6

Youth and Conflicts in West Africa: Regional Threats and Potentials

Augustine Ikelegbe & Dauda Garuba

Introduction

There has been an upsurge of scholarly and policy concerns about the place and role of youths in Africa's contemporary politics and development. This has been spurred in part, by the 'increasing and dramatic incidences of youth protests', the urban youth driven 'upheavals in African cities, and the visible youth dominated acts of rebellion and violence in Africa' (Graham 2001:392-393).

In West Africa, youths have been at the centre of the protracted conflicts, including serving as foot soldiers and recruitment base for the conduct of conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone, as well as in other states such as Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Niger, Mali and Nigeria where horrendous violence and plundering have almost become a way of life. Many of these conflicts have been largely conducted through hordes of mobilised youths, armed bands, cult groups, vigilantes, militias, rebel forces and state militaries. In Sierra Leone, as Abdullah (2004B:62) notes, the bulk of the leadership and membership of Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) were below thirty-five years. Yoroms (2005:31-50) has put some order into the maze of militias by identifying state and non-state militias. He particularly noted the heavy participation of Juvenile youths in the criminal militias.

Youth roles in conflict can be categorised into three. First, there are conflicts in which the youth play some roles. The youth may be physically numerous but this is merely because of the preponderance of active males. Here the youth are participants just as the middle age segment. The second category is that of youth dominance. They dominate the conduct of conflicts but are mostly not the driving force as they largely operate at the level of foot soldiers. This has been the situation of several militias and of insurgent and rebel armies. They are dominated by

youth but directed and led by older age segments, whose participation is high at the level of leadership and command.

The third category is that in which youth spearhead and constitute the vanguard of participation in the conflicts. Here they chart the course of methods, tactics and strategies and define conflicts. By so doing they constitute the very essence of their momentum, vitality, vocalisation and diction. This was the situation of the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire and many other conflict spots in West Africa, including the low-intensity conflicts in Nigeria's Niger Delta and popular protests across the sub-region. While all the categories of youth involvement are important for analysis, youth-driven conflicts are more significant for examining their roles and the character of their involvement.

The questions that are thus apposite in investigating the role of youths in conflicts in West Africa and its regional threats and potentials are: How did youth dominant role in conflicts evolve in West Africa? What drives youth actions? Do youth act independently? Are there common characteristics and tendencies of youth conduct of conflicts? What are the trends of youth-driven conflicts? What comparative insights and notes can be drawn? What policy measures are required for positive redirection of youth with a view to genuinely helping them realise their potentials?

Youth and Conflicts: Towards an Explanatory Framework

The upsurge in scholarly work on 'youth' has not resolved long standing divergent views on the definition of the concept which has been construed and used differently by governments, NGOs and the general public around the world.[126] The United Nations defines the youth as individuals between ages 15 and 24; the Commonwealth pegs youth age category at between 15 and 29; while many African countries have either adopted one of these definitions or set different age categories altogether.[127] While defining youth based on age only attempts to provide a degree of 'objectivity', the concept is, nevertheless, increasingly linked with the 'idea of transition from 'childhood' to 'adulthood', though adulthood itself is 'largely determined by the capacity to sustain a 'legal marriage''.[128]

Although this may explain 'youthhood' as 'a phase of life in which the individual needs protection, sheltering and guidance to one of self-determination, maturity, independence, responsibility and accountability for decision-making',[129] it also renders the notion of youth as both socially constructed and context dependent. As a 'waiting period' in social, economic and political terms, an age-based definition of youth would most certainly differ in view of the diverse and protracted problems that have either slowed down or totally disrupted human growth and development in Africa. This explains the tricky, culturally specific, and susceptibly manipulative context of the concept (Gavin 2007:220) and its diverse definitions.

Be that as it may, emerging literature on youth and conflict in Africa are suggestive of the view that the youth play a significant role in conflicts, be they struggles of regions, ethnic groups, religious groups, popular classes and civil society, as they engage the state and the governing elite for inclusion, accommodation, incorporation, equity, fairness, justice and accountability. These struggles, characterised, as they are, with broad sympathies, sentiments and aspirations, are underlined by mass political and identity mobilisation, broad solidarities, broad political participation, popular organisations and mass politics. This participation has in some cases been transformed into militant, violent and militia activities in circumstances where conflicts, insurgencies and civil wars emerged from the struggles.

But beyond these broad settings of youth involvement as subjects and agents of conflicts are peculiarities, role expectations, frustrations and challenges. The concept of 'youth bulge' has been adopted to explain them. Youth bulge gives a fundamental strain of analysis that suggests the existence of a correlation between youth bulge and civil conflicts. Beehner (2007) buttresses this with the result of an empirical research that reveals that between 1970 and 1999, 80 per cent of civil conflicts occurred in countries where 60 per cent of the population or more were under the age of 30. He added that of the 67 countries with youth bulge around the world, 60 of them experience social unrest and violence (Ibid).

Characterised as 'majority of the African population' (Mamadou 2003:2), the youth population is not only high relative to West Africa's total population, they have also been identified as having recorded high incidence of violent conflicts.[130] They are seen as a social category that makes certain demands on the state. This has its own challenges, especially where the resources and capacity to provide them are inadequate. In situations of slow economic growth, a youth bridge is thus confronted with failing educational and health services, decaying infrastructures and social services, thinning employment opportunities and social mobility. These create frustration and social discontent that prompt diverse mobilisation of hordes of disaffected youths.

