



WHY DO YOUNG PEOPLE PARTICIPATE IN CONFLICT – A THEORETICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract: In today's world there are about 740,000 people who die and are affected as a result of armed violence each year. Armed violence erodes governance and peace whilst slowing down achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Armed violence can have a significant effect on security and development just as it has in societies that are affected by war or civil war. Youth involvement in conflict and violence is a global problem, yet research and interventions tend to be isolated to specific manifestations like participation of children in war, inter-group tensions in the aftermath of war, street living, inter-group fighting and inter-personal aggression or exclusion. Previous analyses have focused on specific manifestations of conflict, in part because conflicts are grounded in different geopolitical and economic situations that are interesting to researchers in different academic disciplines. In this article, the engagement of or the participation of youth in violent armed conflicts is examined. The question of why youth engage in conflict is examined through the lens of the binary argument of greed and grievances. Thus this article engages with a theoretical analysis for the causes that relate to the participation and engagement of youth in violent conflict.

Index Terms - Youth; Insurgency; Greed and Grievances.

In today's world there are about 740,000 people who die and are affected as a result of armed violence each year. Armed violence erodes governance and peace whilst slowing down achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Armed violence can have a significant effect on security and development just as it has in societies that are affected by war or civil war. An armed violence agenda therefore includes a wide range of countries, cities and citizens whose development and security are under threat. It refers to the use or threatened use of weapons to inflict injury, death or psychological harm. It is critical that donors focus on youth because they are the largest and potentially most significant population in the developing world where approximately 1.3 billion youth live in developing countries (World Bank, 2007). A majority of them lack basic education, marketable skills, decent employment and opportunities for positive engagement in their communities. While most youth do not engage in significant or repeated acts of violence, evidence suggests that out of school and unemployed or under employed youth are at greater risk of becoming perpetrators – and victims – of violence and crime, along with youth who suffer from economic and social deprivation marginalization, neglect and abuse (Social Development Direct, 2009).

Youth involvement in conflict and violence is a global problem, yet research and interventions tend to be isolated to specific manifestations like participation of children in war, inter-group tensions in the aftermath of war, street living, inter-group fighting and inter-personal aggression or exclusion. Previous analyses have focused on specific manifestations of conflict, in part because conflicts are grounded in different geopolitical and economic situations that are interesting to researchers in different academic disciplines (Daiute, Beykont, Higson-Smith & Nucci, 2006). Research on young people's involvement in armed conflict has for example been studied primarily by anthropologists and therapists in Africa, the Middle East, South America, and the Balkans (Apfel & Simon, 1996; Bret & McCallin, 1998; Machal, 1996), while psychologists in the United States and Europe have done extensive research on physical and psychological conflict among peers (Elliot, Hamburg & Williams, 1998) and a range of social scientists have studied children living in the streets in nations with struggling economies (Brown, Larson & Saraswathi, 2002).

In today's world children and youth grow up in circumstances where armed violence has become a norm within families, communities or states. Emerging trends in contemporary conflict that has an effect on youth include the

increasing proximity of violence to the lives of young people and the eroding of boundaries between different kinds of violence (UNICEF, 2007). In the developing world young people have easy access to firearms that are available at cheap rates, poorly regulated and often sold illegally which increases the possibility of armed violence and also hinders peace building and humanitarian assistance. These weapons are easy for youth to learn to use and carry. For example, more than ninety percent of young people involved in conflict in a variety of roles in Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone had access to weapons (Florquin and Berman, 2005). Where there is easy access to weapons and the increased familiarity of youth with such small arms has the capacity to sustain a culture of inter-personal and gang related violence not only in societies that have been stable or at peace but also in fragile and post-conflict societies (OECD, 2011). Today's actors in armed conflicts are often non-state actors who use non-traditional forms of warfare where such wars are intra-state rather than inter-state. Frequently, they adopt strategies that bring the battle more immediately to the civilian populations and into the lives of millions of youth. A state's use of paramilitary and proxy forces increases youth vulnerability because these forces are less accountable to the government or the public. Youth are increasingly used as perpetrators or accomplices in terrorist acts and in some places have increasingly come under suspicion and suffer severe abuses when detained. Groups that pursue violent methods of achieving their goals are often motivated with criminal intentions, ideological and political motivations which makes it difficult to draw a clear picture of the groups' intentions. For example, armed conflict that began over political grievances can be furthered by opportunistic greed. Mischaracterizing violent groups can exclude them from conflict resolution dialogue and demobilization (UNICEF, 2007). The result of the realities described above is that young people are often involved in armed violence simultaneously as perpetrators, victims and witnesses. Young boys and girls are frequently victims of violence where boys and young men are at the risk of death and homicide due to conflict while girls and young women face increased risk of sexual violence especially in situations of armed conflict. Homicide on youth and survivors of violence often contribute to global concerns of premature death, injury that in many cases could lead to disability. It could also have a serious impact sometimes lifelong in terms of their behavior and social functioning which in turn has an effect on the victims' families, friends and communities. Young peoples' involvement in violence greatly increases the costs related to health and welfare services, limits productivity, diminishes value for property and disrupts essential services that weakens the fabric of society (WHO, 2004).

