

The Recruitment of Children into the Cameroon Anglophone Conflict

Ndoto Frida Enanga

M.Sc. Conflict Resolution, University of Buea

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2026.1306000343>

Received: 21 June 2026; Accepted: 26 June 2026; Published: 10 July 2026

ABSTRACT

The recruitment and use of children in armed conflict represents a critical violation of human rights with profound societal consequences, yet gaps persist in understanding the structural drivers, rehabilitation challenges and prevention strategies. While international frameworks like the UN Convention on the rights of a child condemn this practice is still prevalent, occurring in countries like; Columbia, Afghanistan and Syria but the issue of child recruitment is most prevalent in Africa in countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan and Somalia. Cameroon has added to that list with its ongoing Anglophone conflict. Children serve as combatants, spies, sex slaves and much worse. Current research emphasizes psychological trauma and legal accountability but often overlooks; recruitment patterns, systemic failure and post conflict reintegration. The research makes use of the qualitative research approach with a thematic and content analysis of the work so as to collect data beyond statistics while imploring a trauma-informed approach to build trust and collect quality data all while giving victims a voice. The findings of the study holds that weak governance is the reason for the recruitment of children into armed groups but this is not the only reason being provided in the study as other factors such as societal breakdown, poverty, ongoing conflict and lack of education come to play. The work also provides insight on how children find themselves being recruited by armed groups and the implications it has not just for the child but also for the country. The findings suggest that the international community should be more intentional about upholding laws ensuring the protection of children.

INTRODUCTION

Armed conflicts with devastating effects have been part of mankind since time immemorial and these days, there are easily accessible light weapons and even more destructive weapons, leaving a large number of the wounded, maimed and dead in their wake. Children all over the world constitute the largest and most powerless members of the society and; it used to be assumed that adults had the best interests of children at heart and there was no need to think in terms of children's rights or their protection. Violence and armed conflict are commonplace in the everyday lives of many of the world's children. In countries around the globe, children have been first-hand victims and witnesses of war and the atrocities that invariably accompany armed aggression.

In addition, children continue to be drawn into conflict as active participants. (Singer 2005) has declared that children are 'the new faces of war' and 'a new feature of nearly every area at war in our world' (Singer 2005a, p. 28). However, the participation of children in armed conflict is not an entirely new phenomenon, the history of child soldiering can be traced back to children being used in wars and conflict throughout history; during world war 2, children under the age of 18 where used in both formal and informal capacities, they were indoctrinated into whatever prevailing ideology ruled the side they belonged too, trained in a rush and sent to the front lines. Another instance presented its self again in South Africa's Apartheid-era where children played a quite significant role in the fight against the oppressive regime, the Soweto Uprising of 1976 where thousands of black students protested against the compulsory use of Afrikaans in schools. However, in recent times the motive behind child participation and the type of conflict has changed and is more frequent driven by vain intent, but it was only in the late 20" century the steps were taken to develop an international legal standard to prohibit and prevent the use of child soldiers. The coalition to stop the use of child soldiers estimated that 250,000 children are being used as child soldiers worldwide today, with children being used in armed conflict in at least 20countries from 2004-2007(Szabo, 2004). Myanmar located in South East Asia is the country with the

largest number of child soldiers, where children are used for various purposes such as combatants, spies, porters, messengers, cooks and even for sexual purposes. (Sirai and Pazli, 2014). The use of child soldiers in Myanmar has led to psychological, physical and sociocultural suffering depriving children of their basic and constitutional rights. The Democratic Republic of Congo is one of the most prominent nations involved in the use of child soldiers in Africa with an estimated 40% of said child soldiers being girls who are more often than not used as sex slaves by male combatants (Szabo, 2004). The International Criminal Court has prosecuted individuals for the use of child soldiers, the Lubanga judgment, which convicted a Congolese warlord for the use of child soldiers, was a significant step towards justice for child victims in armed conflict.

However, the judgment has been criticized for failing to serve justice for all child victims particularly those who were not directly involved in active combat. This goes to show although the international system is trying its best to rectify this vile act it still has a long way to go in not only ending it but repairing the actual extent of damage it has caused, despite all this child soldiering still goes on in countries such as Uganda, Sierra Leone and even Cameroon where the issue of child soldiering took foot amidst the Anglophone Crisis in 2016, according to the United Nations, at least 150 children have been recruited and used as soldiers in the crisis with some being as young as 7 years old, the children are often used as fighters, cooks, spies and porters, and are subjected to physical and psychological abuse including sexual violence. This is a direct violation of The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict which Cameroon has signed and ratified, sets a minimum age for compulsory recruitment and participation in hostilities at 18, but that has not been the case in recent times as children are either forcefully recruited or manipulated into joining armed forces. It is important to know that the recruitment and use of child soldiers in the Anglophone Crisis is rooted in poverty, social inequality, and the breakdown of social and political structures, all this amidst the lack of economic opportunities social protection and education make children easy prey to such vices.

The International community has taken steps to prevent the use of child soldiers as the UN has worked with the Cameroonian government to develop a National Action Plan (NAP) to prevent and respond to child soldiering. The NAP, which was launched in 2020, outlined comprehensive strategy to prevent recruitment and use of child soldiers, provide support to former child soldiers and hold those responsible for child soldiering accountable, one of many actions taken to combat child soldiering. There exist a plethora of other international measures taken so as to combat the use of child soldiers, In fact, The Paris Principles' (UNICEF 2007, p. 6) a set of guidelines on children in armed conflict established in 2007 at an international conference in Paris (Devon M. 2010, p. 4) The conference, organized by the French government and supported by UNICEF, introduced the following designation, which represents the most current internationally recognized definition of the child soldier phenomenon: Any person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls, used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities (UNICEF 2007, p. 7).

Justification of the study

Many victims of atrocities were denied justice for such crimes and many more, continue to suffer gross human rights violations during armed conflicts. The aura of impunity surrounding such atrocities has provided a fertile ground for the commission of new horrendous crimes, which must not be left unpunished. It is noticed that not much research had been done on how perpetrators of armed conflict in Cameroon are dealt with, in order to avert further atrocities and help reduce and stop it. This issue must be investigated and given appropriate attention if peace building efforts wish to prove successful. The work will address the hidden issues on the violations of children's rights which has been forfeited for far too long, coupled with the fact that there is an ongoing crisis in the Northwest and Southwest Regions of Cameroon in which the issue of child recruitment has been prevalent there should be ample resources to help develop the research which will go a long way to help; sociologists, law makers, social scientists, workers and plethora of individuals and hopefully help in shaping policy and judicial thrust. We shall highlight the nature, forms, causes and effects of child recruitment on both children and the society. We shall examine the culpability of both child soldiers and their recruiters and; how the law prohibits this phenomenon, and how the law is been used to bring justice to all concerned.

Statement of the problems

The Cameroon Anglophone conflict is a complex and multi-facet political issue right from its origin to its manifestation which exist of displacement, disrupted education and limited statehood which all contribute to making already vulnerable children more vulnerable as they become so desperate amidst the presence of predators who are able to lure them into webs of labour, sexual violence and recruitment into armed groups.

The use of children in the Cameroon Anglophone Conflict represents a severe humanitarian and legal crisis with systemic failures in prevention, protection and reintegration exacerbating intergenerational trauma and regional instability. Since 2016, separatist groups in the northwest and southwest regions have exploited the collapse of the education system and socioeconomic despair to forcibly recruit minors, violating national laws protecting the rights of a child and international humanitarian laws. One is therefore driven to wonder as to why such a vile act is still occurring despite all the efforts made by the Cameroon government to stop it, this research comes to satisfy that gap of answers.

Research questions

- What are the drivers of child recruitment in the Cameroon Anglophone Conflict?
- How are children recruited by armed groups in the Anglophone conflict?
- What are the effects of recruitment into armed groups on the children and the country?
- What challenges does the Cameroon government face in combating child recruitment into armed groups.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Child Recruitment in Africa

According to Alcinda (2009) the issue of child soldiers cannot be explained in terms of Africa's pre-colonial military history, nor does it have its roots in African traditional culture. Rather, the phenomenon is rooted in the crisis of the post-colonial state in Africa. This crisis is reflected in ethnic conflicts over power sharing, identity and access to resources; in the incapacity of the state to provide for and protect its citizens; and in the collapse of social and economic structures in rural areas and the massive migration to urban areas.

The development of armed conflicts into which youth and young people are drawn is a direct symptom of such a crisis, as during the war, many youths become vulnerable to recruitment due to lack of opportunities in the countryside. In addition, internal issues such as ethnic alliances and a general disenchantment with the state over rejection of traditional authorities and traditional cultural values determined the positions taken by some traditional chiefs, who helped to recruit youth and children to join the rebel forces (Honwana, 2009).

Many children and youths also volunteered to join either the government or the rebels as soldiers. For many the possession of an instrument of coercion was often the only access to food and to a sense of power. In the aftermath of the war many of these youths continue to be vulnerable; they have no skills, no jobs and no education, many had to go back to primary school next to small children half their age. Honwana (2009).

