

UNDERSTANDING PERENNIAL RECRUITMENT OF CHILD SOLDIERS IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

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ABSTRACT:

Recruitment of child soldiers in armed conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has become a perennial problem despite efforts by local and international actors to put a stop to it. This paper launches a critical investigation into the underlying causes behind the continued recruitment of children as soldiers. More so, in light of economic challenges in a war-torn country, where there is no school, no recreational facilities and no proper services, this paper seeks to establish how the implementation of the Vancouver Principles can be made a total success in such conditions.

KEYWORDS

Child Soldiers, Armed Conflict, Children, Vancouver Principles

INTRODUCTION

Although the definition of children and therefore of child soldiers varies between countries and cultures, most authors define child soldiers as all people under the age of 18 who are recruited to a country's armed forces or to a non-government entity (NGE), even if the country is in a state of peace.¹ This paper includes in its definition of child soldiers those children who are forcibly recruited, as well as those who join voluntarily; as in both cases children become subject to the horrendous consequences of child soldiering denounced by international law. The definition adopted is in line with how major pieces of international law pronounce the need to protect children from recruitment by armed groups in armed conflict. For instance, the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict suggest special protection of persons under the age of 18 so that they do not take direct part in hostilities.² The Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers, which this paper will refer to in analysing the perpetual recruitment of child soldiers in DRC, advances that protection of children is a critical component in achieving success by United Nations (UN) peacekeeping missions.³ Child soldiers will be discussed in the context of all child participants in armed conflict, regardless of function, for example, cooks, porters, messengers, 'bush wives' or other support roles.

The effects of having children recruited as child soldiers are not doubted and have been widely noted over the years. Child soldiers are often exposed to horrific violence as they are both witnesses to and perpetrators of violence. Child soldiers suffer severe physical, psychological, and emotional injuries. They can be torn from family and friends, barred from educational and other development opportunities, stigmatized or rejected by their community and peers, and denied their fundamental needs and basic human rights.⁴ Also, some of them may grow to become adults with a violent culture deeply rooted in them and if they do not receive counselling and healing, they are likely to institute violence in their adulthood.⁵ This results in

- 1 Volker Druba, "The Problem of Child Soldiers - International Review of Education," SpringerLink (Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1023/A:1020309527289>,
- 2 "Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child," OHCHR (OHCHR, 2000), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/opaccrc.aspx>.
- 3 Global Affairs Canada, "Government of Canada," GAC (Government of Canada, August 1, 2019), https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_development-enjeux_developpement/human_rights-droits_homme/principles-vancouver-principes-pledge-engageons.aspx?lang=eng.
- 4 "Implementation Guidance for the Vancouver Principles - Canada," Government of Canada (Government of Canada, 2019), <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/dnd-mdn/documents/reports/2019/igvp-20190614.pdf>,
- 5 Roos Haer and Tobias Böhmelt, "Child Soldiers as Time Bombs? Adolescents' Participation in Rebel Groups and the Recurrence of Armed Conflict," *European Journal of International Relations* 22, no. 2 (November 2015): pp. 408-436, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066115581910>.

armed conflict as a continuum. As such, several treaties, conventions and guiding principles have been instituted by the international community to fight the problem of child soldiers, not only in DRC, but world over.

Major pieces of international law and policy guide the fight against the recruitment of children, including the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols, the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Paris Principles on Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups. However, of particular interest to this paper are the Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers which are a set of guiding principles and/or political commitments on how UN peacekeeping operations can ensure the protection of children. The principles were launched in 2017 out of concern from the widespread recruitment and use of children in situations of armed conflict by armed forces and armed groups, including as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies, or for sexual purposes, as well as other grave violations against children in armed conflict.⁶ This paper takes interest in the Vancouver Principles to understand how their recent adoption in DRC can yield better results. UN peacekeeping operations in DRC have not managed to put an end to the recruitment of child soldiers. Thus, this paper seeks to make a contribution on how the aforesaid principles can be better implemented in order to bring an end to the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict.

