

# **Reintegrating by enrolling: Making a case for a problem-solving post-conflict youth military academy in West Africa**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper proposes the provision of a youth military academy for young veterans (former child-soldiers) in order to contribute to the theoretical debate on the social reintegration of former combatants in African post-conflict countries. Using Liberia as an example, the paper argues that vocational training and mainstream education programmes (and the reintegration of child-soldiers is usually based on these programmes), are flawed and not suitable for all young veterans. Their stories attest to the fact that these programmes cannot cater for all categories of young veterans. The paper argues that 'becoming civilians first' should not be viewed as the sole condition upon which young veterans are accepted into the post-conflict society; and that soldiers are also members of that society. The paper therefore suggests a 'post-conflict military youth academy' which combines education and a military career as an alternative redemptive pathway for the 'unlucky young veterans'.

## **INTRODUCTION**

African countries have been and continue to be beset by low, medium and high armed conflicts as a result of protracted religious, ethnic, economic and political crises. Contrary to pre-colonial wars where children were absent in African war theatres (Diallo 1976), recent civil wars have been chiefly characterised by greed and grievance (Hegre *et al.* 2009; Call 2010) and have seen an active immoral participation of children playing roles revolving around fighting, logistics and intelligence (Nwolise 2001; Dallaire 2010). For the past three decades, there has hardly been a war in Africa where children have not served as fighters. The Liberian two-phase civil war<sup>1</sup>, which officially started in 1989 and ended in 2003, epitomises these predatory armed conflicts. During the war, children (both boys and girls, some as young as six years old) served as soldiers within various warring factions (Singer 2006; Jaye 2009; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia 2009).

Before the official end of the war almost half of the child-soldiers self-demobilised, while 8,771 boy soldiers and 2,511 girl soldiers went through the official Disarmament Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR)<sup>2</sup> process (Williamson & Carter 2005; Alusula 2008). During the DDR some child-soldiers, after turning in their guns, and staying for approximately three days to one week in the cantonment site for counselling and recreational activities, were allowed to go back to their communities. Although this was the general demobilisation procedure for all combatants, there were also cases of child-

soldiers taken to transit centres and Interim Care Centres (ICCs) to allow humanitarian Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) to trace their family members for reunification (Landry 2006). Whether these former child-soldiers passed through cantonment sites or transit centres and ICCs, their final destination was the same: the post-war society. Some young veterans returned to their communities of origin while others chose to settle in different receiving communities. As part of the reintegration process, and similar to adult former combatants, young veterans were predominantly asked to choose between mainstream education and a series of vocational training projects.

Young veterans were expected to complete the apprenticeship schemes in a few months in order to become economically empowered. Surprisingly, the flaws embedded in such schemes prevented some young veterans from creating for themselves an adequate survival space in their respective post-conflict communities. The complexities surrounding the implementation of these reintegration programmes can be explored in three categories of young veterans: a first category of young veterans that went through mainstream education successfully despite being subjected to stigmatisation; a second category of young veterans who went through the vocational training programmes successfully; a third category of young veterans who could neither go to school nor succeed through the skill acquisition programmes. Drawing on young veterans' experiential stories, collected through in-depth interviews in Monrovia in 2010 as part of my PhD project, and by way of document analysis, this article proposes a post-conflict youth military academy to absorb some of the former child-soldiers in the third category. Although not a panacea for the reintegration problem, this novel approach (if well thought out) can help some of the idle young former fighters to overcome the challenges of the reintegration process on the one hand, and to positively contribute to societal security, stability and peace on the other hand.

This article comprises seven sections. The first is the introduction; the second discusses the relationship between war, war families and social reintegration; the third gives a cursory description of the Liberian civil war and children's involvement; the fourth describes young veterans' journey back home after the war and their reintegration trajectories; the fifth focusses on the importance of a post-conflict youth military academy as an alternative way of reintegrating some young veterans into the society; the sixth briefly highlights the methodology used during the research which led to this article; the final seventh part is the conclusion and summarises the various salient points discussed in the previous sections.

