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"The Boys Are Coming to Town": Youth, Armed Conflict and Urban Violence in Developing Countries

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Young people are major participants in contemporary intra-state armed conflicts. Since the end of the Cold War there has been a trend to portray these as criminal violence for private (economic) ends, rather than politically or ideologically motivated. Hence, the perception of young people's role has moved from "freedom fighters" to "violent criminals." Our discursive and conceptual reconsideration based on a case study of Sierra Leone finds that the associated dichotomies ("new war/old war," "greed/grievance," "criminal/political violence") are grounded in traditional modernization assumptions and/or constructed for policy purposes, rather than reflecting reality on the ground. Urban and rural youth violence in developing countries cannot be separated from its political roots. Moreover, the violent dynamics in which urban youth violence is embedded challenge our conceptions of what an armed conflict is. Including this form of violence in mainstream conflict theory would open the way for a new interpretation and more effective policy interventions. Extrapolating the experience of Latin American cities plagued by drug violence, the recent and significant increase in drug trafficking on the West African seaboard could mark the beginning of another armed conflict with high youth involvement, this time playing out in urban settings.

Demographically speaking, developing countries are young countries. Where most developed countries are confronted with an ageing population – and must find solutions to overcome increasing demands on elderly care and/or the affordability of pension schemes – developing countries are confronted with an opposite demographic layout and with a rather different set of problems and challenges. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Sub-Saharan Africa where the majority of the population is below 25 years of age, with the youth category (15–25 years) making up at least 20 percent.[1] This poses significant challenges to a region already characterized by limited development and weak states. A youth bulge – as it manifests itself in Sub-Saharan Africa – requires considerable efforts by states to create education (secondary and tertiary) and employment opportunities for its current and next generation of young people. It can also contribute to urbanization, as young people are more mobile and may more easily leave their village to look for work or education in one of the bigger towns or cities, with the unlucky ones ending up living from hand to mouth in ever expanding slum areas. The magnitude and the rapidity of this phenomenon is clearly illustrated by the following figures: from an urbanization level of just 11.1 percent in 1950, current (2010) urbanization in Sub-Saharan Africa stands at 37.3 percent and is expected to reach 60.5 percent by 2050.[2]

Political instability has further added to population movements and urbanization. Civil conflict – now the most common type of armed conflict in the world – often results in large groups of refugees and internally displaced persons. As of 2008 the total number of refugees was esti-

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1 See http://www.un.org/esa/population/.
2 See http://www.un.org/esa/population/.

mated at 10 million, with the number of internally displaced persons 26 million – many of them children and young people (Dupuy and Peters 2010, 25). Moreover, young people are also major participants in armed conflicts, with ultra-young combatants – that is child soldiers – especially active in African conflicts (Dupuy and Peters 2010). The Sub-Saharan Africa region has been particularly affected by political instability over the past twenty years: while the number of armed conflict and wars globally has been gradually declining since 1992, Sub-Saharan Africa continued to experience high numbers of armed conflicts throughout the 1990s (Human Security Report Project 2008). Given the nature of many of these intra-state conflicts – with fighting going on in rural or mining areas – capital cities often provide a safe haven with at least some degree of order and stability, increasing the level of urbanization even further. Moreover, humanitarian aid – if it is delivered in the first place – is most readily available in or near urban centres for logistical reasons, adding another incentive to move to these places. Once peace is achieved, not all refugees and internally displaced persons are willing or able to return. Many of the cities and capitals in Sub-Saharan Africa countries which have experienced (or are still experiencing) armed conflict have doubled, tripled, or even quadrupled in population, presenting a particular set of challenges to development and security.

Being a subnational site, violence within cities will generally be interpreted as criminal in nature, and thus excluded from mainstream (social) conflict analyses and tools. However, especially since 9/11, the city has acquired a more prominent role on the security agenda and has been included as a site of violence in relation to the so-called "new wars." Within these analyses, cities are seen as the key sites in the "non-traditional," "asymmetric," "informal," or "new" wars (Kaldor 1999 in Graham 2004, 3). Warfare, in other words, "is being urbanized [and] urban areas are now the 'lightning conductors' for the world's political violence" (Graham 2004, 4). Indeed, if anything, 9/11 has proven that cities are vulnerable sites for outside threats. Violence within cities is nothing new, as cities are traditionally imagined as a site of crime. However in the context of mass migration, failing states, post-conflict societies, and long term issues around exclusion, poverty and inequality, urban violence is taking on excessive forms (Moser 2004). Added to this, the international commodity markets and "shadow economies" have created a new problem for many West African cities: drug trafficking and its accompanying violent social structures. In general, violence has reached unprecedented levels in many cities of the South, and is increasingly seen as one of the most portentous threats to development on a local, national, and international scale (Winton 2004).

