Militarized youths in western Côte d'Ivoire: local processes of mobilization, demobilization, and related humanitarian interventions (2002-2007)

Chelpi, M.L.B.

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Photograph 7: On the way to Dompleu, 5 km of Man

Photograph 8: Market scene, Guiglo
Militarized civilians: 
Diversity of trajectories, 
diversity of motives for enlistment

Who joins armed groups and why, are empirical questions whose answers vary considerably across contexts. Why do civilians follow certain leaders into war? Are there certain profiles more likely to enrol? When are people more likely to engage in violent action? And certainly equally important to reflect upon when trying to understand local mobilization processes: why do some people ‘not join’ when faced with similar circumstances? Answers to these questions largely depend on individual and collective interpretations of given contexts. Surely, immediate circumstances play an important role in triggering people’s engagement, but because the mere fact of being exposed to the same trouble does not automatically translate into participation in violent action, it is also necessary to reflect on the diversity of exit strategies people devise when subject to harassment by non-State armed groups. In western Côte d’Ivoire after all, not everybody felt obliged to take up arms in self-defence. Not everyone was coerced. This section therefore attempts to find keys of interpretation to understand why some men and women ended up taking up arms at some point in the western region. To do so, it explores the pre-war profiles of 237 militarized civilians who were drawn into armed factions on both belligerent sides, and their motivations
for engagement from their particular points of views. Interviews took place in Man, Guiglo and Blolequin, three locations extensively described in Chapter 5.

Gurr’s famous question, ‘Why Men Rebel’ (Gurr, 1970), has fascinated scholars for a long time. If much has been written on social protest movements (Van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2009: 22-26), the literature on violent social protest movements is much scarcer; this chapter partially attempts to fill this gap. Classical approaches tend to describe contentious politics as an irrational phenomenon: ‘the politics of the impatient’. From this perspective, it is assumed that people protest because they are frustrated, marginalized, affected by economic crises and/or deprived of certain social rights, and explanations are framed foremost in terms of grievances. It is also often assumed that when protest occurs, it is most likely to occur in a chaotic way. Dissatisfaction with these theories grew in the late 1960s with the growth of social movements activities on both sides of the Atlantic, as social protest lost its irrational character and started to be perceived as a positive and possible way to improve politics. The new paradigms that emerged, simultaneously, were structural approaches on the one hand, which began to emphasize the political element of protest, and socio-constructivist ones on the other hand, which focused on the collective and individual interpretations of socio-political contexts. In both these theory trends, grievance has been assigned a subordinate position and the analytical repertoires tapped into have mostly been organized around the three concepts of framing, identity and emotions (and particularly the influence of emotions on action). In conflict studies, a direct consequence has been to switch the focus away from the felt need to make an inventory of grievances to search for the cause(s) of conflict, to a growing interest in understanding the diversity and complexity of local mobilization processes. Perhaps the root causes of civil war no longer matter, as Woodward (2007) writes. After all, people’s motivations usually overlap one another and it makes little sense to search for a mono-cause or for a rationale that would be more significant than others. I empirically reflect on such questions below.

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1 As already mentioned earlier, the bulk of respondents were identified using supporting NGOs as point of entry and were involved in a ‘reinsertion programme’ at the time of the interviews. Given the limited timeline of humanitarian interventions targeting ex-combatants, the terms ‘reinsertion’ and ‘reintegration’ are here used interchangeably. All respondents occupied low-ranking positions in the armed movements and had either joined pro-government militias and rebel groups at the start of the Ivorian conflict. A few recruits who had demobilized themselves were selected through other networks, mainly through young people I interviewed who referred me to other youths who were not part of any programme. The bulk of respondents were young men and women, between 15 and 35 years old; a large majority were men.
Who ‘took up arms’ in the west?

The question of who joins armed groups depends a lot on individual and collective interpretations of a given context. When he studied ethnic militias in Nigeria, Guichaoua (Guichaoua, 2007) used three indicators to characterize the profile of recruits: ‘levels of education’, ‘occupation’ and ‘social connectedness’. His results show that militia members were educated above average, that a large majority had a side job outside the militia, and that most were not dissocialized at all. Many recruits were married, had children, were well-settled in a place they rented, and known as militia members in their neighbourhood. In contrast, Humphreys & Weinstein (2004) pointed out a different trend and found that across factions, the majority of the Sierra Leonean ex-combatants they interviewed were uneducated and poor, with a pre-war background as student or farmer. Perhaps there is some kind of profile for those more likely to join a violent movement. Perhaps there is none and it is more a matter of circumstances. In western Côte d’Ivoire, as I dug into the pre-war educational, professional and social trajectories of the recruits I interviewed, I came across a diversity of patterns.

*Education trajectories: no need for war to disrupt them*

Education is not to be taken for granted in Côte d’Ivoire, and for the ones who go to school, each additional year of education is the product of a fierce struggle against poverty and familial priorities. Militia members interviewed in Guiglo/Blolequin were much better educated than the rebels interviewed in Man. In Man, about half of the respondents had never been enrolled in an education system recognized by the state, while in contrast nearly all had gone through some kind of formal education in Guiglo/Blolequin, with half succeeding in starting secondary school and three entering a post-secondary phase (Table 7.1). These results are not surprising per se and only reflect the structural regional disparity that existed before the war in terms of enrolment rates, use of infrastructure, and completion of schooling (Chelpi-Den Hamer, 2007; Hugon & Bommier, 2002; Le Pape & Vidal, 1987; Proteau, 2002). In Côte d’Ivoire, formal education is the least popular in rural areas, in the north, and among the populations of northern origin, partly because they compete with Quranic schools.