Though the youth in Africa are presented with huge roles, powers, potentials and hopes, their actual fate represents a contradiction (O'Brien 1996; Durham 2000; Ikelegbe 2006A). On one side is powerlessness, dependency, marginalisation and absence of privilege and a search for relevance and space in an adult and elite dominated terrain. On the other is a huge potential for power, autonomy, counter-hegemony, rebellion and subversion, based on a definition of youth that is populist, radical and oppositional. While, in the first, the youth is at the back burner, in the second, the youth is mobilised and appropriated as its power translates into advantage in diverse struggles such as succession and political identity, resource and power struggles. The unfortunate thing here is that the youth, except when it occasionally asserts itself, is at the mercy and manipulation of society, its elite, ruling class and elders.

They are mistrusting of elders, leaders and institutions. They reject and seek escape from the guardianship, supervision and subordination to adults and elders. In sum, they are disaffected and disoriented and their reactions and responses have tended towards disdain, indifference and hostility towards the elite and defiance towards political powers, rules, leaderships, and institutions.

Mamadou (2003:6-10) expresses the youth dilemma and responses vividly:

> … they substitute risky behaviours in the street, the underground and formal economic practices, which provide them with alternative modes of self expression and new procedures for inhabiting the public sphere.…In sensuality or in violence, youth cultures in many African societies, express their outrage and subvert the social norms.

Mamadou (1996:234) further describes the attributes and characteristics of the youth as having 'set about promoting new solidarities and producing new parameters, confronting the state, parents and educators or simply ignoring them. As a result of these contradictions, challenges and ensuing responses, youth participation in conflicts, violence and wars may merely provide media for the expression of power and the search for recognition and identity. The violent conduct of conflicts to them is sometimes, in reality, a registration of dissent and frustration and a challenge against the forms, practices and conduct of the state and its officials and local elite. For example, in relation to the O'odua People's Congress militia in Nigeria, *Human Rights Watch* (2003:7) notes that while some members joined for reasons of identifying with the political ideology and self-determination agenda, the need for protection against perceived political, economic and social discrimination, others, especially the mass of young, unemployed men, have simply taken advantage of the organisation as a channel for venting their general frustration. This is the mindset from which we mirror and discuss the Charles Taylor's *Small boys* (SBU) and *Gronna boys* in Liberia, Museveni's boy soldiers – *Kidogos* – in Uganda, the 'technical' operating *Moryham* youth in Somalia, the lumpen *rarray boys* in Sierra Leone, *Bayaye* in Kenya and Uganda, *Manchicha* in Tanzania, *Hittiste* in Algeria, *Tsotsi* in South Africa, and *Area boys*, *Egbesu boys* and *Yan Daba* respectively in Lagos, Niger Delta and Kano in Nigeria, and several others across Africa; though circumstances under which they have become active participants in armed conflicts are as varied as the conflicts themselves.[131]

The youth then can at best be described as a social category in crisis being excluded, marginalised, threatened, victimised, abused and consequently angry, bitter, frustrated, desperate and violent (Ikelegbe 2006:89–90). But arising from these crises and the nature of responses, contemporary African conception of youth has dramatically changed from that of hope and development, to the representations of the youth as dangerous, criminal, decadent, delinquent, defiant and resistant (Mamadou 2003:6).

There is the phenomenon of urban underclass made up of unemployed school graduates, school dropouts, unemployed artisans and apprentices and 'just all sorts of young men who have problems conforming with the socially acceptable means of earning income' (Obayori 1996:15). With a political consciousness that is characterised by 'spontaneity and fatalism' (Momoh 2000:200), this class has fed the protests, demonstrations, revolts and violence in Africa as well as crime in the urban centers. In Nigeria, Momoh (2000:198 – 199) reports that *Area boys* in Lagos participated actively, sometimes with mobilisation by students, in the anti-SAP protests (in the late 1980s and early 1990s) and the civil society pro-democracy protests from 1993 onwards. However, such participation was often expressed in looting and violence. This underclass is available for diverse kinds of mobilisation, including thuggery, extortion and violent actions. They are associated with drugs and the easy resort to violence for the defence, protection and promotion of their interests.

The youth is also a social category, with a specific, though sometimes fluid and self-forming perceptions about ideas, social behaviours, value systems and attributes, evolving languages and discourses. Several scholars have asserted the existence of a youth culture. The substantive aspects of this culture include elements of nihilism, populism, spontaneity, violence, resentments of the state, politicians and elders, declining obligations to society and the state and deviance from societal norms. The propensity for violence is one attribute that has been quite associated with the youth. Several explanations have been offered. Momoh (2000:201) points at militarism and the culture of violence that it nurtured. Others point at economic crisis and accentuated poverty, unemployment and job losses.

But some enduring strand of explanation for the emergent youth culture are the issue of failing social control, the distortion of social values, the loosening of the cultural and social fabric on social behaviour, the decay of society's moral and ethical fibre and the disintegrating family and communal cohesion. These have loosened the restraints, controls and standards that made for socio-cultural order and released all kinds of unruly, alien, self-interested and decadent behaviour, which are particularly prevalent among the youth.

