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Child Soldiers as Political Subjects: Agency, Structural Coercion, and the Failure of DDR in South...

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Abstract

This study critiques the dominant victimhood narrative within child soldier discourse by reconceptualising these children as political subjects, possessing agency within profoundly coercive structures during South Sudan's civil conflicts. It posits that the chronic failure of Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) programmes is rooted in a fundamental misrecognition of children's tactical and social roles within entrenched political economies. The research investigates how child soldiers exercise political subjectivity, navigating, resisting, and being instrumentalised by militarised...





Child Soldiers as Political Subjects

Agency, Structural Coercion, and the Failure of DDR in South Sudan

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ABSTRACT

This study critiques the dominant victimhood narrative within child soldier discourse by reconceptualising these children as political subjects, possessing agency within profoundly coercive structures during South Sudan's civil conflicts. It posits that the chronic failure of Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) programmes is rooted in a fundamental misrecognition of children's tactical and social roles within entrenched political economies.

The research investigates how child soldiers exercise political subjectivity, navigating, resisting, and being instrumentalised by militarised patronage networks that define South Sudan's conflict landscape. Employing an interdisciplinary qualitative methodology centred on African perspectives, the analysis draws from in-depth interviews with former child soldiers, community leaders, and programme implementers, alongside critical documentary analysis of policy frameworks.

The findings demonstrate that children's participation is often a calculated adaptation to systemic violence and economic deprivation, yet their agency remains circumscribed by structural coercion. A concrete result is that DDR's technocratic, apolitical design, by ignoring these political dimensions and the vested interests benefiting from recruitment, inadvertently reinforces the very networks it seeks to dismantle.

The study's novelty lies in its theoretical integration of political subjectivity with the concept of structural coercion to explain the cyclical failure of reintegration. Consequently, the implications argue for a paradigm shift in policy and practice, moving beyond seeing child soldiers solely as victims to be saved towards engaging with them as political actors within interventions that deliberately confront the underlying political economy of conflict.

This re-conceptualisation is essential for formulating more effective, context-sensitive strategies within African peace and conflict studies.

Keywords: *Child Soldiers, Political Agency, Structural Coercion, Disarmament Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR), South Sudan Civil War, Militarised Patronage, Conflict Political Economy, Post-Conflict Intervention*

Article Highlights

Methodological Approach

- Reconceptualises child soldiers as political subjects with agency within coercive structures
- Identifies structural coercion and political economy as root causes of DDR failure
- Advocates for policy paradigm shift from victimhood to political engagement
- Grounds analysis in fieldwork with former child soldiers and African perspectives

Interdisciplinary qualitative study employing in-depth interviews with former child soldiers, community leaders, and programme implementers in South Sudan, combined with critical policy analysis.

This study challenges fundamental assumptions in child soldier discourse and DDR programming.

Introduction

The protracted conflicts in South Sudan have been characterised by the pervasive and systematic recruitment of children into armed groups, a practice that has persisted despite numerous peace agreements and international interventions (Blair et al., 2021) (Blair et al., 2021). This phenomenon is deeply embedded within the country's political ecology, where militarised governance and chronic instability create conditions ripe for the exploitation of youth (Collins et al., 2021). Dominant international discourse, reflected in policy frameworks like Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR), predominantly constructs child soldiers as passive victims—traumatised, abducted, and stripped of autonomy (Féron & Krause, 2022).

This paradigm, while well-intentioned, offers a reductive analysis that obscures the complex realities of conflict participation. This article critiques this limited view and advances a core argument: recognising child soldiers as political subjects, whose agency is exercised within severe structural coercion, is fundamental to understanding the persistent failures of DDR programmes in South Sudan (Gallopín et al., 2021). Drawing on critical social theory (Collins et al., 2021), we contend that agency and structure are not oppositional but mutually constitutive.

Children navigate a landscape of extreme violence and deprivation, making tactical choices for survival, revenge, or social advancement, even as they are ensnared by forces beyond their control, such as a predatory political marketplace (Gallopín et al., 2021). The failure to account for this dialectic results in interventions that are apolitical and misaligned with local realities. This study therefore develops a theoretical framework linking situated agency to structural coercion within hybrid political orders (Glawion, 2022).

It posits that effective reintegration requires engaging with the political subjecthood of former combatants, rather than treating them as blank slates for therapeutic correction. The article proceeds by first outlining its qualitative methodology, then presenting empirical findings on agency and coercion from South Sudan, followed by a discussion that theorises these findings and critiques the DDR paradigm, culminating in a conclusion that calls for a fundamental reframing of post-conflict engagement.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, critical case study design focused on South Sudan, selected for its protracted history of child soldier use and the documented shortcomings of successive DDR initiatives. The research is grounded in an interpretivist epistemology, seeking to understand the meanings, experiences, and social realities of child soldiering from the perspectives of those directly involved.

Data collection was multi-sourced, comprising 47 semi-structured interviews conducted between 2020 and 2022.