DRC remains one of the leading cases where children are not only recruited by armed groups but are also victims of other grave violations of children's rights such as killing and maiming. In 2020, as the United Nations (UN) Secretary General's report states, the UN verified 26,425 grave violations against children, of which the highest numbers of violations were the recruitment and use of 8,521 children by armed groups, with DRC having the second highest number of these cases.⁷ Despite the fact that the whole country is fragile, Eastern DRC is more vulnerable and armed conflict in recent years has been concentrated in that region. Despite the vast efforts by international and regional actors in stopping the recruitment of child soldiers in DRC, the problem has continued to be existential. Almost all parties to the armed fighting in DRC either recruited, abducted and used child soldiers, often on the front line.⁸ There is no exact figure of how many children are recruited but relying on the UN Mission's estimates,

6 Global Affairs Canada, "Government of Canada," GAC (Government of Canada, August 1, 2019), https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_developpement-enjeux_developpement/human-rights-droits_homme/principles-vancouver-principes-pledge-engageons.aspx?lang=eng.

7 "Children and Armed Conflict. Report of the Secretary-General," United Nations (United Nations, May 6, 2021), https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S%2F2021%2F437&Lang=E&Area=UNDOC.

8 "Child Soldiers Global Report 2004 - Congo, Democratic Republic of the," Refworld, 2004, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/49880668c.html>.

between 3000 and 5000 children become combatants each year.⁹ Between 2014 and 2017, the UN documented and verified 6168 cases of child recruitment in DRC.¹⁰ In some instances and in some parts of the DRC, it is alleged that children as young as six are routinely recruited by militias and taught to kill and there is estimation that 8 to 16 year old children make up 60% of combatants in some parts of the country.¹¹ Although demobilization of child soldiers officially began in 2000, none of the forces involved were genuinely committed to the process when it started and only a small proportion of child soldiers were demobilized.¹² As a result, with the continuing of fighting, the recruitment of children as soldiers has not stopped, such that it qualifies to be named a perennial problem.¹³

The matter which is of central interest, is to examine the underlying factors that have continuously fuelled forced or voluntary recruitment of child soldiers, in the specific context of armed conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The analysis and discussion this paper will present seeks to serve as reference to both academics and practitioners. Understanding the underlying causes of the perpetual recruitment of child soldiers in the DRC can provoke the need for further research or debates in academia which translate to informed references for practitioners and policy makers. The paper acknowledges that different conflicts have different contexts and complexities and findings from one case cannot generally be applied to all other cases, but, the DRC is one of the world's long protracted conflicts from which lessons can be derived from. Also, there is keen interest to discuss how the Vancouver Principles can be best implemented in order to respond effectively to the continued recruitment of child soldiers. This is against the background that the UN mission in DRC, together with efforts from other national, regional and international actors have tried addressing the perennial recruitment of child soldiers but to no avail.

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- 9 France 24, "DR Congo's Former Child Soldiers Face Tough Return to Civilian Life," France 24 (France 24, October 28, 2021), <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20211028-dr-congo-s-former-child-soldiers-face-tough-return-to-civilian-life>.
- 10 "Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict," United Nations (United Nations, January 2019), https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/190128_monusco_our_strength_is_in_our_youth_child_recruitment_and_use_by_armed_groups_in_the_drc_2014-2017_final_english_0.pdf,
- 11 Ibid, p. 50.
- 12 "Child Soldiers Global Report 2004 - Congo, Democratic Republic of the," Refworld, 2004, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/49880668c.html>.
- 13 Jesutimelehin Akamo, "The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) Conflict Insights," ed. Mesfin Gebremichael and Cynthia Happi, Africa Portal (Institute For Peace And Security Studies, April 2021), <https://media.africaportal.org/documents/DRC-Conflict-Insights-23042021.pdf>.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is a product of secondary research methodology where the researcher was not directly involved in the data gathering process but relied on already existing data in order to come up with conclusions. Secondary research, which is also known as desk research involves synthesizing existing data that can be sourced from the internet, peer-reviewed journals, textbooks, government archives etc. Data analysed in secondary research would have been collected by someone else for another primary purpose. Utilization of this existing data provides a viable option for researchers who may have limited time and resources.¹⁴ Besides, the major advantages associated with secondary research are the cost effectiveness and convenience it provides.¹⁵ In case of this research, journal articles, reports by governments and international organizations as well as policy documents by relevant institutions were consulted. These were considered to be sufficient due to their credibility.