The state is at the centre and root of most conflicts in Africa (Oladoyin 2001:196). The nature of state politics has been such that environments and situations of volatile, intense, hostile and bitter politics and political struggles pervade. The state's tendency of being an agent of powerful state officials and hegemonic groups has destroyed its credibility and legitimacy and that of its security agencies, particularly in conflict mediation. (Ukiwo 2003:29-130). The failure of the state to provide security and stability has weakened the people's confidence in its ability to prevent crime, settle conflicts and contain violent clashes.

State persecution, arbitrariness, excessive force, repression, brutalities, and human rights abuses furthermore tend to create politics of counter-violence. According to Gurr (2000:127):

> A government's use of force against people who think that they have a just cause is likely to inspire fear and caution in the short run, but in the longer run, repression provokes resentment and enduring incentives to resist and retaliate.

Economic decline, blocked mobility and aspirations, unemployment and poverty generate frustrations which tend to increase the intensity of political competition. In other words, violent political, ethnic and communal conflicts may be 'rooted in popular alienation' Hutchful (1998:5). There is also the problem of growing dissatisfaction with the achievement of democracy particularly as it relates to material economic improvement and peace in spite of the huge hopes and euphoria that followed democratisation. For example, trickle and fleeting democracy dividends in Nigeria have made the people impatient, restless, alienated, hopeless and disappointed (Ukiwo 2003:130-134). This is the case in Nigeria where democracy is practised top-down – without recount to bottom-up approach – and presented as culture blind. Rather than valorise, since democracy is a cultural model that can neither be exported nor imported wholesale, Nigeria's democracy denies the communal character of Africa's neo-traditional societies which accommodate youth interests and assigned roles.

However, it must be noted that youth involvement in conflict is sometimes a product of strategic manipulation and mobilisation. Youth are particularly amenable to mobilisation of different kinds – be it ethnic, religious, oppositional, regional, communal – and particularly in relation to change, domination and oppression. The elite are the prime agents of the cultural, political and social construction of these diverse mobilisations and often times sustain them with patron-client reciprocities, such as access to goods and services. The elite are at the centre in the sense of promoting, challenging, urging and teasing youth to a regime of more virulent activism, protests, rebellion, armed violence and warfare. In Nigeria, it has been noted that youth community, ethnic and regional militias are mobilised and recruited by political and business elite and ethnic entrepreneurs (Harnisihfeger 2003:23). That a mass of youth is readily available for mobilisation puts to question the functionality of the various youth development policies.

However, youth involvement in conflict cannot always be attributed to agency and particularly elite strategic manipulation. Such is rather a robotic and motorised construction of youth that only gets engaged by manipulation. It thus becomes self-generated and built on youth political interests, knowledge, awareness interpretations, perceptions, frustrations and expectations. There is a sense in which the youth pressure the other demographic segments such as the elite into certain actions. As leaders they know what an active and informed youth would accommodate, expect and reject and they try where necessary and convenient to fall in line.

Youth and Conflicts in West Africa: Zonal Case Analyses

West Africa has been the epicentre of conflicts in Africa, having recorded some of the most atrocious post-Cold War brutalities. These range from civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone, armed insurrections in Guinea, Mauritania, and Guinea-Bissau, to secessionist attempts in the Casamance region of Senegal violence in Cote d'Ivoire and other low-intensity violence that had occasionally plagued Niger, Mali and Nigeria's Niger Delta region. A simplistic categorisation of a number of these numerous conflicts reveals them as local conflicts, national conflicts, rebellion and insurgencies, civil wars and interstate conflicts. Quite associated is the incidence of warlords, armed bands and cults, vigilantes, private armies and gangsters. All this has precipitated damning human carnage and maximum collateral damage that have manifested in the weakening of the state's capacity in several West African countries to guarantee effective security for their citizens, just as it has, in some other instances, set back genuine democratisation efforts in Burkina Faso, Togo, the Gambia and Guinea-Conakry.

Most prominent among the increasingly regionalised and spiral character of the challenges posed by conflict is the lamentable degree of youth involvement in them. In quite a quantum of these conflicts, though intra-state in nature, have crossed borders and mutate into 'network wars'.[132] Due to some geographical linkages and history of similar political and social context, the approach to the nature and character of youth involvement in conflicts in West Africa is to classify, in a panoramic sense, the sub-region into four zones of Sahelian states, Senegambia states, Mano River states and Coastal states. Specific focus is given to the case of Nigeria's Delta region, not necessarily to play down the seriousness of other equally important conflicts in the Coastal zone, but to register how ECOWAS has, for whatever reasons, refused to intervene in the conflict. This observation, if anything, has limited expressed external concerns to the Niger Delta Question as coming only from industrialised countries of Europe and America. Even that has been viewed in the lens of the threats it poses to their source of energy supply.

