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

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The main puzzle I wanted to address in this study was to understand the extent to which, in western Côte d’Ivoire, externally driven interventions targeting militarized civilians and aiming at facilitating their demilitarization and return to civilian life should be conceived as special processes compared to other social processes at play in the local environment. This work clearly shows, for this particular context, that such types of post-conflict humanitarianism cannot be analyzed in isolation from endogenous factors: on the one hand, it has brought to the fore the extreme porosity of borders between the social arenas in which low-ranking and non-professional militarized youths are evolving in, while still involved in an armed group (notably by stressing the navigating strategies of the youths between these different spaces); on the other hand, based on that assessment, it calls for a re-conceptualization of reintegration processes – stripped of their ‘post’-military ‘specialness’ in contexts where the military and civilian spheres are intimately related. If the militarization of civilians cannot be disconnected from the wider context, neither can their demilitarization, especially for those locally recruited, who have never really severed their ties with their families and other pre-war social groups. The effects of external interventions targeting ex-combatants cannot therefore be considered unique in environments where borders are blurred between the military, the civilian and the humanitarian spheres.

As already mentioned in the theory chapter, the contexts under study and the data collected during fieldwork have brought to the fore several phenomena that
have so far been undertheorized for situations where post-conflict intervention plays a side role in the local system. I develop below five main findings that fill certain conceptual gaps or that rehabilitate certain theory trends: the circumstantial and emotional forms of engagement; the nature of entanglement of the militarized youths with their immediate environment; the effects of humanitarianism targeting ex-combatants in such environments (with special focus on the extent to which the clients themselves are able to manipulate the intervention); a critical reflection on several existing analytical dichotomies that might be easily challenged in contexts similar to western Côte d’Ivoire (notably the distinction between militia and local vigilante); and the nature of possible remnants of mobilization when the peak of the conflict has passed (by assessing the extent to which certain armed groups are reactivated to fulfil a function of local guardian more in line with traditional forms of urban/rural vigilantism).

The main empirical and conceptual findings

*Circumstantial and emotional enlistment*

Enlisting in an armed group in western Côte d’Ivoire was more often than not the result of highly circumstantial factors and one of the main contributions of this study has been to rehabilitate the importance of immediate contexts in explaining processes of violent mobilization. In Guiglo and Man, who mobilized and who did not was largely due to a combination of geographic, military and emotional factors. If theories resting on such elements are usually downplayed in the literature as compared to theories that rest on assumptions of causality and that emphasize the loose molecule hypothesis (those that state that adverse structural conditions largely explain engagement in armed groups), this work has stressed quite well the place of such a circumstantial form of engagement, emphasizing the role of leaders and the elite in promoting certain values within society and the importance of ‘framing’.

What in addition strikingly came out of the various testimonies is that individual perceptions mattered quite a lot in such processes of local mobilization. Several considerations were at play for individuals: how they experienced direct danger; how they perceived their degree of vulnerability and that of their close family; how their choices were constrained by the room to manoeuvre they had; how close they were to militia and/or rebel insiders, etc. These results are in line with a certain line of thought, which argues that circumstantial and emotional factors are perhaps more decisive in explaining processes of mobilization in certain contexts than poverty per se, or perceived socio-economic exclusion (Gui-chaoua, 2007). Recruits in fact displayed very different pre-war trajectories and the study tends to depict a picture that shows that it was people who were quite
embedded in society who joined an armed group, rather than the alienated ones. Empirically, this finding conclusively dismisses the loose molecule hypothesis, where the stand is taken that the most likely profile of low-ranking recruits is that of jobless, uneducated, and dissocialized youths with few alternative prospects other than to resort to violence to make ends meet; such a conclusion is in line with other scholarly work (Guichaoua, 2007; Peters, 2004; Richards, 1996).

