

# THE IMPACT OF CHILD SOLDIERING ON EDUCATION AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT IN CONFLICT-AFFECTED AFRICAN STATES

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## ABSTRACT

Child soldiering in war ravaged African countries presents significant and intractable challenges to sustainable human development. The issue is worrisome because in the last five years, thousands of children have been enlisted as soldiers by both government forces and armed groups throughout Africa. The militarization of minors by military forces and non-state armed groups represent a significant global challenge to education and human development. This is because since 2020 millions of minors residing within active conflict zones faced the threat of recruitment. It is against this background the study explores the causes of child soldiers in war torn Africa countries and its impact on education and sustainable human capacity development. The study employed secondary method of data collection, sourced from textbooks, journals, internet, among others, covering from 2020 to 2025. The study concludes that the occurrence of child soldiering is informed by the protracted conflicts which stimulate the enlistment of minors into armed groups to exacerbate cycles of violence and instability. The findings revealed that the socioeconomic repercussions of employing child soldiers significantly hinder national development and the absence of education leads to a depletion of human capital and diminished productivity. Finally, the study recommends a holistic approach with emphasis on the implementation of 2025 Rabat Declaration on Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) held in Rabat, Morocco.

**Keywords:** Child, Development, Human, soldiers, States, Sustainable, War

## Introduction

Africa has a remarkably young population, with 40% of its citizens under the age of 16, and this demographic is increasingly affected by escalating violence. The rising violence is bothersome especially in the Sahel region, where Islamist militant groups are gaining ground. A United Nations report from 2021 pointed out that West and Central Africa experienced the highest verified instances of child soldier recruitment from 2016 to 2020 (Institute of Security Studies cited by Haupt, 2025). In 2021, a staggering 6,310 children were drawn into conflict zones globally, with Africa representing 40% of this worldwide child soldier figure. Additionally, between 2005 and 2022, over 105,000 children were registered as having been recruited by armed forces and non-state actors in conflict areas around the globe (Haupt, 2025). The phenomenon of child soldiering in conflict-torn African countries poses significant challenges to sustainable human development. This is because areas affected by child soldiering often see a decrease in economic productivity, as child soldiers struggle to reintegrate into society and face stigma and discrimination. According to Agudiegwu (2016) the phenomenon reduces economic productivity because former child combatants miss crucial years of schooling. Upon returning to civilian life, these youth face extreme stigma and discrimination, which creates high barriers to employment, drives social exclusion, and risks pushing them back into armed groups.

Furthermore, the use of child soldiers can erode trust within communities, as former child soldiers may be viewed with suspicion or fear, thereby fracturing social cohesion. The 2026 Cambridge study cited by Baldwin (2026) highlighted the alarming prevalence of child soldiers in Somalia, revealing that despite international efforts to combat this issue, recruitment remains widespread. The study documented that an estimated 20% of armed groups in Somalia consist of children fewer than 18 years. In the same vein, Darden (2019) validates this claim, highlighting a "push and pull" dynamic. Socioeconomic hardships and systemic failures "push" vulnerable children toward armed groups for survival or protection, while extremist networks exploit this environment with ideological or financial incentives to "pull" them into their ranks. The social and environmental factors which include poverty, lack of education, and the influence of extremist groups are responsible for the growth of child soldiers (Cambridge University, 2026 cited by Baldwin, 2026). The study further indicated that many children are forcibly recruited or persuaded through manipulation tactics, with limited options for reintegration into society post-conflict (Baldwin, 2026).

The issue of child soldiers in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has direct ties to violence, poverty and exploitation, as armed conflict continues to destabilize communities across the country (Morris, 2026). According to the DRC Research Team cited by Jaël (2025) documented 2,365 cases of children recruited as soldiers within 2024 a single year. This research illustrated the escalating nature of this phenomenon, driven primarily by violence and armed conflict among various militia groups. The report pointed out that child soldiers were often used for frontline combat, support roles, or sexual exploitation, which significantly impairs their psychological and emotional development.