Lack of means, including lack of means after a parent’s sudden death, was the main reason put forward in both locations to explain why respondents had

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2 In 2001, five years was the average duration of schooling in rural areas compared to fifteen years for the country as a whole. Literacy rates were 60% in Abidjan, 10% in the north, 30% in rural areas and 70% in urban zones. Primary enrolment rates were 40% in Korhogo and 80% in Man (Hugon & Bommier, 2002).
dropped out of school – this strikingly came up when examining respondents’ individual trajectories (Box 7.1). Another reason to drop out of school was the loss of interest in general education, the willingness to work and/or the necessity to help parents by either entering the family business or by working for a third party to generate an extra source of income. At adolescent age, many adult respondents reported that they had not yet completed their primary education. Some reported feeling too old to continue going to school and a minority stopped because of educational failure. They usually repeated a class first, but then failed a second time, which was eventually the trigger that convinced them to drop out: continuing was no longer worth their time and financial sacrifices. Many respondents had already stopped attending school one or more years before the start of the war. The few who reported dropping out because of the conflict mentioned their school’s closing as the main reason.

Professional trajectories:

The tribulations of ‘hyper-mobile’ youths in the informal sector

Most recruits I interviewed earned money before the war. Some were doing contractual work and their income varied according to contract opportunities; some were working as day labourers, and some had a regular income. The majority was employed in the informal economy, a few had very decent jobs. Variable income was the norm, and only a minority were earning the same amount every month (about 10% of respondents). In Man, roughly a quarter were
self-employed before the war, another quarter were employed by some kind of boss, and another quarter were enrolled into some kind of informal apprenticeship. The rest did contract and day work; only a minority were studying. In Guiglo, two-thirds of the respondents were self-employed or involved in the family business, 15% were apprentices, 10% were employees, and only a few were still at school.

At the one extreme, I met quite entrepreneurial young men. One respondent, for instance, whom I met in Man, was combining two jobs before the war. He

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**Box 7.1: A selection of educational accounts**

1. B. was a brilliant young man who had received all his education in Abidjan. His father had died when he was very young and his mother was financially taking care of him. When she fell sick in 1996 and decided to go back to her village to get treatment, B. had just started secondary school. He was put into the care of an uncle. Unfortunately, the uncle was transferred not long after to the north of the country, leaving him alone in Abidjan. B. tried to cope as best as he could, but he could not last more than a few months on his own. Schooling was free, but he could not afford transport to go to school and his uncle did not support him regularly. He could no longer rely on his mother as she had passed away. Three months after the start of the 1998-1999 school year, he finally received some financial help from his uncle (the equivalent of EUR 10). He realized it would never be enough to enable him to continue his education and therefore decided to drop out of school. He used the money to pay for transport, and went to the village his mother was from, in western Côte d’Ivoire. He had never been there before but he thought life would be easier than in Abidjan. He moved to the west four years before the start of the war.

2. G. dropped out of school in 11th grade (1ère), one year before completing his secondary education. He was 22 years old. He said he stopped because he lacked the financial means to continue. His scholarship was not enough to cover his expenses. He was entitled to 12,000 CFA francs per trimester, but given that he was an intern in Yamoussoukro, the money was directly channeled to the boarding school and he did not get any cash. He had a side job and used to work as a hairdresser during weekends and vacations, but he was not earning enough. He therefore decided to stop and to return to his hometown, Guiglo, where he started working full time as a hairdresser.

3. M.’s father was a primary school teacher and used to get transferred from one village to another for his work. His wife and kids always followed him. When M. was enrolled in 3rd grade in a village near Duékoué, his parents got into an argument and split up. He ended up living with his mother, who could not afford to have him stay in school. He dropped out of school at 9 and started working as an apprentice in an auto workshop.

4. A. had to enrol in a private school after finishing primary education, spending 90,000 CFA francs a year for tuition fees. He had successfully passed the secondary school entrance exam but his grades did not allow him to continue in the public system. Like many sub-Saharan African countries, Côte d’Ivoire has such a structural lack of infrastructure at the secondary level that only the pupils who score above a certain grade get access to free secondary education. A. was also taking courses in parallel in a vocational school to learn auto mechanics. His father was running a garage. He was 23 when he stopped studying and started helping his father full-time with the family business.

Source: Fieldwork, 2007
was an employee of the sugar firm Sucrivoire in Borotou, where he was paid 75,000 CFA francs a month to stack sugar bags (the equivalent of EUR 115). After his day shift, he ran his own electronic workshop and a local radio station. He had several apprentices to help him, and his daily sales varied between 5,000 and 40,000 CFA francs. Another respondent (met in Guiglo) was running his own business as a building painter and was registered with the local Chamber of Commerce. He had won several bids before the war and once economic activities resumed after the main clashes were over, he became involved in contracts for renovating public infrastructure. At the other end of the spectrum, I met young men who led quite dependent lives. They would not work and blamed their family for that, ‘for failing to place me somewhere’. There were not many of them but their discourses were in sharp contrast with the rest. Out of the 10% of respondents who had never worked for a wage before the war, a minority fell into that category. The rest were simply very young in 2002, under 19, and usually still under parental care. They were either at school, in their first years of apprenticeship, doing rural/urban petty jobs or simply doing nothing.

The flexibility and geographical mobility of the youths I interviewed was rather striking. In western Côte d’Ivoire, and in the country in general, it is a real struggle to work, and earning a living requires more than goodwill and individual skills. In respondents’ own terms, ‘on part pour se chercher’. That literally means that they leave home behind in search of better prospects elsewhere. They may be helped by relatives in the process, or rely on acquaintances to find their way, but this stage recurs repeatedly in their professional trajectories and helps them make the transition to adulthood and financial independence (Box 7.2).

