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## **Researching in an African war-torn zone: A walk in a minefield with war-profiteers?**

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### ABSTRACT

The paper examines the existence of 'war-profiteering' and its impact on research process and findings in war-torn zones in Africa. Many nations in West Africa, North Africa, Central Africa, the Great Lakes and the Horn of Africa are currently bedevilled by intrastate conflicts ranging from low to high intensity conflicts. Some of the causes leading to these wars are, the continual refusal of unpatriotic long serving African leaders to democratically hand over the reins of power, the shift of many guerrilla armies from their initial liberation goal to predatory warlordism, and the negative influence of emerging economies upon the African continent. The dysfunction of regional groups and the African Union characterized by the rehash of conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms, has dented many peace processes and therefore left many African protracted conflicts unresolved. Drawing on Congolese and Liberian field experiences, I argue that one widespread but neglected phenomenon which characterizes war-affected countries is war-profiteering. The paper argues that the validity of knowledge produced by scholars particularly in the field of social sciences in such contexts may be affected by this phenomenon at various levels of the research process. The paper which is crafted as a research story in the field of sociology serves as a caution to novice researchers intending to undertake research in war-affected zones against the negative effects of 'war-profiteering'. The paper examines the various facets of 'war-profiteering' and further highlights key ethical issues which may affect the research process, the findings, subsequent research relationship negotiation, the researcher and the research participants.

## 1. Is Africa currently a continent of belligerent nations?

A synopsis of armed conflicts across the globe reveals that Africa is a war-affected continent. In West Africa, the long-running conflict between the Casamance<sup>1</sup> separatist group and the Senegalese regular army although abated has not been resolved (Lambert, 1998; Sambanis, 2004; Agencies, 2012b). Besides, there are reports of skirmishing along the porous borders of Mano River<sup>2</sup> countries swarming with mercenaries who fought during the Liberian, Sierra Leonean and Ivorian civil wars (Akam, 2011; AfriSCOOP, 2012).

The operations of the terror group Boko Haram<sup>3</sup> in Nigeria may spill over into other neighbouring countries in West Africa and spark off sectarian wars (Blair, 2012; Prieur, 2012). The Arab Spring has reignited some West-African insurgencies and counterinsurgencies. A typical example of such campaigns is the ongoing engagement of the Malian regular army with the Tuareg separatist rebels<sup>4</sup> in the Northern Mali as a corollary of the Libyan war which ended with the demise of Muammar Gaddafi's regime (Agencies, 2012; Agencies, 2012a; UN News Centre, 2012a; AFP, 2012).

Libya remains a volatile country, and one of the many challenges facing the new authorities is how to track down remnants of the old regime (Fordham, 2011; Rovera, 2012). The civil unrest in Egypt, and Algeria's recent intensive armament (Agence France-Presse, 2012), are other indicators of potential wars in North Africa.

In Central Africa and the Great Lakes, militias continue to proliferate. There are frequent clashes between armies of Sudan and South Sudan, the latter gruesomely torn by internal armed conflicts (UN News Centre, 2012b; Gettleman, 2012). The Kivu provinces in the eastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) remain flashpoints with regular clashes between armed groups and the Congolese regular army (Afro America Network, 2012). The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) continues to perpetrate violence against civilians in

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<sup>1</sup> The conflict between the Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance (MFDC) and the Senegalese regular army started in 1982.

<sup>2</sup> The Mano River Union, consisting of Guinea, Liberia, Ivory Coast and Sierra Leone, was established in 1973 to constitute a customs and economic union between the member states in order to improve living standards.

<sup>3</sup> 'Boko Haram' is a nickname for a group which is actually called, Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad meaning 'People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad'. In the Hausa language, spoken in northern Nigeria, Boko Haram means "Western education is sacrilege" (Gardham, 2011). The group has close ties with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.

<sup>4</sup> The Malian Tuareg rebels have close ties with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.