Youth and Spiralling Conflicts in the Mano River Basin

The entire Mano River Union states comprising Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea (and Cote d'Ivoire which is now politically associated with the region by sheer stroke of economic and security interests; have experienced violent conflicts with the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone, precipitating serious human carnage and maximum collateral damage. Violent conflicts in the zone started with the Liberian civil war (1989-1996, 1999-2003). This was followed by the civil war in Sierra Leone (1991-2002) and the violence in Cote d'Ivoire which started in 2002, and the incessant armed insurrection in Guinea which has continued since the conflict in Liberia began. Indeed, the devastating consequence of the pattern of impunity and impoverishment which the extreme violence in Liberia and Sierra

Leone fuelled is today reflected in the potential danger of cross-border recruit-
ment of mercenaries in the zone's emerging conflicts in which Cote d'Ivoire and
Guinea are noted for growing political instability.[133]

Youth and child soldiers were both perpetrators and victims of these con-
flicts. Their involvement as soldiers by all sides in the conflicts in the Mano River,
in which the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone lasted 14 years and 11 years
respectively, was highly publicised in international media. In particular, it has been
argued that the youth crisis in Sierra Leone and other armed conflicts were
instrumental to the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the
Child on the use of armed Children into force (2002) which attracted the attention
of the United Nations agencies and international non-governmental organisations
(INGOs).[134]

The main issue thrown up by the economic re-engineering process which
turned out to be a failure in countries where they were adopted included cut
and/or drastic reduction in social provisioning by governments which resulted in
fall in household income, obliteration of the middle class, decline in healthcare
delivery, increase in cases of school dropouts and decrease in school enrolment.[135]
While the youth were highly affected by governance deficits characterised by
these policies as dependants, their simultaneous interaction with the 'democratisation
wave' that was prompted by the demise of the Cold War and agitation against
one party rule and military dictatorship became the readily available opportunity
through which they vented their anger. This is the sense in which the RUF, an
organisation known for pre-war radical student politics and a force for change,
suddenly gained notoriety for forced recruitment of young people (among them,
children) for the civil war in Sierra Leone. Put differently, it was easy for the RUF
to cash in on the gullibility of the disaffected youth in Sierra Leone who, prior to
the civil war, had been left behind by the country's dysfunctional system. Although
alienated and unemployed youth played a huge role, the lumpen *rarray boys,* made
up of school drop outs, poorly educated and unemployed urban fringe youths
and characterised with drug addiction, anti-social behaviours and rebelliousness
(Abdullah and Muana 1998) became a particular category that was catalysing.
This category of disaffected youth developed a particular culture of rebellion
built around resistance discourse, militant language and some political consciousness
of liberation and change.

The enlarged *rarray boys* were not only some of the early members, but the
base of the early recruitments for the Revolutionary United Front. Like the lumpen
youth resident in Liberia and in the mining areas of the early RUF-conquered
territory, the youth of Freetown and the hinterlands and lumpen youth who
engaged in diamond mining (San-San boys) were the initial recruitment-base once
the war began (Abdallah & Muana 1998).

From the foregoing our take on the divergent perspectives on the involve-
ment of youth in the conflicts that conflagrated the Manor River states are largely
complex and tied to a combination of factors.

Beyond the various perspectives analysed above are other downplayed issues
relating to problems of governance and the nature of social organising which
had 'thrived within a particular demographic space,'[136] as well as a combination
of political and economic policies that deepen contradictions in the face of
declining capacity of the state's welfare role in a post-Cold War globally-led reform.
In the wake of the crisis precipitated by the deepening and intensified contradictions
signified by the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP) and Economic Recovery
Programmes (ERPs) in Mano River state (and by extension) other parts of Africa
in the 1990s, the youth became victims of mass poverty and alienation.

The constructive social incentives attached by rebel groups to the youth being
recruited and several others who became conscripted, to the disregard of the
UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocols and the
African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child in the various states in the
Manor River, only added to the ever-declining belief in the state as an institution
that could function to the benefit of its citizens. Although both parties in the
conflict in Sierra Leone were culpable in the use and recruitment of underage
children, RUF was most often criminalised. Also, youth (and children) who refused
recruitment into the *Forces de Liberation du Grand Ou*est (FLGO) – Liberation
Forces of the Great West – to fight along side government forces in Cote d'Ivoire
were regularly harassed and threatened. Interests within neighbouring countries,
including the desire to settle old grudges, did not only fuel the war in the Mano
River, but they also accounted for cross-border recruitment of youth in conflicts
in Mano River states.

In Liberia, Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia – NPFL (1989-
1997) and his government (1999-2003) were also guilty of recruiting youth to
fight in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Cote d'Ivoire, while the Ivorian government
assisted the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) in recruiting children
and youth from refugee camps to fight in Liberia in 2003. In Cote d'Ivoire, there
were cases of Liberian youth and children who were recruited under an
arrangement between the Ivorian government and Liberian armed opposition
group – Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) – for the
latter to return to Liberia with their arms when they would have accomplished
their mission in Cote d'Ivoire.[137]

In his November 2003 Report to the UN General Assembly, the Secretary
General, Kofi Annan, said the Ivorian armed forces and the *Mouvement Patriotique
de Cote d'Ivoire* (MPCI) – Patriotic Movement of Cote d'Ivoire – and the *Mouvement
pour la justice et la Paix* (MJP) – Movement for Justice and Peace – *Mouvement
Populaire Ivoirien du Grand Ouest* (MPIGO) – Ivorian Popular Movement for the

Great West – also recruited quite a lot of youth and child soldiers[138] with MPCI drawing significantly from Guinea. Annan also expressed deep concern about what he described as the 'pervasive involvement of youth in the conflicts in Cote d'Ivoire and other neighbouring countries at a meeting of the UN Security Council in December 2003, adding that it undermines the security of the Mano River countries.[139]