Apart from giving the reader a good insight into (unsafe) local work practices, this case is illustrative in many respects. First, it shows that at a certain point in their lives, it is implicitly expected that young people, and especially young men, stop being a burden on their relatives. Second, from the day they start working, youth are successively pushed and pulled into activities, moving from one region to another, following opportunities or fulfilling certain commitments. They usually work in several locations before reaching financial independence, and many eventually build their professional trajectories by alternating work in urban and rural settings. Finally, this case shows that it is not uncommon to return to the village or town of origin after a few years of independence, and not necessarily for lack of options. An implicit set of obligations exists among family members, and sometimes one simply goes back to respond to familial obligations, even if it takes precedence over personal preferences. One respondent was an accomplished tailor in town, running his own business for several years, when his brother asked him to return to their village to take care of their mother. Their
three sisters had married and had left home, leaving the old woman on her own with several grandchildren in her custody. The person I interviewed was 26 years old when he moved back to his village. There, he started a small tailoring workshop with three sewing machines (two were paid for by his brother) and four apprentices. He was taking care of twelve people: his mother, his own family, and all the nephews and nieces his mother had in her custody.

Box 7.2: A typical ‘hyper-mobile’ youth

C. was 22 years old before the war and had already worked in six different locations. He never went to school and started working when he was 11. He would go and fetch water, he would scare the birds in the fields, he would sell bags of rice in the market. His mother gave him petty cash when needed. He was 16 when he left home and began doing contract work. He started clearing the field of a Baoulé in a village near Issia. The man told him that he would pay him 150,000 CFA francs after the harvest (the equivalent of EUR 230), but C. only received the third of it. Cocoa and coffee yields had not been good that year, and the man could not pay what he had promised. C. left him and started working on the cocoa and coffee plantation of a Sénoufo near Guiglo. He said he would have liked to stay longer there, but a few months after he started the job, a group of men – former employees – broke into his boss’s house, where he was staying, with a 12-calibre gun. C. was frightened. He thought that if the men came back when the boss was absent, he would be beaten up. He therefore left for a more secure place.

At first, he stayed at his aunt’s in town, in Biankouma, helping her in her cassava/yam/maize fields for a few months. Then he worked for a Baoulé, to whom he had been introduced before (the person was the friend of an acquaintance). His new boss was working for the Ivoirian electricity company. Despite his lack of specific skills, C. was hired to work on high-voltage power lines in the rural areas near Touba. He was based in town but usually spent a couple of weeks in nearby villages to do the work. He used to work in a group of 7 or 8 men, and each of them would earn 50,000 CFA francs per job (the equivalent of EUR 75). The work was hard but C. said his boss took good care of them. He paid for their food, and he also provided accommodation, power and water. A few months later, C. moved on elsewhere. He went to a mining place with a friend and started digging holes to find diamonds. But as he did not earn anything there and as he did not trust his co-workers, he stopped and went back home, to his mother’s place. He was then 19 years old. There, he started commuting every day between his village and the nearby town (Man), earning his living by carrying luggage and pushing wheelbarrows. On good days, he could make up to 5,000 CFA francs (the equivalent of EUR 8), on bad days nothing. He would take 200 FCFA francs per day to pay for the rental of his wheelbarrow, and he would save some cash to pay the city fee, which allowed him to carry out such activities (13,000 CFA francs per year). Sometimes, he did contract work for the Ivoirian electricity company. C. gave most of what he earned to his mother and was the primary provider for his family.

Source: Fieldwork, 2007
Social connectedness: alternating practices of ‘tapping’ and ‘giving’

About a third of respondents in Guiglo were head of their household before the war and another third were still under their parents’ direct care. In Man, familial ties were looser: if a third of the respondents were still living at their father/mother’s place, another third lived with extended family and about one fourth were fending for themselves with no family to rely on, living with acquaintances, in the home of their boss, or living on their own. This is not to say that they were disconnected socially (I only remember one or two cases that I would qualify as being socially ‘lost’ before the war), but many respondents in Man were using weak ties and extra-familial networks to get along on a daily basis. This is in fact hardly a surprising situation: Man is an important magnet for the western region (it is much bigger than Guiglo in terms of size) and it has become the host city to many youths who had left home in search of better prospects.

One way to assess how much the recruits I interviewed were socially connected before the war is to look at their degree of financial dependence. Were the youths I interviewed supported by someone before the war? Or were they supporting someone themselves? If a majority of respondents claim to have received some kind of financial assistance, many also claim to have provided for close relatives before getting involved in an armed group. It was not rare for a ‘supporter’ to become someone ‘supported’ later on, and vice versa. The scope and frequency of support generally varied depending on timing, available resources and upcoming expenses, but a common pattern was that even in a difficult position, they were doing their best to send something to close parents and spouses. This did not impede them from tapping into their social network when they were in difficulties (father/mother, relatives in better economic conditions, creditors); several youths mentioned having been helped by relatives to set up their own business, some were regularly receiving Western Union transfers from siblings overseas, and it was also not uncommon to see a younger sibling supported by an older brother in a better socio-economic position, even if it was not really necessary (the younger sibling being completely independent financially and primary caregiver for his own family). Help could be given with no expectation of payback or could be linked to some sort of investment, in which case the ‘supporter’ retained some rights to expected returns. But in general, respondents’ testimonies show that family members were simply helping one another in a context marked by a severe socio-economic crisis and by structural poverty features unfortunately unlikely to disappear any time soon.
The specificities of the youngest recruits

The participation of children and adolescents in violent conflicts is the gloomy reality of many wars, and Côte d’Ivoire is no exception. Both rebel and pro-government militias made public that they had some under-eighteens among their troops in the beginning of conflict. At the same time, they always denied having consciously recruited them.