The study on the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda 2025 provided first-hand accounts of former child soldiers who had been abducted and forced into conflict. In addition, girls and women were exposed to forced displacement and physical and sexual violence. Also between the mid-1980s and the mid-2000s, over 50,000 people in Northern Uganda, including more than 25,000 children were abducted (Cassar, et.al, 2026). The study narrated the brutal experiences faced by child soldiers, including coercion into violence and the loss of family

connections (Uganda Research Initiative, 2025 cited by Stahl, 2025). Participants reported varying degrees of psychological trauma and difficulties in reintegration into their communities. According to information from the United Nations Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, alongside reports with Human Rights Watch as cited by the Peace and Security Council (2025), opined that the regions bearing the brunt of these issues are primarily Central and West Africa. Notably, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has been reported as having the highest incidence of new child recruits, especially among non-state armed groups. In Nigeria, terrorist groups are actively kidnapping and utilizing hundreds of children for roles in combat and support, with a considerable portion of these affected individuals being young girls (Aisedion et al, 2025). The Central African Republic (CAR) witnesses both non-state armed groups and government-aligned forces repeatedly using children for combat and logistical roles (Hastira, et.al 2025). In Mali, the turmoil has resulted in numerous children being recruited by extremist factions, and there have been verified cases involving national security forces as well (UN 2017). Therefore, internal conflict, political intolerance, and escalating sectarian violence in Africa have resulted in widespread poverty, malnutrition, and considerable underdevelopment across the continent (Gowan & Davis, 2024; UNICEF, 2022).

The objectives of the paper were to examine the causes and recruitment of child soldiering in Africa. This is by highlighting its impact on education and sustainable human capacity development. The significance of the study underscores the need for policy makers to make policies aimed at prevention and rehabilitation that will ultimately promote human development. Moreover, addressing the issue of child soldiers is fundamental for achieving peace and security in the region, as it directly impacts conflict dynamics and governance structures (Bøås, 2021). Thus, examining child soldiering is integral to developing comprehensive strategies for sustainable human development in post-conflict African states. The study used secondary data to collect and analyze data that has already been collected, processed, and published by other researchers. The sources of secondary data used in this study include: Peer-reviewed articles, internet, books, among others. The study employed historical analysis to analyze the data collected.

## **Literature review and theoretical framework**

### **Child Soldiers in Africa**

The recruitment of children by armed militants and government forces remains a significant and ongoing challenge, despite 196 countries having ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It is also noted that even when 172 countries endorsed the Optional Protocol on the involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (OPAC), children in conflict zones still continue to face the severe risk of being recruited by both state and non-state actors (Faulkner, 2024). The heightened vulnerability of children aligns with rising violence in several regions, particularly in the Sahel, where Islamist insurgencies have expanded dramatically in recent years. A United Nations report (2021) designated West and Central Africa as the latest epicenter for child soldier recruitment, noting that this region recorded the highest number of verified cases between 2016 and 2020 (Faulkner, 2024). Countries such as Mali and Burkina Faso have been particularly affected, grappling with the threats posed by Al-Qaeda and Islamic State-linked groups. For instance, the U.N. Secretary-General's 2022 report on children and armed conflict in Mali documented a persistent increase in child recruitment over numerous years. In Burkina Faso, as of October 2023, at least a quarter of all schools were closed due to armed groups' ongoing "war against education" (Faulkner, 2024). Furthermore, beyond the Sahel, nations

including Nigeria, Sudan, South Sudan, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and Somalia have all faced ongoing issues with child soldier recruitment over the last decade (Faulkner, 2024).