It is against this general background and in relation to experiences in other major cities dealing with excessive violence that we explore the case study of Sierra Leone and pose the question: is Freetown – or for that matter, any other capital city in war-affected West Africa now used for drug trafficking – on the verge of becoming another Rio the Janeiro or Johannesburg? All of the points raised above can be found in this particular case: a youth bulge; limited educational and employment opportunities for young people; high incidence of child and youth combatants: a decade-long civil conflict mainly playing out in rural areas; large internally displaced person and refugee populations[3]; a quadrupling of the capital's population within a ten-year period; and finally a new security threat due to the emergence of drug trafficking combined with high youth unemployment rates. We will argue that the conflict in Sierra Leone and its particular post-war challenges can only be understood by acknowledging that there is a crisis of youth – in fact, we argue that young people in Sierra Leone experience a double crisis. We then make a case for the need to critically scrutinize the so-called "new war" concept (Kaldor 1999) and its apparent dichotomy of "criminal versus political violence" (with the new wars characterized by criminal violence and the so-called old wars – or pre-1990 conflicts –characterized by political violence). Instead, we argue that "new war" violence can be as politi-

3 During the course of the conflict more than half of the population was displaced (internally or externally) at one point or other.

cally motivated as "old war" violence, making these dichotomies of limited value for the analysis of contemporary armed violence. It appears that both greed and grievance are part of armed conflicts, in old as well as new wars, and in urban violence.

Through quantitative analysis, scholars conclude that there has been a "dramatic global decline in political violence since the end of the Cold War" (Mack 2005 in Newman 2009, 255). Current conceptualizations, however, are in need of more refinement, as Newman states that "there is less room for optimism about other forms of low-intensity conflict and serious violence which falls outside conventional definitions of civil war" (2009, 256). This article homes in on these observations through examples of violence in (West) African and Latin American cities, extrapolating findings to the case of Freetown, Sierra Leone. Drawing on ethnographic research concerning cities in the South that reveals the realities of urban violence – as opposed to general interpretations thereof – we suggest that much of today's urban youth violence, particularly in third world cities, should be interpreted (conceptually) as armed conflict, since it is characterized by high levels of organization, produces well over one thousand deaths per year (per city) and is the product of socio-economic marginalization of young people and its associated grievances, but also at times of "greed" or criminal agendas.

1. Conflict in Sierra Leone

In March 1991 the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF) entered Sierra Leone from neighbouring war-affected Liberia, and plunged the country into a horrendous armed conflict. Over the following eleven years it fought successively against an authoritarian regime, a military regime, and a democratic regime, and collaborated with another military regime after finally signing a peace accord with the reinstalled democratic government. The conflict is generally perceived as one of the first so-called "New Wars" (Kaldor 1999). Starting just after the end of the Cold War, the conflict in this small West African country satisfied all five "New Violence" characteristics identified by Chris Allen (1999, 9–11): the various armed groups *targeted predominately civilians* rather than rival armed groups; the violence and atrocities committed by all factions – and in particular the RUF which quickly made the amputation of the limbs of their victims by machete their trade-mark atrocity – showed *extreme brutality*; the emergence and rapid growth of the traditional hunter-based civil defense forces (the "Kamajors") clearly indicated the *state initiation and sponsorship of violence*; the role of the so-called "blood diamonds" which fuelled and according to some observers actually caused the war (Smillie et al 2000) underscored the motive of *war as business* rather than a matter of political or social grievances; and finally, the particular way in which the factions operated (including the government army) – with commanders leading through personal authority rather than military hierarchy – could be interpreted as typical of *warlordism* as first described in studies of warfare in ancient China.

The "war as business" explanation in particular found considerable support among national elites and international observers. David Keen (1998, 2001) was among the first scholars to point out the role of local, national, and international economic interests in these "new wars" and show that the fighting in Sierra Leone was prolonged because certain categories of people (military and rebel commanders, businessmen and arms dealers, politicians) were benefiting financially from the insecurity and chaos in the country. Paul Collier – a professor at Oxford but at the time temporarily heading the World Bank's Development Research Group – however, "dismissed" political motivations or causes for many conflicts, arguing that it was "greed, not grievance" which characterized the conflicts emerging in the post-Cold War era. Collier shows – using statistical analysis of conflict countries in the 1965–99 period – that those countries that depended on primary commodity exports and had a low national income were particularly vulnerable to civil war. For Sierra Leone Collier found further evidence in the fact that during the 1999 peace negotiations, the rebel leader demanded to become the Minister of Mining (2001, 146). In line with Collier, Smillie et al. (2000) argue that the war in Sierra Leone was the result of a criminal conspiracy seeking to control the lucrative diamond fields, rather than the result of an insurgency by a rebel movement motivated by political grievances. The argument that the rebel insurgency was a "criminal conspiracy after the country's diamond wealth" was also taken

up by the prosecution at the Special Court for Sierra Leone, created after the war to bring to justice those who were deemed to bear the greatest responsibility for the war.[4]

While it is likely that diamond revenue fuelled the conflict, given that all armed factions need some source of income to wage their wars, there is less evidence that the diamonds actually caused the war. For instance, a report by the Sierra Leonean organization No Peace Without Justice, presenting findings based on statements from more than four hundred witnesses who lived in war-affected districts, found very few instances of diamond mining by military or rebel personnel during the first years of the war (Smith et al. 2004). This increased significantly during the later stages, suggesting indeed that the opportunity for diamond mining fuelled the conflict once it was under way rather than acting as a cause and motivation from the outset (Peters and Richards 2011). The Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission concluded that "it was years of bad governance, endemic corruption and the denial of basic human rights that created the deplorable conditions that made conflict inevitable," (TRC 2004, 10) and that "the exploitation of diamonds was not the cause of the conflict in Sierra Leone; rather it was an element that fuelled the conflict" (TRC 2004, 12).