Uganda, Sudan, and DRC (Downie, 2011)<sup>5</sup>. In the Horn of Africa, despite the international community's recent concern and actions to quell the long-running conflict in Somalia, evidence is available that there is a continual spate of killings and kidnappings, describing the region as one of the deadliest in the world (Kalib, 2007; Gettleman, 2012; The Associated Press, 2012).

From the foregoing cursory analysis armed conflicts in Africa, it is obvious that the continent is a fertile ground for new wars. I argue that through "diffusion and contagion" (Sambanis, 2004:270), irate citizens may express their revulsion against long serving leaders, and decide to force the latter out of leadership. Because of the lack of conflict carrying capacity of the affected countries, such forceful change of regime may pave the way for more intrastate armed conflicts (Banda, 2011).

Internal crises ruining the African Union (AU) peaked with member states' incapability to elect the president of the union's commission during its last meeting. It seems AU is deviating from one of its cardinal functions, which consists of issuing early warning, analyzing, preventing and resolving conflicts across the continent. The union is rather entangled in a geopolitical crisis of leadership (Parker, 2012).

On a broader scale "the consensus on peace operations is potentially challenged by the increasing engagement of emerging regional powers—in particular Brazil, China, India and South Africa" (see SIPRI Yearbook 2011)<sup>6</sup>. Besides, the African continent is flooded with small arms—most of the weapons used by armed groups in Darfur are from China and Russia (HSBA, 2009; RFI/AFP, 2012).

The above-mentioned facts suggest that Africa is presently a war-torn continent where various actors namely countries, corporations and individuals are vested interests. No matter the scale of the envisaged profit, it represents an aspect of war-profiteering. It is therefore the thrust of this paper to delve into this practice and provide novice researchers with ideas which may help them during research in war-torn zones.

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<sup>5</sup> Also see Security Report/July 2011.

<sup>6</sup> More detail available at <http://www.sipri.org/yearbook/2011/03>

## 2. From research interest to field work

I worked within the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as a protection and field officer in the war-torn Greater North Kivu in the north-eastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo—in the second half of the year 2008. I was coordinating and reporting on protection-related issues in Beni and Lubero territories, within the Protection Cluster.<sup>7</sup> This assignment gave me the opportunity to organize protection assessment and security monitoring field missions to volatile rebel-held zones of the above-mentioned two territories. I did such field missions together with colleagues from other agencies of the humanitarian community namely the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Save the Children, and the Civil Affairs and Child Protection sections of the United Nations Mission in Congo (MONUC).

In the towns, villages and hamlets we often visited, clashes between pockets of rebels and the soldiers of the Congolese National Army (FARDC)<sup>8</sup> were commonplace despite a Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) signed in 2006 between the government and the armed groups. It happened that during some of our field missions, a series of events involving children formerly associated with warring factions caught my attention. The first one was an encounter with a former child soldier in a locality called Kamandi Gîte<sup>9</sup> in Lubero territory. This former young rebel in a discussion with the protection team blatantly disclosed that if he could get an AK-47 he was going to 'wreak more havoc than he did before when he first served within warring factions'. The second incident occurred in a town near Kamandi Gîte called Kirumba where some former young combatants took a colleague of our team hostage after throwing stones at him. The hostage gained freedom after serious negotiations with the former young rebels.

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<sup>7</sup> The Protection Cluster was an outcome of the new humanitarian approach used in some war-torn countries where agencies, NGOs and the United Nations Peacekeeping and Stabilization missions are requested to work in teams to tackle some problems which cannot be dealt with by one single agency. The protection cluster was concerned with the physical and legal protection of the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) including children and women. Its mission was to do fieldtrips to rebel-held zones, assess the protection situation, report and advocate. It equally takes preventive, corrective and punitive actions or measures to abate violations of human rights and dignity.

<sup>8</sup> FARDC (Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo) was the French acronym of the Democratic Republic of Congo Armed Forces.

<sup>9</sup> The residents of this locality were coming to the village during the day and sleeping in the bush during the night to avoid being killed over night. As a matter of fact this village was between two warring factions: On one side was the FARDC and opposite a rebel group called Mai Mai PARECO.