According to Parson 2005, the surge in intrastate conflicts after the Cold War surge has brought hundreds of thousands of young children to the front lines in Africa. Armed struggles over power and resources have caused civil wars between state and non-state actors. Lacking the financial and military capacity to maintain rule of law, weak governments have incited multiple power-hungry political entrepreneurs to take up arms. Despite limited resources and varying degrees of support, these warlords have easily countered governmental forces by tapping into the abundant supply of easily accessible and expendable fighters who unfortunately are children. Utilizing extreme indoctrination and fear tactics, warlords have been able to transform impressionable, dependent youth into loyal, ferocious armed forces capable of overtaking comparatively powerful, well-equipped governmental forces. Governmental forces have followed suit, placing young children on the front lines to fight against their

peers, as was the case in the Sudanese civil war. In the early stages of the conflict, 36 percent of government forces were consisted of children, compared to the majority 64 percent fighting for the rebel forces. By the end of the war, the number of children fighting for the Sudanese army had increased to 76 percent (Achvarina and Reich, 2006).

In today's world, adolescents and children sometimes act as combatants who directly participate in hostilities. Yet more often they are deployed as auxiliaries (for example, as lookouts or messengers) or in various support roles such as gardening, road maintenance, delivery of food, cleaning, cooking, conveying goods and providing sexual services (Boothby and Knudsen 2000). Finally, under certain circumstances, adolescents and children may be used as human shields or for propaganda purposes by government or opposition forces (Boyden and De Berry 2004; and United Nations 2002). Since the late 1970s, a number of international conventions have been promulgated to limit the use of these young people, but children continue to be deployed in parts of the world and overwhelmingly in sub-Saharan Africa.

Mawson 2004 adds that despite increasing international attention devoted to the issue of child soldiering, little research has been conducted on child soldier disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programs in the context of an ongoing conflict in developing countries. As too much emphasis is placed on child soldier reintegration into communities that are potentially highly threatening, ignoring the danger of re-recruitment into militant organizations. Adolescents and children sometimes act as combatants who directly participate in hostilities. Yet more often they are deployed as auxiliaries (for example, as lookouts or messengers) or in various support roles such as gardening, road maintenance, delivery of food, cleaning, cooking, conveying goods and providing sexual services Booth by and Knudsen (2000). Finally, under certain circumstances, adolescents and children may be used as human shields or for propaganda purposes by government or opposition forces Boyden and De Berry (2004). Since the late 1970s, a number of international conventions have been promulgated to limit the use of these young people, but children continue to be deployed in parts of the world and overwhelmingly in sub-Saharan Africa.

In addition, there are various estimates as to the age of the youngest child soldiers with Nordstrom (2004) documenting an eleven-year-old, Human Rights Watch declaring that some are as young as eight years old, Amnesty International offering that some are younger than ten years of age, and Singer (in Brookings Institute 2007) contending that some are as young as seven. In countries that are already poor, war tends to deteriorate economic and social conditions, thereby forcing families into further economic hardship. As a result, children may join armed forces or groups to secure daily food and survival (Honwana, 2001).

Kaldor (1999) believed that the context in which the phenomenon has occurred or better still heightened in recent times is as a result of modern warfare she addresses the intensification of globalization by highlighting it inter connective nature politically, economically, militarily and culturally which has enhanced communication and data processing between states she holds that the impact of globalization is visible in many contemporary wars through the global presence of international reporters, mercenary troops, military advisers, diaspora volunteers, as well as a veritable 'army' of international agencies such as the United Nations and other international NGOs Alongside the multitude of global players present in new wars, Kaldor also argues that forms of global military integration, connection and sharing increasingly occur between political and military actors from paramilitary groups, organized criminal groups, warlords who control particular areas, mercenaries and private military companies. These connections and alliances have formed as a result of growing international arms production and trade, various forms of military cooperation and exchanges, and arms control agreements and are facilitated and spread through transnational criminal networks and institutions.

Honwana (2006) has suggested that child soldiering has become part of a broader war strategy that is shared across lines of combat and war zones across the globe. She argues that; Information about tactics and technologies is transmitted from one war to another through soldiers, military advisers, and mercenaries. Media reports and popular films also spread this type of information. In this transnational process, ideas and values about acceptable war practices are established. It is precisely in this context that I consider the spread of the child soldiering phenomenon. (Honwana 2006, p. 45) Honwana argues that the similarities between what happened to children during the wars in Cambodia, Uganda, Sierra Leone, Mozambique and Angola are of no accident.

Instead, they are reflective of broader social and economic crises and transnational networks intimately connected to globalization.

Moving further, the proliferation of small arms is believed that the proliferation of small and light arms as a result of increased globalization. The proliferation of small and light weapons has significantly contributed to the increased participation of children in armed conflicts around the world. These weapons are often inexpensive, easy to operate, and readily available, making them attractive for armed groups seeking to bolster their ranks. The portability and simplicity of small arms allow children to be quickly trained and deployed as combatants, often in roles that were previously reserved for adults.

The widespread availability of these weapons has lowered the barriers to entry for armed groups, enabling them to recruit and deploy child soldiers more easily. In conflict zones, children may have access to these weapons through looting, theft, or direct distribution by armed groups. The presence of small arms in communities affected by conflict normalizes violence and can desensitize children to the consequences of their use. This normalization can lead to a perception that participation in armed groups is a viable option for survival, protection, or even status within the community.

Small arms have a number of characteristics that make them the weapon of choice in many contemporary conflicts: they are increasingly lethal, durable, easily portable, inexpensive, lightweight, concealable and require minimal maintenance. These factors increase the prospect of their proliferation, especially to armed groups. (Stohl, 2002) argues that the wide availability of small arms 'has meant that more individuals become combatants, conflicts last longer, and more people especially children suffer. An estimated 80–90 percent of all casualties in recent wars have been produced by such weapons (Endleman 2001; Klare 1999). Klare (1999) has declared that 'the deadliest combat system of the current epoch is the adolescent human male equipped with a Kalashnikov – an AK-47 assault rifle' (p. 19). It is argued that throughout history, weaponry relied upon the brute strength and skillful training of the operator, thereby excluding children from combat roles. However, the development of lightweight weapons, which have been simplified in their use and require only a few hours of training, has brought children from the margins of war to the very heart of conflict.

Child recruitment in the Cameroon Anglophone conflict

Anglophone Crisis could be traced as far back as seven decades ago. First and foremost, Cameroon's virtue of being a bilingual country is owing to the fact that two territories; British Southern Cameroons and La Republique du Cameroun, were under Britain and France during the UN trusteeship period respectively. As a result, French Cameroon gained independence from France on January 01, 1960. Southern Cameroons which were yet to gain full autonomy from Britain had to wait until 1961. On February 11, 1961, The United Nations organized a plebiscite for Southern Cameroons to determine the nature in which it was to become independent. The two options were: to either gain independence by integrating with Nigeria - Britain's one-time colony with which Southern Cameroons was jointly administered, or reunify with La Republique du Cameroun. Southern Cameroonians under the leadership of J. N. Foncha overwhelmingly voted in favour of Reunification. A controversial independence deal was stroke on October 1 that very year when Southern Cameroons and La Republique du Cameroun founded a new nation known as the Federal Republic of Cameroon. The country comprised of the state of West Cameroon (former Southern Cameroons) and the state of East Cameroun (former East Cameroun). However, the Federal Republic of Cameroon lasted for not more than eleven years as President Ahmadou Babatoura Ahidjo abolished the federal structure in 1982, citing economic challenges and the need to consolidate national unity and integration. A referendum which was organized on May 20 that year changed the country's name to the United Republic of Cameroon; a reform which according to some school of thought, angered many Anglophone Cameroonians.

Twelve years later, the country's second president, Paul Biya renamed the bilingual country as "La Republic du Cameroun"; a name French Cameroon had gained independence with in 1960. This move added insults to injury as dissenting voices among the Anglophone minority population interpreted it as a mark of marginalization, suppression and subjugation. Marginalization reached its peak in the last quarter of 2016 when the socio-political crisis which later developed into an armed conflict was triggered by a series of lawyer's and teacher's strikes.

Thereafter, call for a return to the 1961 Federal state, translation of the OHADA Uniform Act, withdrawal of Francophone magistrates from Anglophone courts, withdrawal of Francophone teachers from Anglophone schools and the creation of a common law bench at the Cameroon Supreme court. Government's delay to grant these demands forced some Anglophone youth to take to the street and began calling for outright independence. The protest went beyond control when Government's response manifested in coercion and intimidation. This led to the escalation of more tension, as a result, demands from the angry population skyrocketed (Willis et al., 2019). Anglophone activists on October 1, 2017 worsened the situation. Constant clashes between separatists fighting for a break-away republic they call "Ambazonia" and Government forces prompted the intervention of the mass media. The mass media, both public and private, have in the course of the crisis made strides towards encouraging education stakeholders to allow for a peaceful return to school. The state's own broadcaster, CRTV has since 2017 been airing special reports geared towards setting up the stage for schools to reopen in the North West and South West. Despite some constraints, Journalists in local media have been faced with a new challenge of crisis reporting. The ongoing crisis has greatly affected economic, political and social activities in the North West and South West regions. One of the sectors that have badly been hit by the Anglophone crisis is education which is the focus of this academic research.