In the African continent, West and Central Africa have the highest number of child soldiers in the world. According to United Nations Children's Fund (2021) the regions have been hit by growing conflict in which more than 21,000 children have been recruited by government forces and armed groups since 2016. The Sahel region that stretches from northern Senegal through parts of Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Chad, and into Sudan and Eritrea, has a bitter share in violence. Several countries in the Sahel have been embroiled in conflicts involving several armed groups, military campaigns by national armies and international partners, as well as local militias (UNICEF 2021)

### **Sustainable human capacity development in Africa continent**

Human capital development is the most critical factor than physical capital in any country aspiring for wealth creation. This has led to the drive for knowledge to enhance productivity because the loss of human capital due to insecurity remains a "cog in the wheel" of progress (Aisedion, & Omoregie, 2021). The need for human capacity development in Africa is borne out of the growing population and high rate of urbanization as well as the demand for sustainable infrastructure development (Ene, et.al, 2016). However, Africa's systems of learning are weak reflecting a wide skills shortages, mismatches, deficiencies and attendant high unemployment. Human capital encompasses education, skills, and health of the people which are critical for inclusive growth and shared prosperity (Leornard, 2022). Therefore, a country that lacks human capital cannot aspire or sustain economic growth. Any country that lacks the capacity to invest in human capital will not have a workforce for highly-skilled jobs and cannot compete effectively in the global economy. From this context, human capital includes education, skills, and health of people playing a pivotal role in the transformation of African economies. This is why access to sources of human capital in Africa, has increased significantly over the past two decades. However, the quality of life still lags behind significantly even in other developing countries. In Nigeria for instance, human capital is critical for inclusive growth and development. Consequently, investment in human beings automatically improves social and economic outcomes through education and learning experience, or health interventions (Leornard, 2022).

Human capital development is hindered as the children's access to education and healthcare are often disrupted. Instead of training, children are recruited to take part in fighting or for support roles. The development of the children is thwarted as children are separated from their families and end up displaced or find themselves 'on the move. Human capital development is affected when children are deprived of care and protection particularly their education is severely affected by armed conflicts with generalized degradation of education systems (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2021). Despite the fact that educational facilities should never be targeted in a conflict, reality shows that school buildings are often targeted, damaged or even used for military purposes.

### **Theoretical frame work**

The 2025 Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) research on intergenerational trauma and 2026 Cambridge study on masculinity and survival will be employed as the theoretical frame work of the study. The phenomenon of child soldiering in conflict-affected African nations has drawn global attention due to its long-term repercussions on education and broader human development. This analysis incorporates findings from the 2025 Democratic

Republic of the Congo (DRC) research on intergenerational trauma and the 2026 Cambridge study on masculinity and survival, elucidating how the involvement of children in armed conflict alters their educational trajectories and socio-economic prospects. The DRC, marred by prolonged conflict, has witnessed a disturbing trend of child soldiering. The 2025 DRC research highlights the concept of intergenerational trauma, which posits that the psychological scars of violence and war are transmitted across generations as children are often forcibly abducted or driven to join armed factions, such as the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), due to extreme poverty, lack of educational opportunities, and the need for protection (Jaël, 2025). Children in these groups experience an average of six to 24 highly traumatic events, including witnessing killings, mutilations, and participating directly in combat. Girls forced into armed groups frequently experience severe sexual abuse and are often treated as "wives" to combatants, leading to high rates of stigmatization (Jaël, 2025).

Similarly, former child soldiers often return to their communities with heightened "appetitive aggression" and a diminished capacity for reconciliation, sometimes favouring retaliation as a coping mechanism. The DRC study illustrates how the trauma experienced by former child soldiers disrupts their cognitive processes, social interactions, and emotional regulation (Ibanda, 2025). Furthermore, based on prolonged conflict, child soldiers often miss critical schooling years due to their involvement in combat, exacerbating illiteracy rates in conflict-affected regions. By failing to secure a stable and quality education, these children are thrust into a cycle of poverty and violence that tends to perpetuate intergenerational trauma (Mbuyi, 2025).

Complementing the DRC study, the 2026 Cambridge research grapples with the themes of masculinity and survival of conflict in Somalia. Somalia is one of the most persistent backgrounds of child soldier recruitment globally. The intensification evolves from the emergence of the Islamic militant group Al Shabaab. This development has intensified fears about the insecurity of, and threat posed by combatants' children as agents of war in Somalia (Baldwin, 2026). The societal expectations are placed on young males in environments where violence is normalized. As a result young boys are often socialized into hyper masculine identities that encourage aggression, dominance, and survival at all costs (Baldwin, 2026). This paradigm induces the engagement in armed conflict or criminal activities as a means of survival as against educational aspirations and development. The Cambridge study suggests that many former child soldiers internalize a mindset that equates education with weakness, thus diminishing their engagement with formal schooling systems and fostering a culture that devalues academic success (Smith & Johnson, 2026). Such narratives not only hinder the personal growth of these individuals but can also destabilize communities attempting to rebuild. The educational disconnect further compounds developmental challenges, as youth who perceive little value in formal education are less likely to contribute to the socio-economic rejuvenation of their societies.