## **WAR, WAR FAMILIES AND SOCIAL REINTEGRATION**

Reintegration is the R-phase component of the DDR programme designed to facilitate the acceptance of former combatants of a civil war by members of the post-conflict society. Such a stereotyped definition, mainly centred on humanitarian operations, does not capture social complexities and dynamics within which the reintegration process takes place. While the aim of this article is not to engage readers in a thorough discussion of reintegration as a concept, it is however important to highlight some aspects of the disintegration and integration patterns which occur during and after civil wars as presented by Hazen (2005), as this has some bearing on the discussion about social integration and post-conflict reintegration. Any debate around post-conflict

‘reintegration’ should actually be preceded by the understanding of the concept of social integration. The notion of social integration according to Hazen (2005:1) refers to a ‘situation in which members of a community share common norms, beliefs, and goals that are structured and enforced through social institutions and a common dialogue’. Disintegration takes place when those common traits which constitute the cement of the society become absent; this is what transpires during wars. The reconstruction of those ‘norms and social structures in order to re-establish the social, economic, and political structures destroyed during the war’ is the aim of post-conflict reintegration (Hazen 2005:1).

As Hazen (2005) pointed out, during civil wars, there are patterns of ‘social disintegration’ and ‘social integration’ which occur concomitantly. The wartime disintegration affects the community and economic ties, the judicial system, and the political landscape; at the same time there is a form of social integration which occurs among combatants within the various warring factions which involves establishing a ‘war family’. This war family provides former combatants with a ‘support network’ (Hazen, 2005:4-5). In my experience ‘war families’ are actually established during a war; different warring factions produce different war families, and there are even different sub-war families within warring factions. These war-induced families, continue to exist even among civilians, whether they are refugees or Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). These war families are a form of accidental instrumental coalition for survival during the war (Kirkpatrick & Ellis 2004). This paper will emphasise the war families related to factions; these war families are stronger because of the command structures and guns, or sources of power. Wartime social disintegration results in the formation of a first type of war family. After the war there is a ceremonial disintegration of the first war family during the demobilisation stage of the DDR programme. Whether this disintegration, which consists of dismantling the chain of command of the factions involved in the war is successful or not, a replication of wartime war families, or a formation of new post-conflict war-families among former combatants will usually occur. Some of these post-conflict war families may play very negative roles while others may play positive roles. These roles will greatly influence the reintegration of some of the former fighters including young veterans. In the light of the foregoing inevitable formation or replication of post-conflict war families, this article proposes a ‘state-backed war family’, in the form of a post-conflict youth military academy, for young veterans who could not be reintegrated into the post-conflict society through mainstream education or vocational training. This suggestion is premised on the fact that, to a certain degree, the war has prepared such young veterans for a military career and through this they can become profitable to the post-conflict society.

## **LIBERIAN CIVIL WAR, A WAR OF CHILD-SOLDIERS**

During the Liberian civil war, each of the factions extensively used children as soldiers (Grinker 2004; Jaye 2009). Notwithstanding the lack of fixed statistics which quite often characterises research in armed conflict contexts (Wells 2009), it was estimated that 21,000 child-soldiers including 8,500 girl-soldiers were actively involved in the war (Singer 2006). Jaye (2009:7) put this into perspective by stating that child-soldiers were ‘the primary fighters in the first phase of the Liberian conflict’. Failed attempts to disarm,

demobilise, rehabilitate and reintegrate fighters in the first phase of the war paved the way for cases of re-enlistment and re-recruitment of former child-soldiers (Human Rights Watch 2004). Child-soldiers were used as infantry shock troops, raiders, sentries, spies, sappers, sneakers, thieves, aides de camps, camp sentries or prisoners' guards, for weapon maintenance, and fighters (David 1998); they were also used to perpetrate egregious crimes such as rape and murder (Mugaga 2010). But the most horrific hallmark of Liberian child-soldiers was their cannibalistic behaviour. A survey conducted by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, revealed that about 3.2% of Liberian child-soldiers were traumatised as a result of their involvement in cannibalism (Deng 2001). Because of these wartime macabre practices, roles and the total identification with their commanders (Hundeide 2003), as well as the fighting names they willingly gave themselves or that were foisted on them (Human Rights Watch 2004), former child-soldiers diversely encountered hindrances in the post-conflict society. The acceptance of former fighters, and in this case young veterans, is a complex issue and not all young veterans can be accepted into their communities after a war. As Hazen (2005:5) pointed out: 'ex-combatant insecurity is heightened by reluctance of communities to accept the return of an ex-combatant, the lack of employment opportunities, the stigma of troublemakers, and the end of the feelings of empowerment experienced during the war'. A novel approach seems to be necessary to ensure that these 'pariahs' become useful to their post-conflict nation; this is what this paper set out to explore.