There is little hope of getting a good approximation of the number of child recruits in the Ivoirian conflict, let alone of the number of those who did not enter formal demobilization and reinsertion. Numbers used in institutional reports are based on FAFN and militia lists and are only reported cases of demobilization. They are therefore rule-of-thumb figures, which say little about the scope of the phenomenon, even if intuitively one could argue that child recruitment in Côte d’Ivoire was not as massive in scale as it was during the Liberian and Sierra Leone wars. The conflict did not last long, and the main period of violence only lasted a few months in the west, from the end of 2002 to mid-spring 2003, with a short peak in November 2004. This is of course not to suggest that extreme violence was absent in the Ivoirian war, but only to make the point that cannon fodder was only needed for a short period, given the timeline of combat operations.

Much of the literature on children’s involvement in military action emphasizes their limited agency when they enlist in violent groups and often implies that youngest recruits follow different patterns of mobilization than their older peers. There has in fact been a proliferation of articles and reports in recent years that have been widely relayed in the international media, documenting stories of youths coerced into violent movements. The main effect of such writings has been to shape the dominant discourse on child soldiering, with the main pitfall being to oversimplify children’s motives for engagement by reducing the issue to forced conscription and manipulable minds. Conversely, ethnographic studies have highlighted the complexity of children and adolescents’ mobilization processes, the multiplicity of patterns, and the similarities and differences with the older recruits. After all, who joins armed groups, how and why remain empirical questions, regardless of the age marker. As noted earlier, the main pitfall of adopting a ‘politic of age’ is to distract public attention from the real problems. By drawing on solid empirical data, the reflections that follow hope to join this stream of writing.

The youngest recruits I interviewed were between 14 and 18 years old at the time of the first interview and they were then hosted in a reinsertion centre in Man. The first interview happened approximately three or four years after their enlistment into an armed group, which means that they were between 10 and 14 years old when they were recruited. This is well below the acceptable age in Côte
d’Ivoire, even if we take the pragmatic view of tolerating recruitment into armed groups for the oldest teenagers. A striking outcome of the interviews was the degree of resilience and maturity these children displayed when confronted with difficult situations. They shared several characteristics with the older recruits: they were far from having few or no ties to society (even if most were using loose networks to get along on a daily basis), they usually had a certain level of education (dropout was mainly due to a lack of financial means), some had job skills (mainly learnt through informal training), and they were not necessarily more prone to violence than their contemporaries.3

Perhaps the main difference with adults is that child respondents experienced a substantial loss in terms of human capital, a point Blatmann (2006) made for another context. In our case, the ones at school when the conflict started and the ones involved in informal apprenticeships clearly wasted precious years. As they say in their own words, they ‘put themselves late’. If the same motto generally also applies for the older recruits, the genuine effects are usually felt to a much lesser extent. The main difference is that when this loss of human capital happens at an early age (which is the case for children and adolescents), there is usually much less time to acquire a skill before joining an armed group and there is also less time to develop an extensive social network, which might result in fewer options after the war for employment or self-employment. In sum, the involvement in warfare of the very young hampers their individual social advancement on a much more pronounced scale than it does for adults.

There are two other differences with adult respondents that young age also exacerbates: one relates to the extent of financial independence, the second concerns the extent of geographical mobility. If adult recruits often reported having left home in their late teens or early twenties in search of better prospects elsewhere, this trend was much less pronounced with child respondents. In addition, even if many were contributing to the family income by earning petty cash, most were still dependent on caregivers, whether direct family (mother and/or father) or extended relatives. This second point, however, also applied in our case to many young adults.

**What drove young civilians to military life?**

*Protection from real and perceived threats*

‘I joined the militia because transport was too expensive.’ I would never have thought of such an argument if I had not come to Guiglo to hear it, and hear it repeatedly. If the causal relationship does not strike the reader at first sight, it

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3 For additional interview fragments and detailed empirical information, see (Chelpi-Den Hamer, 2010).
quickly makes sense when you put the line into context. At the start of the war, the west was at the heart of the violence and there was fierce fighting between government troops, the rebelling forces, and their respective allies. Civilians were not spared and people had to act quickly in towns and villages close to the front line to save their families and their main assets. Those wealthy enough to own cars, minivans, buses or trucks had an important advantage compared to the others and could flee faster than those on foot to safer places. But since vehicles were valuable assets for belligerents and quite prone to be quickly requisitioned for warfare, there was no time to lose. Several people I interviewed pointed out that transport prices to southern locations skyrocketed during that period, making it very difficult to transport everyone in the family. In addition, not much room on board was available and the families of the vehicle owners had priority over clients and acquaintances.

Many respondents considered their involvement in armed groups as the most logical move in response to a potential threat (Chelpi-Den Hamer, 2011). By taking up arms, they were protecting themselves from an extremely violent context (or at least they were trying to). Many felt that they would be better off in than out. As Utas (2006: 165) noted for another context, they were ‘escaping the disadvantage of being a civilian’. One individual, for instance, joined to be allowed to continue farming. As he put it: ‘It was very common then to arrest someone for no reason. But if I am within the movement, I am one of them. They can no longer accuse me of being against. I can therefore go and work without being arrested.’ Other respondents felt they had to become soldiers to protect their family from abuse while trying to save the little they owned: ‘Soldiers were annoying the population, so we joined to protect our parents. No-one bothers them anymore since we are in.’ Many said ‘took up arms’ because everybody in town was in uniform and could break into their homes and steal from them with total impunity. When Man was attacked, most of the population fled to neighbouring villages, and after a few days young men began to return to their homes to keep an eye on family assets. The town had however become so militarized in the meantime that many respondents genuinely believed that they would be better in the rebel forces than out. It was also not uncommon for families to split up in the panic surrounding the flight, especially if all household members were not physically present at the same location when they had to leave in a hurry. The youngest were particularly vulnerable if they were left on their own, and in such

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4 The trip from Guiilo to Abidjan could cost up to 20,000 CFA francs per person. One respondent mentioned that since he could not afford to pay for the 10 relatives he supported, he decided to stay and fight.