### **Causes of child soldiering in Africa and**

The 2025 DRC research notes that "poverty is a major factor leading to the recruitment of child soldiers as DRC in 2024 was the poorest country in the world. According to Brownell and Praetorius (2015), Faulkner (2024) and UNICEF (2022) armed groups being aware of the vulnerability of children will actively exploit it by using monetary incentives to lure children into their ranks. In many conflict-affected regions, children and their families face dire economic realities marked by poverty, lack of opportunity, and limited access to basic resources. The 2026 ICWA recruitment methods unveiled that some children are forcibly abducted and coerced,

threatened or manipulated by armed actors (UNICEF, 2022). Most children are recruited because they are seen as valuable resources. Militant groups take advantage of children's susceptibility to exploitation and loyalty because of their limited cognitive development and desire for social vices (UNICEF, 2022; Faulkner, 2024). In the same approach, coercion, manipulation, and outright abduction are all too common tactics being employed. This is because ruthless commanders view youngsters as ideal recruits, less likely to question orders and more expendable on the battlefield.

According to UN in 2024, cited by Jaël (2025) 2,365 cases of recruitment and use of children (1,651 boys and 714 girls) in the DRC with (approximately 98%) among the perpetrators are armed groups followed by regular forces (approximately 2%). This is because in DRC, social relationships are transformed into instruments of coercion as children are forced by their communities to join armed groups to protect their families. This development makes child recruitment to tear apart the social fabric of society as children abandon school, community, and family (Jaël, 2025). Apart from being coerced, some children join the armed forces through voluntarily action out of a desire to defend their communities from violence and oppression (UNICEF, 2022).

The cultural dimensions of child soldiering socially legitimize the involvement of children in some armed groups in the DRC, as children are perceived to possess spiritual powers (Denov, 2024). The "sacred" or "ritualistic" role in the war is ascribed to young people who are drawn to armed groups as a way to rebuild an identity and belong to a "warrior group. Child recruitment is a byproduct of adverse lack of access to quality education and meaningful economic prospects (Brownell & Praetorius, 2015). When children are denied the chance to learn, grow, and build a viable future for themselves, they become prime targets for recruitment by militant groups. Without the stabilizing influences of school, family, and community, these vulnerable youth find themselves idling, lacking the resources and support systems that could otherwise steer them away from the battlefield. Rebel commanders capitalize on this desperation, offering them "work". Moreover, the disruption of schooling during times of violence and unrest further exacerbates the problem. This vicious cycle traps successive generations in a spiral of poverty, violence, and militarization.

For some children, the decision to join an armed group is rooted in a desire for vengeance. They may have witnessed the killing or displacement of family members at the hands of rival factions, which fostered a deep-seated anger and thirst for retribution (War Child UK, 2018). This passion for revenge can become a powerful motivator, as children come to see the armed group as a vehicle for exacting justice and restoring a sense of personal or communal honor). Most at times, children lack trust in the government and believe the government are incapable of standing for and protecting them. This motive at times is not necessarily born of direct, personal loss. Rather, it can stem from a broader sense of injustice and distrust in the government's ability or willingness to protect their community. When formal systems of justice and security are perceived as failing, children may gravitate towards armed groups that present themselves as champions of the people's struggle.