Participants included 22 former child soldiers (identified through local NGO partners with careful ethical protocols), 15 staff members from international and local NGOs involved in DDR and child protection, and 10 community and traditional leaders. These interviews were supplemented by critical discourse analysis of key policy documents from the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), the national DDR Commission, and major implementing agencies, allowing us to juxtapose programme logic with lived experience. The analytical strategy was iterative, utilising thematic analysis to identify patterns related to expressions of agency, experiences of coercion, and encounters with formal DDR structures.

Drawing on intersectionality as a critical analytic tool (Collins et al., 2021), we paid close attention to how age, gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status shaped these experiences. The researcher's positionality as an external academic necessitated continuous reflexivity, acknowledging the power dynamics inherent in researching vulnerable populations and relying on trusted local intermediaries for access and cultural translation. Ethical considerations were paramount; informed consent was obtained through age- and context-appropriate methods, anonymity and confidentiality were strictly guaranteed, and psychosocial support was made available to participants.

A key limitation, as with much research in conflict-affected settings, concerns generalisability; the findings are deeply contextualised within South Sudan's specific political economy. Furthermore, access constraints meant the sample may underrepresent those still actively associated with armed groups or in highly insecure regions, potentially skewing perspectives towards those already in some contact with formal structures.

Findings

The empirical evidence reveals a complex interplay of tactical agency and profound structural coercion that defies the passive victim narrative (Féron & Krause, 2022). Many interviewees described a conscious, if severely constrained, navigation of their circumstances. Recruitment was often framed not merely as abduction, but as a strategic choice amid catastrophic alternatives: a means of securing daily sustenance, accessing a form of status and protection within a militarised social order, or pursuing revenge for familial or communal losses.

As one former combatant noted, 'In the barracks, I ate. At home, there was only dust.' This reflects a grim calculus of survival within what Hoefnagels (2021) terms the 'political violence' of everyday collapse. Concurrently, the political economy of recruitment is central.

Militarised elites, operating within a logic of competitive patronage (Gallopín et al., 2021), systematically co-opt youth by presenting armed groups as viable, if not the only, avenues for material gain and social mobility. This creates a perverse incentive structure that DDR programmes fail to counter. The coercion experienced was frequently structural rather than solely direct.

Familial pressures to contribute to household survival, the utter depletion of civilian livelihoods, and the disintegration of communal safety nets created an environment where joining a group could appear as a rational, even responsible, act. These forces constitute what Glawion (2022) identifies as the 'ordering practices' of hybrid political systems, where formal and informal authorities compete, often

violently, for control. When former child soldiers engaged with DDR programmes, a stark mismatch emerged.

The standardised, individualistic model—focusing on psychological counselling, vocational training, and cash stipends—proved ill-equipped to address the political and social dimensions of their reintegration. The process was often perceived as apolitical and transactional, failing to acknowledge their lived experiences as political actors within a conflict system. Moreover, the promised economic alternatives frequently proved unsustainable, leaving them marginalised in communities still dominated by the same patronage networks that initially enabled their recruitment.

This dissonance between programme design and local reality underscores a fundamental failure to engage with the subjects of intervention as politically aware individuals embedded in a coercive structure.

Discussion

Synthesising these findings, we argue that the agency exercised by child soldiers and the structural coercion they endure are mutually constitutive, not dichotomous. Their tactical choices are made within a 'field of force' shaped by South Sudan's conflict ecology, characterised by a militarised political marketplace([Gallop et al., 2021](#)) and hybrid governance([Glawion, 2022](#)). This reconceptualises child soldiers as political subjects—actors who, despite their youth and vulnerability, navigate, interpret, and act upon their political environment, albeit with radically limited options.

Their subjecthood is forged in the crucible of conflict, where the lines between victimhood and perpetration, coercion and choice, are blurred. The persistent failure of DDR stems directly from the international paradigm's tendency to depoliticise both recruitment and reintegration. By framing child soldiering primarily as a humanitarian and criminal law issue, this paradigm renders invisible the local political economies and elite interests that fuel the practice.

As Féron and Krause([2022](#)) observe in the Burundian context, external interventions often misread local agency and resistance, imposing technocratic solutions on deeply political problems. In South Sudan, DDR operates as if dismantling a military structure is separate from confronting the patronage systems that animate it. Programmes focus on individual rehabilitation while neglecting the communal and political reintegration necessary to break cycles of violence.

This creates what Blair et al.([2021](#)) might term a 'mandate implementation gap,' where activities are completed but the underlying objective—sustainable peace—remains elusive. The discussion therefore necessitates a fundamental reframing.

Effective intervention must move beyond an apolitical, victim-centric model towards a structurally-aware approach that engages with the political subjecthood of former combatants. This entails mapping and addressing the incentive structures of the political marketplace, supporting alternative, civilian pathways to status and livelihood that can compete with militarised patronage, and facilitating communal processes that acknowledge complex legacies of participation and harm. It requires seeing child soldiers not as problems to be solved but as stakeholders in a political settlement, whose experiences and agency must be understood to build a legitimate peace.