Youth and Conflicts in the Sahel

The Sahel states of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger are caught in a web of violent conflicts, though they do not share the same intensity as those of the Mano River states. The dust generated by the armed insurrection in the Sahel became an unsettling issue between Malian and Nigerien governments and the mainly young Touareg rebels in the northern part of both countries, while Burkina Faso, the other country in the zone, is associated more by its alleged support to one of the Ivorian rebel groups – MPCI. The Touareg, also called 'Blue men of the desert' because of indigo colours of their traditional flowing garments, number about two million people, straddling between Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, with yet other smaller numbers in Algeria, Libya and Mauritania. Their traditional nomadic and pastoralist life style which accounted for their incessant movement across colonial borders prevented them from being fully integrated into the emergent social fabric of French colonial rule which, upon termination in Mali and Niger in the 1960s, kept them 'outside the web of political relationships and material benefits of the new states'.[140]

Among the major issues underlying their grievances from the earliest times in both Niger and Mali were land tenure system, equitable representation in government, and underdevelopment. The real or imagined sense of marginalisation this conveys has prompted the Touareg's long dream of an independent state of Azawad that would comprise Touareg populations in northern Mali, northern Niger and southern Algeria.[141] Complaints about inequitable allocation of revenue accruing from uranium (mainly derived from Touareg area), with increasing soared price as an alternative source of energy to the spiralling oil prices at international market, added a major dimension in the case of Niger.

The droughts of the 1970s/80s and the deepening economic crisis that precipitated the adoption of structural adjustment programmes (SAP) in the 1980s, combined with long- held feeling of marginalisation that led to the emigration of a large cohort of disaffected Touareg youth to North Africa, especially Libya where a large proportion of them picked up wage labour in the oil industry. Others joined the Libyan army as volunteers where they received military and ideological training. Libya was soon to also suffer a series of reverses precipitated by the 1980s oil glut (i.e. prices collapse) leading to the downsising of its workforce. This resulted in visibly widespread unemployment and restlessness among Touareg

youth who returned home in the Sahel with considerable military experience. This development, coupled with the original grievances dating back to the 1960s – i.e. that their central governments were unresponsive and hostile to them – provoked a rebellion that became difficult for Malian and Nigerien governments to easily contain or crush in the face of severe financial constraints and ground-swell opposition precipitated by the democratisation wave of the 1990s.

While it took the timely signing of a National Pact in Mali in 1992[142] and National Agreement in Niger in 1995 to deal with the security threats precipitated by the rebellion, current reference to reneging on the implementation of the peace agreements in both countries has taken the rebellious youth back to the trenches, with Niger posing bigger security threats for obvious reasons.[143] External influences have been seen in the sense in which Libya, Algeria and Morroco are locked in the Sahel-Sahara politics. The French multinational company, Areva (owner of equity shares of the two dominant companies in the uranium extraction), is also involved in a game of wit with some Canadian, Chinese and Indian firms in northern Niger; while the US Pan-Sahel Counter-terrorism project has also added to the extraneous factors and cobweb of relations in the conflict that have put the youth at the centre of crossfire in the Sahel.

Youth and the Casamance Conflict in Senegambia

The protracted armed insurrection in Casamance region, involving the *Mouvement des Forces Democratiques de Casamance* (MFDC – Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance) consisting of mainly, but not entirely, Diola (Jola) ethnic group, and successive Senegalese governments, has raged with little regional and international concerns. The uprising for self-determination for Casamance region, which formally began in the provincial capital of Ziguinchor in December 1982 with active youth participation, is fallout of the people's grievances over political under-representation and economic under-development.

The conflict 'has been characterised by unsuccessful negotiations punctuated by periodic clashes that have resulted in the loss of many lives and displacement' with each side in the conflict blaming 'the other for the lack of progress towards peace'.[144] Added to this is the split within MFDC in August 1992 which has resulted in both splinter groups led by Fr. Augustin Senghor and Sidy Badji alternating between negotiating table and battle field in the quest for independence for Casamance.

While the conflict in Casamance is readily explained by ethnic factors, the fact that the fighters are mixed in terms of ethnic origin has provided for an alternative explanation by De Jong who placed more emphasis on 'youth disaffection and unemployment resulting from structural adjustment and the 'downsizing' of the Senegalese state'.[145] This, if anything, simply confirms already articulated position that youth violence does not just erupt, but that it is often symptomatic of clashing political and socio-economic factors often buried from ordinary eyes.

Arms flow from various civil war sites in Liberia and Sierra Leone has not only fuelled the conflicts in Casamance, it has also precipitated criminal activities such as poaching, armed robbery and drug trafficking among the youth in Senegal. This has also resulted in the growing isolation of the older generations of MFDC leadership whose influence has fast diminished and replaced by younger elements, with fluid motives.[146] The Senegalese government's tradition of defining the Casamance conflict as an issue of 'law and order' with the separatists referred to as *bandes armies au Sud* (meaning, armed bandit in the South) makes the conflict fester on while giving international public opinion the impression that a negotiated settlement is in process. One sad effect of this is that having realised how impossible it is to win the war by military might, both the government and the MFDC now take on innocent civilians who are regularly subjected to all forms of arbitrary arrest and detention, murder and extrajudicial killing, rape and torture, intimidation and extortion.[147] Many children and youth have been taken hostage from their homes by the MFDC, while state security officials have been unable to make arrest of the perpetrators of this dastardly act.