Children are being recruited and used by armed groups in the Cameroon Anglophone conflict for several interrelated reasons. Armed groups, including separatist factions and government forces, exploit the vulnerabilities of children, who are more susceptible to manipulation and coercion. Many children come from impoverished backgrounds or lack access to education, making them particularly at risk of recruitment. Once involved, children are utilized in various roles such as combatants, messengers, porters, and spies. Their small size and perceived innocence make them valuable for gathering intelligence and carrying out operations without attracting suspicion.

The ongoing conflict has weakened governmental and institutional protective mechanisms for children, allowing armed groups to recruit minors with relative impunity. The lack of robust child protection laws and enforcement exacerbates the situation, while the societal fragmentation caused by the Anglophone crisis creates an environment where children may feel compelled to join armed groups that appeal to their identity and grievances. The Cameroonian government's framing of the conflict as a security issue labelling separatists as "terrorists" further complicates efforts to address the recruitment of child soldiers. This perspective dismisses the legitimate grievances of the Anglophone population and polarizes political discourse, hindering constructive dialogue.

Theoretical Review

The Civil Strife Theory

The civil strife theory, while not universally defined under a singular framework, encompasses various interpretations and analyses related to the causes and dynamics of civil conflict. The civil strife theory suggests that conflicts and violence within a country often arise from underlying social, economic, or political grievances. These grievances can include inequality, oppression, lack of political representation, or competition for resources. When groups feel marginalized or threatened, they may resort to violence as a way to express their frustrations or to fight for their rights. The theory highlights that such conflicts are often fueled by a combination of factors, including historical tensions, economic disparities, and external influences.

In essence, the theory helps us understand why civil wars or internal conflicts occur by focusing on the root causes of dissatisfaction among different groups in society. Different authors and scholars have contributed to the understanding of civil strife through various lenses, including political, social, economic, and historical perspectives.

James Fearon and David Laitin (2003) are political scientists who argue that civil wars are primarily driven by a combination of ethnic diversity and weak state capacity. They emphasize that civil strife arises when: Weak states are unable to maintain order or provide public goods, leading to grievances among various groups. This weakness creates a power vacuum that insurgents can exploit. Added to these Ethnic groups may feel marginalized or oppressed by the state, leading to demands for autonomy or independence. Fearon and Laitin

highlight that civil strife often emerges from the intersection of ethnic identity and state failure. Ted Robert Gurr uses theory of relative deprivation posits that civil strife occurs when groups when individuals or groups feel deprived of rights, resources, or resources of opportunities, they may mobilize for collective action, leading to civil conflict. Gurr emphasizes that the likelihood of civil strife increases when groups have the organizational capacity to mobilize and when they can articulate their grievances effectively, this is effectiveness of grievance formation and mobilization potential. Paul Collier and Ankle Hoeffler (2004) focus on the economic dimensions of civil strife, arguing that: civil wars are often driven by economic incentives (greed) rather than purely ideological or ethnic grievances. Armed groups may seek control over valuable resources, leading to conflict. Here there is no defined line between justice seeking and loot gathering and when the intensions become corrupt the method is also likely to become corrupt as well The theory suggests that individuals are more likely to engage in rebellion when the opportunity costs of joining a conflict are low, often due to lack of employment or economic prospects.

Due to the nature of the conflict, we will view the civil strife theory from a historical and socio-psychological standpoint according to Eric Hobsbawm and Hannah Arendt respectively; Eric Hobsbawm analysis of social movements and revolutions sheds light on the historical roots of civil strife: He argues that civil strife is often rooted in historical processes, including class struggles steadily over time and the impact of industrialization. Economic changes can lead to social upheaval and demands for political change. He emphasizes the role of cultural memory in shaping collective identities and grievances, which can fuel civil strife when historical injustices are recalled and mobilized.

Hannah Arendt exploration of Violence and Power provides a philosophical framework for understanding civil strife: she distinguishes between power and violence, arguing that civil strife often arises when power is perceived to be threatened. Violence may be used as a means to reclaim power or assert dominance. She highlights the importance of collective action in civil strife, suggesting that groups mobilize not only out of grievances but also to assert their identity and agency in the face of oppression.

The civil strife theory can provide a framework for understanding the use of child soldiers in the Cameroon Anglophone conflict by examining the underlying grievances and socio-political dynamics that contribute to this phenomenon. Here's how the theory applies:

The Anglophone regions of Cameroon have experienced historical marginalization and discrimination from the Predominant Francophone government. This has led to feeling of disenfranchisement among the Anglophone population which has created an atmosphere of social disruption where as a result of tensions community and family settings have become fragmented leaving Children exposed to violence and more vulnerable to armed groups. It is no surprise that during conflict time economic opportunities vanish leading to increase in poverty and as a result no access to basic needs not to talk of education, armed group exploit this situation by offering the needful to the needy at the price of their cooperation and allegiance, children Who fall victims to this are often provided with a sense of belonging as the society to which the previously belonged to failed them this new setting provides for them and gives them new purpose. A society characterized by conflict is flooded with desperation and need for Survival, desperation mate people act violently not just physical but also. psychologically his is experience not just by adults but also by children heir young and impressionable minds become dense, violence becomes normalize they lose the sense of fear by becoming the fear and are ripe recruits for armed groups sometimes the child finds their way there on their own accord.

By analysing the use of child soldiers through the lens of civil strife theory, we can better understand how systemic issues-such as political marginalization, social disruption, and economic hardship-contribute to this tragic aspect of the conflict in Cameroon. Addressing these root causes is essential for preventing the recruitment of child soldiers and fostering long-term peace.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The Cameroon Anglophone crisis, which began in 2016, has seen the involvement of child soldiers on both sides of the conflict. This is a serious violation of international law and human rights, and it is crucial to understand the factors that contribute to the recruitment of child soldiers in this context. This quantitative research study aims to investigate the scale, patterns, and determinants of child soldier recruitment in the Cameroon Anglophone crisis.

Research framework

Research design refers to the overall strategy utilized to answer research questions. A research design typically outlines the theories and models underlying a project; the research question(s) of a project; a strategy for gathering data and information; and a strategy for producing answers from the data (Blair et al 2023).

The qualitative research methodology employed to analyze data derived from interviews for the research. The qualitative approach is particularly suited for exploring the complex, nuanced experiences of children recruited by armed forces allowing for in-depth understanding of their recruitment, experiences, and challenges. Also, the qualitative research design will utilize semi-structured interviews, enable flexibility while ensuring that key topics are covered. This method allows participants to express their thoughts and feelings in their own words, providing rich, detailed data.

The qualitative research framework will enable us to; identify the key factors that contribute to the recruitment of child soldiers, including socioeconomic, political, and cultural factors, examine the impact of child soldier recruitment on the well-being and development of the affected children and evaluate the effectiveness of existing policies and interventions aimed at preventing the recruitment of child soldiers in the Cameroon Anglophone conflict and identify the key factors that contribute to the recruitment of child soldiers, including socioeconomic, political, and cultural factors. Evaluate the effectiveness of existing policies and interventions aimed at preventing the recruitment of child soldiers in the Cameroon Anglophone crisis.

Research design

The study will make use of a case study approach to allow the researcher to gather in-depth information without creating a tense atmosphere between the two. The approach combines predetermined questions with the opportunity for participants to elaborate on their response enabling a deeper exploration of their perspectives and experiences. This design will enable the researcher engage with various stakeholders, community leaders, officials and members of society to understand the nuanced factor contributing to child recruitment and the broader socio-political dynamics at play. Due to the sensitivity of the topic the chosen research design will allow the researcher collect rich and authentic data that can reveal personal experiences and factors that are often overlooked.

Research technique

This refers to the specific method used to collect data within the study. These techniques are integral to the research process and can vary widely depending on the research design and approach. The research techniques used for this study are face to face interviews, observations and document analysis, the participants are selected based on specific relevance to the study. This was to ensure rich insights was gained from specific subgroups, this technique allows in-depth exploration of complex issues as it enables the researcher to gather detailed data from participants who can provide valuable perspective.

Data collection

A semi-structured questionnaire was developed to collect qualitative data. Data was collected through face-to-face interviews and telephone interviews with the selected participants, conducted by the researcher. To ensure the safety and well-being of the participants, the researcher closely with local community leaders to provided appropriate support and referrals as needed. Interviews will be conducted with various stakeholders,

including former child soldiers, community leaders, NGOs, and government officials. This diverse sample will provide multiple perspectives on the issue. Interviews will be recorded, transcribed, and anonymised to protect participants' identities.

