Introduction

Armed factions need recruits to wage their struggle, and when voluntary conscription does not provide sufficient manpower, armies, militias and rebel movements can resort to forced conscription of adult and underage recruits. But where recruits do not join out of conviction or free will, armed groups need to find ways to initiate feelings of loyalty to the movement to minimize the risk of desertion. Moreover, they need to increase the group coherence because, after all, fighting is a social activity. Threats, punishments and rewards are the most straightforward ways to prevent desertion and nurture feelings of loyalty. Socialization and indoctrination can further contribute towards this and intend to make conscripts perceive the rebel’s struggle as their struggle and the faction’s ideology or agenda as their agenda. It is generally assumed that children are more receptive to these loyalty and group binding processes. For instance, Michael Wessells (2006, p. 53) points out that:

Teenagers are susceptible to manipulation by propaganda because they lack the broad life experience needed to think issues through critically, particularly in contexts where they have had little education or education that does not favour critical thinking.
But Jason Hart (2008, p. 281) warns us to be cautious with generalizations, arguing that the social and political environment is critical in the child’s cognitive development:

…it is likely that a child who grows up in a politically fragile environment requiring her or him to negotiate serious threats on a daily basis will develop the competence to grasp issues around the use of military power, the morality of such usage and its consequences at a younger age than a child in a more stable socio-political setting.

This chapter looks into the recruitment of young and under-age fighters by the main rebel movement during the conflict in Sierra Leone (1991–2002), and explores the ways in which loyalty was obtained and group coherence was achieved after their violent recruitment, paying attention to structural mechanisms, but without neglecting the agency of young people, as referred to by Hart above. The Revolutionary United Front (RUF) of Sierra Leone – an infamous rebel movement widely known for its terror-tactic of amputating the limbs of its victims – did exist mainly out of young and sometimes ultra-young fighters (Richards, 1996; Gberie, 2005; Keen, 2006). Many, including some of its most loyal fighters and those who did rise to senior ranks during the conflict, were conscripted by force at a young age. It is argued below that two characteristics of the RUF made the socialization of recruits particularly effective; firstly, during a number of years the RUF was based in isolated jungle camps, and cut off from the wider society, the movement became a micro-society in itself. Secondly, the RUF was based on meritocratic values – the better one fought, the quicker promotion would be taking place – which proved to be quite attractive to the mainly young and socio-economic marginalized Sierra Leoneans who had limited opportunities within the traditional gerontocratic organized villages and the patrimonial organized state (Richards, 1996).

Interview material presented in this chapter has been collected over a decade long period, both during and after the war (Peters and Richards, 1998; Peters, 2004, 2006, 2011). Interviews with ex-child combatants and young fighters were qualitative in nature and careful consideration was given to build up rapport. Field visits varied between a number of weeks and several months in a row. Field locations included the capital Freetown, provincial towns, remote villages and diamond mining areas.