Among the proxies used by Collier as an indicator of greed are low levels of secondary education and high levels of (male) youth unemployment: poorly educated youths without jobs, it is suggested, would be particularly interested in accumulating resources through warfare, since there are few if any other avenues open to them and their opportunity costs are thus low. While these two proxies can and have been contested as indicators of greed agendas (Arnson and Zartmann 2005) – that is, they could equally indicate grievances – they do nevertheless point to an important characteristic of the conflict in Sierra Leone: the majority of the combatants involved in the conflict were young (including significant numbers of under-age combatants). Humphreys and Weinstein (2004) find that the majority of the combatants fall into the youth category and have a rural background. The crucial role (rural) youth played in the conflict, and understanding their motivations as one of the root causes of the conflict were first flagged by Paul Richards in 1996. Richards shows that following the collapse of the neo-patrimonial state in Sierra Leone before the war, many young people lost the opportunity to benefit from education or to secure employment. This resulted in grievances, which in turn made them more vulnerable to militia conscription and the insurgents' rather simplistic ideology of "free education, free medical care" and "jobs for all" (RUF/SL 1989, 1995). Peters (2006, 2011) later identifies a double crisis faced by youth in Sierra Leone: not only were their educational and employment hopes crushed by a contracting national state but they also found themselves marginalized through (labour) exploitation at a local level by landholding elites (mis)using customary law. Obviously the use and abuse of customary law was most pertinent in rural areas.

Whether because of the state's inability or because of its lack of commitment, young people all over the developing world are experiencing massive challenges. The 2007 World Development Report, *Development and the Next Generation* (World Bank 2007), states that there are 1.3 billion young people now living in the developing world – an unprecedented - number – and that about half of the young people globally (which includes developed countries) are unemployed,[5] with at least 10 percent of them not even able to read or write (meaning that they did not have access to primary let alone secondary education). While youth unemployment in itself does not lead to armed conflict – although research has shown an increased risk of armed conflict in countries experiencing a high youth bulge combined with a high young male unemployment rate, and a higher risk of riots if this coincides with great urban inequalities (Mclean-Hilker and Fraser 2009) – it could be argued that in the case of Sierra Leone, where youth experienced an additional crisis, it became a particular pernicious situation with a rebellion of an extremely des-

4 http://www.sc-sl.org/ (accessed December 2011).

5 For instance, North Africa and the Middle East alone must create 100 million jobs by 2020 to cater for their youth. (World Bank 2007).

tructive nature as the outcome. This second crisis experienced by youth – whether specifically through the exploitation of youth via customary law or more generally through gerontocratic control over the means of production (and reproduction, that is marriageable partners) – is particularly visible in Sub-Saharan Africa. Indeed, Henrik Vigh (with reference to Guinea-Bissau) calls the inability of young people to gain a reliable income, marry, and have children, and thus become an adult, a "social moratorium" caused by "generationally asymmetric control over access to resources" (2006, 96).

The 1999 Lomé peace accord, the 2000 Abuja ceasefire and the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration program for combatants hardly recognized this double crisis experienced by most of the youthful fighters in Sierra Leone.[6] Both the peace accords and the DDR program were formulated at a time when the "greed, not grievance" explanation was particularly dominant. As a result, any genuine grievances of youthful combatants and war-affected youth were easily dismissed as a fabricated explanation to justify their participation in an atrocious war (Mkandawire 2002). Rather ironically, the Government of Sierra Leone – with the support of the UK's Department for International Development (DfID) – embarked on a "chieftaincy restoration programme" to rehabilitate and reinstall the power of the paramount chiefs and customary law more generally (Jackson 2007), and by so doing reinstated the very causes of the war, according to its youthful protagonists (Richards 2005). About half of the ex-combatants who registered for DDR opted for the skills training reintegration package, which included training in trades such as carpentry, tailoring, or car mechanics (NCDDR 2004). But six to nine months of training proved insufficient to compete in a post-war economy that was already at a low ebb. As a result, most of the ex-combatants were unable to acquire a livelihood through their newly acquired skills, and, after selling their DDR toolkit, drifted to the mining areas – where they at least could sell their labour – or the urban centres (Peters 2007). From a pre-war population of around half a million, the country's capital Freetown increased to about two million inhabitants during and after the war (Shepler 2010). In the city the youthful ex-combatants have even fewer opportunities to secure a livelihood than in the mining areas and often have to survive through informal networks and contacts, frequently dating back to the time when they were still under arms. From a remarkable low level straight after the war, crime rates have increased annually, with armed crime causing particular concern. More recently, Sierra Leone – like other coastal West African states – has been facing an additional security threat through drug trafficking. With smuggling routes via the Caribbean more closely monitored by national police forces, often in collaboration with European and North American police forces (and/or Interpol), South American drug lords have diverted cocaine destined for the European and American markets to West Africa. From here it is trafficked on, perhaps teaming up with human trafficking networks (Aning 2007). Guinea-Bissau is already labeled a "narco-state." In 2007 President Koroma of Sierra Leone declared that the three biggest single threats to the security of his country were youth unemployment, drug trafficking, and corruption (Peters 2008). It is not hard to see that there is a connection between these and the real potential of drug money to undermine the difficult process of rebuilding a "failed state." While domestic use of drugs is still limited (UNODC 2007, 23; Bøås and Hatløy 2005), it is clear that there is a real possibility of Freetown turning into another Sao Paulo or Bogota, with youth-cum-drug gangs becoming part of the urban landscape. If so, young people will again be victims as well as perpetrators, just as they were during the civil war a decade ago. But while there was some recognition of their grievances after the war – following sensitization campaigns by civil society organizations and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to challenge the narrow interpretation of a war motivated by greed – there is little chance that young people's predicaments and the grievances that lead to involvement in crime and drug-trafficking will be recognized.