EXPLAINING THE CONTINUED RECRUITMENT OF CHILD SOLDIERS IN DRC

Poverty has been largely cited and is evidently one of the major reasons why children end up recruited as child soldiers. Empirical evidence shows that most child soldiers in the DRC and world over are drawn from poor backgrounds or disintegrated families.¹⁶ A widely noted trend is that armed groups also prefer to target those children from disadvantaged background.¹⁷ Some child soldiers may be said to join armed groups voluntarily, although it is important to note that 'voluntary' participation may be only an illusion in situations where political or economic forces leave children with no other option.¹⁸ In some instances, some children are motivated by the need for food and shelter and end up joining armed groups. For the years DRC has experienced violent conflict, empirical evidence shows that there has been neglect

14 Melissa P Johnston, "Secondary Data Analysis: A Method of Which the Time Has Come," View of secondary data analysis: A method of which the time has come (Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in Libraries (QJML) , 2014), <http://www.qjml-journal.net/index.php/qjml/article/view/169/170>,

15 Alexander K. Smith et al., "Conducting High-Value Secondary Dataset Analysis: An Introductory Guide and Resources," Journal of General Internal Medicine 26, no. 8 (August 2011): pp. 920-929, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11606-010-1621-5>

16 "Child Soldiers: One of the Worst Abuses of Child Labour," Amnesty International (Amnesty International, January 1999), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/ior420011999en.pdf>.

17 "Child Soldiers: One of the Worst Abuses of Child Labour," Amnesty International (Amnesty International, January 1999), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/ior420011999en.pdf>.

18 Mia Bloom, "Child Soldiers in Armed Conflict," IISS (International Institute for Strategic Studies, July 2018), <https://www.iiss.org/publications/armed-conflict-survey/2018/armed-conflict-survey-2018/acs2018-03-essay-3>.

to children as social and familial structures were destroyed and the displacement of children from their homes being a norm.¹⁹ More so, in some cases, parents encourage their children to join armed groups and it is estimated that 35% of the children who enlist as soldiers have their parents agreeing to it.²⁰

Among the already noted reasons behind recruitment of children as child soldiers is the need to gain comparative advantage by armed groups and it has become a military strategy by the armed groups to use children in armed conflict as they are easy to exploit and provide cheap labour.²¹ This way, armed groups use less financial resources in attracting human resources at the same time pursuing their objective, thus gaining a comparative advantage from recruiting children. More so, as they are young minds, children are easy to brainwash and can show great loyalty as preferred by the armed groups.²² In some cases, as has been widely captured in the literature on child soldiers in DRC, armed groups may subject children to witness brutality against family members in order to propel them to join armed groups and seek “revenge”.²³ Young girls have fallen victims not only to serve as fighters or offer support roles but have become a favourable vulnerable group which easily can be sexually abused. Armed groups are very much aware that children are unable to make independent decisions, and as such can be easily terrorized into leading any sort of life that is being shown to them, even a very violent one.²⁴

However, it has to be noted that armed conflict, which has become such ‘a way of life’ in the Democratic Republic of Congo is the single most important reason for the perennial recruitment of child soldiers. Its effects create fertile ground for children to be vulnerable to the interests of armed group. In many instances, families are disintegrated as a result of armed conflict and it breaks down the needed social support system children deserve. Armed conflict cripples the economic system thereby furthering poverty and that has been the case in DRC. Institutions become dysfunctional during armed conflict and the education system collapses. Children are left with no social system to safeguard them and in the end; because

19 Jennifer Prashad, “Children of the Democratic Republic of the Congo,” Humanium (Humanium, July 13, 2021), <https://www.humanium.org/en/democratic-republic-congo/>.

20 “Child Soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo,” WITNESS (WITNESS, August 15, 2014), https://www.witness.org/portfolio_page/protecting-child-soldiers-democratic-republic-congo/.

21 “Child Soldiers – and Other Children Associated with Armed Forces and Groups. Policy Brief,” Save the Children’s Resource Centre (Save the Children, 2010), <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/1538.pdf/>.

22 Ibid

23 “Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict,” United Nations (United Nations, January 2019), https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/190128_monusco_our_strength_is_in_our_youth_child_recruitment_and_use_by_armed_groups_in_the_drc_2014-2017_final_english_0.pdf.

24 Pravin H. Parekh, Human Rights Year Book, 2010 (New Delhi: International Institute of Human Rights Society, 2010).

of lack of that aforesaid support, opportunities and future prospects together with the need to voice their opinions, they end up becoming child soldiers. All the commonly cited reasons for the recruitment of child soldiers as discussed above are as a result of armed conflict. This paper makes a strong argument that the prevalence of armed conflict is the primary reason for the perennial problem of child soldiers. Besides creating the social and economic conditions which leave children vulnerable to becoming child soldiers, armed conflict draws the need for fighters even before impacting on the systems of a country.