The third incident occurred again in Kirumba when about twenty child-soldiers who were released from different factions, by MONUC Child Protection Section, and handed over to an International Non Governmental Organization (INGO) for rehabilitation, engaged themselves in a fierce brawl. The fourth was not an incident but a personal astonishing discovery. A group of former child-soldiers, whom a particular agency failed to cater for, after they had been released to the agency for reintegration and rehabilitation, decided to organize themselves and were staying in a non-completed building close to my abode in Beni.<sup>10</sup>

My interest in doing research on the post-war lives of the young veterans was born out of these evocative encounters I had with them. An attempt to craft a research problem woven around these encounters led me to scan an initial fuzzy research problem to be delved into in the field of sociology. Although the interest to undertake a study in the field of armed conflict, agency, behaviour and development with a focus on the youth occurred to me in the North Kivu, I could not conduct systematic field research in the region before leaving owing to the volatility of the region and the brevity of my work contract. I however became more observant during subsequent field trips prior to my departure.

Whenever we went to the field, I especially focused on these young veterans to notice how they were behaving towards their peers and community members. I also had the opportunity to glean vital information from colleagues who had been in contact with these young veterans for many years, especially those who were local staff members in humanitarian organizations and were conversant with many issues in this field. Our discussions provided me with a spectrum of ideas from which the current study on ex-fighters formerly associated with armed groups as children evolved.

I later decided to conduct research towards a PhD degree, on young veterans (former child-soldiers) in Liberia. The war in Liberia began when the rebel leader Charles Taylor and a small group of 150 Libyan-trained rebels launched an incursion from neighbouring Côte d'Ivoire on 24<sup>th</sup> December 1989 under the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL)

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<sup>10</sup> Beni is the capital of Lubero Territory in the Greater North Kivu (Democratic Republic of Congo).

(Williamson & Carter, 2005; Hull, 2008) and ended on 17<sup>th</sup> June 2003 when a ceasefire agreement was signed in Accra between the last main three warring factions including the Government of Liberia (GOL), the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL). At the end of the civil war in Liberia in 2003, about 21,000 child-soldiers needed to be demobilized (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2004:76) only 11,780 child-soldiers were officially disarmed and demobilized (Jaye, 2009).

The overarching aim of my research was to prove that there is a caveat to the societal and scholarly apocalyptic view of young veterans. The study aimed to demonstrate, based on the young veterans' own stories, how through agency, jungle ties and instrumental coalitions in the post-conflict damaged society, they were able to negotiate their civilian identity, social acceptance and create comfortable and conformable spaces for themselves, in the midst of stigmatization and marginalization. This paper derives from a section of the methodological chapter of my thesis.

### **3. Is war-profiteering a new phenomenon?**

The scanty literature on 'war-profiteering' makes it an amorphous concept. The concept of war-profiteering dates back to January 1961 when the then American President Dwight D. Eisenhower<sup>11</sup> in his farewell address warned his audience of what he termed "the military-industrial complex," referring to the acquisition of unauthorized influence (Davidson, 2011:891). Similarly, many critics in the post-World War I America expressed a revulsion against what they described as:

A cabal of death merchants—arms manufacturers and others who profited from war—existed at the highest levels of American society ... war profiteers used their political and economic clout to influence national policy, especially economic development and international relations, to serve their own interests at the expense of the general public (Davidson, 2011:891).

But later, heated debates pertaining to war-profiteering in America led to the enactment of the "War Profiteering Prevention Act of 2007"<sup>12</sup> by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America, with the aim of "taking the profit out of war" (Ledbetter,

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<sup>11</sup> President Dwight D. Eisenhower was the American War Department mobilization planner in the 1930s (Davidson, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> For a full copy of the Act see Calendar No. 148, 110<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, S.119 [Report No. 110-66].

2011:25). While such anti-war-profiteering act mainly focuses on America, and it is not clear to what extent it is enforced, it fails to capture the phenomenon in all its ramifications especially in war-ravaged countries on the African continent. It is therefore worth revisiting this concept so that it actually percolates through academic circles for further analysis.