In Somalia, armed groups such as Al-Shabaab exploited the dire economic conditions by luring impoverished youth into their ranks with promises of financial support and basic necessities. This underscored the findings of the 2026 Cambridge study, which indicates that many children in conflict zones are motivated with personal gain to be enlisted into child soldiering. The ICWA (2026) cited by Jaël, (2025) analysis highlights the recruitment methods, noting that some were forcibly abducted and coerced, while others voluntarily join to escape poverty, defend communities, and seek revenge. In Somalia, these methods manifest prominently, where coercion often involves kidnapping and forceful enlistment into militant

groups. Families living in conflict zones were deprived of their safety and were sometimes forced to submit to armed groups, resulting in children torn from their homes and thrust into militancy. Many young Somalis viewed joining a militia as a pathway to reclaiming their disintegrated traditional structures. Social structures that previously provided security and community support have been upended. This led to the propensity among youth to join armed groups in order to defend their communities from perceived threats.

The cultural dimensions of harm reveal how war is sometimes a continuation of a spiritual and traditional order. Some armed groups exploit traditional, identity-based, or cultural narratives to recruit children, relying on cultural, ideological, and religious dynamics in a context where the conflict alters traditional cultural norms. In Somalia, similar beliefs influenced their perceptions of child soldiers, infusing their involvement with notions of honor and valor (Jaël, 2025). The socio-political landscape in Somalia exacerbated the conditions that fostered child soldiering. The lack of a stable political framework facilitated the proliferation of armed groups. The collapsed state and continued civil strife contributed to an environment where challenges to authority were met with violence, making enlistment in militant groups a logical option for many children (ICWA, 2026 cited by Jaël, 2025). Where political instability remains a critical issue, the entrenchment of armed groups, alongside cultural valorization of warfare and poverty, contributes to the alarming prevalence of child soldiers.

### **The impact of Child Soldiering on Education and Sustainable Human Capacity Development in Africa Continent**

This section argues that child soldiering disrupts education, causes psychological trauma, and hinders economic growth. Child soldiering afflicts many war-torn regions in Africa which significantly undermines sustainable human capital development. This practice has far-reaching effects on families, communities, harm on the children involved and the broader socio-economic fabric of affected nations. The recruitment of children into armed conflict hinders their potential for growth, education, and healthy development. This creates long-lasting barriers that hold back sustainable development efforts. The 2025 Institute for Security Studies Africa report cited by Haupt (2025) notes that the economic repercussions of child soldiering profoundly hinder national development. The absence of education for these children leads to a depletion of human capital and diminished productivity. This ultimately fosters a cycle of long-term economic stagnation characterized by lower workforce participation. At the sometime elevated poverty levels, and diminished foreign investment, all stemming from persistent instability.

According to the DRC research documents 2025 cited by United Nations (2026) revealed that recruited children find themselves in a situation of lost schooling, persistent poverty, and a lack of opportunities. Child soldiers often miss out on schooling, thereby hindering their ability to contribute to society positively in the future. This educational disruption perpetuates cycles of poverty and underdevelopment. The trauma associated with being a child soldier can lead to long-term psychological issues that impede learning and personal development. The integration of former child soldiers into the economy can lead to distorted labour markets, where the skills and opportunities do not support the needs of a sustainable economy (Hawk, 2022). The negative effects of the use of force on civilians during hostilities have made child soldiers vulnerable combatants to harm both within and outside armed groups. In the DRC, abducted and recruited children are victims of murder, mutilations, war wounds, physical abuse, torture, arduous forced labour, drug use and addiction (Maguire, 2026). This condition have made them vulnerable to disease and malnutrition as some girls are subjected to rape, sexual slavery, and forced marriages with their recruiters and peers.

Beyond the visible and physical effects, the exposure of children to violent acts as members of armed groups in the DRC, can lead to mental health consequences (Jaël, 2025). In this circumstance, victims often exhibit high levels of trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder, criminal and aggressive behaviours. These mental health issues affect the individual's capacity to function in society and also pose challenges for community unity and stability. The stigma surrounding former child soldiers no doubts isolates them, thus making it difficult for them to reintegrate into their communities. These challenges disrupt the immediate lives of the children and also create broader social tensions that impede sustainable human capital development (Frantz, 2026). Furthermore, nations bear heightened costs related to social services that cater to the healthcare and legal requirements of former child soldiers. This worrisome task goes alongside with the social unrest generated by the difficulties of reintegrating these individuals into society.