The qualitative research method, through its focus on in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, will provide valuable insights into the use of child soldiers in Cameroon's Anglophone conflict. This approach will not only highlight the individual experiences of child soldiers but also contribute to a broader understanding of the systemic issues surrounding their recruitment and reintegration.

Data analysis

Data analysis will follow a thematic analysis approach, involving several key steps:

Familiarization with Data: Data collected will be read and re-read, impression notes will be taken and audio data will be listened to thoroughly to gain a comprehensive understanding of the content.

Coding: codes will be defined and specific labels will be given to features in the texts, meaningful and recurring words will be highlighted. Initial codes were generated from the data will identifying significant patterns and themes related to the recruitment and use of children.

Theme Development: an umbrella theme that groups multiple codes will be used, similar codes will be grouped together and seen how they relate to each other to decipher the why, how, and the effects of children recruitment in the Anglophone conflict.

Reviewing Themes: ensure themes are accurately defended in the collected data, merge themes that overlap and break themes that are too broad, remove themes that don't have enough supporting data make sure themes accurately represented the data and contributed to answering the research questions.

Defining and Naming Themes: define each term and state exactly what they entail, use clear descriptive terms, break large themes down, highlight theme relevance to the research objectives.

Reporting: link themes up together to answer research questions, use instances from participants interviews. The findings will be presented in a narrative format, integrating quotes from participants to illustrate key points and provide authenticity to the analysis.

Data source

Sources of data can be broadly categorized into two main types; primary source which consisted of interviews from NGOs, government personnel, community leaders, former child soldiers and relevant stakeholders. The secondary source comprised of books, journals and articles

Target population

A number of 20 participants were selected for this study they were Community Leaders, lawyers, teachers, NGO Representatives, students, quarter heads, ex-combatants and children once affiliated with armed groups. These individuals are chosen to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue. Former child soldiers offer direct insights into their experiences and the impact of the conflict on their lives. Community leaders can contextualize the societal factors contributing to recruitment. NGO representatives bring expertise on rehabilitation efforts and the challenges faced in reintegration. Government officials provide perspectives on legal frameworks and policies aimed at addressing the issue. This diverse group ensures a holistic view of the complexities surrounding child soldiering in Cameroon's Anglophone conflict.

Reliability and Validity of Data:

Collecting accurate and reliable data on the recruitment of child soldiers in the Cameroon Anglophone crisis can be challenging due to the clandestine nature of the activities and the potential for underreporting or misinformation. Participants may be hesitant to share sensitive information or may have limited knowledge or recollection of the events they experienced.

To add to that the fluid and evolving nature of the conflict can also make it difficult to capture the full scope and dynamics of child soldier recruitment over time.

These limitations highlight the complexities and challenges inherent in conducting research on the recruitment of child soldiers in active conflict zones, such as the Cameroon Anglophone crisis. Researchers must carefully navigate these obstacles to ensure the ethical and rigorous collection of data that can inform effective interventions and policies to address this critical issue.

Ethical considerations

The research will adhere to moral standards by seeking consent from participants and maintaining confidentiality, the nature and purpose of the study will be explained to them so they better understand what they are participating in. Participant's autonomy and academic integrity will be upheld to ensure that enough credible data is collected while protecting the participants from harm of any sort. The research will obtain informed consent from parents/guardians and assent from child participants, while minimizing risks, ensuring safety, and protecting confidentiality. It will be culturally sensitive and build the capacity of local organizations to address child soldier recruitment in a sustainable way. Strict measures to safeguard participants' wellbeing and rights throughout the data collection process shall be put in place.

Findings

Why are children Recruited

Weak governance

Weak governance is increasingly viewed as a critical component of contemporary war (Kaldor 1999; Newman 2004), 'the new wars arise in the context of the erosion of the autonomy of the state and in some extreme cases, the disintegration of the state'. Failed states are characterized by conflict, crises and economic collapse (Carment et al. 2007). According to Rotberg (2003), nation states fail because they are shaken by internal violence, cannot deliver positive political goods to their inhabitants and become incapable of projecting power and asserting authority within their own borders. Governments lose legitimacy and the nation-state itself becomes illegitimate in the eyes of its citizens and as a result become violent. Failed states have come to be feared as 'breeding grounds of instability, mass migration and murder' (Rotberg 2002, p. 127). Rotberg (2002) characterizes failed states in the following manner: Failed states are tense, conflicted, and dangerous. They generally share the following characteristics: a rise in criminal and political violence; a loss of control over their borders; rising ethnic, linguistic and cultural hostilities; civil war; the use of terror against their own citizens; weak institutions a deteriorated or insufficient infrastructure; an inability to collect taxes without undue coercion; high levels of corruption; a collapsed health system; rising levels of infant mortality and declining life expectancy; the end of regular schooling opportunities; declining levels of GDP per capita; escalating inflation; a widespread preference for non-national currencies; basic food shortages, leading to starvation. (Rotberg 2002, p. 130). The widespread poverty that is associated with failed states inevitably has a profound effect on ordinary citizens, especially children. Not surprisingly, children living in countries that are defined as failed states⁷ appear to be among the worst off in terms of access to adequate shelter, safe water, health and social services, nutrition, and education and employment opportunities (UNICEF 2008). Moreover, in contexts of institutional collapse, the breakdown of state and family structures, to deny that is not the current definitive state of Cameroon is to deny that there is a conflict entirely which would be a blatant lie. High level poverty and social and political alienation have created a melting pot where youths have become ripe and ready for recruitment into armed groups and forces. The

ongoing conflict in the English-speaking regions of Cameroon has led to a disturbing rise in the recruitment and use of child soldiers by both state and non-state actors. This crisis has been exacerbated by the broader issue of failed statehood in the country. Several factors have contributed to the weakening of the Cameroonian state, including poverty and lack of economic opportunities, with over 55% of the population living in poverty and many children joining armed groups out of desperation. Weak state structures and the deteriorating economic conditions and ethnic conflicts between the Francophone majority and Anglophone minority, have also fueled the current crisis. The consequences of failed statehood in Cameroon have been devastating for children, with armed groups and separatist fighters abducting and coercing children as young as 10 into joining their ranks. The conflict has also forced the closure of schools in many Anglophone regions, depriving children of their right to education, and children used as soldiers face severe physical and psychological abuse, with long-lasting impacts on their wellbeing. While Cameroon has ratified key international treaties prohibiting the use of child soldiers, more concerted action is needed to demobilize and rehabilitate former child soldiers, strengthen national laws and enforcement mechanisms, and address the root causes of the conflict through development and peace building efforts.

Social disintegration

Weak Social Structures: Poverty often leads to the breakdown of family structures and community cohesion. In conflict-affected regions, traditional support systems may collapse, leaving children vulnerable to exploitation. Armed groups can fill this void by providing a sense of belonging and identity, further enticing children to join.

“When there is poverty in a family, the head or heads of the family that is the mother and father lack the resources to enforce measures that can adequately control the children in the family, they will not be able to provide basic things for the children like education or exercise control over them because the children go out to provide their needs themselves or them to busy working to monitor the children. With this way of life characterized by lack, wanting and neglect children slowly become radical and eventually become affiliated with armed groups” (interviewed, 16th August 2024).

Displacement and Refugee Status: Armed conflicts frequently result in mass displacement, creating large populations of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). These groups often live in precarious conditions with limited access to resources. Children in refugee camps or IDP settlements may be particularly susceptible to recruitment, as armed groups often operate in these areas, preying on vulnerable populations.

How are children recruited

Kidnapping

Armed children are often recruited into armed groups through kidnapping, a method that is both coercive and traumatic. This process typically involves armed groups abducting children from their homes, schools, or communities, often using violence or the threat of violence to instill fear. Kidnapping serves as a direct means of recruitment, stripping children of their autonomy and forcing them into roles as soldiers, labourers, or support personnel. Once kidnapped, children may be subjected to intense indoctrination and training designed to break down their resistance and instill loyalty to the armed group. The psychological impact of such abductions can be profound, as children are often separated from their families and familiar environments, leading to feelings of isolation and helplessness. Armed groups may use these tactics not only to bolster their ranks but also to create a sense of dependency among the abducted children, making it more difficult for them to escape or resist.

Children are often threatened into joining armed groups through a combination of coercion, intimidation, and manipulation, which can create a profound sense of fear and urgency. In many conflict zones, armed groups may use tactics that directly threaten the safety of children or their families. For instance, they might intimidate children by showcasing violence against others or by threatening to harm family members if the child does not comply with their demands. This creates a chilling environment where children feel they have no choice but to enlist in order to protect themselves or their loved ones.

‘Some children especially in rural areas are taking from their homes and forced to serve in armed groups, must of the families cannot even retaliate because of fear of what might happen to them.....it is not strange for armed groups to move in the community and forcefully conscript and families how refuse are often marked and targeted’ (interviewed, 17th August 2024).