#### **4. War-profiteering: A hindrance to research?**

Although research is generally thought to be grounded in specific epistemic frames of reference, contexts within which studies are conducted vary and are to be considered. What is applicable during a research undertaking in a peaceful environment may not work in an unstable environment. Despite these contextual differences, researchers are expected to produce valid and reliable knowledge. The implication is that procedures and techniques used to collect data are context-driven and should be designed and applied accordingly. For instance, methods, techniques and procedures used to conduct sociological enquiries in rural areas may differ from those used in carrying out research in urban areas. It is one thing to conduct research in peaceful rural or urban areas, it is another to conduct research in an area where war is taking place or has just ended.

Given the aforementioned analysis, it seems peculiar that methodological issues with regard to research in armed conflict situations have not been sufficiently highlighted in the literature, especially in the field of sociology. Such tangled methodological issues may directly or indirectly affect the trustworthiness of research findings especially in qualitative studies. My focus is to examine some peculiarities inherent in the conduct of qualitative research in a war-torn zone. This may serve as a framework for future research in armed conflict contexts. Firstly, I try to highlight the interplay between war-profiteering (that is, perceiving war and its outcome as a lucrative cash-cow) (Ryan, 2008; War Resisters' International, 2011; Pein, 2011) and research relationship negotiation on various levels. Secondly, I examine ethical issues including researcher and research participants' protection on the one hand, and possible impacts and risks of promises made by researcher to research participants during data collection on subsequent studies whether or not these promises are fulfilled.

Post-war societies are typically societies in dire straits due to the disruptive effects of the war. There is no doubt that the majority of the inhabitants therein are perceived as vulnerable for a number of reasons. They are faced with a struggling economy and a higher cost of living, and therefore increasingly get anxious about their livelihood. But amidst this collective war-induced wretchedness, there are people who use war as a source of enrichment. For instance, evidence is available that during the Liberian war, top leaders such as warlords massively looted mineral resources. They connived with other interested stakeholders to trade weapons, timber and diamonds, and to create human trafficking networks (Global Witness, 2010; Sherman, 2011). I call this first set of individuals who benefited from the war, war-profiteers category one (van Niekerk, 2002; Soggot, 2002; Campbell, 2002).

There were also individuals who considered the war and the post-war social chaos as an avenue to earn their living or make huge amounts of money. They consciously engaged in benign or illegal activities to achieve their aim without necessarily having any links with external profiteers. This category, I term, war-profiteers category two. This second category is made up of local and national criminal syndicates, organizations and associations which beyond their debatable humanitarian concern used the war as a pretext to make money. Some of them served as sex workers, mercenaries and fighters.

There is a category three of war-profiteers which in my opinion although unusual, comprises inhabitants who have seen a remarkable improvement in their living conditions as a result of the war. According to them, such betterment of their living conditions would have been impossible without the war owing to pre-war entrenched structural inequalities (Mekenkamp, van Tongeren, van de Veen, 1999). For instance, there were children from poor families before the war who acquired or furthered their formal education as a result of the Disarmament, Demobilization and Rehabilitation and Reintegration (DDRR) process after the war. The following interview excerpts from some Liberian young veterans<sup>13</sup> attest to this:

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<sup>13</sup> Interviewees' names mentioned in this paper are nicknames.



For my own interpretation the DRR process was good for me, it helped us to go far in school. My parents can say today they have a child who is in high school. I am satisfied with that (Author's interview with Enfant, 2010).

I usually tell my friends that if you want to go far in life, the medicine is going to school. So far, I can see myself in school today. I can say that my dreams are fulfilled (Author's interview with Martine, 2010).

I have decided and my focus is to do peace and conflict studies up to the level that I can do it. My major focus is to work in conflict prone communities. You see my experience to see how especially communities that experience war where I can interact with ex-coms or combatants or military personnel, people who have experienced war, because I have had an experience of war and I know what it means to fight war. So my major focus of life is now is to become, I mean to learn conflict, to understand conflict from a deeper perspective and know what are the feelings and thinking of the actors of conflicts so that whenever I see a conflict situation, I will not be too much judgmental to it. I will understand the feelings of those that are involved into conflict because one thing I know is that people don't get into conflict because they want to get into it, their feelings, their interests that can bring people into a conflict situation so my major focus is to do conflict to a higher level. I was just telling Nimi [real name withheld] that I am presently reading sociology as a big foundation and I told him I want to do peace and conflict studies as my Master's degree and if I can pursue it even to the level at which you are I will be to glad (Author's interview with Petit, 2010).