The Coastal Zone: Youth Militias and Insurgency in the Nigeria's Delta Region

The Niger Delta region, Nigeria's oil belt, is at the epicentre of the numerous violent conflicts in the coastal states of West Africa. The conflict in the place, which has reached crisis proportion, is a culmination of long years of neglect and of unstructured and unpredicted struggles that started in the 1960s under a young cadet sub-inspector, Isaac Adaka Boro, who together with his colleagues in the Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF), declared a separate state of Niger Delta Republic and proceeded through an armed insurrection to seize oil facilities. While the NDVF could not withstand the Nigerian army as its members were arrested, prosecuted and convicted for treason, the action of the 'boys' has nevertheless become a heroic precursor and example of the current insurgency involving the youth in the Niger Delta.

From the despair of peaceful protests and petitioning against conditions of poverty in the 1970s and 1980s to blockading of oil platforms and occasional disruption of oil production in the 1990s, the struggles in the Niger Delta have risen, since the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa in 1995, to the point of a rebellion in which small arms flow easily through the region's labyrinthine network of creeks and rivers.[148] The violent character of the rebellion were: shotdown of oil installations and platforms, cross-killing and maiming of militants, state security forces and innocent citizens, and unprecedented practice of hostage-taking and 'illegal oil bunkering', which has become big business in recent times. More recently, militias have attacked military and oil facilities with bombs and explosives. This has led to shut down, suspension or curtailment of operations, production cuts and deferments and

heavy production losses, which in 2003 and since 2006, have affected over 40 per cent of Nigeria's oil production.[149] This is apart from severe periodic disruptions of oil distribution. Oil and gas production has become so risky and insecure that it is moving offshore. Also, thousands of soldiers and youth have been lost to the conflict. Since 1999 and particularly since 2002, the militias have embarked on an extensive regime of kidnapping and hostage-taking of foreign oil workers.

Youth militancy, militant movements and militias in the Niger Delta region are founded on deep and broad grievances about neglect, underdevelopment and marginalisation since the dying days of colonisation. The emergence of the region as Nigeria's oil belt accentuated the agitation as the state of under-development and exclusion worsened, in spite of enormous resource contribution. The region's elite led the agitation through 'accommodationist' and 'pacifist' approaches. The failure of the elite and rising impatience of the population began to manifest in disparate but uncoordinated and localised protests in the 1970s. In the late 1980s, increasing oil exploitation to generate funds for development and debt re-payments amidst economic crisis and economic adjustment heightened environmental degradation, land scarcity, social and economic disruptions, poverty, unemployment and misery in the region.

A regime of anger, disorientation and frustration emerged which accentuated localised protests and began to coalesce in the flowering of regional, ethnic and communal groupings, minority nationalism and region wide co-ordination of struggles for resource control. The 1990s defined the struggle. First amidst localised community protest, the Ogonis began minority ethnic rights campaigns against environmental devastation, economic and political discrimination, resource and political inequity and marginalisation that was directly related to their minority status. The mass ethnic-wide mobilisation and action and the nature of excessive state force and repression attracted international attention. But rather than douse the agitation, the Ogoni struggle largely conducted through youths and women generalised and intensified the region's struggle. By the mid-1990s, other ethnic groups had become 'restive' and begun a regime of communal and ethnic protests.[150] Second, Having been disillusioned and disappointed with failed elders and the elite in the struggle, highly mobilised, politically conscious, angry, desperate and assertive youths, began to shove their elders and elite aside right from the communities and took over the task of conducting the struggle, through more mobilised activism, aggressive and combatively militant methods.[151]

There are certain things to note. First, the youth vanguard of the Niger Delta conflict arose out of a massive mobilisation of communities and people through a massive flowering of civil society and a growing activism and concern over civil, human, ethnic, environmental rights abuses (Ikelegbe 2001; 2005A; 2006A). Second, the existence of youth vanguard meant that the youth took their destiny in their hands and embarked on a vociferous, combatively militant and

confrontational challenge of the Nigerian state and multinational oil companies by popular direct actions. This meant the appropriation of the *Ogelle*, the traditional community square protests by aggrieved community members in Ijaw land.

Third, it was the extreme repression, confrontation and excessive force of the Nigerian state that compelled the formation of militias and armed bands and the intensification of violent confrontations. At this stage in the late 1990s, the youth appropriated the *Egbesu* Ijaw deity as a rallying point for strength and invincibility in the 'just war' for survival. Numerous and disparate *Egbes*u militias emerged and the struggle became 'militarised' and militia-driven.

Fourth, certain factors intervened. First among these was considerable opportunities for resource appropriation at various levels emerged and more importantly; a lucrative illegal theft and sale of crude and refined oil emerged which equipped the conflict with loose funds and arms and drove the struggle into greater violence and criminality (Ikelegbe 2005B; 2005C, 2005D; 2006A; 2006B). Second, intense electoral competition which has become largely violent since 2002 made loose funds and arms further available and enabled the political elite to infiltrate, manipulate, divide and utilise youth militias for political struggles. This further drove the militias into violence and criminality (Ikelegbe 2006B). Third, a lull in the activities of the militias between 2000 and 2002 enabled a weakening of the militia and militant movements' organisational frameworks and the infiltration of political elite and illegal oil thieves. What ensued was loss of focus, control, direction and discipline. The result was a growing criminality of the militias (Ikelegbe 2004).