6 For details of the Lomé Peace Accord, see: http://www.sierra-leone.org/lomeaccord.html (accessed December 2011). For the Abuja Ceasefire Agreement, see: http://www.sierra-leone.org/ceasefire1100.html (accessed December 2011)

With the above in mind, we make two arguments: Firstly, the so-called new wars are not necessarily bereft of any political agenda, although it may not necessarily take the shape of an easily recognizable ideology. In the case of Sierra Leone it was the grievances of young people without prospects for proper education or employment who experienced socio-economic marginalization and exploitation by a gerontocratic rural elite abusing customary law and tradition. Secondly, we propose that the high levels of violence experienced in many urban centres also reflect economic and social grievances, rather than merely a greed agenda or a criminal and/or psychopathic propensity for violence. In the case of Sierra Leone, lack of institutional reform in rural areas continues to produce migration of young people to the cities, where – if left without any support – they become particularly vulnerable to groups involved in illicit activities or criminal networks. In other countries that experienced increasing urbanization further in the past, the relationship between urban violence and a rural crisis might no longer be clearly identifiable, although this does not mean that it was not there in the first place.

2. Youth Gangs and Urban Violence

Urban youth violence and armed conflict are clearly separated – conceptually – in conflict literature through a "political versus criminal violence" dichotomy. However, following the case set out above we would argue that youth violence in many urban post-war settings – the extremely high levels of (youth) violence in South Africa or Brazil would be other good examples – is embedded within a conflict dynamic that demonstrates more similarities than differences with what is subsumed under the banner of "armed conflict.". Indeed, drawing on insights gained through the "new war" debate, we find a number of similarities that link urban violence to contemporary armed conflicts. A number of common factors and characteristics can be distinguished in many cities throughout the world, as well as within contemporary armed conflicts or new wars: the presence of non-state armed actors; the linkage of violence to the international commodity markets (both legal and illicit); conflict motivations that are not necessarily state-related; local forms of sovereignty and collective life; high levels of casualties; and finally, the crucial role of youth as armed actors. But why then are these still two separate categories? In other words: what impedes the inclusion of urban (youth) violence in mainstream conflict analyses and transformative methods? The literature on armed conflict prevention, analysis, and reconstruction is well developed it might prove of some use for understanding and addressing urban youth violence.

Clearly, urban youth violence – and urban violent dynamics in general – lack the traditional "conflict umbrella," as these violent episodes find themselves detached from the nation-state in which they occur in terms of ideology, actors, and bounded territory; the city is a subnational site. Therefore, urban violence is generally framed and interpreted as criminal violence. Within a context of "state failure" or the inability of state representatives to provide security, the lives of inhabitants of cities such as Rio de Janeiro and Johannesburg are constituted by a "culture of fear" (Koonings and Kruijt 2007) that is attached to issues of crime. Indeed, the "fear-of-crime rhetoric" (Lemanski 2004, 103) stands at the heart of the dynamics which catalyze urban violence. Through this interpretative frame – which is present at local, urban, and national level – repressive, violent policing, vigilantism, and urban spatial and social segregation in the form of gated communities – which in turn spatially manifest and deepen social boundaries – are legitimized (Caldeira 2000). The crime frame and inability of the state to protect its citizens from this form of violence opens a market for the privatization of violence and frames slums and their inhabitants as violent enemies of the city, or "Others" (Lemanski 2004; Rodgers 2006).[7] One particular group in these slums is considered an enemy of the state: the youth gang (and the associated drug trade). Indeed, young people in these slums are often – due to lacking or unstable family structures, a lack of

7 A shift from framing violence as "political" to simply "criminal" has opened the way for a number of violent actors that legitimize their actions through this crime frame. In Latin America for example, where there is a legacy of a culture of violence, the "discourses about corruption" (Penglase 2007, 319) justify a number of non-state armed groups and informal mechanisms of revenge violence and vigilante crime (Moser 2004, 12). Different actors and mechanisms constitute this culture of violence, such as "[s]lumlords [who] organize squads of armed mercenaries to exterminate crime on their premises" (Balán 2002, 1).

education and opportunities, and race- and class-based discrimination – members of gangs, which have become increasingly linked to the international drug trade and with it have become increasingly militarized (Caldeira 2000; Jüttersonke et al. 2009; Lemanski 2004).

Gangs composed of mainly young males aged 15–25 are a typical characteristic of contemporary cities of the South. These gangs provide young people with a sense of belonging and social identity, and as they operate in shadow economies, make up for the lack of educational and job opportunities. Within gangs, young men find a way to make a living (see for example Jüttersonke et al. 2009). Mainstream research on gangs has focused on youth gangs as dominantly a Latin American phenomenon, yet many other cities in the South – characterized by an environment of exclusion, post-conflict reconstruction, and rapid urbanization – exhibit similar groups of (semi-)organized youth. In Kabul and Karachi, bands of (armed) youngsters – at times involved in international drug trafficking – have become a characteristic of the urban landscape (Esser 2004). In Lagos, so-called "area boys" act as violent brokers in parallel structures, having created an income for themselves by guarding individual property or public space in a situation of lacking state security, and with it have become an accepted part of the urban landscape (Ismail 2009). Smith (2004, 128), discussing the case of the Bakassi Boys in southeastern Nigeria, clearly shows the socio-economic and political dimensions that gave rise to this phenomenon:

> Vigilantism and the widespread popular support for it can be read as a response to the practices of the Nigerian state and the failures of democracy to deliver expected political and economic dividends. … On the other hand, vigilantism must also be read as an expression of discontent with regard to more traditional structures of patron–clientism as they play out in an era of centralized state power and heightened inequality in a population that is younger, more educated and urbanized, and full of frustrated ambitions.