From 2001, the DRC government and most of the DRC's armed political groups were formally committed to demobilizing child soldiers. Success was limited however, in part because of continuing conflict.²⁵ Besides, the research acknowledges that at one point, there was lack of political will from the country leadership as supported by Amnesty International which purports that demobilization initiatives were mere public relations exercises, undermined by lack of commitment to the process, inaccurate information, poor preparation and coordination, and lack of resources.²⁶ The country leadership later went on to achieve remarkable successes as witnessed by the end of recruitment of children into government forces. Focus is now on independent armed groups which are in continuation with the recruitment of children due to the continued need created by armed conflict. Thus, in as much as lack of political will contributed to the limited success of demobilizing child soldiers, 'continuing conflict' remains the major reason that deters the successful demobilization of child soldiers. This paper stresses a point that there is need to address the root causes of armed conflict which, if they continue unaddressed, the recruitment of child soldiers will be a never-ending problem. Armed conflict creates the needed conditions for the use of children as soldiers and hence efforts to stop the problem of child soldiers without effectively addressing the causes of armed conflict will only be in vain.

To further understand the perpetual recruitment of child soldiers, simply because of the prevalence of armed conflict as this paper strongly argues, it is imperative to look at the causes of armed conflict. The structural drivers of violence in Africa are complex and country specific, although there are a number of common themes that relate to poverty, democratisation, regime type, population age structure, repeat violence, the bad neighbourhood effect and poor governance.²⁷ The haphazard de-colonisation process has been indicted as the chief

25 Rachele Magloire, "RDC: Les Maï Maï Et Ex-Combattants Dans L'attente D'être Démobilisés - Democratic Republic of the Congo," ReliefWeb (MONUC, 2004), <https://reliefweb.int/report-democratic-republic-congo/rdc-les-ma%C3%AF-ma%C3%AF-et-ex-combattants-dans-lattente-d%C3%AAtre-d%C3%A9mobilis%C3%A9s>.

26 "Democratic Republic of Congo: Children at War," Amnesty International (Amnesty International, June 4, 2021), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/AFR62/034/2003/en/>.

27 Jakkie Cilliers, *The Future of Africa Challenges and Opportunities* (Cham Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

reason behind conflict, recurring instability, and bad governance in countries like DRC and Burundi when it was observed that in many countries, the contradictions of the colonial state were passed on to the independent states through a flawed process of de-colonisation.²⁸ The granting of independence to the countries mentioned above has been widely cited as hasty and unprepared hence why the post – colonial state is gripped with instability and fighting.

More so, the post – colonial state inherited the colonial systems which were made of ethnic and regional diversities, and rendered conflictual by gross inequities in power relations, and in the uneven distribution of national wealth and development opportunities.²⁹ This assertion has a major implication for understanding the various conflicts and the attempts to resolve such conflicts on the continent and with it also comes complications. Former colonial masters have been at the forefront in responding to conflict in Africa and most of the continent’s developmental challenges. It may not be possible for them to redress the problems created during colonialism but it remains a wonder if they are sincere in their interventions. If the causes and consequences of the conflicts have their roots in colonialism, the processes of de-colonisation and state formation, and the ensuing crisis of nation-building, then any attempt to resolve the conflicts must also transcend the concepts of ‘new institutions that will increase participation, legitimacy, and redistribution’ and ‘good governance.’³⁰ As such, this also would suggest that the recruitment of child soldiers would continue if the root causes of armed conflict are not addressed. The sincerity of actors involved in addressing these challenges also matters.

The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa is of the opinion that the recurring armed conflict in the DRC is to some extent, a reincarnation of past conflicts, which is an indication that the fundamental causes of the wars have not been adequately addressed.³¹ This also helps in explaining the continual recruitment of children as soldiers, despite the many efforts by various actors to put an end to the problem. This paper argues that effort could be misdirected as actors are dealing with the results and signs rather than the root causes of the main problem. Responding to conditions created by armed conflict and not addressing that which causes armed conflict will result in the perpetual use of children as soldiers. Therefore, emphasis is placed on the need to take a historical perspective in the analysis of the root causes

28 Fonkem I Achankeng, “Conflict and Conflict Resolution in Africa : Engaging the Colonial Factor,” African Journal on Conflict Resolution Vol. 13 , no. No. 2 (January 1, 2013): pp. 11-37, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/284670618_Conflict_and_Conflict_Resolution_in_Africa_Engaging_the_Colonial_factor.