I want to become a doctor because there in the war front, I was serving as a doctor. When people were wounded, or received bullet, I used my own experience to help people. So I decided to do it as a course for myself (Author's interview with Enfant, 2010).

In the second category of war-profiteers, I purposely left out a group, that is, those I call 'local war scholars'. These were individuals who collectively or individually could carry out some action research, or serve as gatekeepers to assist foreign researchers to gain access to their research field. Collective action was usually undertaken through humanitarian organizations or associations they set up. They were either civilians or former fighters who perceived their assistance to foreign researchers as an avenue for money making. I acknowledge the fact that local people by virtue of their knowledge of local realities are often used by researchers to gain entry into their community, but my claim here is that in

war-torn countries, the craving for money is very high. Profitability from war tends to supersede other considerations. War-affected societies are often infested with opportunistic individuals or groups, be it local, national or international. Such a state of affairs calls into question the credibility and dependability of individuals who 'volunteer' to assist researchers. Another huge concern it raises is that of 'access to the real research respondents'. For instance, young veterans (research subjects in the case of this study), were not necessarily clustered together in the post-war society, although there were areas highly concentrated with former fighters such as Santos Street. How can the researcher therefore trace and gain access to the real research subjects? Based on the field experience in Liberia and other war-torn zones, I argue that some factors need to be taken into consideration while negotiating research relationships (Maxwell, 1996) in war-torn countries.

Researchers should be cognisant of the fact that on a general note war-related statistics provided are not fixed statistics and are quite often full of inconsistencies (Wells, 2009), therefore casting doubt on the real dimension of the phenomena under study. Statistics can be provided for various reasons, most importantly in the interest of organizations that do so, and this boils down to the issue of profitability from war mentioned earlier. Every 'war theatre' should be perceived by researchers as a huge, attractive and at times untapped political, humanitarian and diplomatic market where complex and controversial deals are made among both local and international actors. So how researchers manoeuvre to ethically collect data appears to be a daunting task. It without doubt, requires a painstaking analysis of the terrain in order to identify war-profiteers before building any credible research relationship.

##### **5. Access negotiation for data collection in war-torn zones: A multilayered endeavour**

Access negotiation to research subjects in war-torn countries may be considered a multi-layered and daunting undertaking. On a general note, war-affected countries are countries where all sectors are dysfunctional. Consequently, foreigners travelling to such countries are often suspected of war-profiteering regardless of whether they are business men and women, humanitarian workers, peacekeepers, diplomats or researchers. Although there are usually good reports confirming the positive role played by peacekeepers in those countries

(Diaz, 2010), there are also dumbfounding instances of bogus humanitarian workers and peacekeepers involved in the immoral looting and smuggling of mineral resources from war-affected zones (UN News Centre, 2011a; All Africa Global Media, 2011), and cases of sexual abuse (Le monde & Agence France-Presse, 2011; Sapa-AP, 2011; Delva, 2011).

This gradual involvement of peacekeepers and humanitarian workers in war-profiteering quite often set the stage for complicated visa application procedures for those who may want to travel to such war-torn countries, and researchers are no exception. I deemed it necessary to narrate the following two personal accounts to support this argument. In 2008, when I was appointed as a protection and field officer within the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in the North Kivu war-torn province in the Democratic Republic of Congo, my visa was delayed for three weeks. A top official of the Congolese embassy pointedly informed me that the North Kivu region was a turbulent zone and any visa application to go to that region must be scrutinized. All the letters from the host agencies in DRC, namely UNHCR and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) could not accelerate the process. The visa was finally issued when I almost gave up, unsurprisingly to face other hurdles upon arrival at N'djili airport in Kinshasa, the Congolese capital city.