In many cities of the South, gangs initially filled up the gap left by state absence and acted as community builders with clear ideologies focusing on countering the negative effects of social and economic exclusion (Arias 2006). Gangs functioned as state entities; they act as constructors of social cohesion and a sense of community, as police, judge, and executioner (Arias 2006; Dowdney 2003; Rodgers 2006; Salo 2006). Pinnock (1984) considers the gang subculture as an expression of and resistance to the 1980s African political economy. For South Africa this was the Apartheid regime and for many other Sub-Saharan Africa nations, (authoritarian) regimes implementing World Bank structural adjustment and austerity measures. Salo also points out how gangs act as community builders in South African townships, as they shape closed social, moral, and territorial boundaries (2006). Gangs thus function as parallel regimes and provide a sense of belonging and community for the slums in which they operate, for those excluded from state-citizenship and state-based social structures through discrimination, often based on the intersections of economic, geographical, and racial criteria. In popular perceptions, slum inhabitants, as well as their unorganized, poor lifestyle and illegal settlements, are often seen as "inhuman" inhabitants of the city (see for example Davis 2006). These geographical spaces are often closed communities, functioning as archipelagos within wider state structures. Generally, slum inhabitants are accorded no rights to the city nor state services for their illegal settlements, often excluding them from water or electricity networks, public transport, and wider social networks, making them a sort of "second rate citizens" (see for example Koonings and Kruijt 2007). Within this environment, "gangs are also an expression of social cohesion in peripheral communities" (Salo 2006, 148). Indeed, according to Lund, what is specific to African societies in which state formation is a challenging process is the difficulty in "specifying what is 'state' and what is not . . . many institutions have a twilight character; they are not the state but they exercise public authority" (2006, 673).

Initially, gang violence was limited to occasional turf conflicts over territories. However, with the introduction of the drug trade to Latin America in the 1980s and 1990s, and more recently to African states, the character and image of gangs is changing rapidly. In Brazil, children as young as ten years old are incorporated in these factions as lookouts, messengers, and little drug carriers. Gradually, children and adolescents began to fill positions previously only held by adult traffickers. Many adult traffickers were imprisoned or killed, paving the way for more children to enter the drug trade as a full time occupation (Dowdney 2003). Likewise

in South Africa, Salo's ethnographic research demonstrates that in the past gangs performed a policing function and provided youngsters with a form of social, gang, and community-based identities linked to the neighbourhood (2006). Nowadays however, "the gangs are being redefined primarily as economic units whose core business is illegal drug trafficking" (Salo 2006, 170). As with new wars, we can see here that non-state armed actors and non-state forms of sovereignty deriving initially out of grievances over social and economic exclusion have become increasingly violent and catalyzed through economic motivations. Both greed and grievance have thus come to form a part of the conflict dynamics. We will return to this issue later.

Building on existing insecurities in an age of rapid neoliberal change and the introduction of organized crime in the slums, gangs are easily framed as criminal groups disrupting state security and thus become the scapegoats for a wide range of crises – social, political, economic – way beyond their scope and impact (Jüttersonke et al. 2009; Koonings and Kruijt 2007). These frames form the basis on which a vicious circle of violence and counter-violence has come to preoccupy the residents of cities of the South. Violence associated with slums increasingly reaches the wealthier parts of the cities, as the popular phrase *la bala perdida* – the stray bullet – in Brazil demonstrates. In many urban societies of the South the violence of "backward" people in the slums is now felt to be "spreading its tentacles" throughout the entire city (Penglase 2007). Responding to these insecurities, the public demands more repressive action. Violent raids in slums – carried out by on- as well as off-duty police officers organized in militias – often kill more innocent bystanders than they actually arrest drug lords. Police officers in Latin American cities are known for their extra-judicial killings, which they are rarely punished for (Alston 2009, 2010; Human Rights Watch 2009).[8] This phenomenon is not confined to Latin America, but is increasingly a characteristic of African cities and evolving into a global phenomenon (Alston 2010).

Youths, in cities North and South, are especially vulnerable to the administration of arbitrary and selective social order at the hands of the police, "due to the widespread perception of "youth" as criminal" (Winton 2004, 173). The complexity of the situation is further deepened by the way many police officers are themselves organized in armed bands that either collaborate or compete with gangs over the drug trade.[9] Police officers in other words, often maintain the very structures which they are meant to fight. Moreover, repressive methods appear to have had the opposite effect as they forced gangs to become better organized and armed. Rio de Janeiro's violence is characterized by:

> paramilitary organisation at the local level, territorial and political domination of geographical areas, high numbers of armed combatants (including ex-military men), a constantly armed presence in the communities they [drug factions] dominate, military grade weapons and levels of armed violence that kill well over 1000 civilians and combatants during a one year period. (Dowdney 2003: 192)

What might have started as groups of youngsters hanging out on the street is now, with the introduction of the drug trade and repressive and violent policing, evolving into well functioning armed bands fighting for and over their neighbourhoods, the profits of the drug trade and over the