### **JOURNEYING BACK HOME ON ROUGH PATHWAYS**

Following the Liberian Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA)<sup>3</sup>, of the 21,000 child-soldiers who were to be demobilised officially (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers 2004), only 8,771 boy-soldiers and 2,511 girl-soldiers underwent the process (Williamson & Carter 2005: xi); which points to a self-demobilisation of almost half of the child-soldiers<sup>4</sup>. During the disarmament and demobilisation process in Liberia, young veterans' career orientation interviews seemed to be limited to going to school, or learning a trade through a vocational training project or apprenticeship. With regard to the vocational training, the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL 2004) pointed out that it 'is part of the rehabilitation and reintegration phase of the ongoing DDDR programme in the country. Participants will acquire basic skills for the establishment of income generating microenterprises, including carpentry and wood work, masonry, plumbing, metal works and welding, blocks and tiles production, blacksmithing, painting, and electrical installation.'

There is no doubt that in the majority of African war-affected countries, skill acquisition through vocational training programmes is commonplace, and considered as one of the viable options to reintegrate former combatants and Liberia was no exception (Scott 2007; Gordon *et al.* 2010). According to the Liberian Executive Director of the National Commission on Disarmament, Demobilisation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (NCDDRR), the vocational training project was meant to 'help ex-combatants earn their living through decent and peaceful means' (in UNMIL 2004). Actually the Liberian reintegration strategies revolved around formal education at primary, secondary and university levels; vocational training; and apprenticeship. The vocational skills training included, but was not limited to, agriculture, auto mechanics, pastry, tailoring and tie-

dye. The ex-fighters were given an opportunity to choose or identify their training preferences. About 40% chose formal education, and the remaining 60% chose training programmes, such as auto mechanics, tailoring, agriculture and masonry (UNMIL, as cited in Jaye 2009:16).

There is empirical evidence that the fulfilment of the above reintegration strategies resulted in a cynical mirage. Actually, sub-standard apprenticeship from these programmes has left many young veterans with pain and regret. The choice of a career by young veterans, particularly in the Liberian context showcased the incongruities which characterise peacebuilding operations in war-affected countries, impressing the world with unrealistic statistics, but dooming beneficiaries. The aftermath of such speedy humanitarian undertakings has never really been the focus of donors and their allies.

This defective nature of the reintegration process stems from the complexities surrounding peacekeeping and peacebuilding operations. The flaws embedded in the Liberian reintegration process illustrate what occurs at a macro level. Dallaire (2010), a former insider of the United Nations system, a general who commanded the United Nations Mission in Rwanda, in his book *They Fight Like Soldiers, They Die Like Children*, made an illuminating observation, which exposed the laxity and the obscurity that envelop the intervention of the majority of humanitarian organisations and agencies involved in post-conflict recovery operations. With particular focus on the United Nations, Dallaire (2010:154) pointed out that:

Generally speaking, the people running the show on all sides-both the strategic bodies, such as the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations and the Security Council, which produce the peacekeeping mandates, and the field missions that attempt to enforce them and are always hard-pressed by and resources to produce tangible near-term results-regard child soldiers as an annoyance, a pain in the side, a social adjustment meriting a minimum of effort. The UN can only push an agenda if it has buy-in from its member nations, and if child soldiers are not a priority for those nation states, funding and resources for DDR programmes can be hard to maintain. In case that seems inexplicable to you, remember that child soldiers may have better access to food and medicine inside their armed groups than they will have after they've been repatriated to their home communities, and both the children and the people who attempt to demobilize them know that.

The international community-backed DDR process, particularly in some African war-affected countries, appears to have disregarded the military mentality of many of the former soldiers. It always leaves post-conflict countries in a dilemma: complying with international norms but disregarding social instability. Such a situation raises the following question: What will society do with individuals involved in hostilities, and whose only career could be in the army but who have unfortunately been denied this opportunity?

People generally work because of 'the money they are paid' (Vroom 1964:30). Similarly in the post-conflict context, the primary motive for people, including ex-combatants, to work is to earn a living. Giving young veterans opportunities as sources of livelihood may sound good immediately after the war, but in the long run such an approach to abating their plight may prove unethical and counterproductive. Work which provides food to

young veterans but neglects the 'attainment of acceptance and respect by others' in the society (Vroom 1964:44) may not be appropriate for young veterans. Unfortunately, the hasty nature of peacebuilding projects undermines the intricacies enveloping former fighters' work in a post-conflict society. A young veteran revealed the defective nature of the skill acquisition projects:

I just want to tell you a bit about the DDR process in Liberia. You know the DDR process in Liberia was actually a failure from my perspective ... there was this reintegration programme crafted by the donors and international community ... without a psychosocial component ... they only go and get some skill training programmes ... and then get into the larger society... There was no means leading these ex-coms or providing opportunities for them to use the skills they've acquired ... A carpenter going round the town a whole day and could not even get a contract as means of survival. The following day I will take the hammer and give it to somebody and ask him to give me something to eat... at the end of the day all those tools are sold and they go back to square one ... some began to beg, some became armed robbers – the way of life they knew before, they decided to go back to it. ... So you can see the reason why a lot of ex-coms decided to go back ... so you find out that there is an increase in the criminal rate in Liberia, there is an increase in robbery, there is an increase in street beggars because these guys had nothing to exchange against the gun they had before for survival for 14 years. ... You get somebody skill training, for three months, six months, and you have professionals who have gone for three to four years in training ... and the stigma is there, the person is an ex-com, how do you think you have prepared society to accept these people? So the gap between them is so wide to the extent that they can't even find employment because they are ex-coms, and there is no way they can even be reintegrated into the larger society. ... We did a research where we interviewed some of these ex-combatants: today will you prefer to fight war or to stay like this? Most said they preferred the days of war to today. (Anini 2010 int.)

Any career orientation programme young veterans go through should take into consideration the general assertiveness of ex-combatants. In fact, some Liberian young veterans were both disgruntled and assertive. The following account from a female social worker in a refugee camp in Sierra Leone hosting Liberian refugees attests to this: 'they [former child-soldiers] sometimes come to my house at night and demand food and sex saying that they know I am not a virgin and that in the bush they slept at will with women even better than me' (IRIN 2003a). Similarly, it was reported that 'in mid-August (2003), a group of about 20 child-soldiers organised a strike amongst the 7,000 people living in the camp (refugee camp) near the eastern town of Kenema to demand bigger food rations. They barred camp officials from entering the settlement until the police intervened' (IRIN 2003a). Some humanitarian workers similarly stated that 'they [young veterans] are stigmatised a lot, having carried out grievous atrocities while in battle ... Violence has become part of their lives. They find it extremely difficult to recognise authority since they had power over the civilian population in their previous lives' (IRIN 2003a).

The post-conflict vocational training schemes to reintegrate young veterans were poorly designed. They provided individual former fighters with sub-standard vocational skills

which did not allow them to compete with pre-war professionals trained for a longer period of time. Such skill deficiencies aggravated Liberian young veterans' vulnerability.

In the neighbouring Sierra Leone, a small number of urban-based former combatants, instead of seeking to compete with existing professional craftsmen by all means through the quasi-failed vocational training schemes, organised themselves to make a living as local taxi drivers with motorbikes (Peters 2007). While such initiative marks a success story, and shows how former fighters can navigate and survive in the Sierra Leonean context, it cannot be considered as a panacea to the plight of ex-combatants, including young veterans in other contexts such as Liberia.

Apart from the difficulties related to the vocational training schemes, there were also difficulties related to the education of some young veterans; some found it difficult and even impossible to stay in classrooms with younger children were not soldiers during the war. Fears that keeping former child-soldiers together might make them congregate and wreak havoc, might account for the lack of specific schools to cater for them.

Actually, allowing unruly young veterans angered by 'all sorts of unfulfilled expectations' (IRIN 2003a) to stay in the same classrooms with younger pupils, seems inconceivable. Although such experiences worked in some contexts, in others, it was an uphill endeavour for educators on the one hand, and for young veterans themselves on the other hand. While with time palliative measures were taken to reduce this discrepancy in some schools, demobilised students felt the weight of discriminatory behaviour on the part of their classmates. A young veteran cited his own experience: 'I disengaged [left the war] and went back to school. My friends saw me and they knew that I was involved in the war, I was already fighting ... in fact, in class, I was a laughing stock.' (Petit 2010 int.)

Based on their experiences, young veterans assessed the demobilisation and reintegration process in diverse ways. Some deemed the process satisfactory, not only for them but for the entire Liberian post-conflict society. The following are the accounts of two young veterans:

'the demobilisation process I really loved the idea, because it changed some people's mind ... people learned how to drive, people learned mechanic; people went to school. Also it changed some people's life. The people you find in various garages in Monrovia here, most of them are ex-combatants, and they keep making money on their own. It also helped to change the society.' (Anyon 2010 int.)

'After the disarmament the demobilisation went on with the destruction of command structures, some of our colleagues regretted why they did not go through the DDR process because they began to hear the good news where some of our colleagues were given US\$300, US\$150x2; some went through the formal education and some did vocational training. For some who did not know the importance of education they sold their daily allowance cards.' (Mawudem 2010 int.)