The second account involved Liberia, on my way to collect data for the current study. Right at Roberts International Airport (RIA), I was asked to give some token of money and suggest the number of days of stay I wanted on the visa. This was in sharp contrast with the immigration agreements signed between member states of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).<sup>14</sup> And being a national of an ECOWAS member state, I was entitled to 90 days of stay in Liberia without any visa. Unfortunately, I was denied that right and given a limited number of days for my research (15 days). Of course, I understood that "the country was left without basic political, social, and economic structures in place. Poor governance resulted in a virtually non-existent rule of law and an environment rampant with mass corruption and state looting" (Global Witness, 2010:4). The import of these two

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<sup>14</sup>According to Article 3 (2) of the ECOWAS Protocol A/P.1/5/79 Relating To Free Movement Of Persons, Residence And Establishment: A citizen of the Community visiting any Member State for a period not exceeding ninety (90) days shall enter the territory of that Member State through the official entry point free of visa requirements. Such citizens shall, however, be required to obtain permission for an extension of stay from the appropriate authority if after such entry that citizen has cause to stay for more than ninety (90) days.

accounts is that any researcher preparing for fieldwork in a war-torn country should be psychologically prepared to encounter unpredictable situations which have the potential to hinder his/her access to the field.

A great deal of information and early preparation (prior analysis of the political, economic and security atmosphere) are therefore needed. Besides, researchers should be cognizant of the fact that war-torn countries are diseased by many ills such as lawlessness (especially immediately after the war), corruption and insecurity (Global Witness, 2010). A set change can only occur after a long period of time. The mere fact that eight years after the war officially ended in Liberia "idle ex-combatants still roam the streets, reawakened by the fighting in neighbouring Côte d'Ivoire to their potential as guns-for-hire" attests to this (Ajayi, 2011).

How sensitive the research topic is may also influence the entry process. At this juncture the involvement of reputable organizations, associations or other key institutions is very important. The negotiation of host organizations may be done through informal channels (indirect negotiation) or formal channels (direct negotiation). One overriding condition which should govern the choice of a host institution or organization is its credibility. By credible organization, I mean an organization which is not enmeshed in corruption and unavoidably in connection with controversial politicians and dubious business men and women. A thorough investigation is required to establish such credibility. If the intended host organization is a local one, the researcher may enquire from international organizations intervening in the country especially the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA). This is important because UNOCHA is regarded as the umbrella organization coordinating humanitarian activities, and can therefore provide the researcher with a list of organizations making up the various clusters.

The new approach used by the humanitarian community is the cluster approach. In this approach various organizations local and international form clusters to focus on specific areas of needs of war or disaster-affected communities. Areas of focus of these clusters for instance are protection, camp coordination and management, early recovery, emergency shelter, health, water, sanitation and hygiene, nutrition, education, agriculture, logistics,

emergency and telecommunications (Global Protection Cluster Working Group, 2007).<sup>15</sup> A snowballing strategy can be used to identify organizations which can pertinently assist the researcher. This necessitates a careful study of the activity profile of organizations. Researchers may equally find out whether the identified organization assisted researchers in the past, and what the outcome of such a research relationship was.

In the case of my research, I identified the Lutheran Church Liberia-Trauma Healing and Reconciliation Programme (LCL-THRP) which referred me to the National Ex-Combatants Peace-Building Initiative (NEPI)—a sister organization (Boelt, 2007; Jaye, 2009). A proper identification of host organizations is to a great extent a guarantee that the researcher can gain access to the research subjects from which he/she intends to solicit data.

There may be cases of misleading information. For instance, researchers can be provided with 'research subjects' who are not actually the intended respondents. The process of selecting research subjects is a tricky one in war-torn contexts and requires a painstaking approach on the part of the researcher. For example, it is not easy to distinguish between an ordinary criminal or miscreant and a disgruntled former fighter, as they both share some common attributes. They may both display asocial behaviour. Similarly it is difficult to distinguish between a former fighter who displays prosocial behaviour and an ordinary gentleman or woman. Elusive local war-profiteers therefore bank on these factors to deceive researchers and present them with 'fake research subjects' capable of providing researchers with answers that suit questions. In other words, the wrong set of people providing seemingly suitable answers. In my case, the identified young veterans were individual former child-soldiers who were known to the two host organizations. These young veterans underwent at least one of the programmes of the organizations and had their names recorded or were easily identifiable. In summary, the researcher should be able to know at every stage of his/her access negotiation when war-profiteering begins to interfere with the research aim.