5 Original text in French: ‘Les corps habillés fatiguaient la population. Nous, on s’est mis dedans pour protéger les parents. Personne ne vient plus menacer nos parents puisqu’on est dedans.’
cases joining an armed group – or being taken into the custody of a rebel chief – was therefore perceived as a real relief (Chelpi-den Hamer, 2010).

*The question of ethnic polarization: the feeling of being ‘on the wrong side’*

If it would be over-simplistic to describe the Ivoirian war as ‘ethnic’ in nature, ethnic polarization did occur and the Ivoirian war crystallized long-standing tensions in the west between autochthonous and non-autochthonous populations. As already outlined in the contextual sections, the concept of ethnicity provided an easy political and military hold over the years, in a historical and structural context propitious to this.

On the counter-insurgent side, mobilization clearly took place along ethnic lines, with an unprecedented massive mobilization of the Guéré youths. There, the populations of northern origin were perceived as ‘the others’ and associated with the enemy, foreign nationals and some Ivoirians alike (Burkinabés, Dioulas, Lobis); they were then naturally drawn into the rebel forces, either by circumstances or out of genuine interest, in which case mobilization was often spurred by pre-existing social networks. Noteworthily, even if the Baoulés were also targeted by some of the most extreme autochthonous youths (the chronology presented earlier revealed several cases of expropriation of plantations), they did not seem to be particularly prone to join the rebel forces in the west (in our sample for instance, we did not interview any Baoulés in Man). If one could argue that the individual feeling of being on the wrong side was particularly present at the start of the war (especially with the Burkinabés and Dioulas), it also survived over the years in government-controlled territory, especially in the Guiglo/Duékoué area. At some point, one could even wonder why the targeted non-autochtones continued to live in the area despite so many recurrent attacks and such a latent threat. Perhaps the main reason was to maximize potential benefits (at great risk), since volatile environments are also known for the opportunities the circumstances provide. A more practical reason could also be that having already invested quite a lot in their plots, in time, daily labour and money, non-autochthonous peasants were genuinely hoping to avoid losing everything and to be obliged to start from scratch elsewhere.

Ethnic polarization was also an important dimension of recruitment in the rebel forces. One respondent described how government soldiers would come into town to conduct identity checks on foreigners and on Ivoirians of northern origin. Being the latter, he thought he would be better off if he enlisted in the rebel forces: ‘Gbagbo people’ were killing the Malinké. Because of the rebellion,

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6 ‘Gbagbo people’ refers to government soldiers.
we were killed. Because we did not have papers, we were killed. Because we were dressed with dirty clothes, we were killed. They were even killing insane men. We were scared.’ (interview fragment, April 2007). In November-December 2002, Man changed hands three times in a couple of weeks, shifting first from the national army to the rebel forces, then from the rebel forces to the national army, and finally from the army to the rebel forces. Each time, violent retaliation followed, targeting suspected opponents. But the feeling of being on the wrong side was not only framed along ethnic lines in rebel-controlled territory, it was also conceived in terms of political and social markers. In December 2002, being a gendarme and a FPI sympathizer was a double offence, and there was usually no mercy. These markers were much more pronounced in the beginning than in the later stages of conflict. Conversely, on the counter-insurgent side, ethnic polarization seemed to reinforce itself over the years with the diffusion of violence in the rural societies.

Another example of inter-ethnic rivalry instrumentalized by the war in the western region is the long-standing resentment between Yacoubas and Guérés, triggered by the assassination of former head of State General Gueï (he was of Yacouba origin). This event had a significant impact on the young Yacoubas and was cited many times as a reason to enlist. But simple facts clearly stress the need to go beyond an interpretation of the Ivoirian conflict based solely on ethnic grounds, notably because there has been anecdotal evidence that, in some cases, Yacoubas fought on the same side as Guérés (this was the case for one female respondent, for instance, who only joined a pro-government militia to save her family assets). Pastor Gammi, the leader of the MILOCI pro-government militia has also been said to be of Yacouba origin.

*Unwilling and coerced*

If most respondents could exercise some kind of agency in their decision to enlist (with the little room to manoeuvre they had), many were also taken by force, especially those who joined armed factions led by Liberian mercenaries: ‘They would have killed me if I had refused to carry their ammunition in the bush.’ Others were taken because their skills were useful to the group, blacksmiths for instance, or technicians. The first knew how to repair guns, the second could maintain communication equipment.

*We heard on the radio that Côte d’Ivoire was under attack, but our boss decided to continue working. Some workers fled, others stayed, and I continued at the factory. One night, I heard gunshots at the plant. We were then busy loading sugar bags in trucks. It sounded like shooting in the air. Rebels came in and requisitioned a truck. They asked us to load sugar bags in it. We were at gunpoint, so we had to obey. They came back shortly after. They were looking for a technician to change the frequency of their walkie-talkie. The staff was scared and pointed at me. They asked me to do it because they wanted to communicate with their chiefs. I did not want to but they had guns, so I could not refuse. When they were finished...*
speaking to their commanders by radio, they told me I was an important asset for them, as a technician; they could therefore not let me go. I did not want to go with them. I told them I was no military, I had no war experience, I did not know how weapons worked. But they told me they would protect me. The more we were discussing, the more angry they became. “Why was I annoying them?” they said. One rebel took his Kalash and hit me with the butt. He told me that if I wanted to die now, he would kill me. I was therefore obliged to follow them. We left for Séguéla to receive military training. I did not want to be part of it, but the ones who refused were killed in front of me. I had to stay calm.’