Other young veterans consider the process to be partly successful. The following interview excerpts attest to this: 'during the disarmament when you go there they will give you US\$150 and they asked what school you want to go to or you want to train. They were paying our tuition but after that, you know Liberians when they do things at the end of the day they will never end it ... the sponsorship began to decline ... so it caused

problem for us' (Evoo 2010 int.); 'the bad aspect is that if someone tells you that they are going to help you they should go to further steps and do it; but in our case they dropped the process of sponsoring us on the way' (Anyon 2010 int.).

There is a third category of child-soldiers who described the entire process as a fiasco. They levelled criticism against the process as they could not figure out how it was going to abate the plight of former combatants including young veterans (see Anini on page 6).

The various perceptions of the reintegration process by former child-soldiers, as revealed through the above interview excerpts, point to the emergence of at least three major categories of young veterans in the post-conflict Liberia society: the young veterans who went through the mainstream education successfully; young veterans who made it through vocational training projects; and young veterans who are still roaming the streets, and constitute a threat to the peace and stability of the post-conflict society. Former combatants who could not make it through the mainstream education and vocational training, the two principal reintegration components, may become counterproductive to the post-conflict reconstruction. This latter category of young veterans is a reservoir of potential professional soldiers; this article therefore suggests a military career as a potential redemptive pathway to absorb some of these veterans.

## **YOUNG VETERANS' REINTEGRATION AND THE MILITARY CAREER**

The envisaged disintegration of war families during the demobilisation stage of the DDR process does not lead to dissolving of the underlying ties of these families; and even if there is disintegration, often new war families develop in the form of instrumental coalitions (Kirkpatrick & Ellis 2004). The National Ex-Combatants Peacebuilding Initiative (NEPI)<sup>5</sup> initiates life-transforming projects and typifies such post-conflict war families (Jaye, 2009). While there are positive war families, there are also some negative ones, and this paper suggests a military career to accommodate the latter.

The creation of a post-conflict youth military academy to absorb some young veterans and its effectiveness could help the post-conflict society solve some of its problems including crime and unemployment. Leaving young veterans to fend for themselves through substandard vocational training may lead to the development of a crop of idle drifters and criminals. As a young veteran pointed out: 'Once a soldier is always a soldier in his entire life. If he gets to the larger community it doesn't mean that he has forgotten his training. He can perform any guerrilla tactics in that community to survive at the detriment of the community.' (Gracias 2010 int.). Gracias' statement shows that young veterans, just like adult fighters, tend to use the jungle manoeuvres they learned during wartime in the post-conflict society whenever these may be deemed useful. Such tactics are predatory behaviours and may include minor and major theft, raiding, looting and other forms of criminal activities. Such criminal practices intensify when these young veterans are unemployed; and this is commonplace in African post-conflict societies. Actually such young veterans need 'mental disarmament' (Malan 2000:44), if they are to conform to societal norms. But since the reintegration process inevitably leaves out some of these young veterans, the post-conflict society will definitely be infested by individuals whose behaviours may be antithetical to the post-conflict societal norms. A post-conflict youth military academy could be used to channel such negative tendencies

and make them profitable to the society, by combining mainstream education and military training.

There are various factors that point to the possibility of and the necessity for a youth military academy. Some young veterans' longing to embrace a military career is one of these reasons. During the Liberian civil war, Kanaba<sup>7</sup> a child-soldier, a battle-hardened killer within the LURD<sup>8</sup> revealed the following: 'I enjoyed fighting. I want to be soldier when war finished [sic]' (IRIN 2003b). Kanaba's desire to join the army is indicative of other child-soldiers with similar aspirations but who may not have had the opportunity to make this known. Young veterans like Kanaba were not given the opportunity to fulfil that dream as a military career was not suggested among the reintegration strategies. This readiness to be part of the army was confirmed by the post-conflict roles that some of these young veterans played in Liberia and neighbouring countries. Since the military genius in young veterans was not prioritised by the Liberian government and its DDR partners, some were later used in armed conflicts bordering Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire. The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child-soldiers (2008:212) confirms this:

In the period June 2004 to June 2005 there was reportedly active recruitment of former combatants in Monrovia and in Bong and Nimba counties bordering Guinea for both pro- and anti-government groups in Guinea ... Many of the Liberian former combatants approached by recruiters had previously been recruited as children during the conflicts in Sierra Leone and Liberia ... – many of them former child soldiers – available. ... Scores, if not hundreds, of Liberian children who had been reunited with their families following their demobilisation during the disarmament process were reportedly re-recruited in Liberia between late 2004 and late 2005 to fight in Côte d'Ivoire, both for pro-government militias and for the opposition Forces Armées [sic] des Forces Nouvelles [sic] (FAFN).