Analytical Notes on Regional Threats and Potentials

From the foregoing, it is discernable that conflicts in West Africa have a character of youth identity that is mirrored in highly chaotic, horrendously violent and unregulated ruthlessness and criminality. This general nature of opportunism and illegal economy that pervades conflicts in West Africa, and elsewhere around the globe, does not only devoid them of organisational control and discipline, it also sends far-reaching regional consequences. Beyond destabilising governments and everyday life in countries where they manifest, conflicts in West Africa have precipitated refugee crisis with adverse regional calamity.

Of the estimated 350,000 refugees in Africa, a sizeable number comes from West Africa, being centre of one of the most atrocious conflicts in Africa, while the sub-region also constitutes a good chunk of the estimated 80 per cent of the World's child soldiers, among whom were 15,000 young Liberians who had to be lured to surrender their arms in exchange of $75 under the UN-supervised disarmament, demobilisation, rehabilitation and reintegration (DDRR) programme (Garuba 2005). The growing population of refugees who are victims of abuses and impunities perpetrated by all sides in conflicts in West Africa have shown the least

respect for the Geneva Convention in relation to war rights.[152] This poses the challenge of finding solution to the UN Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Youth involvement in conflicts has also provoked spiral character in West Africa. The prominence here is in the Mano River, where all countries in the zone have been at some point or the other caught in the eddies of interlocking web of conflicts, with perverse cases of cross-border recruitment of youth and child soldiers who have become roving warriors-for-hire in the zone. These youth were soon to precipitate a perverse culture of cross-border armed banditry, plundering and looting that is further compounded by human rights abuses and outright impunity.

Closely linked to the above point is the increased flow and youth's access to small arms and light weapons which has a huge implication for regional security threats in West Africa. Both from the conditions that precipitate their demand and the abuses that their availability facilitates, small arms are a fundamental challenge to post-Cold War life in West Africa. While they do not necessarily cause conflicts, small arms have the potential to fuel underlying tensions, deepen sense of crisis, to a point that raise the number of casualties and generate more insecurity (Ero & Ndinga-Muvumba 2004:223). Thus, from the hotbeds of wars in the West African states of Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea Bissau and Cote d'Ivoire to the low-intensity violence arenas of Niger, Mali and Nigeria's oil-rich Niger Delta region, the record of internal conflicts sustained by youth's easy access to obviously cheap, portable and easily transferable and difficult-to-monitor small arms and light weapons poses challenges and vulnerabilities (Garuba 2007:1-2). The human and development consequences of this is manifested in the loss of state monopoly over arms (Musah 1999:11) and the increased culture of violence that this thus precipitated in terms of conflict escalation, undermined peace agreements, criminality, impediments to socio-economic stability and democratic governance (Garuba 2001) in the sub-region.

Youth involvement in conflicts in West Africa has also exacerbated poverty and ravaging HIV/AIDS pandemic in the sub-region. Indeed, poverty and HIV/AIDS are about the most devastating of all non-military threats to security in contemporary West Africa. As the largest social category of the sub-region's population, youth involvement in conflicts reduces productivity and increases social problems (such as prostitution, rape and sexual slavery) often associated with poverty and its net effects on unrelenting deterioration in healthcare, public education, food security, as well as water and sanitation. This is further compounded by the fact that vulnerability to HIV infection are increased by peacekeeping operations in conflict zones. An example is Cote d'Ivoire. conflict which did not only compound the government's poverty reduction strategy programme (PRSP) (which was kept on hold in 2002 when the conflict started), but also considerably

raise the statistics of households living in poverty in the country from 32 per cent in 1993 to 37 per cent in 2005, while cases of HIV/AIDs have risen to 7 per cent of the population, one of the highest in ECOWAS member states.[153]

The foregoing notwithstanding, there is a sense in which the youth, through appropriated policy planning and direction, could represent an enabler of opportunistic and sometimes fatalistic and tactical ways to expand possibilities in the world of conflict, turmoil and diminishing resources depicted by West Africa. This sense requires that the youth be seen as being at the heart of the possibility of potentials for the transformation of West Africa into a peaceful and progressive sub-region.

Conclusion and Policy Options

There is a growing vilification of youth in relation to conflicts in society as if the mere fact of being young and supposedly energetic is synonymous with conflict. This tends to overlook the clearly positive roles that the youth play in sustaining the society and peace-building through positive changes and transformations. Perhaps it has been forgotten, so soon, that the youth were at the 'forefront of anti-dictator and anti-structural adjustment street protests throughout the 1980s and 1990s' (Graham 2001:392.).

While conflicts might represent a violent manifestation of youth crisis, they, nevertheless, mirror a combination of factors in which contradictions precipitated by the declining capacity of the state to function to the benefit of the youth – supposed 'leaders of tomorrow' – provide the option of taking up arms against the system; thus making youth violence symptomatic of a clashing political and socio-economic agendas. It is in this sense that unemployed and unemployable youth became the cesspool from which warlords and other conflict entrepreneurs recruited foot soldiers to prosecute the several conflicts that have ravaged the West African sub-region for over two decades. Thus, rather than vilify the youth for their role as non-state combatants, child soldiers and suicide bombers in the myriad of conflicts that have rocked the sub-region, more productive efforts could be directed toward reflecting on problems of youth crisis and the factors that engender them with a view to designing policy programmes that could positively re-direct their potentials for the good of the sub-region, rather being a threat to peace, security and development.