The economic implications of child soldiering are significantly profound and pathetic. This is because children involved in armed conflict are often forced into various labour activities. The absence of educated, healthy adults severely hinders a nation's economic potential ( Paul 2024). Therefore, early childhood experiences significantly influence a country's economic as the loss of productive citizens poses substantial barriers to economic development. Additionally, reintegrating child soldiers into the workforce is often a costly process. Countries like Liberia and Sierra Leone, which have extensively experienced child soldiering, are facing immense challenges in vocational training and employment opportunities for former combatants (Jaël, 2025). In this case rehabilitation process becomes economic burden alongside the mechanisms needed to provide socioeconomic support. This is because the process can divert resources from other crucial areas, such as infrastructure and health care to hinder overall national development (Ogundunmade,et.al, 2022). The repercussions of child soldiering create a cycle of violence and impoverishment and extend into future generations. Communities that lost their youth to armed conflict are typically less able to cultivate a stable and productive society. This situation creates high rates of unemployment with accompany poor educational outcomes and psychological trauma.

### **Conclusion**

Child soldiering in Africa exerts a deep impact on sustainable human capital development. This is done by thwarting educational attainment, inflicting psychological scars, and inhibits economic growth. The absence of education limits children's ability to acquire essential skills. The loss of potential human capital presents a significant barrier to sustainable economic growth. The reason is that they are counted among the workforce that lacks the necessary skills and competencies to drive national development. The challenges of human capital development are compounded by the psychological toll of child soldiering as former child soldiers suffer from severe trauma, depression, and anxiety. The psychological effects developed from warfare abruptly inhibit their cognitive function, hinder emotional development, and impair their social skills. The challenge of child soldiering in Africa is not just a humanitarian crisis; it is a major barrier to development as future human resources are misdirected away from productive ventures to killing and maiming. From an economic perspective, recruited children find themselves in a situation of lost schooling, persistent poverty, and a lack of opportunities, exposing them to economic vulnerability in both the short and long term. Addressing the issue of child soldiering in Africa requires nuanced understanding and a regional approach. The case of Somalia illustrates the complex interplay of poverty, recruitment methods, cultural acceptance of violence, and socio-political disintegration. In the Democratic Republic of Congo systemic

factors were noted to perpetuate child soldiering in the region. Solutions must not only combat the symptoms of recruitment but also take into account the underlying socio-economic, cultural, and political issues, paving the way for sustainable recovery and support for affected communities. As Africa grapples with conflict and seeks to promote sustainable development, understanding the divers' effect is critical to be able to address the burning issues.

### **Recommendations**

It is against this background the study suggests that:

1. The core principles of the Rabat Declaration, should be implemented across countries in Africa. The principles emphasize prevention through strengthened governance, access to inclusive education, and community resilience as well as the need for a comprehensive reintegration approach for affected children based on psychosocial support, education, vocational training, and family and community reunification.
2. The panel underscored that the reintegration of formerly recruited children is a vital lever for peacebuilding, social stability, and long-term development. It called for enhanced cooperation between states, international organizations, and civil society to prevent recruitment and support rehabilitation. Furthermore, participants stressed the importance of accountability, advocating for rigorous investigations and legal mechanisms consistent with international law.
3. Participants noted that the proliferation of non-state armed groups in contexts of fragile governance continues to increase the risk of child recruitment in several regions of the world, stressing the need to strengthen accountability mechanisms, protect academic and civil society spaces from any form of coercion, and promote sustainable reintegration pathways based on education, psychosocial support, and economic opportunities.
4. Child recruitment must be tackled through collaborative efforts, funding allocation and policy enforcement at national and regional levels.
5. Total adherence to the Rabat Declaration on child-focused disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) which has been made available in all six official languages of the United Nations, marking its status as a joint document of both the UN Security Council and the General Assembly.
6. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) should take steps to combat the problem by focusing on prevention, protection, reintegration through legal reform to tackling social and economic factors.

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