Interestingly, some people reported having first been coerced into an armed group and then having stayed for lack of better alternatives elsewhere. Some were initially taken by force into a rebel Liberian-led armed group, and then fled, only to re-enter another armed group, willingly (this was mentioned several times by recruits who had first been drawn into MPIGO and who had been left ‘unattended’ when the Ivoirian rebel forces rid themselves of the Liberians in the spring of 2003). Noteworthily, being coerced was not necessarily presented as a traumatic event. It was sometimes very pragmatically presented as an inevitable event, as some kind of necessary plague:

‘In the beginning, there were not enough men in the rebellion, so they were taking people by force. At the military camp, we were told that it is now war and that we have to fight. We were given two days to visit our parents to receive their blessing and anti-bullet medicine. After that, we all boarded a military truck and we were sent as reinforcements to fight the battle of Man.’

**Opportunistic young men?**

Contrary to the widespread idea that the core of armed groups consists of opportunistic young men, relatively few respondents reported having joined for work. If some people mentioned having been attracted in a group by the prospect of receiving subsequent incentives, they also said they were quickly disabused: ‘They told me that if I go and fight, they will give me 100,000 or 200,000 CFA francs. I got money once, after the first fighting. Afterwards, I got nothing.’ Some were told that there might be an opportunity to enter the regular army afterwards (a rather interesting prospect as it implied stable work, and decent and regular pay with retirement benefits); others were promised implicit rewards if their group was victorious. But many simply reported to have enlisted because there was nothing else to do. At the peak of the conflict, in areas close to the front line, economic activities had either stopped or had slowed down consider-

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7 ‘On nous a raflé. En ce moment, y avait pas beaucoup d’hommes. Donc eux prenaient les gens par force. Tu sais, ça a commencé chez nous. Le même jour, y a eu la prise de Bouaké et de Korhogo. Quand on est arrivé au camp, on nous a dit que, actuellement, c’est la guerre et que chacun va faire ça. On nous a donné deux jours pour aller voir nos parents pour qu’ils nous donnent un peu de “babwadi” (médicaments anti-balles). Après les parents ils ont dit, on n’a qu’à aller. On est monté dans camion. On nous a envoyé en renfort à Man.’
ably and many people were unable to resume their pre-war activity; some therefore pragmatically decided to join an armed group; at least then they would be certain to eat during the period of their engagement. Being given the opportunity to start a career in the military was surely an attractive prospect for many youths, but to equate all civilian recruits with young men driven foremost by opportunistic motives would simply be oversimplistic in its disregard for the complexity of the process.

Switching between groups existed, especially in the beginning, as FLGO absorbed most LIMA and AP-Wê recruits on the militia side, and when Liberian fighters were expelled from the rebel factions (several MPIGO recruits I interviewed reported having re-entered other rebel factions afterwards), yet these movements between factions appear to have been relatively marginal. If there was some kind of flow between the different armed groups, it was not so much in terms of shifting allegiance (free movement between the rebel and the pro-government zones was particularly difficult at the peak of conflict and even in the later stages) and individuals more often ended up in another group as a consequence of the recomposition of armed forces. This situation is very different from the one Vlassenroot describes in Eastern DRC in early 2000. There, the speed with which militarized civilians changed ideologies and allies was a clear sign that what they were ultimately looking for by joining an armed group was some alternative to a situation of acute deprivation and social marginalization (Vlassenroot, 2006: 59). In western Côte d’Ivoire, such opportunist behaviour did sporadically occur, but was far from being a norm.

The question of informed choice for the youngest combatants
There are a number of well-anchored ideas about children that are not easy to challenge. Across contexts, they are usually presented as innocent, vulnerable and financially dependent, regardless of actual circumstances, to the point that it has become unimaginable that they would rationally choose a path that could possibly lead them to perform evil. For the youngest combatants, the question of informed choice is fiercely debated (Peters et al., 2003). Boyden (2007) has rightly pointed out that any child engaged in violence disturbs adults, foremost because by going against the odds, he or she challenges the very foundation of the existing social order. In the same vein, Honwana (2005) recognizes that children who behave violently clearly fall outside mainstream formulations of childhood and upset social norms and codes. The view that children are innocent is largely based on a certain conception of children’s cognitive development that assumes that their moral understanding, their political thoughts and their actions differ widely from those of adults because they mature in stages, following an ordered sequence of cognitive steps (Kohlbert, 1976; Piaget, 1972). In this per-
spective, the following holds: children’s abilities to think and act reasonably are largely conceptualized as being immune from environmental influence; a lower age limit is even suggested for linking moral reasoning with action; it is strongly implied that adolescents and pre-pubescent youth are more malleable than adults; and the phenomenon of child soldiering is mainly explained by coercion, abuse of authority, unscrupulous commanders or drug addiction.