The entanglement of militarized youths with their immediate environment

It is often assumed that youngsters who have been involved in armed groups must be resocialized after their military experience, as if their bonds with society were cut during their engagement; the vast majority of humanitarian programmes targeting ex-combatants are based on this postulate. But there is growing evidence that militarized civilians often keep in contact with civilian life during their period of engagement in an armed group, especially the ones locally recruited who remain posted in their immediate surroundings (their main characteristic, in fact, is to never have stopped being involved with family, friends and pre-war acquaintances). In western Côte d’Ivoire, many recruits I interviewed undertook extra-military activities when violent fighting diminished, and there were always basic logistics to take care of, which implied continuous interaction with non-militarised people. If not yet mainstream, this conception of armed violence as a prosaic and intermittent occupation calls for a nuanced approach when analyzing processes of violent mobilization, one that foremost rests on the assumption that borders between the military, the civilian and the humanitarian spheres are fluid and blurred, especially once the period(s) of open fighting has passed. Rather than conveying the idea of a clear distinction between those three arenas, this study has stressed their overlaps, their dynamics, and has clearly dismissed strict conceptual boundaries. It also stressed the opportunistic manoeuvres of the militarized youths, which reinforces such a blurring effect all the more.

On both belligerent sides, full-time involvement in an armed group gradually evolved into a ‘part-time’ one after the period of open fighting was over. Relationships between militarized recruits and local populations have been based on a combination of solidarity and coercion and have varied over time depending on strength of ties and immediate stakes involved. Within the group of recruits locally recruited, persistence of family ties was a striking feature in both Guiglo and Man and the flows of food, cash and services were going both ways between the militarized and their respective families. But relationships with civilians were not confined to the close family structure. An important feature that the study brought to the fore is that it is quite difficult to draw a clear line between militarized life and the civilian one, since eating habits, accommodation practices, and continued participation in the family affairs (in sum, the daily routine) oblige
the militarized and the non militarized to continuously interact, with the effect that they have less and less distinct characteristics.

Since borders between military, civilian and humanitarian spheres were so much blurred in western Côte d’Ivoire, the conceptualization of reintegration processes would undoubtedly gain if it were no longer presented as a drastic change, ‘post’-military. Immediate reintegration was mainly driven by internal processes there, since reintegration assistance did not occur during the immediate post-return phase recruits went through, when social acceptance was at its most challenging (social networks and immediate surroundings therefore played a key role in local demobilization processes). But even if they were late, post-conflict interventions also attempted to facilitate the return to civilian life for militarized populations, and engaged in such a programming in 2006 and 2007. Regardless of one’s opinion of them, they were part of the environment in western Côte d’Ivoire and, as such, unavoidable stakeholders in the local systems. The examples of externally driven interventions given in this study clearly showed that humanitarianism was not at the core of social change there, with people not hesitating to opt out when better opportunities emerged elsewhere. Humanitarianism has instead been locally used as something extra and, to project participants, it provided a social opportunity among a wide range of other social opportunities.

What comes out of a humanitarian apparatus targeting ex-combatants when it does not play such a central role in their immediate contexts?

Considering that planned interventions implemented in post-conflict contexts are simply additional social opportunities among a wide array of other social opportunities does not mean that they do not have effects and that these effects do not influence the local systems in some ways. This case study has highlighted at least three: 1) the seizing of an opportunity, 2) the placing of close relatives in the income-generating activities fostered by the intervention (a variant being to hire someone to operate the activity on a regular basis), and 3) the boosting of demobilization and disarmament processes, an effect particularly pronounced with the youngest recruits on the insurgent side (certainly linked to the negative international press surrounding the child soldiering phenomenon), but also noticeable for some older ones, especially on the counterinsurgent side, as exemplified by some testimonies heard:

‘When we came back from Toulepleu after the military encampment period, I kept my weapon in the village. Later, Maho disarmed us in Guiglo. From there, we were put in a truck and we were brought to Duékoué for the DDR.’

