed nations. In addition sexual and labor exploitation (slave labor and armed conflict) has increased in the last twenty to thirty years. Africa is experiencing this state of affairs due to the poor state of socio-economic development in Africa and the nature of the development policies that have given rise to it. This terrible situation these children find themselves in is largely due to the failure of both state governments and markets. The developed world needs to redefine poverty reduction strategies urgently to address this situation and this may include more discriminatory aid allocation that includes debt relief, in agreement with the individual governments commitments to reducing poverty.

The poverty we refer to above is predominantly of a rural nature as many of Africa's poorest live in rural areas and thus depend on subsistence farming to provide food and income. Sub-Saharan Africa has the greater amount rural poor who are living in abject poverty and this includes the rural poor people of Eastern and Southern Africa, a region that has one of the world's highest number of poor people. Rural poverty in many areas of Africa such as the

Sub-Saharan region has its roots in the colonial system and the policy and institutional restraints that it imposed on poor people.

Recent developments that affected the poor in Africa can also be attributed to the cold war between the east and west. The competition between the two sides resulted in many countries throughout Africa taking sides and either following a socialist model of development or a neo liberalism approach. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fact that many born in recent generations within Africa have been exposed to the later model, many saw their future based within the context of a ' free market' system. This system while showing encouraging signs initially started to show cracks into the 1990's as it became apparent that an ever widening gap was developing between the south and the north. Many countries now found themselves in more debt from borrowed funds that could not be repaid than they were a decade earlier. In short the policy had basically managed to increase the wealth of developed countries, particularly multinational corporations (MNC's) and the elitists within either African governments / rebel leaders. In contrast the poorest have received little due to a lack adequate social development policy (Baylis & Smith, 1999).

In recent decades, economic policies and institutional structures have been modified to close the income gap. Structural adjustments have also dismantled existing rural systems, but have not always built new ones. Furthermore in many transitional economies, the rural situation is now experiencing continuing stagnation, poor production, low incomes and the rising vulnerability of poor people. The reduced access to markets is a problem for many small businesses in Africa. The rural population is poorly

structured and is often situated in remote locations that make it difficult for any assistance initiatives to reach. As a result more and more government policies and investments where they exist to address poverty reduction will most likely favor urban over rural areas.

Given the above situation child labor is likely to keep increasing in Africa into the future as the families or possibly just the children are dependant on the income they earn to simply subsist. In addition it has been found that if attempts are made to stop children working, it will only worsen the families or individuals situation unless new forms of income producing activities can be provided as an alternative. While this shift in income producing activities may help alleviate the situations where children are exploited and exposed to hazardous working conditions there still is concern that these children are not receiving an education. As the children are often not attending school they are in effect limiting their future chances of actually improving their situation and are more likely to continue a cycle of poverty through to the next generation (Ronald, Hope Sr. Kempe, 2005).

Other Causes

An obvious but often overlooked cause is simply ' war' itself – for without war there would be no need for child soldiers. Other causes consist of a proliferation of small arms since the end of the cold war, lack of education and displacement. These factors are likely to be present when a child is forcefully recruited by means of abduction which is a common occurrence in poor rural remote parts of Africa.

Well known targets for this repulsive behavior are schools, walking home from school, refugee camps and from the home, often during the night. Others motivations that may lead to a child ' voluntarily' choosing to become a child soldier often stem from a view that the armed force will provide various opportunities not available at home. Additionally they are seen as providing a sense of adventure, survival in the case of an orphan, revenge against killed family members and escape from an either oppressive or abusive home (Cahn, 2005).

These ' other' causes do indeed contribute to a child decision to become a child soldier, especially if that recruitment has been forcibly undertaken. The ' state' is often virtually non existent due to corruption / conflict and thus not able to provide sensible economic policy that may encourage industry and development or any social safety nets. The result is there are simply insufficient jobs; the only organization is that of the army or rebel group and therefore child soldiers in Africa do not exist for ideological reasons, but rather reasons of survival and escape from abject poverty.

The fact that war is one of the main causes of child soldier recruitment seems too obvious and it appears quite strange that many non government organisations, researchers and bodies such as the UN have failed to even recognise it as a major cause in their research / discussions as a trigger for child soldier recruitment This ignorance may account for why many of the current efforts such as the millennium development goals (MDG's) are failing Africa. Moreover as war is such a massive force of destruction and normality in Africa that sadly many children grow up believing it is a part of everyday life. Just being aware of its presence in your backyard / town generates a

continuous need where a child must look out for themself through violence. War will cause the collapse of society including, family structures, closure of schools and other places of learning and lead to high unemployment. All of which indirectly lead children to view involvement in military conflicts as the only choice available to them for survival.

The circumstances of education have a very immense impact on young children and through childhood and education children are forming their morals, values and goals for later life. Access to education and the content that is actually taught in schools are of equal importance. The relevance of education to employment, the way in which children are treated in their schools, or the way the school operates as a recruiting place are also important when studying the relationship between education and the recruitment of child soldiers. Likewise, the lack of education is a perilous trap because children will find armed violence as the only possible solution to their unappeasable boredom. Whilst studying the significance of education, the link between education and employment is also very important. In many of Africa's unstable countries, this connection is very fragile and as a result children often find themselves thrown into a world of poverty and unemployment where education has no value. A consistent cycle of poverty leads to one course for its children that appears to offer economic protection and that course is that of armed involvement. As poverty increases in third-world countries the connection between education and employment is rapidly eroding and tragically a child coming to the conclusion that education is not very important in their lives.