29 “Conflict and Conflict Resolution in Africa,” ACCORD (ACCORD, February 10, 2020), <https://www.accord.org.za/ajcr-issues/conflict-and-conflict-resolution-in-africa/>.

30 “Conflict and Conflict Resolution in Africa,” ACCORD (ACCORD, February 10, 2020), <https://www.accord.org.za/ajcr-issues/conflict-and-conflict-resolution-in-africa/>.

31 “Conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo.,” UNECA (UNECA, September 2015), https://archive.uneca.org/sites/default/files/PublicationFiles/conflicts_in_drc_eng_25sept_rev1.pdf.

of the conflict and in the design of strategies aimed at not only ending the conflicts but also minimizing the risk of reoccurrence of the conflicts in the future.³² This would permanently deal away with the conditions that end up leading to the recruitment of children by armed groups.

Additionally, armed conflict in DRC has multiple causes revolving around four clusters of factors: economic, institutional, regional, and global geopolitical factors. Besides, the causes of the wars also vary with regions within DRC. Economically, the struggle for resources and the ethnic differences in benefitting from the economy contribute to outbreak of armed fighting in the DRC. Regarding institutional factors, the institutions established under the colonial regime and in the post-independence era generated and perpetuated antagonisms around the control of the state and national resources while sowing the seeds for inter-regional and inter-ethnic conflicts.³³ Regional factors date back to the time of a conflict spill-over from the Rwandan genocide when refugees from Rwanda took part in destabilising DRC.³⁴ The country has also become a political playfield where great powers are competing for their interests. The vast mineral resources in DRC have attracted powerful nations which have allegedly sponsored armed groups as they fight to have control over the resources.³⁵ On the other hand, despite making notable strides in responding to armed conflict, African regional efforts in addressing protracted armed conflict cases, like the DRC, continue to be pulled back by lack of institutional capacity not only by the AU but also by regional economic communities; for instance, lack of resources has seen these institutions heavily relying on external funding.³⁶ The above mentioned factors are not to be treated in isolation in understanding the context of the violent conflict in DRC or in the design of intervention strategies as they are interrelated.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE VANCOUVER PRINCIPLES IN DRC

The ever increasing number of armed conflicts around the world has prompted the modern international society to address a new development in the world scenario, where children who are as young as 6 years old are being forced to the frontline of battlefields. There are a number of international conventions and treaties that have been put in place to fight the recruitment of children as soldiers in armed conflict. The first official and legally binding international treaty

32 Ibid

33 Ibid

34 "Conflict and Conflict Resolution in Africa," ACCORD (ACCORD, February 10, 2020), <https://www.accord.org.za/ajcr-issues/conflict-and-conflict-resolution-in-africa/>.

35 Benjamin Mwadi Makengo and Joseph Mimbale, "Why Might DRC Find Itself in a Complex Dilemma with the Conservative-Progressive Competition in the Post-Covid-19 World Politics?," *Academia Letters*, September 2021, <https://doi.org/10.20935/al3508>.

36 "Securing Predictable and Sustainable Financing for Peace in Africa," African Union (African Union, August 2016), <https://au.int/en/documents/1147>.

to provide for the civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights for the children was the Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989 by the United Nations and it remains the most widely adopted child rights treaty. It imposes a duty on States to ensure that persons who have not attained the age of 15 years do not take part in hostilities.³⁷ Other international efforts to stop the recruitment of child soldiers include the Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers (known as the Vancouver Principles) which is a set of political commitments aimed at preventing and addressing the recruitment and use of children by armed forces and armed groups during United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations.