What is of particular interest regarding the last two effects is that although they both result from unintended consequences of the interventions themselves,
they are probably their most tangible outcomes: the second one by bringing to the
fore the ineluctable involvement of the close family structure in the potential
benefits derived from the intervention, and the third one by giving a sense of
closure to those who were once involved in an armed group (and to the war-
affected population). If rarely highlighted by the operators of post-conflict inter-
ventions, these effects clearly show that the navigating strategies of the mili-
tarized youths between different arenas are not confined to their time within their
respective armed groups. From the perspective of the youths benefiting from re-
integration programmes, placing someone else in a project seems to be a logical
move when more interesting opportunities emerge elsewhere; such behaviour in
fact only reproduces a well-embedded cultural pattern of patron/client relation-
ships, coloured with a degree of moral obligation when the close family is in-
volved. It is in no way unusual. In that respect, it resembles the strategies of the
population at large, which can be quite keen on navigating between informal paid
work opportunities; this social behaviour is not confined to those who have partic-
ipated in an armed movement.

This last remark enables us to reflect on the extent to which the clients them-
selves are able to manipulate the intervention and to go beyond the usual patron-
client relationship that depicts warlords as the only skilled manipulators of ex-
ternal assistance. There are many stakes in DDR-related interventions, even
when the benefits seem at first hand minimal, and those who profit from them
also play with them if it has the potential to serve their ends. This is why there is
an urgent need to reconceptualize externally driven demobilization and reinte-
gration processes, away from a segmented approach\(^1\) that overemphasizes the im-
portance of the local elites in shaping the effects of the interventions, and to-
wards a perspective that recognizes the room to manoeuvre of the low-rank-
ing recruits and their continued links with their immediate environment. In situations
where humanitarianism does not play such a central role in the local context,
interventions do not run the risk of drying up the already existing social mecha-
nisms that regulate social life – quite the contrary. One interesting finding of this
study has actually been to stress – with caution – that a possible effect of DDR-
related interventions is to reinforce existing moral obligations, not to weaken
them. This point is probably best exemplified by the behaviour of ‘reinserted’
recruits, who we literally see juggling social obligations and personal benefit
after having received their financial safety nets, and who sometimes place a close
relative in the activity fostered by the intervention.

Another contribution of this study has been to bring nuance to the general
perception of the patronage links inherited from relationships built during war-

\(^1\) ‘D’ and ‘R’ can simply not be seen as distinct processes, they constantly overlap.
fear. If the humanitarian interventions that were under the lens eventually drew on existing patron-client relationships over which they had little control (since militia leaders and the rebel État-Major were the ones selecting the recruits to include in the reinsertion projects\(^2\)), the study has revealed that the extent of patronage relations in reintegration processes has in the end not been as systematic, negative and unfair as intuitively anticipated. If there is no way to avoid militia leaders’ relatives appearing on the reinsertion lists, who else is included and who is left out appears to be chosen quite arbitrarily in many cases, especially in areas far from the leaders’ compounds, where these decisions are taken without taking into account the usual social networks based on geographic proximity (from the same family, one can be in the project, another not). It is noteworthy to recall here that whether or not someone makes the list does not depend so much on the function fulfilled in the armed group: the Ivoirian DDR plan – like many others – had taken such a wide definition of who was entitled to post-war benefits that many people could eventually qualify, provided they had been associated with an armed group for a certain period of time. To put it bluntly: a combatant has as much chance of making the list as a cook or a cleaner, even if it is often locally perceived that the one who fought has more ‘rights’ to post-war benefits. But since the function eventually does not matter, there is no need to manipulate one’s identity to ‘fit’ into a combatant category to receive post-conflict assistance. Reinserted recruits get the same package, regardless of their former wartime occupation. In western Côte d’Ivoire, some militarized youths became eligible for reintegration assistance, while others did not, for no particular reason, and despite having assumed similar duties during the war. For the lucky ones, the fact that they made the lists has opened a door for them, and it has since been up to them to make the most of it. This observation is in line with other scholars’ calls for moving away from the general rejection of war-time patronage networks and to consider the potential benefits of this phenomenon pragmatically, notably by recognizing its ability to foster a stable economic basis for recently demilitarized local youths (Lemasle, 2010: 334).