ECOWAS is in a position to lead the process that would evolve a policy framework in which member states could take primary responsibilities for redirecting the youth to work for peace and security in the sub-region.

For policy options, therefore, the first possible thing to address is the reconfiguration of the society by those at the helm of affairs in West Africa to counteract the sense of betrayal that the youth hold about them. This is necessary because youth violence in conflicts is, in a sense, an expression of grievance and a

dramatisation of bitterness, anger and frustration, as well as a challenge to op-
pressors and those perceived as responsible for societies' marginality, poverty,
unemployment and blocked social aspirations and expectations. Thus, their
engagement in plunder, looting and extortion results in part from the frustration
and disenchantment with the society and their desire to get their share (though by
force) of the distribution of largess and wealth monopolised by the elite.
Bazenguissa-Ganga (1999:48) puts this phenomenon more succinctly in relation
to Congo Brazzaville conflicts:

> Looting constituted a trial of the older generation, collectively held responsible for
> the everyday failures, the misfortunes and the frustrations of those who considered
> themselves the younger generation.

Another policy option is the need for ECOWAS to encourage member states to
establish and support structures that give a sense of recognition and social inclusion
to the youth. While it is worthy to note and appreciate the regional body's initiative
in suggesting to all its member states to establish a ministry of youth, it will also
be interesting to push the agenda up to ensuring that programme contents and
human capacity of the ministries are actually youth-directed and participatory.
They should not reflect a case of the senior citizens imposing policies on the
youth, bearing in mind that no matter how good a policy is, it can only be rightly
and better directed if it takes into account the people whose lives it seeks to
improve. The regional youth policy that is currently being developed by ECOWAS
could draw on the peculiarities of youth vulnerability and exclusion in West Africa,
rather than merely rehash the United Nations and the Commonwealth use of age
to define the social category; a yardstick that hardly meets exigencies in the sub-
region or any other part of Africa.

The enhancement of human capital development through provisioning of
basic education, vocational training and infrastructures that would guarantee life
and livelihood skills are also a precondition for youth attainment of necessary
multiple capabilities that would transform and enable them survive in their societies.
ECOWAS could encourage its member states, through constant engagements
and partnership with the donor community, to provide required resources to
address this. The engagement should be directed at bringing to the fore the fact
that the youth are a social category that are in dire need of attention and resources
to be committed to their cause for genuine realisation of the sub-region's dream
of building a society of the future.

To be sure, the above efforts will also require an all-inclusive citizenship edu-
cation for the youth, as a requirement, to positively redirect their life goals and
focus. Peace education and conflict resolution skills acquisition programmes should
be a component of the curriculum of the inclusive citizenship education. Through
it, it should not only demonstrate that while particular conditions of state mis-
governance, economic decline and deterioration ideally precipitate radical pro-

tests and demands for regime change, the outright resort to war to forcefully effect such a change often takes the country far back when compared to the conditions that precipitated the war in the first instance.

At the national level, governments should promote programmes that decriminalise the youth, especially those that have been at the centre of conflicts. Investigation reveals that general perceptions about youth are often driven by negative stereotypes of young people as harbingers of delinquency, drug abuse and violence; thus failing to recognise that while most young people do not engage in these activities, several others who engage in them do eventually desist (ECOSOC 2005:22). Thus, decriminalisation programmes of youth take on the issue of mindset and the associated labelling that goes with it. It is common to refer to *Taylor boys* and *ex-RUF* in today's Liberia and Sierra Leone respectively with scathing and disparaging remarks that tend to keep civil war wounds in both countries from healing, just as the mere mentioning of youth in Nigeria's Delta region, Touareg homesteads in northern Niger and *New Forces* in northern Cote d'Ivoire conjures images of violence and rebellion. Such is the power of mindset.

To all appearances, mindsets have more powerful effects on action and behaviour of any people than structures and systems. This is the context in which policy option for reconciling the youth with society should seek to neutralise what Adedeji Ebo refers to as 'looking at each other with yesterday's eyes'.[154]

Another area requiring policy intervention is post-war reconstruction programmes. A cursory look at most ones organised by the World Bank and other international governmental and non-governmental agencies emphasise the rebuilding of infrastructure instead of youth rehabilitation. Where the youth are given any focus at all the emphasis is on disarmament, demobilisation and re-integration (DDR) of ex-combatants. Very little consideration is given to fashioning out comprehensive programmes capable of tackling children and youth challenges in post-conflict societies who genuinely require therapy for trauma suffered in the years of war. This tends to give the impression that the society is only interested in (*rewarding*) ex-combatants, as against several other categories of youth who, though did not bear arms during war, went through psychological trauma that could well be compared with the experiences of ex-combatants. ECOWAS could do much by driving a process that would enable comprehensive and all-inclusive post-war reconstruction strategies for youth through collaborative efforts with international governmental organisations and development partners.

At the national level, ECOWAS member states need do much more to tackle the ever-soaring problem of youth unemployment in West Africa. This should be seen as a matter of urgency, especially against the backdrop of guaranteeing socio-economic security and giving desired sense of belonging and partnership of the vast army of jobless youth who have become willing soldiers for mobilisation in the sub-region. This, no doubt, will enable them realise their potentials rather than craving for opportunities that conflict and war provide.