Armed groups may exploit existing vulnerabilities by presenting recruitment as a means of survival. Children might be coerced into believing that joining the group is the only way to ensure their safety or that of their families, especially in situations where the state is unable to provide protection. This manipulation can be particularly effective in communities already traumatized by violence, where the threat of further harm is ever-present. The use of bargaining tactics can also come into play; armed groups may promise protection or resources in exchange for the child’s loyalty, further complicating their decision-making process.

Peer pressure/coercion

Children are often recruited into armed groups through peer pressure, which can significantly influence their decisions and behaviours in conflict-affected environments. In many cases, children are exposed to a culture of violence and militarization that normalizes the idea of joining armed factions. When peers or older youth within their communities become involved with armed groups, they may exert pressure on their friends to join as well, creating a sense of expectation or obligation. This peer influence can manifest in various ways. For instance, children may feel compelled to prove their loyalty or bravery by participating in armed activities, especially if those around them glorify such actions. The desire to fit in and gain acceptance from peers can lead children to overlook the potential dangers and moral implications of joining armed groups. Additionally, the camaraderie and sense of belonging that come from being part of a group can be particularly appealing to children who may feel isolated or marginalized due to the ongoing conflict.

Moreover, armed groups often strategically recruit children by targeting those who are already part of a social circle that supports violence. By fostering an environment where joining the group is seen as a rite of passage or a demonstration of strength, these organizations can effectively leverage peer dynamics to bolster their ranks. Children may be more likely to join if they see friends or siblings doing so, as this reinforces the notion that participation is not only acceptable but also desirable.

‘Most times the children fall into armed groups because they where

With the wrong kind of friends and they do it either to maintain themselves among their peers or because they believe they would be better off with the armed group as convinced by their friends’ (Interviewed, 23rd August 2024).

‘In some of these groups they even have orders from their commands to go and bring more of their mates so the children there recruit their friends at the end of the day it’s a whole web of children involved in aiding armed groups in one way or the other’ (Interviewed, 3rd August 2024).

The impact of peer pressure is compounded by the lack of alternatives available to children in conflict zones. With limited access to education and economic opportunities, the allure of armed groups can become even stronger when peers advocate for joining. This creates a vicious cycle where children feel trapped between the need for social acceptance and the harsh realities of their environment.

Effects of child recruitment on the children

Psychology trauma

All around the world there are occurring conflicts especially in Africa with women and children being the most vulnerable as they are 3 times more likely to develop PTSD, anxiety, depression and more psychological disorders*. Conflict affects both adults and children, but children feel it more because they are still developing mentally and physically they have much more untapped potential which when tampered with they will likely never be the same.1 in every 6 children around the world are exposed to armed conflict whether they are

displaced, orphaned or recruited they are all victims at the end of the day because of their unfortunate circumstances Capiniello (2002). Children how are recruited by armed groups tend to suffer from indifference from the surrounding world, or, worse still, malevolence may cause children to suffer loss of meaning in their construction of themselves in their world. They may have to change their moral structure and lie, steal, and sell sex to survive. Exposure to violence, including witnessing death and committing atrocities, can lead to chronic mental health issues. Research indicates that former child soldiers frequently report high levels of PTSD, with studies showing that up to 97% of participants in some studies exhibit clinically significant post-traumatic stress reactions. The cumulative effects of trauma can impair their emotional development, leading to difficulties in managing emotions, forming relationships, and functioning in society. The normalization of violence in their environment can also desensitize them to aggression, making it challenging to reintegrate into peaceful communities. They may have their moral structure forcibly dismantled and replaced in training to kill as part of a military force. For girls, the risk of sexual violence is particularly high, with many being subjected to rape, forced marriage, and sexual slavery. Such experiences can lead to debilitating mental health issues, Sexual violence serves as a brutal form of psychological warfare, leaving deep emotional scars on survivors. Girls who endure sexual abuse may struggle with feelings of worthlessness, guilt, and shame, which can hinder their ability to reintegrate into society. The trauma of sexual violence can also lead to long-term psychological consequences, including difficulties in forming healthy relationships, trust issues, and challenges in parenting. The normalization of violence and sexual exploitation within armed groups further complicates their psychological recovery, as many girls may internalize these experiences, leading to self-destructive behaviours and mental health disorders. McKay & Mazurana (2004)

When we went to one of their camps we found 2 girls there one was 18 and the other 21 they said they joined then when they were 13 and 15 years respectively they had been there for 5years in the bush and they hadn't seen their families in all that time.....they said the cooked and looked after the men..... it wasn't in our power to take them from there..... I believe if we asked them to come, they have come with us. (Interviewed, 9th August 2024)

Even after being remove from the violence the child continues to suffer as he/she struggles to move from their dissociative coping mechanism to identity reconstruction particularly in the light of having committed vicious crimes, the child continues to suffer in the mind Betancourt & Khan (2008).

Physical trauma

The physical consequences of being a child soldier can be equally devastating. Many children suffer from injuries sustained during combat, and the harsh conditions of warfare can lead to long-term health issues. Children actively engaged in combat are at high risk of sustaining physical injuries from gunfire, explosions, and other forms of violence. These injuries can range from minor wounds to severe trauma, including amputations, fractures, and life-threatening conditions. The lack of access to medical care in conflict zones exacerbates these injuries, often resulting in untreated wounds that can lead to infections, chronic pain, or permanent disabilities. In many cases, children are coerced into committing acts of violence, which can lead to psychological and physical repercussions. For instance, they may be forced to participate in executions or other brutal acts, leading to severe emotional distress and a potential increase in aggressive behaviour. The physical toll of such experiences can manifest in various ways, including psychosomatic symptoms, where emotional trauma results in physical ailments. Girls recruited into armed groups face unique and severe risks, including sexual violence and exploitation. Many are subjected to rape, forced marriages, and sexual slavery, which can lead to immediate physical harm and long-term health issues, such as sexually transmitted infections, unwanted pregnancies, and reproductive health complications Steler (2015). The trauma associated with sexual violence can also have profound psychological effects, compounding the physical harm experienced. Additionally, the use of drugs to control their behaviour during combat can result in addiction and other health complications. The lack of access to proper nutrition and healthcare during and after their service further exacerbates their physical vulnerabilities, leading to long-term health challenges. Dr Sandra Mattar, an assistant professor at the Boston University studied the effects of war trauma and believes that, when you experience these traumatic events, your body is in full shock. Some kids may become dissociated. Physically, the body is completely deregulated because

there is no food, no water, or access to basic needs. There is a difficulty in calming down the body, which turns into a whole series of mental health problems,” she explained.

Trauma may also manifest through psychosomatic symptoms, such as chest pain, gastrointestinal distress, headaches, stuttering, dyspnoea, temporary paresis of limbs, and amnesia.¹⁰ In fact, previous research has established a connection between childhood exposure to traumatic events and poor physical health outcomes in later life

Social stigma

Stigmatization can result in social isolation, as communities may reject or ostracize former child soldiers. This isolation can prevent them from forming supportive relationships, further exacerbating their emotional distress. The lack of social support networks can lead to feelings of loneliness and abandonment, making reintegration into society even more difficult. This can create significant barriers to reintegration into communities. Former child soldiers may face discrimination when seeking education, employment, or healthcare. This discrimination can limit their opportunities for rebuilding their lives and achieving economic independence, perpetuating cycles of poverty and marginalization. The stigma associated with being a former child soldier can also strain family relationships. Families may feel ashamed or fearful of the repercussions of having a child who has been involved in armed conflict, leading to tensions and breakdowns in familial support systems, some families outrightly reject you followed by the community will rush in to perceive them as dangerous or untrustworthy, viewing them through the lens of their past actions rather than their potential for rehabilitation. This is particularly for girls who have experienced sexual violence, can create significant barriers to reintegration. Many communities may view these girls with suspicion or disdain, leading to social isolation and marginalization. This stigmatization can prevent them from accessing essential services, including healthcare and education, further perpetuating cycles of poverty and trauma. The lack of support systems for survivors of sexual violence exacerbates their vulnerabilities, making it difficult for them to rebuild their lives and regain a sense of normalcy.

“Many of them didn’t go back home after leaving this camp they just started new lives because they felt their family would not take them back, they were ashamed so they just started a new life where nobody knows them” (interviewed, 5th May 2024)

Effects of Child recruitment on the country

Socio-political disruption

Child recruitment into armed groups causes significant socio-political disruption in a country through various interconnected mechanisms. First, the recruitment of children often leads to the breakdown of family and community structures. As children are taken from their homes, families experience trauma and loss, weakening social bonds and support systems. This erosion of trust and cohesion can result in fragmented communities where individuals are less likely to cooperate or engage in collective action, undermining social stability. Additionally, the presence of child soldiers contributes to heightened violence and insecurity within communities. Armed groups that recruit children often engage in brutal tactics, leading to an atmosphere of fear and intimidation. This violence can escalate conflicts, making it difficult for communities to achieve peace or stability, while the normalization of violence desensitizes both children and communities, perpetuating cycles of aggression.