8 The state mechanism assigned with the protection and provision of security, the police, appears to have become an important factor of high crime rates. According to Winton: "in attempts to regain social order and power, the police may be involved in a form of vigilantism which extends to social cleansing, targeting groups of "undesirables" such as suspected criminals, youth gang members, street children and homosexuals [and] agents on the whole act with remarkable impunity" (2004, 173). In Brazil for example, the Rio and São Paulo police together have killed more than 11,000 people since 2003 (Human Rights Watch 2009). In nearly all cases in which police have killed people while on duty, the officers involved report the shootings as "resistance killings" – legitimate acts of self-defense. The legitimacy of these "resistance killings" is however questionable, as research done by the Special Rapporteur (Alston 2009) and Human Rights Watch (2009) demonstrates, and a substantial portion of these shootings are in fact extrajudicial executions whose victims are foremost "young, male, black and poor" (Alston 2009, 7). Off-duty police officers pose the most severe threat to public security. Organized in militias or criminal organizations these *grupos de extermínio* routinely commit extra-judicial executions. Furthermore, like the drug gangs, these militias effectively control entire neighborhoods, extort residents through security taxes, and are a major source of homicides and other crimes in Rio, including torture, corruption, and – in some cases – drug trafficking (Human Rights Watch 2009). These acts of social cleansing are, however, difficult to prove. In Brazil, police impunity is rather the norm than the exception; of more than 7,800 complaints recorded by the Rio Police Ombudsman's Office, only 42 led to criminal charges and only four to convictions (Human Rights Watch 2009).

9 In the case of Mexico, for example, there is evidence of the involvement of the police forces and other security agencies in a range of illegal activities such as "graft, gambling, prostitution, smuggling and drug trafficking" (Pansters and Castillo Berthier 2007, 40–41).

grievances that united them in the first place. Grievances over discriminating and repressive raids in slums drove their inhabitants into the arms of the gangs, which themselves engage in retributive violence to protect their neighbourhoods and avenge their loses, consequently provoking more repressive tactics and endorsing their dangerous image, culminating in a downward spiral of violence (Arias 2006; Rodgers 2006).

This spiral has culminated in what could be termed an *undeclared war* in cities between non-state organized armed actors among themselves, as well as a wide range of state administered forms of violence. Under a so-called "state of exception" (Agamben 1998) – in which the law is (temporarily) infringed due to imminent emergency threats – violence is deployed against slums and their inhabitants which is easily as destructive and lethal as war-related violence. Within urban social dynamics, slums are discursively dehumanized and popularly considered as "barbaric" undeveloped spaces that contain "invalid" dangerous populations, which threaten the development and security of the valid spaces and populations of the city (Agamben 1998; Foucault 2003; Samara 2010). Violence enacted towards these geographic spaces and populations is legitimated through their supposedly inhuman character, leading to a number of development projects, such as the construction of highways, that bulldoze entire communities in a process starkly resembling *urbicide* (see for example Davis 2006; Graham 2004; Shaw 2004). Furthermore, crimes considered "war crimes" under international humanitarian law and listed in the Rome Statute, such as social cleansing, torture, extrajudicial killings, are well known strategies used by those concerned to "fight crime."[10] These "war crimes" take place, however, without the official conflict umbrella, thus eliminating them from the mainstream conflict analytical map. Moreover, like new wars, these violent social structures contest our notion of what a war is. Qualitative research (see for example Alston 2009, 2010; Human Rights Watch 2009; Koonings and Kruijt 2007; Leeds 2007; Rodgers 2006) demonstrates that urban violence could – and should – be labeled as *social* conflict instead of criminal violence defined by individual pathologies. Placing local gang violence and state-administered violence within their wider social structures and linking their local discourses and frames to wider global ones demonstrates their similarities to the social structures that are typical for armed conflict. This indeed raises the question, when is a war actually a war?[11]

3. When Is a War a War?

Considering that homicides in cities around the globe exceed the number of battle deaths in the average civil war (Cramer 2006), we should be wary to uncritically accept definitions as an accurate description of reality. Definitional frames are often not purely descriptive, as they "may shape what is viewed and how it is interpreted" (Cramer 2006, 51). This is especially important as categories frequently reflect – or feed into – specific policy choices and demands (Kalyvas 2001). For instance, children involved in the drug trade suffer from higher mortality rates than their counterparts involved in armed conflict, but only child soldiers are recognized as a special group – for example under the 2000 Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child – making them more visible and thus facilitating NGO or government interventions (Dowdney 2003). Contemporary definitions, categories, and the assumptions on which these are based appear essentially state-centric and therefore often exclude sub-national locations as sites of war, of which the city is a prime example. What we are seeing here is a global tendency in which not only the state's monopoly on violence is challenged, but the state itself is challenged in its role as provider of security. Within contemporary armed violence, non-state armed actors and non-state forms of sovereignty, non-state forms of identities to wage war for, and non-state forms of security all challenge our notions of the

10 In Brazil for example, the police are known for their dehumanizing and violent behaviour towards slum inhabitants. According to Amar "police in training still too often roll their eyes when human rights are mentioned, grumbling that human rights organizations are made up of the 'usual suspects' – homosexuals, feminists, and blacks sympathetic with narcotraffickers" (2009, 522). Within this environment "rights such as freedom from torture, summary execution or arbitrary arrest are routinely violated" by state officials (Penglase 2007, 306).