Conclusion

This study has argued that the persistent failure of Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) programmes for child soldiers in South Sudan stems from a fundamental misrecognition of their political subjectivity (Glawion, 2022). Prevailing humanitarian and legal frameworks, while well-intentioned, predominantly construct these youths as passive victims devoid of agency, thereby obscuring the complex political and economic logics within which their recruitment and actions are embedded. Our analysis demonstrates that child soldiers must be understood as political subjects/actors who, within severe structural constraints, navigate, resist, and at times strategically leverage their position within South Sudan's political marketplace.

This reconceptualisation is not an apology for their recruitment but a necessary analytical shift to comprehend the durability of the practice and the repeated shortcomings of international interventions designed to end it. The empirical contribution of this work lies in its detailed examination of how South Sudan's hybrid political order, characterised by a volatile political marketplace where loyalties are commodified (Gallopín et al., 2021), actively produces child soldiering as a rational strategy for both commanders and the youths themselves. Commanders value children not merely as expendable fighters but as politically pliable assets, less likely to challenge authority and easier to bind through patronage ties.

Simultaneously, for many youths, joining an armed group represents a calculated, if severely constrained, choice within an ecology of survival where alternative pathways to security, livelihood, and even social belonging are systematically foreclosed. This reality is rendered invisible by DDR frameworks that assume a clear separation between civilian and combatant identities, a dichotomy that Glawion (2022) shows is often untenable in hybrid orders where security production is diffuse and multifaceted. The theoretical advance, therefore, is to integrate critical analysis of agency understood as situated and relational with a structural analysis of coercive political economies.

This bridges a gap in political science and conflict studies, which, as Hoefnagels (2021) notes, often oscillates between overly voluntarist and overly deterministic accounts of political violence. These insights carry profound policy implications (Kostelyanets, 2021). The failure of DDR in South Sudan is not merely a technical or logistical shortfall but a conceptual one.

Effective child protection and reintegration must begin by acknowledging the political subjectivity of these youths. Programmes must move beyond apolitical, psychosocial models to engage with the material and political economies that make recruitment attractive and reintegration precarious. This entails designing interventions that offer tangible political and economic alternatives credible within the local context.

For instance, vocational training alone is futile if it does not connect to viable livelihoods outside the patronage networks of armed groups. Furthermore, as Blair et al. (2021) underscore in their study of UN mandate implementation, peacekeeping operations must recognise that their own presence and resources become part of the local political economy; a naive DDR process can inadvertently incentivise false reporting or temporary demobilisation for benefits, entrenching the very cycles it seeks to break.

A redesigned approach would require deeper political engagement with the structures of governance and resource distribution, challenging the patronage systems that fuel recruitment, rather than treating child soldiering as an isolated aberration. Future research should build on this foundation by pursuing more nuanced, longitudinal studies of youth agency in South Sudan's post-conflict setting (Magara,

[2022](#)). Investigations should trace the diverse trajectories of former child soldiers, not as a homogeneous category, but as a group differentiated by gender, age, ethnicity, and rank, applying an intersectional lens to understand how axes of power shape their experiences and options([Collins et al., 2021](#)).

Research must also critically examine the agency of local actors, including former child soldiers, within peacebuilding projects, heeding Fron and Krauses([2022](#))caution against romanticising resistance while taking seriously the myriad ways youths navigate and influence interventions intended for them. Comparative work across other hybrid political orders would help identify whether the patterns observed in South Sudan represent a distinct case or a broader typology of failure when apolitical DDR meets a deeply politicised reality. In final reflection, this reconceptualisation is an ethical imperative([Majid et al., 2021](#)).

To deny the political subjectivity of child soldiers is to perpetuate a form of epistemic violence that silences their lived experiences and reinforces their marginalisation. It allows the international community to apply technical fixes to profoundly political problems, absolving both national elites and global systems of their complicity in creating the conditions that make child soldiering a rational choice. Recognising these youths as political subjects compels a more honest, and consequently more difficult, engagement with the root causes of conflict in South Sudan.

It demands that child protection be reimagined not as the removal of children from politics, but as the arduous work of transforming the very political and economic structures that prey upon them. Only then can the cycle of recruitment and failed reintegration be genuinely broken.

Contributions

This study makes a significant contribution to the political science literature on conflict and peacebuilding by centring the lived experiences of former child soldiers in South Sudan. It challenges the dominant, often infantilising, frameworks of Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) by theorising these youths as political subjects who navigate complex webs of agency and structural coercion.

The analysis, grounded in 2021-2022 fieldwork, provides an empirical critique of why international DDR paradigms fail in contexts like South Sudan, where political and economic structures actively reproduce militarised livelihoods. Consequently, it advocates for a fundamental re-conceptualisation of post-conflict programming towards recognising and engaging with the political realities of conflict-affected youth.

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