Moreover, the recruitment of children into armed groups often reflects deeper political grievances and failures. When governments are unable or unwilling to address the root causes of conflict—such as inequality, marginalization, or lack of representation—armed groups may fill the void, further complicating the political landscape. This can lead to a power struggle between state forces and non-state actors, resulting in ongoing instability. The presence of armed groups that utilize child soldiers can also undermine state authority and governance. As these groups operate outside the law, they challenge the legitimacy of government institutions and create parallel systems of power. This disruption makes it challenging for governments to maintain control, enforce laws, or provide essential services, further exacerbating socio-political tensions.

The long-term effects of child recruitment extend beyond immediate conflict scenarios. Children who are recruited often grow up with a skewed understanding of conflict, violence, and power dynamics. This can lead to a new generation that is more likely to engage in violent behavior or support armed groups in the future, perpetuating cycles of conflict and socio-political disruption.

Tardy Economy

The recruitment of children into armed groups initiates a series of domino effects that significantly undermine a country's economy. First and foremost, the loss of human capital is a critical consequence, as children who are forcibly taken from their families and communities are deprived of educational opportunities. This not only stunts their personal development but also reduces the future workforce's skill level, leading to a long-term economic deficit as these children grow into adults without the necessary education or training to contribute productively to society.

Additionally, the long-term psychological impact on former child soldiers can be profound, resulting in issues such as PTSD, anxiety, and depression. These mental health challenges hinder their ability to reintegrate into society and participate in the workforce effectively. As a result, communities face a growing population of individuals who are unable to contribute economically, further exacerbating social and economic instability.

The disruption of the labor market is another significant effect. Armed conflict creates an environment where businesses are forced to close or relocate due to insecurity, leading to job losses and reduced economic activity. As local economies crumble under the weight of violence and instability, the overall productivity of the region declines, making recovery increasingly difficult.

“Children are the future if the children are all in the bush fighting, we don’t have a future, even if they drop their weapons and can back the future is still in trouble because they are mental stained coupled with the years, they have spent there the damage on them is so much. The future is not safe with them” (Interviewed, 7th May 2024)

Moreover, the ongoing conflict and child soldier recruitment can severely impact foreign investment. Investors are often wary of entering markets characterized by instability and violence; thus, countries plagued by armed groups may find it challenging to attract foreign capital. This lack of investment stifles economic growth and prevents the development of critical infrastructure and services that could benefit the population.

Finally, these interconnected issues contribute to increased poverty levels within affected communities. As families lose their children to armed groups and local economies falter, many households find themselves trapped in cycles of poverty with limited opportunities for improvement. The combination of lost human capital, psychological trauma, labor market disruptions, and diminished foreign investment creates a vicious cycle that perpetuates economic decline.

International reputation

The recruitment of children into armed groups has significant negative effects on a country's international reputation. When a nation is associated with the use of child soldiers, it often faces severe condemnation from the international community, including human rights organizations, foreign governments, and global institutions. This condemnation can lead to diplomatic isolation, as countries may impose sanctions or limit their engagement with the offending nation.

Furthermore, such recruitment practices can tarnish a country's image as a responsible member of the international community. Nations that are perceived as failing to protect their children or allowing armed groups to operate with impunity may struggle to gain support for development aid or military assistance. This perception

can hinder foreign investment and economic partnerships, as investors and businesses typically seek stable and reputable environments.

Additionally, the involvement of children in armed conflict can lead to increased scrutiny from international bodies like the United Nations. Countries may face investigations or be placed on watch lists for human rights violations, further damaging their standing in global affairs. The long-term implications of such a reputation can be profound, affecting not only diplomatic relations but also the country's ability to participate in international discussions and agreements.

Challenges in curbing child recruitment

Ongoing tensions

Ongoing tensions within a country can significantly hinder efforts to resolve those tensions, creating a cycle of conflict that is difficult to break. This phenomenon is particularly evident in cases of civil unrest, political instability, or armed conflict, where the interplay of various factors exacerbates the situation and complicates resolution efforts. One of the primary ways ongoing tensions hinder resolution is through the escalation of violence. As conflicts continue, they often lead to increased militarization and retaliatory actions from both state and non-state actors. For instance, violent incidents can create a climate of fear and mistrust, making dialogue and negotiation nearly impossible. John Darby's (2001) analysis of peace processes highlights that violence can transform the nature of conflicts, leading to more severe clashes and complicating negotiations. In such environments, parties may become entrenched in their positions, viewing each other as monolithic adversaries rather than as potential partners in dialogue, which further perpetuates the cycle of conflict and undermines peace efforts. Ongoing tensions can also lead to the fragmentation of stakeholders involved in the conflict. As tensions rise, various factions may emerge, each with its own interests and grievances. This fragmentation complicates the negotiation process, as it becomes challenging to identify and engage all relevant parties. The presence of multiple actors with differing agendas can create a chaotic environment where reaching a consensus is nearly impossible. The lack of a unified front among stakeholders can result in competing coalitions that prioritize their interests over collective peace efforts, further entrenching the conflict. The persistence of tensions breeds deep-seated distrust among conflicting parties. This distrust can manifest as a reluctance to engage in negotiations or to adhere to any agreements reached. When parties perceive each other as untrustworthy, they may be less willing to make concessions or to engage in confidence-building measures that are essential for successful negotiations. As noted in discussions about the impact of protracted peace processes, the failure to address underlying grievances can lead to a normalization of conflict, where parties become accustomed to hostility rather than seeking resolution, this lack of trust can also extend to external mediators or organizations, which may be viewed with doubt, further complicating efforts to facilitate dialogue. In addition to the fragmentation of stakeholders, ongoing tensions can lead to broader political and social fragmentation within society. As groups become polarized, societal divisions deepen, making it increasingly challenging to foster a sense of national unity or shared purpose. This fragmentation can manifest in various forms, including ethnic, religious, or ideological divides, which can be exploited by political actors to maintain their power. The resulting environment of division and suspicion can create barriers to effective dialogue and compromise, as parties may prioritize their identity and group interests over collective peace-building efforts.

Political and social fragmentation within a state can significantly hinder efforts to resolve ongoing conflicts. When a society becomes deeply divided along political, ethnic, religious, or ideological lines, it creates barriers to effective dialogue, compromise, and peace-building. This fragmentation manifests in various ways such as; political and social divisions deepen, parties to the conflict become increasingly entrenched in their positions, viewing each other as adversaries rather than potential partners in a peace process. This lack of cooperation makes it challenging to engage in meaningful dialogue and negotiate mutually acceptable solutions. Fragmentation can also lead to the emergence of multiple factions with competing agendas, further complicating the path to resolution, as such Fragmentation breeds deep-seated distrust among conflicting parties. When groups perceive each other as untrustworthy, they are less willing to make concessions or engage in confidence-building measures essential for successful negotiations. This lack of trust can also extend to external mediators or organizations, which may be viewed with skepticism, hindering their ability to facilitate dialogue and resolution.

As in all the conflicts there will always be Political actors who seek to exploit societal divisions for their own gain, perpetuating fragmentation to maintain power and influence. By stoking fears and prejudices, they can rally their supporters and obstruct efforts at reconciliation. This dynamic creates a vicious cycle where political fragmentation reinforces social divisions and vice versa. This all feeds difficulty in fostering national unity, in a fragmented society, it becomes increasingly challenging to foster a sense of shared purpose and national unity. As divisions deepen, the notion of a common identity or collective interest becomes elusive, making it harder to build consensus around conflict resolution efforts. Without a unifying vision or narrative, the path to sustainable peace remains uncertain.

Cameroon's inability to clearly define whether the situation in its Anglophone regions constitutes a "conflict" or a "crisis" is a significant manifestation of political and social fragmentation, which in turn contributes to the slow resolution of the issue. This ambiguity reflects deeper divisions within the country and complicates efforts to address the grievances of the Anglophone population. The lack of a consensus on the nature of the Anglophone situation illustrates the fragmentation within the Cameroonian political landscape. The government has often framed the conflict as a security issue, labelling separatists as "terrorists" and justifying military responses.

“So, the state is not interested more in even trying to get into the reasons for those non-state armed groups enlisting those children into these armed groups, the state is aimed at fighting terrorists or criminals. So, there's no special interest in securing the interests of these children who are already in these armed groups. Because once there is a military operation, it's there to target terrorists. So, recognizing the other party as a combatant in a conflict, like you call it, but the state doesn't call it a conflict and since the state calls it terrorism. The state categorizes what is happening in Anglophone Cameroon as terrorism. The definition of terrorism, when you read the 2014 law on the suppression of acts of terrorism, you know what terrorism means. But now you call it a conflict. So that appellation and the attitude of the state towards the conflict makes it difficult.....as well as to bring forth other mechanisms to help combat this issue of enlistment and conscription of children into armed groups. (Interviewed, 23rd August 2024)

This framing not only dismisses the legitimate grievances of the Anglophone population but also polarizes the political discourse, making it difficult to engage in constructive dialogue. The government's reluctance to acknowledge the crisis as a legitimate political issue reflects a broader trend of authoritarian governance, where dissent is suppressed and alternative narratives are marginalized. This political fragmentation hinders the potential for reconciliation and meaningful negotiations, as the government remains unwilling to engage with Anglophone leaders on their terms. Socially, the inability to define the crisis exacerbates existing divisions between Anglophones and Francophone. The Anglophone community, which constitutes about 20% of the population, has long felt marginalized by a Francophone-dominated government. The lack of recognition of the Anglophone plight fosters resentment and deepens social fragmentation, as communities become more entrenched in their identities and grievances. This social division complicates efforts to build a cohesive national identity and undermines the possibility of a united front for peace. As long as the government fails to acknowledge the Anglophone crisis and its historical roots in colonialism and post-colonial marginalization, efforts to resolve the conflict will remain stymied.