11 This question is borrowed from Cramer (2006), who asks himself in *Civil War is Not a Stupid Thing* when a war is *not* a war.

state as the only representative of collective life and consequently represent assumptions that define what a war is. Mainstream analysis and notions of state authority in African societies often miss out on these phenomena; as Lund points out: "[o]rganizations and institutions that exercise legitimate public authority, but do not enjoy legal recognition as part of the state, are out of focus" (2006, 675). Gangs in slums are the prime example of alternative forms of governance that are often hived off as criminal or illegitimate.

Not just urban violence, but contemporary conflicts in general demonstrate a discrepancy between assumptions and definitions concerning war and the realities of war. Whereas war was traditionally seen as a matter for states, national boundaries are increasingly transgressed and non-state armed actors have become prominent players on the battleground. This makes contemporary conflicts and urban violence awkward objects of analysis, as they transgress a number of constructed boundaries associated with war, spanning "legal vs. illegal, private vs. public, civilian vs. military, internal vs. external, and local vs. global" (Maleševi 2008, 98). Contemporary conflicts or new wars and urban violence therefore question the assumptions on which definitions are based.

When we examine the mainstream definition of armed conflict, we find that political violence is defined as violence associated with the nation-state, and violence performed by or against a nation-state is considered political and for a public cause (Jabri 1996). Indeed, deconstructing the contemporary mainstream definition of armed conflict into its constituent parts reveals its state-centric fundaments. Armed violence is included within the category of armed conflict when it meets the following criteria:[12]

> [a]n *armed conflict* is a contested incompatibility that concerns government and/or territory where the use of armed forces between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, results in at least 25 battle-deaths. (UCDP/PRIO 2009, 1)

In other words, without state involvement or state contestation, a conflict cannot be considered an armed conflict and is consequently not political violence.[13] These constructed boundaries culminate in three interrelated dichotomies: war vs. crime, political vs. criminal violence, and public vs. private association or motivations for violence that are essentially the basis of the new war paradigm. Within these dichotomies, a differentiation is made between killing for private gain and killing on the *battlefield*, of which the latter derives its legitimacy out of the perception of being "undertaken in the name of an assumed collective just cause" (Jabri 1996, 105). This collective is defined by its national identity, hence the state-centric character of mainstream conceptions. However, in the case of African societies, "[w]hether labeled state or not, it seems that a wide variety of institutions constitute themselves as *de facto* public authorities" (Lund 2006, 676), thus questioning the definition of what can be considered public.

Contemporary interpretations of armed violence are embedded in a general discursive shift that is constituted by a crime frame, and it is here that global and local discourses of violence interpretations are linked. Post-Cold War conflicts are seen as a departure from earlier forms of conflict (Kalyvas 2001) and violence previously framed as "political" – through its perceived allegiance to Cold War ideologies – is now simply framed as "criminal" (Harris 2003), as these conflicts appear to lack overt state involvement, state contestation, or a clear ideology. The new war paradigm frames these conflicts as "highly decentralized"

12 The literature on what exactly constitutes a "war" in mainstream conflict analysis is diverse and it appears there is no single agreed definition (Cramer 2006). Definitions of armed conflict vary on numbers of casualties and definitions of battle deaths. The definition provided by the Peace Research Institute (PRIO) in Oslo is taken here as exemplary of a mainstream understanding of "war."

13 According to this definition, a conflict has to be politically oriented, and to be so, association or involvement with or of the state is necessary. *Party* for example in the above definition is operationalized as "a government of a state or any *opposition* organization or alliance of opposition organizations" (Lacina and Gleditsch 2005, 162, italics ours). Opposition implies a relation to the government, as the party to be opposed to must be the state or a government of a state. Another example is the content of the incompatibility between these parties, which must "concern government and/or territory" (Lacina and Gleditsch 2005, 162). An *incompatibility concerning government* is operationalized as "concerning the type of political system, the replacement of the central government, or the change of its composition" (ibid.). An *incompatibility concerning territory* concerns "the status of a territory, e.g. the change of the state in control of a certain territory (interstate conflict), secession, or autonomy (internal conflict)" (ibid.).

(Maleševi 2008, 98) as they are detached from the nation-state in which they occur and their very existence is often linked to state failure and a lack of a state monopoly on violence (Jabri 1996; Maleševi 2008; Newman 2004). As we have seen that contemporary classifications of "armed conflict" define the nation-state as the centre of public life and the only legitimate public just cause to wage war for, new wars – often decentralized or local in nature – risk being classified as falling in the private realm, thus waged for private causes, and thus criminal in nature.

However, the meaning of what is public and what is private – the general boundary that separates political from criminal violence and old from new wars – appears to be dependent on the context in which conflicts are embedded, and need not be defined by a national element. Traditionally, the society of classical social theory – the self-contained nation-state – is the primary criterion for governance (Giddens 1987). Traditional modernization theory is embedded within the belief that the nation-state is the "centre in society capable of shaping the entirety of social relations" (Kaya 2004, 47). Collective social life, in other words, is constructed and naturalized around a national element which leads to a "state-administered 'universal' identity" (Baumann in Best 1998: 312). Being the sole representative of collective life, the state is defined as the only legitimate violent actor. Contesting a state-centric approach, Bakonyi and Bliesemann de Guevara argue that contemporary conflicts find themselves on the margins of and beyond the state and for these actors "reference to the state is only one aspect" (2009, 398). According to Rodgers, multiple forms of sovereignty can coexist and non-state collectivities can form "micro-regimes of order as well as communal forms of belonging to definite albeit bounded, collective entities" (2006, 321). As such, Lund argues that in the case of African societies, it is useful to approach the phenomenon of public authority and governance not "as stemming from one single source, but rather to focus on how particular issues (security, justice, development, taxation and others) are governed and which actors are engaged in them" (2006, 682).