One of the challenges that is recurrent in youth work is defining who they are. In this context, for example, people in the west and among international agencies, there is a strong tendency to use age range to define the category of youth. In this common or more general approach there are at least four problems. First, the age ranges continue to differ where a common range is 15-24 which is suggested by UNICEF and others. However, there is slight variations amongst international agencies such as Save the Children which specifies an age range of 13 to 25 (Sommers, 2001). Secondly, definitions of youth often overlap with the much more common age based definitions of child and adult. One of the common and widely accepted notion in the west and the United Nations is a person's 18th birthday which marks the separation point of moving directly from the status of child or minor (ages 0-17) directly into adulthood (18 and above). Thirdly, concepts of youth, adolescence and even what constitute being young also varies. Adolescence is generally assumed to be a subset of the category of youth. An official of the World Health Organization described the complications that come with such overlapping assumptions - "adolescents are 10-19 years old and youth are 15-24 and young people are 10-24 years old" (Lowicki and Pillsbury, 2000). Finally, in many parts of the world definitions of youth are confused by the fact that the idea of youth may not be determined by age. The period of youth is often considered as the time of passage between childhood and adulthood or as the period between puberty and parenthood which is a biological marker. Male and female initiation rites mark the passage between childhood and adulthood in some cultures while in others females are considered as youth only before marriage which in some cultures occur in an early age and have children soon after reaching puberty which results in they becoming young adults at a very early stage of life and no longer youth or even children (Sommers, 2001). In Darfur, the idea or the concept of youth as a stage of development is unknown. Females are considered girls until they reach puberty at which point they are known as women. The social status of women changes when motherhood is attained and its effects are far greater vis-à-vis fatherhood (USAID, 2006).

Policy makers and practitioners have tended to conduct separate analysis for different forms of collective violence – political, criminal and ideological – in which youth are involved. A close examination of the evidence suggests that the underlying psychological factors that influence voluntary youth participation in different types of violent groups are similar, despite the different contexts in which youth participate. The developmental tasks of adolescence include solidifying a set of values that guide behavior, responding more to their peers than adults, achieving independence from adults

both emotionally and financially and becoming members of the community (Erikson, 1968). In conflict environments coming of age becomes particularly difficult for young people to complete the period of transition as community structures and state functions such as health care and education are disrupted. Young people who

belong to marginalized groups often find it more attractive to join violent groups as it seemingly offers a faster transition into adulthood as well as protection and opportunities for advancement economically along with adventure. It also offers young people a sense of identity and affinity, develop respect and status among their peers and the community and opportunity to take revenge on other groups. Proximity, opportunity and familiarity are the reasons why young people join a particular type of group and it is not based on a fundamental reflection over differences in the psychological motivations of young people. Whilst men predominantly involve in armed violence, women not only play support roles by engage in perpetrating acts of violence themselves (OECD, 2011). There are fundamental contradictions that are present in the literature on youth. The depiction of youth is generally that of passive victims of trauma or as agents of active security threats. These separate depictions have separate origins. Graca Machel's (1996) landmark submission to the UN General Assembly – the Report on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children describes how war traumatizes children. The report describes the devastating effects of war on children. Eversince, Machel has conducted several studies that have reemphasized the fact that although some children may have been spared direct experience of violence in armed conflicts, yet they still suffer deep emotional distress. She concluded that all children who have lived through conflict situations would require psychological support (Machel, 2001).