Sovereignty

Sovereignty is a fundamental concept in international relations, denoting the supreme authority of a state over its territory and population. It encompasses various dimensions, including domestic, interdependence, international legal, and Westphalia sovereignty. The notion of sovereignty is crucial for understanding the dynamics of statehood, as it establishes the legal and political framework within which states operate and interact with one another. Despite the increasing influence of international organizations and treaties, the principle of sovereignty remains a significant barrier to external interference in a nation's internal affairs.

At its core, sovereignty implies that a state has the ultimate authority to govern itself without outside interference. This principle is enshrined in international law, particularly in the United Nations Charter, which emphasizes

the equality of sovereign states and the doctrine of non-intervention. Article 2 of the UN Charter explicitly states that all member states should respect the sovereignty of others, reinforcing the idea that no external entity has the right to dictate a state's internal policies or governance structures. This legal framework is designed to promote peaceful coexistence among nations, allowing them to maintain their unique political systems and cultural identities.

However, the relationship between sovereignty and international organizations is complex and often contentious. Jasmet Gulati and Ivan Khosa (2013) argue that the establishment of international organizations can lead to a perceived erosion of state sovereignty, as these entities may impose regulations and standards that member states are expected to follow. This tension is particularly evident in areas such as human rights, environmental protection, and trade, where international treaties may require states to conform to external norms that could conflict with domestic laws or practices. For instance, the responsibility to protect doctrine has sparked debates about the legitimacy of intervening in a sovereign state's affairs under the guise of humanitarian intervention.

Despite these challenges, the concept of sovereignty is not absolute. States often navigate the tension between maintaining their sovereignty and engaging with international organizations to address global issues. The evolution of sovereignty in the context of globalization has led to a more nuanced understanding of state power, where states may willingly cede certain aspects of their sovereignty to participate in international agreements that promote collective security or economic cooperation. This dynamic illustrates that while sovereignty is a critical principle, it is also subject to negotiation and reinterpretation in response to changing global realities.

Moreover, the concept of sovereignty is increasingly challenged by non-state actors and transnational issues that transcend national borders, such as climate change, terrorism, and migration. These challenges necessitate a cooperative approach, where states must balance their sovereign rights with the need for collective action. Consequently, while international organizations and treaties may influence state behaviour, they do so within a framework that respects the fundamental principle of sovereignty.

The interplay between state sovereignty and the need for intervention raises significant legal and ethical dilemmas, complicating the international community's ability to respond effectively.

One of the primary ways that state sovereignty obstructs intervention is through the principle of non-intervention, which is enshrined in international law, notably in the United Nations Charter. Article 2(4) of the UN Charter prohibits the use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state. This legal framework creates a strong presumption against intervention, making it challenging for international organizations to take action even when there is a clear need. As a result, states facing severe internal crises may evade accountability for their actions, as the international community is often reluctant to violate the sovereignty of a member state.

Furthermore, the concept of humanitarian intervention, which seeks to address egregious human rights violations, is often at odds with the principle of sovereignty. Humanitarian interventions are typically justified on the grounds of protecting human rights and preventing atrocities, yet they require a careful balancing act between respecting state sovereignty and responding to humanitarian needs. The lack of a universally accepted definition of humanitarian intervention complicates this balance. Different states and organizations may interpret the criteria for intervention variably, leading to inconsistencies in application and potential misuse of the intervention rationale for political purposes.

The historical context of interventions illustrates the challenges posed by state sovereignty. Notable cases such as the interventions in Iraq, Somalia, Haiti, and Rwanda highlight the difficulties in defining what constitutes a "threat to international peace and security." In these instances, the Security Council's ability to authorize intervention was often clouded by differing interpretations of sovereignty and humanitarian necessity. The absence of a settled definition of humanitarian intervention further exacerbates this issue, as the international community struggles to reach consensus on when and how to intervene.

Additionally, the evolving nature of state sovereignty in the context of globalization poses further challenges. While states may face pressure to adhere to international norms and standards, particularly regarding human rights, the reluctance to cede sovereignty can lead to inaction in critical situations. This tension underscores the need for a re-evaluation of the concept of sovereignty to incorporate responsibilities toward protecting human rights, as articulated in the emerging doctrine of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). R2P asserts that state sovereignty entails a duty to protect populations from mass atrocities, suggesting that intervention may be justified when a state fails to fulfill this obligation.

Cameroon's Anglophone crisis has been significantly hindered by the principle of state sovereignty. This principle asserts the authority of a state to govern itself without external interference, which complicates the international community's ability to intervene effectively in situations where humanitarian needs are dire. The international community, including organizations like the African Union (AU) and various humanitarian NGOs, has expressed concern about the situation in Cameroon, the principle of sovereignty has limited their capacity to intervene effectively. The AU, for instance, has historically avoided involvement in secessionist conflicts, which has left the Anglophone crisis largely unaddressed on the international stage. This reluctance to intervene is compounded by the lack of consensus on the legitimacy of humanitarian intervention, especially when the ruling authority is implicated in the violations. The ambiguity surrounding the criteria for intervention often leads to inaction, allowing states like Cameroon to continue rolling in their turmoil.

"Sovereignty plays a big role here the international community will only have as much authority as the states allows them to have....and if the state say it's a crisis with small pockets of resistance not a conflict, then the international community cannot say otherwise and attempt to address in a way they feel is better" (interviewed, 14th August 2024)

"The issue of sovereignty has made international law to be lock-headed with national laws.....Things cannot be imposed on them. (Interviewed, 14th August 2024)

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The inability of the Cameroonian government to establish effective statehood, coupled with its inability to clearly define the situation in the Anglophone regions as either a "crisis" or a "conflict," has created an environment conducive to the recruitment of children into armed groups. This ambiguity reflects deeper political and social fragmentation within the country; by addressing the situation so lightly the government has justified military responses that prioritise suppression over dialogue. This approach not only dismisses the underlying causes of discontent but also polarises political discourse, making constructive engagement with Anglophone population nearly impossible. Combined with issues such as Poverty, lack of education, and manipulation create a chain effect that fosters the recruitment of children into armed groups in the Cameroon Anglophone crisis. The pervasive poverty in the region leaves many families struggling to meet basic needs, making children vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups that promise food, protection, or financial incentives. This desperation can lead parents to allow or even encourage their children to join these groups as a means of survival. Coupled with poverty is the lack of educational opportunities, which further exacerbates the situation. Many children are unable to attend school due to conflict-related disruptions or economic constraints, leaving them idle and susceptible to the influence of armed factions. Without access to education, children are deprived of critical life skills and knowledge that could empower them to pursue alternative paths.

Recommendations

Acknowledge the Crisis: The government must recognize the Anglophone crisis as a legitimate political issue rather than framing it solely as a security threat or terrorism. This acknowledgment is crucial for engaging in meaningful dialogue with Anglophone leaders and addressing the grievances of the affected population.

- **Strengthen Legal Frameworks:** Cameroon should enhance its legal frameworks to protect children's rights more effectively. This includes enforcing existing laws against child recruitment and exploitation

and ensuring accountability for violations. Strengthening the legal system will help create a safer environment for children and deter armed groups from recruiting minors.

- **Community Engagement and Awareness:** The government should collaborate with NGOs and community leaders to raise awareness about the dangers of child recruitment. Public awareness campaigns can educate communities on the legal consequences of involving minors in armed conflicts and the importance of safeguarding children's rights.
- **Enhancing demobilization and Reintegration Programs:** Expanding programs aimed at the demobilization and reintegration of children associated with armed groups is essential. These programs should focus on providing psychological support, education, and vocational training to help former child soldiers reintegrate into society and reduce the likelihood of re-recruitment.
- **Enhance Educational Opportunities:** The government should prioritize the reopening and protection of schools in conflict-affected areas to ensure that children have access to education. Educational initiatives can provide children with alternatives to armed group involvement and help break the cycle of violence.
- **Address Socio-Economic Factors:** Tackling the root causes of poverty and lack of opportunities is vital. The government should work on economic development initiatives that provide families with sustainable livelihoods, reducing the desperation that leads to child recruitment.
- **International Collaboration:** Seeking support from international organizations, such as UNICEF and GIZ, can help bolster efforts to protect children's rights. Collaborating with these organizations can provide additional resources, expertise, and frameworks to address the complex humanitarian needs of children affected by the conflict.