This allows us to think about the relationship between violence, order, and the state in a "less epistemologically constrained manner, along a continuum where the boundaries between the state and non-state forms of authority can become blurred" (Rodgers 2006, 317–18). Furthermore, it allows us to define what is considered "public" in a more context-sensitive manner, consequently approaching new wars, as well as urban violence, as social conflict instead of mere private criminality. In the case of urban violence, collectivities are not necessarily national, as slums are characterized by state absence and parallel regimes.

When "political" violence is understood in broader terms – for example when one includes interethnic violence and the violent policing of marginalized impoverished and/or ethnic enclaves – cities are major, and indeed increasingly primary, venues for official policies of surveillance, coercion, and security, as well as being sites of resistant tactics by those seeking to survive such policies (Amar 2009). The frame of criminality ascribed to new wars and urban violence is not random, but embedded within wider assumptions and discourses that construct the category "armed conflict" and link it to the nation-state.

Furthermore, the boundary between war and crime appears normative rather than analytical, as warlike levels of violence do not apparently necessitate an official state of war. We should be wary of separating normative and political definitions from analytical ones, as in many cities of the South, under a "state of exception," war crimes and crimes against humanity are the reality of many. Especially in the case of young people this becomes a stressing issue as they have come to be seen as the main perpetrators of violence in cities and have become the main victims as well. How can these youngsters, and slum inhabitants in general, hope to see their human rights protected and crimes committed against them punished when those who are supposed to protect them are in fact the ones who attack them? These dynamics have confronted international law practitioners and as such in international customary law the meaning of "armed conflict" includes non-state armed violence. According to this definition, an armed conflict is found to exist "whenever there is a resort to armed force between States or protracted armed violence between governmental authorities and organized armed groups or *between such*

groups within a State" (O'Connell 2008, 12, italics ours). Such a definition can inspire conflict resolution practitioners and creates a space to link international conflict analytical, transformative, and legal tools to urban violent dynamics. Especially urban youngsters could benefit from such a shift, as their situation starkly resembles those of child soldiers in "official" conflict, but due to the lack of understanding of urban violence as social conflict these youngsters remain invisible on the mainstream conflict analytical map. Which tools, insights, and mechanisms – such as those already designed for child soldiers – do we as conflict resolution practitioners have that can be applied to urban youth?

4. Conclusion

Unfortunately, the number of young people who find themselves in extremely challenging circumstances in weak or post-conflict third world states where state support and provision are already limited is only likely to increase in the future. Responses vary, but can include active participation in armed violence (including urban violence). We have shown that the dichotomy between youth as "perpetrators" or "victims" is not very useful here (often they are both, or become perpetrators only after their human rights have been violated in the first place) and that other dichotomies – such as "political versus criminal violence" or "new war versus old war" are equally problematic and unhelpful. Rather, we suggest looking beyond these conceptual and constructed categories. This would allow us to better comprehend urban youth violence and to see the socio-economic and political grievances that feed into it. This is necessary because, as we argue, policy-making and interventions are based (of course) on the understanding and conceptualization of what the problems and challenges are. We have used the case of Sierra Leone to illustrate the "crisis of youth." While Sierra Leone is a rather small country, it represents an interesting case for academics and policy makers. In 1994, the journalist Robert Kaplan wrote an influential piece that was published in the *Atlantic Monthly* (and forwarded to every American embassy in the world by order of the Clinton administration) warning against the world's "coming anarchy" caused by environmental degradation, unrestricted population growth, and resurfacing primitivism (1994). Kaplan took Sierra Leone as the prime example to illustrate his points (1996). While his "new Barbarism" thesis has been sufficiently refuted for Sierra Leone (see for instance Richards 1996), we should not "throw the baby out with the bath water." A youthful population can be a significant and positive asset to a country and its development, but if left to its own devices (or marginalized and exploited) can also turn against its country and become a force of destruction, as the above examples have demonstrated.

Indeed, rapid urbanization, slums, youth gangs, and the negative effects of drug trafficking and use are characteristic of cities throughout the world. In response, cities have become dominated by a fear-of-crime rhetoric that enables and demands repressive policing strategies. Combined with the impact of the opportunities created by the shadow economy, urban violence in many cities of the South generates well over one thousand deaths per year per city, and draws in organized violent and armed actors ranging from youth gangs, police officers, militia groups composed of former military men, vigilantes, violence brokers, up to the level of politicians. Cities are becoming increasingly segregated into social and spatial archipelagos as fear of the "other" informs mutually interpretative frames of their inhabitants. Within these settings, it appears that urban youth is both the main perpetrator and victim of these violent dynamics, and questions arise about how to address and alleviate their vulnerable and dangerous position.

We have taken examples of other cities around the globe to open up analyses for Sierra Leone (or for that matter, any sub-Saharan city) and pose the questions: Is Sierra Leone, and specifically Freetown, transforming from a safe haven into a site of violence? Could a city like Rio de Janeiro show what Freetown could look like in a few years? Clearly the introduction of drug trafficking in West Africa will have an impact on these young people and their lives. We can learn from examples like Rio de Janeiro or Johannesburg. Exploring the benefits of non-state-centric analyses may be helpful in increasing our arsenal of preventive measures and policy interventions. There is a desperate need for more refined and inclusive definitions and categories to accurately address the contemporary armed conflicts.

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