These popular depiction of young men as threats to security for the most part has been a western notion. Robert D. Kaplan characterized male youth living in West Africa as “out of school, unemployed, loose molecules in an unstable social fluid that threaten to ignite” (Kaplan, 1996). These descriptions as menacing as they are have also been supported by Samuel P. Huntington who has argued that societies are particularly vulnerable to war when people belonging to the age group of 15-25 (youth) comprise atleast 20 percent of the total populations. This thesis showcases the demographic dangers that could be created through ‘youth bulges’ which is defined as extraordinarily large youth cohorts relative to the adult populace (Urdal, 2004).

According to this view of young people, male youth may not be the only ones to fear. Hendrixson highlights the counterpart image of the aggressively heterosexual angry young man, whose presence accentuates the implied violence and is the passive, veiled young woman, whose presence accentuates the implied violence and menace of all youth (Hendrixson, 2004). the author argues that the passive young woman image lumps together southern and Muslim women into a single figure hidden behind a veil interpreted as a sign of women's unfreedom (*ibid*). As depicted by adherents of the youth bulge threat, female youth are menacing as they are, effectively, the principal source of the bulge. Hendrixson argues the viewing female youth mainly as potential mothers reinforces the notion that young southern women's fertility is responsible for population growth and more specifically for the rise in number of young male terrorists (*ibid*).

The literature that touches on youth and violent conflict focuses on analyzing the reasons why young people join the fighting. it is often remarked that war would not be possible without youth as combatants of any war in any part of the world. Why is this the case? Are young people by the mere fact that they are young and energetic possess a tendency towards violence? Therefore, does a large proportion of young people in society per se mean a warning sign for trouble? Do young people fight for their own cause, or are they mobilized into war by others or do young people fight to change the existing conditions of their particular grievances and if so what are these grievances?

Most of the analyses on youth and violent conflict are produced by working backwards, that is, by analyzing the motivations of young people that are or have been fighting and generalizing these motivations as if they were applicable to the whole youth cohort in a particular context. Here an important question arises, what about the majority of youth who do not participate in violent activities? As Nicholas Argenti (1998) puts it, with specific reference to Africa:

‘The remarkable thing is not why some of Africa’s youth have embraced violence, but why so few of them have’

It is also interesting to note that most of the literature is gender-biased. Although the necessity of incorporating a gender dimension is generally acknowledged, theories on youth and violence still implicitly or explicitly refer to young males. literature on the victimhood of youth often focuses on young women, but it is the young males that are viewed as threats to security and thus emblematic of the societal problems resulting from the youth crisis. Girls tend to disappear from the mainstream literature on youth and violent conflict, except when in the role of victims (Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery, 2005).

The focus on youth as an area of concern for the situation of youth emerged with strength in the UN developmental discussion between the years 1996 and 2001, according to the UNDP Youth and Conflict Report. Interest was initially due to the growing recognition of the challenges that young people face when returning from armed conflict and attempting to integrate into communities and find jobs or access to education. the UN view was that young people are disproportionately affected by violent conflict, both as victims and as active participants.

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Interest was initially due to the growing recognition of the challenges that young people face when returning from armed conflict and attempting to integrate into communities and find jobs or access to education. The UN view was that young people are disproportionately affected by violent conflict, both as victims and as active participants. However, youth have been primarily viewed as potential perpetrators, due to the influence of two intertwining agendas. The most influential idea driving an increase in youth in the last decade has been the youth bulge. The idea has been most closely associated with the research conducted by Henrik Urdal for the World Bank (Maytok, Senehi & Byrne, 2011). Caught between childhood and full adulthood, youth are often even more undeserved than children. Young people while struggling with their own identity often are in a situation that makes them witness the collapse of the social fabric. It is held from a conflict perspective that idleness, and especially the realization of a lack of future prospects on terms of employment and lack of educational opportunities represent not only social problems, but may further turn youth into those that are prone to be recruited into rebel armies and violent movements (World Bank, 2011).

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