Far from denying the fact that, in many cases, children’s recruitment was the result of coercion in western Côte d’Ivoire, reducing their agency to nil during the enlistment process and during their involvement in warfare would also be misleading. If the children I interviewed clearly expressed having felt more fear in the recruitment stage (even if they could exercise some kind of agency in the process), the processes of mobilization had also been very complex: there was no single pattern and the types of rationales that emerged generally challenged popular theories on social movement that assume causal relationships between pre-war backgrounds and motives for enlistment. Various reasons were mentioned for joining the rebellion ranging from self-defence to the protection of parents. They also included genuine desire for revenge, joining for lack of alternatives, and merely seizing an opportunity to secure food for a limited period of time. Some enlisted late and only joined the military after a brother or sister had done so, several months prior. Some were recruited because they were alone, with no resources, in a place full of soldiers. For them, joining the army was a logical move, and becoming a soldier was perceived as a necessary and positive choice. Motives were rarely clear-cut, and respondents usually brought forward more than one reason in their narrative, pointing to different degrees of agency. As an analyst, I started wondering if some motives weighed more heavily than others in their decision-making and if I should rank them in my interpretation. I quickly discarded that option. What led children to join a group, and what kept them there, was the result of a complex process, rather than something that could be attributed to isolated factors. What mattered in the end was how respondents made sense of their war experience, and how they interpreted their entry into the groups and their stay there. With some children, it was clear from their accounts that they never wanted to be where they were. Certain youths, especially among the ones that had been coerced by Liberian mercenaries, were forced to do things that they would have despised in normal times (torturing prisoners, extortion, stealing). Some reported feeling under constant threat. With other children, it was more complex. Even if some had initially been abducted into the movement, they did not experience their belonging to the group as something entirely negative.

The accounts that follow describe the complex reasons and processes that led very young people to engage in violence. They clearly show that the phenomenon of child soldiering cannot be reduced to coerced recruits, and that even the
youngest can exercise some degree of reflection and agency when enlisting in the military. Two primary aims of respondents were staying alive and protecting their closest caregiver, which in practice meant finding the right strategies when their path and the military’s crossed. The testimonies are expressive enough to give a fair idea of the diversity of enlistment patterns while bringing to the fore the extraordinary individual stories. Some of the accounts have been slightly adapted for better reader comprehension.

‘Everybody had fled the village. I had stayed with my grandfather. When the rebels came, they said my grandfather was hiding a soldier at his place. They started to beat him up. I pitied him. I even cried. They shot a bullet at his feet. But they were telling lies. My grandfather was hiding no-one. The rebels searched everywhere in the house. They told my grandfather that they would kill him if he would not tell them the truth. That is why I joined the rebellion. It hurt me too much to watch my grandfather being molested. Two or three days after this incident, I and my brother gave our names, and we joined the rebels.’

‘The war came in the weekend. I was in town, working in my uncle’s workshop. Everybody fled. I fled with my cousin. We went to the bush, then to the village. My uncle was there. He told us that he feared his place in town would get robbed. He did not have the time to lock his home. The attack had arrived so quickly that even the food was still the stove. So with my cousin, we went back to town to guard the houses. We stayed in one home, and we were watching the others. One day, a rebel came. He told us not to worry and he started staying with us. We were eating together. After a while another rebel came, and then another. Eventually, there were a lot of them in the house. My cousin said we’d better join them. We were stuck anyway. We could not go back to the village because they had installed checkpoints and we could not leave the town.’

‘I was recruited by someone I knew from my neighbourhood. He knew my difficulties. My grandmother had died, and she was the one who used to take care of me. My boss had also died, and I had to stop my work at the workshop. When the rebels took the town, my neighbour joined them, right from the beginning. When he saw that he was earning a bit of money, he came back to our neighbourhood to recruit people. He knew my situation. He told me to go with him; he told me I would earn something out of it. He promised me money.’

‘When the rebels came, they took people by force and loaded them into trucks. They caught me and my brother. We did not want to go, but we had to. They were threatening people at gunpoint.’

Reflection on violent mobilization processes
Finding clear boundaries between motives is a difficult task as respondents’ narratives are rarely clear-cut in distinct categories. Motivations usually overlap one another and people enlist for a range of reasons; it therefore makes little sense to search for a single cause. If we look at what people spontaneously mentioned (Table 7.2), there seems to be relatively little support for grievance-based motives for enrolment and only a minority enlisted to express their frustration with a past event or to seek revenge. It is rather striking that land-related grievances were absent from the reasons brought forward, and have not been mentioned once by the people I interviewed, especially since the Ivoirian
history of land tenure is closely intertwined with that of inter-ethnic violence. Surely the picture would have been different if I had focused on more rural forms of counter-insurgency (the rural vigilantism we mentioned earlier, that was re-activated during the crisis in a more sophisticated way). From the chronology of violent events presented earlier, it is clear that land stakes have fueled violence in several rural locations in the west, and at several periods, before and since the start of the war. To mention a few: the Guéré-Baoulé clash at Fengolo in 1997, which was used as pretext to introduce a new land regulation; the events of October 2002 on the Duékoué-Kouibli axis (the villages of Blodi, Iruzon, Diahouin, Toazéo, and Kouibli), when Guéré youths were abusing the Burkinabés residing in the area; January 2003, when ethnic tensions exploded again in the same area but targeting the autochthones instead since a circumstantial alliance between Burkinabés and rebel forces had actually occurred to fight the Guéré youths; April 2004, in the Diéouzon area; April/May 2006, east of Bangolo, when Guérés accused Baoulés and Burkinabés of having set fire to several autochthonous plantations near the village of Gohouon Zagna, etc. As already mentioned, such diffuse forms of violence have surely been the most worrying development that has taken place in the Ivoirian rural societies.