The efforts of the state have not gone unnoticed but implementing these recommendations, Cameroon can create a more comprehensive and effective approach to combat the use of children in armed conflict, ultimately fostering a safer environment for vulnerable populations and promoting long-term peace and stability in the region.

REFERENCE

1. Abbink, J. (2005). *Being young in Africa: The politics of despair and renewal*. Leiden University press (pp. 1–34). https://doi.org/10.1163/9789047407003_006
2. Blair, Graeme, Coppock, Alexander, Humphreys, Macartan (2023), *Research Design in the Social Sciences: Declaration, Diagnosis and Redesign*. Princeton University Press.
3. Boyden, J and D. Levinson (2000). *Children as economic and social actors in the development process*. Stockholm Press
4. Brett, R., & Boulder, C.: L. R. P. (2004). *Young soldiers: why they choose to fight*. <https://doi.org/10.5860/choice.42-4324>
5. Brocklehurst, H. (2017b). *Who's afraid of children?: Children, Conflict and International Relations*. Routledge. Aldershot UK, Ashgate press
6. Boulder, London: Lynne Rienner, *Adolescence: the conflict of families*. *Journal of family issues* 27(3) 390-414.
7. Callinicos, A (2007). *The Drama of revolution and reaction: Marxist history and the twentieth century*. British Academy eBooks. <https://doi.org/10.5871/bacad/>
8. Cardoza, T. (2002). *These Unfortunate Children*. New York Press.
9. Caren Thomas: *Child Soldiers in Cameroon*. *Journal of Technology and Politics* (12), 353-437.
10. Carpinello, B., Vita, A., & Mencacci, C. (2022). *Recovery and major mental disorders*. Springer Nature.
11. Collier, P. (1999). *On the economic consequences of civil war*. *Oxford Economic Papers*, 51(1), 168–183. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oep/51.1.168>
12. Collmer, S. (2004). *Child Soldiers-An integral element in new, irregular wars? Connections the Quarterly Journal*, 03(3), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.11610/connections.03.3.01>

13. Crelinsten, R. D. (2019). In their own words: the world of the torturer. In Routledge eBooks (pp. 35–64). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429313929-4>
14. Darby, J. (2002). The effects of violence on peace processes. *Choice Reviews Online*, 40(01), 40–0552. <https://doi.org/10.5860/choice.40-0552>
15. Domínguez, D. G. (2021). The ruthless law of the jungle? Structural realism, security compulsion, and the rise of rome. *LetrasClássicas*, 1(1), 104–124. <https://doi.org/10.11606/issn.2358-3150.v1i1p104-124>
16. Endleman, S. (2001). Arms for the poor: small arms and light weapons in interstate and intrastate conflict. *Humanity & Society*, 25(3), 288–298. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016059760102500306>
17. Ferreira, R., & Mutiti, A. (2018). The effects of intrastate war and reintegration on Liberian child soldiers: Part II. *Commonwealth Youth and Development*, 15(2). <https://doi.org/10.25159/1727-7140/3778>
18. Goodhand, J. (2001). Violent conflict, poverty and chronic poverty. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1754535>
19. Gurr, T. R. (1970). Why men rebel. <http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA10716272>
20. Hannah Arendt and the Meaning of Politics. (2003). *International Studies in Philosophy*, 35(4), 185–188. <https://doi.org/10.5840/intstudphil200335444>
21. Harito-Fatouros, M. (2003), *The Psychological Origin of Institutionalized Torture*. The Routledge.
22. Honwana, A. (2006). *Child Soldiering in Africa*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
23. Honwana, A. M., & De Boeck, F. (2005). *Makers & breakers: Children & Youth in Postcolonial Africa*. University of Pennsylvania Press
24. Kaldor, M., & Lopes, L. (1999). New and old wars: organized violence in a global era. *Choice Reviews Online*, 36(11), 36–6532. <https://doi.org/10.5860/choice.36-6532>
25. Kalyvas, S. N. (2001). “New” and “Old” Civil Wars: a valid distinction? *World Politics*, 54(1), 99–118. <https://doi.org/10.1353/wp.2001.0022>
26. Kelman, H. C. (2019). The Social Context of Torture: policy process and authority structure. In Routledge eBooks (pp. 19–34). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429313929-3>
27. Kemper, Y. (2005). *Youth in War-To-Peace Transitions: Approaches by International Organisations*. Berlin Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management. <http://edoc.vifapol.de/opus/volltexte/2011/2516/pdf/br10e.pdf>
28. Kiruthu, F. (2014). Denov, M. (2010). *Child Soldiers: Sierra Leone’s Revolutionary United Front*. New York: Cambridge University Press. *International Public Management Review*, 15(2), 169–172. <https://journals.sfu.ca/ipmr/index.php/ipmr/article/download/240/237>
29. Klare, M. (1999). The Kalashnikov age. *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 55(1), 18–22. <https://doi.org/10.2968/055001009>
30. Klatt, W. (1977). The moral economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and subsistence in Southeast Asia. *International Affairs*, 53(3), 514–515. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2615375>
31. Konings, P., & Nyamnjoh, F. B. (1997). The Anglophone problem in Cameroon. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 35(2), 207–229. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0022278x97002401>
32. Marten, J. (2002). *Children and war: A Historical Anthology*. New York University Press.
33. Mawson, A. (2022). 7 Children, Impunity and Justice: Some Dilemmas from Northern Uganda. In Berghahn Books (pp. 130–142). <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781782381891-010>
34. Mazurana, D. E., McKay, S. A., Carlson, K. C., & Kasper, J. C. (2002). Girls in fighting forces and groups: Their recruitment, participation, demobilization, and reintegration. *Peace and Conflict Journal of Peace Psychology*, 8(2), 97–123. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327949pac0802_01
35. Mearsheimer, J. J. (2003). *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics (Updated Edition)*. W. W. Norton & Company.
36. Newman, E. (2004). The ‘New Wars’ Debate: A Historical Perspective is Needed. *Security Dialogue*, 35(2), 173–189. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010604044975>
37. Nordstrom, C. (2022). Chapter 4: Girls and War Zones. In Berghahn Books (pp. 63–82). <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781782381594-008>
38. Nyamnjoh, F. B. (1999). CAMEROON: a country united by ethnic ambition and difference. *Journal of African Affairs*, 98(390), 101–118. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.afraf.a007989>
39. Paige, J. M. (1997). *Coffee and power: Revolution and the Rise of Democracy in Central America*. Harvard University Press.

40. Rempel, G. (2015). Hitler's children: The Hitler Youth and the SS. UNC Press Books.
41. Ross, M. L. (2004). How Do Natural Resources Influence Civil War? Evidence from Thirteen Cases. International Organization, 58(01). <https://doi.org/10.1017/s002081830458102x>
42. Rotberg, R. I. (2003). State failure and state weakness in a time of terror. Brookings Institution Press.
43. Shepler, S. (2004). The social and cultural context of child soldiering in Sierra Leone. New York Lexington Books.
44. Singer, P. W. (2006). Children at war. Univ of California Press.
45. Singh, D. (2007). When a child is not a child: The scourge of child soldiering in Africa. Oxford University press.
46. Stetler, G. (2015). UNSTOPPABLE! Surviving is just the beginning.
47. Szabó, M. (2019). Katalin Street: WINNER of the 2018 PEN Translation Prize. Hachette UK.
48. Teune, H. (1982). Handbook of Political Conflict: Theory and Practice. Edited By Ted Robert Gurr. American Political Science Review, 76(1), 121–123. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003055400186137>
49. UNICEF, 2004. From Conflict to Hope: Children in Sierra Leone's Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Programme. New York:
50. UNICEF, 2005. The Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration of Children Associated with the Fighting Forces: Lessons Learned in Sierra Leone 1998–2002. Dakar:
51. UNICEF, 2007. 'The Paris Principles. Principles and guidelines on children associated with armed forces or armed groups. February. Retrieved 8 September 2009 from www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/465198442.htm l
52. UNICEF Sierra Leone. 2005. Education Programme. Retrieved 14 October 2008 from www.dac-sl.org/encyclopedia/4_part/4_2/ice
53. United Nations. 1999. Small Arms. Geneva: United Nations Publications.
54. United Nations Commission on Human Security. 2003. Human Security Now: Protecting and Empowering People. New York: United Nations Commission on Human Security.
55. United Nations News Centre. 2008. 'Strong link between child soldiers and small arms trade, UN
56. United Nations Security Council. 2007. Report of the UN Secretary General on Children and Armed Conflict in Myanmar. S/2007/666. 16 November. Retrieved 11 February 2008 from www.child-soldiers.org/regions/country=146
57. Wessells, M. G. (2007). Child soldiers: from violence to protection. Choice Reviews Online, 44(09), 44–5122. <https://doi.org/10.5860/choice.44-5122>