**Calling existing analytical dichotomies into question**

What does it mean to be a ‘reinserted’ or a ‘reintegrated’ rebel or militia, and what does thinking in terms of dichotomy bring to the analysis when making the distinction between ‘reinserted’ and ‘non-reinserted’ recruits? Is it to be expected that there will be no regression into armed groups for the ‘reinserted’ ones? Under no circumstances? The recent events in western Côte d’Ivoire seem to

\(^2\) With the variant in Man that the initial list supplied by the the central rebellion administration in Bouaké was eventually adapted locally, in collaboration with the local rebel administration.
prove this wrong by rehabilitating once more the argument that enlistment into armed groups stems from highly circumstantial factors. When I talked to M. in early May 2011 (M. was a demobilized child soldier I interviewed in Man in 2007 and with whom I continued to have sporadic contact in 2008), once past the relief of learning that he was still alive after the wave of particularly violent events that rocked the west in the spring of 2011, it became clear that he had been lucky to escape reengagement. As he told me, he had to hide. He was particularly in danger of being redrafted because the rebel État-Major needed recruits skilled with weapons for the southern offensive taking place, and he had once been one of them. Sadly, his partner did not make it and was killed by a stray bullet during the events. He was about to bury her, hence the reason for his call. But beyond this tragic anecdote, M.’s story shows well that having been ‘reinserted’ once does not mean that someone can claim to no longer have anything to do with warfare.

This study also challenges the notion that ‘reinserted’ recruits are different from ‘non-reinserted’ ones by highlighting the fact that interventions targeting ex-combatants in the end play a very modest role in improving their lives, to the point that several people do not hesitate to opt out when better opportunities emerge elsewhere. If most demobilized recruits interviewed saw financial compensation as a back-payment for their services, the safety net was distributed well after their return to their community, sometimes two or three years after they had ended their engagement in the armed group. It therefore had a limited impact on their immediate post-return phase, which is when social acceptance was the most challenging. Recruits used their safety net very differently. Out of the five broad categories of expenses identified – 1) reimbursing creditors, 2) responding to familial demands, 3) investing in own business, 4) allocating money to war chiefs, and 5) facing social events (such as medical expenses, funerals, home improvements) – three would not have emerged if no cash had been given to combatants (reimbursing creditors, responding to familial demands, and allocating money to war chiefs). For investment, the financial compensation was indeed useful but should not be overestimated, especially since it was given in three instalments in a context where small amounts are easily wasted on day-to-day expenses. In terms of facing social events, extra cash has helped recruits to respond to immediate expenses (medical expenses, school fees, costs associated with marriage and newborn), however, they were more likely to be abused by their immediate entourage. In sum, the use of cash transfers in the reinsertion phase has indeed meant a breath a fresh air to ex-combatants, but should not be overrated, as their room of manoeuvre was eventually limited by the way they balanced their social obligations with personal benefit.
Another dichotomy that could easily be challenged in contexts similar to western Côte d’Ivoire is the distinction between a militia member and a local vigilante. More than being a terminological challenge, it is a real puzzle in some contexts to draw a clear line between who is/was a militia member and who is/was a civilian; as Pouligny (2004) rightly noted, the distinction between the two can be all the more blurred by the fact that the construction of the militarized/civilian dichotomy might differ from the viewpoints of individuals and groups within the local societies, and from the viewpoints of outsiders. If the confusion and overlapping of terms exists to such an extent – Who is a combatant? Who is a militia member? Who is a local vigilante? – it actually makes little sense to distinguish between the three labels in certain contexts, especially on counterinsurgent sides and in areas close to the former front line, where armed mobilization is likely to have been initially based on community forms of policing.⁢³ The literature on vigilantism sheds some light on this dilemma by pointing out the multiplicity of forms vigilante groups take over time and space and by stressing several paradoxes that surround the concept when traditional forms of rural/urban vigilantism are related to a form of mobilization that resembles warfare (Baker, 2007; Kirsch & Gratz, 2010; Kyed, 2007; Menkhaus, 2007; Pratten & Sen, 2007; Reno, 2007). If vigilantes are often genuinely driven by a set of moral values and a desire to promote social order in the societies in which they operate, their ‘guarding’ function can be paralleled by acts of extreme violence against whomever is perceived as the enemy (Abrahams, 1987). Also (and contrary to a widespread perception), vigilantes are no substitute to the State and often engage in an evolving relationship with it, alternating periods of confrontation with periods of entanglement and mutual support (Buur, 2010; Kirsch & Gratz, 2010). It is this last point that applies so well in the Ivorian case, given the extent of entanglement of the counterinsurgent movements with the national army in the beginning of the conflict and their severing of links at a later stage; as Meagher (2010) convincingly writes, there is a strong urge to look at how the State accommodates (or not) counterinsurgent armed groups over time. The mass uprising in Guiglo was largely a response to violence ‘from below’, which got quickly captured, absorbed and instrumentalized by the Ivorian State, as the national army was failing to provide protection to the western residents at the onset of conflict. But while one would have expected that this counterinsurgency would gradually slip into a function of local guardian by securing their immediate surroundings (resuming thereby a more traditional form of urban/rural vigilantism once the period of combat had passed), western militias in fact did little to counter the criminality in their zone. Worse, there have been several