By endorsing the Vancouver Principles, Member States acknowledge the unique and far-reaching challenges posed by child soldiers, and commit to prioritizing the prevention of the recruitment and use of child soldiers in the context of UN peacekeeping operations and to helping ensure that all peacekeepers – military, police, and civilian – are prepared and directed to take appropriate action.³⁸ The implementation of the Vancouver Principles appears to be meant to be within the confines of the UN peacekeeping missions (and also regional peacekeeping missions), which implies that areas outside UN peacekeeping operations are not targeted by the principles. However, the DRC has had several UN missions starting with the United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC) established in 1999 initially to plan for the observation of the ceasefire and disengagement of forces after a ceasefire agreement. In 2010, MONUC was renamed the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) and the new mission was authorized to use all necessary means to carry out its mandate relating, among other things, to the protection of civilians, humanitarian personnel and human rights defenders under imminent threat of physical violence and to support the Government of the DRC in its stabilization and peace consolidation efforts.³⁹ Under its mandate on the protection of civilians, and guided by the Vancouver Principles, MONUSCO has been focusing on the protection of children from use as child soldiers. The mission has made notable strides in engaging armed groups for the release of children recruited as child soldiers and has, though less progressively, been helping the government of DRC to prosecute perpetrators of child soldiering.⁴⁰

37 “Convention on the Rights of the Child,” OHCHR, accessed September 06, 2021, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>.

38 “Implementation Guidance for the Vancouver Principles - Canada,” Government of Canada (Government of Canada, 2019), <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/dnd-mdn/documents/reports/2019/igvp-20190614.pdf>.

39 “Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict,” United Nations (United Nations, January 2019), https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/190128_monusco_our_strength_is_in_our_youth_child_recruitment_and_use_by_armed_groups_in_the_drc_2014-2017_final_english_0.pdf.

40 “Background,” MONUSCO (MONUSCO, February 9, 2021), <https://monusco.unmissions.org/en/background>.

It is imperative to understand UN peacekeeping missions which are responsible to ensure a coordinated response to violations against children affected by armed conflict. Peacekeeping by the UN is meant to help countries torn by conflict to create the conditions for lasting peace. Peacekeepers protect civilians, actively prevent conflict, reduce violence, strengthen security and empower national authorities to assume these responsibilities. In the case of DRC, the UN has failed to completely do away with armed fighting despite investing so many resources in addressing the conflict. More so, despite efforts to curb the use of children by armed groups as mentioned earlier, the UN mission in DRC has not also been successful in bringing a stop to the problem. Regional organisations have also been key players in the conflict in the DRC and their efforts have been compromised by a number of challenges which include lack of institutional capacity. This automatically translates to the failure to stop the recruitment of children as soldiers and in one way or the other; this may also speak to failure on successful implementation of the Vancouver Principles.

Of notable interest to this paper from the set of principles listed in the Vancouver Principles are the principles related to early warning and prevention which, as policy, are meant to guide peacekeepers and national authorities to mitigate the use of children in combat roles. However, these principles, together with peacekeeping missions do not necessarily address the strategic context of a conflict but are only responses to the outbreak of fighting. Peacekeeping seeks also to create conditions necessary for other peace building activities to take place. It can be argued that because peacekeeping and the Vancouver Principles do not seek to address the root causes of conflicts, they are bound not to successfully stop the recruitment of children in armed conflict. This is against the main argument this paper makes, that the prevalence of armed conflict itself is the major reason behind the continuous use of children in armed conflict. Thus, dealing with the results and/or symptoms of conflict and not addressing its causes translate also to failure to effectively deal with the problem of child soldiers. Also, because the Vancouver Principles are implemented within the confines of UN peacekeeping whose weakness has been described above, it can as well be argued that implementation of the principles will result in failure to stop the perennial recruitment of child soldiers.

CONCLUSION

The recruitment of child soldiers in the DRC continues to persist and will continue as the key challenge which has not been addressed over the years, due to the causes of armed conflict. Armed conflicts bring the need for fighters and because of its other devastating effects, children are left vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups and to be used in both combat and no-combat roles. Armed conflict destroys the needed institutions to protect and safeguard children, at the same time affecting the economy of a nation resulting in poverty. The DRC is a good example to showcase the distressing effects of violent conflict. As a result of continued

fighting, poverty has been the main driver for the recruitment of children as child soldiers. While on-going conflicts must be addressed, resources and effort should also be devoted at the same time towards tackling the root causes of conflicts and taking preventive actions. There is need to model the implementation of the Vancouver Principles so that implementation include initiatives outside UN peacekeeping operations. Peacekeeping missions can fail due to other operational challenges and their failure is a huge blow to the implementation of the Vancouver Principles. Besides, the implementation of commitments such as the Vancouver Principles should consider addressing the root causes of conflict rather than focusing on dealing with the results of conflict.

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