During wars child-soldiers are often on the frontlines and partake in hostilities, and make good fighters (Dallaire 2010), and Liberia was no exception. Consequently many child-soldiers developed, although not in a well-organised or professional manner, exceptional skilfulness in military tactics and operations. Just like adult fighters they underwent tough induction training, laid ambushes, and manned checkpoints. Although some of them were forcefully recruited, the one career for which they were trained and through which they could have served their nation, was a military career. Paradoxically, this likely envisaged military career they commenced in the jungle was hamstrung by age-centred legal considerations.

The widespread and prevailing criminal syndicates in African post-conflict countries and even in neighbouring countries, although not always, are the result of a diversion of former fighters' ability to do something they have been prevented from doing officially. It would have been fairer to cater for all the mature<sup>7</sup> young veterans wanting to continue with their military career by creating a special military academy for them, instead of infesting fragile post-conflict communities with individuals whose lives could not fit into a society where they are forced to become what war did not prepare them to be. The following questions may be raised: What of the economic implications? How can young soldiers who committed atrocities and lost people's trust be transformed into dependable soldiers? This paper argues that it would be better to make professional soldiers from the mature young veterans. When these soldiers learn the values and ethos

of professional soldiers, they could become refined soldiers, more controlled and therefore useful to the society. This usefulness would also imply societal acceptance.

The Congolese government's clarion call for an intensive enrolment of youths into the Congolese army and the consequent positive response of the youths to the call (Radio Okapi 2012)<sup>9</sup>, provide an indication of the viability of creating an academy for youths formerly involved in African civil wars. To date this kind of thinking about reintegration has never been brought to the fore. It can be argued that most youths who positively responded to this call were young veterans who participated in the various phases of the war which started in 1996 in the DRC. Such an initiative to reinforce the Congolese army could have taken place earlier; precisely during the various DDR periods by painstakingly selecting willing child-soldiers-to-be-demobilised who were deemed fit to be part of the army. Many young veterans would have been infused with patriotism through becoming members of the professional defense force of their country instead of leaving them to a cyclical service within armed groups.

The military forces of a nation are made up of individual soldiers who are willing to defend their country against any external attacks. Professional soldiers understand that they are to serve the nation by protecting it, and that they are under civilian authority (Janowitz 1960). They are members of the society, and consequently should not be perceived as strangers or enemies by other members of the society. While this understanding of the ideal role of the military in a stable and peaceful country may be widely accepted by members of the society, it becomes questionable, particularly in societies affected by war where usually the line between professional armies and negative armed groups becomes blurred. The barbaric roles played by some soldiers in some African countries becomes obvious during elections and peaceful demonstrations by civilians; the military tasked to quell civil unrest, savagely represses demonstrators, a mission initially meant for the police. This enmity between armies and civilians in Africa has eroded the honour initially given to armies as a result of their protective role, and paved the way for a crisis of confidence between them and the rest of the society. During civil wars in Africa, that gulf between the military and civilians widens. State soldiers and rebels all commit diverse atrocities — killing, looting, rape, torture, to mention a few, are commonplace. Such repugnant attitudes of the military have dire consequences including obstacles related to the reintegration of former fighters in recent or current African wars. The army of a country should consider itself and be perceived as one of the entities making up society.

The proposed youth military academy would provide post-conflict countries with a cadre of well-trained soldiers endowed with a sense of constructive patriotism. These soldiers would protect their society, thus ensuring their social acceptance, which is the ultimate goal of reintegration. This seems a possible way of preventing these mentally armed former fighters from becoming a reservoir of rebels, mercenaries and terrorists in their country or across porous borders of West Africa (Addo 2006; Aning & Pokoo 2013).

This academy could also be a means to transform young veterans from agents of destruction into agents of redemption, where they easily become actors in the post-conflict reconstruction process. As a matter of fact, such concern to participate in the post-conflict reconstruction process already exists, but how this should be translated

into action is the challenge. As a young veteran pointed out: ‘as we were part of the war, the destruction of the war, we found out that it was necessary to contribute to the reconstruction of the country ... so we can use ourselves as role model for other ex-coms<sup>10</sup> to follow’ (Gracias 2010 int.).

From the above interview excerpt it is obvious that there are young veterans who are willing to participate in the post-conflict reconstruction process; but that willingness cannot be translated into reality only through the traditional channels of child-soldiers’ reintegration including vocational training and mainstream education. A youth military academy should also be considered as viable reintegration option. During wartime, the military duty of child-soldiers was to serve the interest of specific warring factions; their duties and activities were not in keeping with the interest of the society. Through the proposed academy, there would be a shift in loyalty from serving armed groups to serving a post-conflict nation.