Table 7.2 First reason given by respondent for joining an armed movement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>MAN</th>
<th>GUIGLO</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To protect themselves</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To protect parents and community</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To defend ‘their’ region</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taken by force</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraged by friends</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harassed too often for being of northern origin</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To avenge the death of General Gueï</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To work</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In response to a call for volunteers</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraged by soldiers</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In response to the death of someone close</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


As the mere fact of enlisting in a movement that seeks to overthrow the state probably draw on other rationales than enlisting in a movement that seeks to defend it, there is the need to make an analytical distinction between insurgent and counter-insurgent movements and each must be explored in depth. This might sound trivial, yet it is striking how uninvestigated counter-insurgent mobilization processes are in comparison to the extensive research on rebel recruit-
ment. This observation is shared by other scholars (Arjona & Kalyvas, 2009; Meagher, 2008), who urge that more attention be given to how the State accommodates (or not) the counter-insurgents. In western Côte d’Ivoire, belligerent side and local territorial sovereignty clearly mattered in fostering local mobilization. In Guiglo for instance, it was striking that the large majority of respondents reported having enlisted to protect their region and community. If the role of immediate contexts has to be acknowledged (and foremost the role of local leaders in promoting mass mobilization), individual perceptions should not be underestimated, especially the feeling of ‘being attacked’. A lot of the youths I interviewed reported having been extremely ‘shocked’ when they witnessed the distress of the displaced people who were passing through Guiglo as they were fleeing combat in Toulepleu or Blolequin, and a recurrent concern I heard was the fear of what would happen to their family if some of them would be unable to flee on foot, if no-one posed any resistance. Armed mobilization took several forms on the counter-insurgent side, but was eventually grounded foremost on community ways of policing and on the paramilitary structure that derived from these. These ‘self-defence’ groups resembled paramilitary structures at the peak of the counter-insurgency, before gradually giving up their purely military tasks after the period of combat operations had passed. But while one would have expected that they would have gradually changed function to become local guardians by securing their immediate surroundings (resuming thereby a more traditional form of urban/rural vigilantism), western militias have in fact done little to counter the criminality in their zone in the later stages of conflict. Conversely, on the insurgent side, low-ranking elements in the rebel forces increasingly fulfilled the role of public security officials.

Processes of mobilization took on different forms in the western region, depending on individuals’ affiliations, beliefs and social networks, but also depending on more contingent and geographical factors such as which side of the front line it was, the dynamics of local politics, the characteristics of the mobilizing context, and the recruitment strategy of the armed factions. Although this diversity of factors is usually recognized in explaining processes of mobilization, there is somehow a tendency to bring to the fore grievance-based motives, adverse structural conditions, and individuals’ characteristics, especially when the base of an armed group shows a certain ethnic homogeneity. The contribution of this section has been to rehabilitate the importance of immediate contexts and political geography.

Concluding remarks

The Ivoirian case is a good illustration of the plurality of profiles and of the diversity of forms of engagement. It also clearly stresses the importance of im-
mediate contexts in explaining processes of violent mobilization. This chapter has pointed out that in 2002-2003, enlistment in armed groups in western Côte d’Ivoire stemmed from highly circumstantial factors, showing that, in some cases, who mobilized and who did not was simply a matter of geographic and military factors. As Arjona & Kalyvas (2009) put it, ‘by assuming the role usually ascribed to the state, armed groups become recognized as the authority, which ultimately leads to recruitment’. In other words, whatever armed group is in control of a given place at a given moment is potentially the most decisive factor in influencing people’s behaviour. This perspective clearly places a strong emphasis on the role of leaders and the elite in promoting certain values within society and emphasizes the importance of ‘framing’ and the role and charisma of individual leaders in explaining recruits’ engagement (Leach & Scoones, 2007): in which circumstances did civilians take up arms? What information was disseminated at the time to the population? Who framed such local discourses, and how was it interpreted locally? If these dimensions are usually less put forward in conflict analysis in comparison with explanations based on adverse structural conditions, they are certainly worth looking at, and what happened in western Côte d’Ivoire highlights very well the importance of each of the points above. On the pro-government side, the role of a local political leader in Guiglo was key in triggering massive local mobilization; on the rebel side, the assassination of the former head of State General Gueï and the way this information was exploited by the media and local politics had a significant impact among the young Yacoubas, and was cited many times as a rationale to enlist. Recruitment appeared strikingly local in Guiglo and Man, and if mobilizing contexts have varied tremendously from one place to another, local territorial sovereignty was clearly one important dimension of recruitment there, combined with individual interpretations of specific situations.

In terms of profile, the Ivoirian case shows that there was no single pattern. Recruits displayed very different pre-war trajectories, and in line with other studies on social movements (Van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2009: 22), this case tends to depict a picture that shows that it is people who are rather embedded into society who are politically active, and not the alienated ones. Empirically, this study firmly dismisses the loose molecule hypothesis, which basically argues that the most likely profile of low-ranking recruits consists of jobless, uneducated, and dissocialized youths with few alternative prospects other than to resort to violence to make ends meet. If the young militia members I interviewed appeared better educated, with more stable social networks, this does not mean that the young people who joined the rebellion were disconnected socially. They were just using other ties and extra-familial networks to get by on a daily basis. Perhaps one noteworthy characteristic of recruits was the fact that
prior to their engagement in armed groups, they were all extremely mobile, both in terms of geographic location and sector of activity. Although this observation can be made for most African youths, whether or not they have been drawn in an armed movement, it exemplifies once more the already well-documented ‘hyper-mobility’ phenomenon, and at the same time recalls the fact that the characteristics of militarized recruits only resemble the ones of the population at large.

In terms of mobilization processes, one has in fact to be careful not to downplay individual perceptions at the expense of geopolitical factors, even if the characteristics of immediate contexts are recognized to have played a major role in the processes of enlistment. This work has also empirically underlined that individual perceptions matter quite a lot in understanding local processes of engagement and that several considerations are at play for individuals: how they experience direct danger; how they perceive their degree of vulnerability; to what extent the choices they have is constrained by a limited room to manoeuvre; and the social proximity to militia and/or rebel insiders. Such results are in line with certain scholars who argue that these factors are more decisive in explaining processes of mobilization in certain contexts than poverty per se or perceived socio-economic exclusion (Guichaoua, 2007).