Singer (2001, p. 45) attributes the expansion of child soldiers to the proliferation of light weapons.

" *Rarely mentioned in analyses of world threats, which typically focus on the most complex and expensive systems, light weapons (rifles, grenades, light machine guns, land mines, and other " child-portable" systems) are the weapons most often used in contemporary warfare and produce 80 to 90 percent of all the casualties. Technological and efficiency advances in these weapons permit the transformation of children into lethal fighters".*

After the Cold War there were enormous amounts of small arms in surplus throughout the world. Until recently, the weight and technicality of small arms precluded the employment of children in front-line positions. The proliferation of simple, light arms such as the M16 and AK-47 assault rifles has meant that they are now easily

handled and carried by the child. This is due in part to lighter weight, less moving parts, which allows for easy stripping and reassembly even for a child under the age of 10 (Faulkner, 2001).

A final contributing factor discussed in this essay is that of ' displacement'. Children that are separated from a family due to a variety of different reasons will not have any reference for guidance, support or education. These children's displacement may be the result of past wars that have created a generation of orphans as well as other children that are dislocated. Often these times is when children may identify with an armed group and possibly even volunteer their services to an armed group. However many children most likely initially move to either live on the streets in urban areas

or possibly be able to access an orphanage for protection and shelter, although many will end up in refugee camps for displaced peoples. It is from these places of ' safety' that these special risk groups are often forcibly recruited and as they are especially vulnerable and feel defenseless they will usually come to acceptance of promises that a powerful armed group will also provide them with protection, shelter, food, and other basics of survival (Save the Children Federation, 2001).

International Law & Children's Rights

The international community has implemented laws that ban the recruitment and use of child soldiers in conflict. This legal and policy network is comprised of numerous laws developed by many international institutions and have been ratified by many governments.

The following lists some organizations that have established many of the laws we see today that prohibit the use of child soldiers in conflict and also some of the major conventions (Hughes, 2000).

- The League of Nations (1924 – Declaration for the Rights of the Child).

- The UN Security Council – numerous resolutions.

- The International Labor Organisation – Child labour conventions.

- The Geneva Conventions were adopted in 1949.

- The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child – 2002.

Although some of these laws may be imperfect, legal protections now exist and are increasing to protect children from being drawn into military service.

Where governments such as seen in Africa are not democracies and therefore may not be accountable to their citizens, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and

International institutions represent the best possible sources of change because they function outside of the state bureaucracy. In some of Africa's states that are experiencing conflict they may be either unable / unwilling, to protect children's rights. NGOs have shown success in drawing attention to the problems facing children and in affording services and resources to help them. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) has also been fervently promoted by NGOs which has resulted in many countries ratifying the convention (Cahn, 2005). While conventions and laws are importantly necessary to address child soldier recruitment defiance of them needs to be correctly scrutinised, reported and the perpetrators held accountable before tribunals or other bodies such as the Statute of the International Criminal Court.

Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration

The ' gun' gave a sense of power that was not there prior to becoming a child soldier and was most likely used against a child's own community. This raises two issues, firstly how do these children lose this sense of power and secondly how do the children reintegrate into communities they may very well have alienated? One thing that is obvious it that the process will be long and difficult in many cases and will require feasible and special programs to

achieve rehabilitation and reintegration (Zack-Williams, 2001). When children can be induced into formal disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes, there are many factors to address. Firstly the number of soldiers reporting for disarmament and demobilisation need to be counted, their weapons surrendered and consideration given to what communities or other destinations they choose to relocate to. The ideology of violence needs to be addressed by imposing alternative values and non-violent means of conflict resolution. The following points Malan (2000) demonstrates what needs may need addressing when child soldiers are being demobilised:

• Nutrition

• Medical treatment (including STD's and drug abuse)

• Respect and self-esteem

• Human dignity and confidentiality

• Consultation and participation in determining their fates

• Reintegration packages and benefits

• Community sensitisation in advance of family reintegration

• Amnesty from prosecution, protection from retribution for acts committed

• Protection from repeat recruitment

• Mental ' disarmament';

• Education, peace education and vocational training

• Employment creation.

Given the number of needs as shown above there would obviously need to be a huge commitment on the part of all parties involved (not just the NGO's) to have any hope of achieving a beneficial outcome. Furthermore when considering the above needs it does highlight how much damage child soldier's recruitment can do to the child. This awareness should encourage further urgent work by all concerned to address the causative factors such as abject poverty which is at the root of the whole child soldier process.

Conclusion

The entire child soldier phenomenon is a poignant process where children are being deprived of their childhood, denied an education and blocked from actively participating in their chosen culture. As a matter of urgency the underlying abject poverty that is a catalyst for children's involvement in conflict and war, must be addressed by good governance, social policy and targeted aid / assistance by NGO's and international bodies such as the UN. Priorities to assist in achieving a reduction in poverty in countries where hostilities have ceased should include the following. Improvements that allow ' secure' private sector activity, strengthening the public sector / quality of governance, increasing investment in infrastructure, the creation of service delivery in human development and the creation of a social safety net. Furthermore increased work must be done to not only create laws that prohibit the use of child soldiers in Africa, but to actively prosecute those responsible and apply appropriate penalties as a deterrent to others. Given

the large number of needs shown to rehabilitate child soldiers and the

subsequent investment in time and money; a serious commitment will have

to made by those involved to provide the best chance for the child to attain

some ' normality' of life and to not see the child return to armed conflict.

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