Lack of professionalism has been the hallmark of many African post-conflict armies. Two factors account for this: to a great extent post-conflict armies are made up of soldiers who are illiterate, and lack proper understanding of post-conflict reconstruction and nation building. Such soldiers simply view their profession as a survival strategy and do not actually understand the sacrifice attached to it, or they know the sacrifice but are not willing to pay the price. Soldiers of some state armies rape the girls and women whose protection is at the centre of their mission. The DRC, with the multi-layered continual defections of soldiers from the army and the formation of many armed groups, is a typical example (The Enough Project 2012). A better way to abate or eradicate such flaws that characterise armies in African post-conflict countries is to professionalise such armies in theory and practice. Preparing a dignified army of soldiers through a youth military academy could be a good point of departure.

Recruits in this military academy would receive a formal education similar to the mainstream education but definitely in a military context. Young veterans who could not cope with the mainstream education system may cope with one taking place in a military context, simply because their service with warring factions during the war has prepared them for this. Teachers, instructors and tutors will be dealing with learners who have had similar experiences. In the military context there will be mutual understanding between learners and trainers to a great extent. The stigmatisation that some young veterans might have been grappling with in mainstream education would almost be absent in such an academy. Education in this academy would make up for some child-soldiers’ lack of opportunity for any education previously. The education would sharpen their perspective on social issues contrary to many unprofessional post-conflict military personnel whose ignorance and illiteracy quite often combine to estrange them from the very society they are supposed to protect<sup>11</sup>.

The recruitment of soldiers into state armed forces in some African countries is usually characterised by tribalism (Ellis 1993), and the pre-war Liberian army was a typical example (Mekenkamp *et al.* 1999). This discriminatory approach to army formation also affects the recruitment of youth into military academies during peacetime. The difference between a peacetime youth military academy and a post-conflict youth

military academy lies in the fact that the young soldiers-to-be recruited into the second category, have had an experience of serving as soldiers within warring factions during the civil war. What is required to mould them into professional soldiers is institutionalised training. But such recruitment should be done in such a way that the ethnic or tribal inequalities which mark pre-war youth recruitment are prevented or mitigated.

The young veterans' integration into the army at the point of demobilisation could draw on the help of reliable warring factions' commanders, who could attest to the military capacity of some of the former child-soldiers. At the outset of the 2004 official DDR process in Liberia, 48 generals from various warring factions were used for information dissemination campaigns (United Nations Development Programme Liberia 2004). These generals could also be used to identify young veterans capable and willing to serve in the state army. For such a selection process to be successful, it must be guided by measures guarding it against nepotism and cronyism.

The success of a problem-solving youth post-war military academy will depend on the level of ownership by post-conflict governments. Such ownership must hinge on well thought-out state policies in order to ensure its institutionalisation and sustainability, and increase the level of commitment of the recruits.

A remobilisation of former fighters becomes possible if fail-safe monitoring mechanisms are not put in place to guard against the former. All the same, the curriculum of the proposed academy should make patriotism a core component. The education dimension of this academy should be a top priority as this would support understanding in the prospective post-conflict soldiers that the state army should be under civilian authority, thus smoothing civil-military relations, a prerequisite for a genuine reconstruction and national development.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The research leading to this article was conducted using an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) which encourages the use of a small cohort of research informants (Smith *et al.* 2009). Consequently the data collection was done through in-depth interviews of a dozen young veterans in 2010 in Monrovia, the capital city of Liberia. Research informants were interviewed on a one-on-one basis and face-to-face. The data analysis was done through first and second cycle coding (Saldaña 2009). Document analysis was also used for additional information to develop certain points and to put some of the claims into perspective. Owing to the peculiar nature of the research participants, ethical measures such as a pre-research induction course on how to interview war-affected youths, and debriefing after interviews, were taken to ensure a smooth interview process and to vouchsafe for the safety of the informants. This was done with the help of two NGOs involved in the rehabilitation of former combatants in Monrovia.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper reveals that post-conflict social reintegration in African war-affected countries revolves around mainstream education and vocational training, and Liberia was no exception. The paper argues that apart from the mainstream education and vocational

training, a post-conflict youth military academy should be considered as another viable option to reintegrate young veterans into the post-conflict society. Jungle soldiering often transforms young veterans into socially repugnant beings. Society sees in them agents of harm and destruction who might compound its existing woes and predicaments. This paper argues that a shift from a view of veterans as agents of destruction to agents of protection, and hence societal acceptance, is possible through a youth military academy.