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<sup>15</sup> Details available at <http://www.humanitarianreform.org/>

## **6. Ethics and research in war-torn zones**

### **6.1 Protecting the researcher and research participants**

The protection from harm of both the informants and the researcher is important during research in war-torn zones and cannot be overemphasized (Social Research Association, 2001; Bloor, Fincham & Sampson, 2010). Whether a foreign researcher gives research subjects some money or not, he/she is a target for criminals who may connive with the very research subjects. The researcher should consider him/herself as a target. This therefore suggests that researchers should find a secure place to conduct their interviews, focus group discussions or workshops. They should equally be briefed on the security situation in the area where they may want to collect data. It is also advisable to undergo a prior induction course and counselling from the host organization.

Prior knowledge of the type of research subjects the researcher will be soliciting information from is very important. For instance, although there may be general assumptions about how young veterans behave, there are country-specific behaviour patterns which should be taken into consideration. It is also important to have a brief historical account of similar data collection sessions in the country and what the weaknesses, strengths and proffered solutions were.

### **6.2 Making promises to research participants during data collection: A risk or an advantage for subsequent researchers?**

Conducting research in war-affected countries is similar to walking in a minefield. Research subjects in war-affected countries generally perceive researchers as the *haves* and regard themselves as the *have-nots*. Respondents and even the gatekeepers perceive themselves vulnerable and expect foreigners to regard them as such. Such lines of thought put them in a position of dependence. It is worth mentioning that such a dependence syndrome is an endemic hallmark of war-affected countries. As a young veteran asked, one important question researchers may face during their interview sessions with respondents will be the following, "what are we going to gain from this research?" (Author's interview with Philemon, 2010). Such a question warrants an ethical answer on the part of the researcher.

Making promises of financial remuneration to respondents is likely going to render that particular research site slippery to subsequent researchers regardless of whether those promises are kept or not. Even if the promises have been kept, such an approach to research may negatively affect knowledge production itself. It will simply increase war-profiteering. In addition, knowledge produced in such conditions raises ethical concerns which cannot be dealt with extensively in this paper. In the case of this study, when I was asked the above question, I answered within a broader peacebuilding perspective. I explained to my interviewees who asked this question that my research was hopefully going to contribute to the stability and development of their country, and that this stability would potentially allow for a peaceful environment where individuals could easily go about their activities and earn a living. Such an answer in my opinion is ethical. First the answer is true because the research output can inform the country's policy-making processes; second, it satisfies the interviewee to a great extent.

A prior understanding of the origins and nature of the conflict as it is experienced by those involved in, or affected by it, is very important. Similarly, it has been recognised that working within a conflict-affected region cannot be regarded as a neutral activity. Instead, researchers are frequently seen as having a significant bearing over the course, and even the outcome of the conflict itself.

I argue in this paper that the research process in a war-affected setting is predominantly characterised by war-profiteering elements. Research is perceived by local people as a money making avenue, undermining therefore the trustworthiness of research findings which is the researcher's top priority. The researcher can easily be misguided by organizations and individual 'gatekeepers'. My claim is simply that researchers should painstakingly negotiate their access to the country of research, host organizations and research subjects, taking into consideration the political and economic atmosphere prevailing before and during their fieldwork. I also argue that researchers ought to sedulously avoid making promises to research subjects as these promises may constitute huge obstacles for subsequent researchers on the one hand, and impinge on the credibility of knowledge production in the field of social sciences on the other hand. The study of war-profiteering as a phenomenon is beyond the compass of this paper. However the paper

constitutes a springboard for further research on the issue especially in other belligerent African countries.



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