The formation of post-conflict war-families among young veterans is inevitable. These war families can only be in keeping with societal norms if their members are resourcefully used; and being part of the army is one of the ways to achieve this. The mainstream education usually suggested during demobilisation seems ideal for some youth, and the importance of education as a key to the development of an individual and the society cannot be overemphasised (Chandola *et al.* 2006; Glaeser *et al.* 2007) but for some young veterans this education should be in a military context. It would be erroneous to assume blindly that all young veterans must go to school even if there are signs that they may not be successful in life through formal education.

While success stories about the education of young veterans exist, there is also evidence that some young veterans cannot make it through conventional classrooms. The mass failure of all the 25,000 students who wrote the 2013 university admission exam in Liberia attests to this (BBC News Africa 2013). The continual effort to transform former child-soldiers into upstanding civilian citizens, even when the war has moulded some of them into potential professional soldiers, deepens their isolation from other citizens in post-conflict communities.

Ignoring young veterans' military prowess on the frontlines and undermining their usefulness in consciously building a more professional post-conflict army, should be perceived as a strategic oversight with negative outcomes. The wealth of combat techniques acquired by these young veterans could be improved through a more formal military academy. Such an academy may have the capacity to make child-soldier veterans more useful and friendly to their society. Becoming part of the defence vanguard of their post-conflict nation could instil in young veterans a sense of national pride. The promising future of some young veterans can become a cynical mirage through crime, the legally overstressed vulnerability, and physical and psychological immaturity.

This paper proposes that if some young veterans cannot be 'unmade' through the traditional and international community-backed reintegration strategies, hinging on mainstream education and vocational training, an alternative strategy should be envisaged, to make these former fighters useful to and accepted by their communities. The premise upon which this argument is made is that the jungle-inherited military career of young veterans can be professionalised.

With regard to child-soldiering, the paper argues also that, despite its positive outcomes, the compliance of war-affected countries with international legal standards paradoxically has a negative threefold impact: firstly, it distorts young veterans' individual career dreams; secondly, it deprives the post-conflict nation of a host of its youth capable of serving in the army if given the opportunity; and thirdly, it regrettably infests the Liberian society with miscreants, assertive mendicants, and the West African sub-region with

cross-border guerrillas. The paper finally argues that for this remedial option of a military career to be effective it needs to be institutionalised; such institutionalisation will ensure its sustainability guarding it against tribalism and war-profiteering.

## NOTES

1. The first phase of the Liberian civil war took place between 1989 and 1996. Failure by the parties to the conflict to effectively disarm and demobilise their combatants paved the way for the second phase between 1997 and 2003.
2. The United Nations-backed programme through which most African post-war governments ensure the shift of fighters from soldiers to civilians is Disarmament, Demobilisation (DD) and Rehabilitation, Reinsertion, Reintegration (Rs). While the D-component usually remains unchanged, the number of Rs in the R-component may vary leading to three acronyms for the same programme: DDR, DDDR, and DDDRR. This is an indication of the complexities which characterise the programme. But for the purpose of this paper DDR (Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration) has been adopted.
3. The Liberian Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed in Accra (Ghana) on 18 August 2003 by all the parties to the conflict.
4. The discussion in this paper focuses on young veterans who were officially disarmed and demobilised.
5. The National Ex-combatants Peacebuilding Initiative (NEPI) which has become the Network for Empowerment and Progressive Initiatives, is a Liberian local NGO created by young former fighters to contribute to the peacebuilding process and national development in Liberia.
6. A 15-year-old Liberian child-soldier; his real name is withheld.
7. Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) was one of the warring factions.
8. By mature young veterans the author means young veterans who have exceeded 18 years, who have not developed any battle fatigue, and who are healthy enough to begin a military career.
9. The government of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) started to enrol youths into the ranks of the national army (FARDC) from August 2012. The objective of this youth enrolment was to numerically strengthen and rejuvenate the ranks of the army in order to end the activities of armed groups particularly in the Kivu provinces.
10. 'Ex-coms' used by young veterans during interview sessions is an abridged form of 'ex-combatants'.
11. This is as a result of the author's observation in war-torn zones where he served before as field and protection officer.

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### Interviews

Evoo, Anyon, Mawudem, Petit, Anini, and Gracias are pseudonyms of some young veterans interviewed in Monrovia (Liberia) in June 2010. They served with various factions during the war; some in enemy factions at the outset of the conflict but later in the same factions.

DRAFT