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³ Which was notably the case in Guiglo.
allegations that some militia members contributed to it. Thieves and *coupeurs de route* have remained a structural issue in Guéré territory (with seasonal peaks in December and during the cocoa/coffee harvest time, when money circulates most widely), and autochthonous and allochthonous communities have continued to clash regularly, without appropriate mediation.

*When fighting is over, what remains of the warfare apparatus?*

The (quasi) absence of intervention on the counterinsurgency side in local security matters once the peak of conflict had passed is another odd trait of the Ivorian case. Although there has been anecdotal evidence that some militia recruits have genuinely been contributing to the maintenance of the local social order (some being employed as local security guards by private companies or as escorts), militia leaders have never publicly advertised this role, which, to some extent, has maintained a certain vagueness with regards to the participation of militarized civilians in local security matters. Another layer had yet been added to the existing system, even if the main driver had switched from some sort of moral obligation in the very beginning (which boosted massive recruitment for self-defence) to more lucrative notions at later stages (the prospect of deriving an income from securing local goods); in addition, this phenomenon did not concern everyone and the ones who got access to these paid opportunities were usually the ones who continued to maintain visible links with prominent militia leaders. But if new regimes of local governance have certainly been negotiated at the local level with regards to local security matters – informed by immediate circumstances, but also derived from the local historical trajectory of popular justice and social mobilization (Buur, 2010; Kirsch & Gratz, 2010: 18; Mbembe, 2001: 76-93) – the situation in Guiglo has been quite a far cry from situations elsewhere, where local vigilantes were quick to redress the grievances of the poor by taking local justice into their own hands (Meagher, 2008; Sen, 2007). On the insurgent side, conversely, an interesting development that took place after 2006 is that low-ranking elements in the rebel forces increasingly started to fulfil the role of public security officials (in agreement with the Ivorian government) to make up for the absence of State officials in the rebel-controlled areas4 (this notably concerned the functions of police, forestry control and penitentiary guards). But instead of interpreting such a phenomenon as an example of militarized youths keen on pursuing an opportunistic career in the rebellion, one has to see it as a social claim, with a main rationale less linked to the willingness of pursuing

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4 A quite ironic development when compared to the situation in 2002, when the first to die in the rebel-controlled areas were precisely those State security officials.
war in the long run than to individuals’ desire for (and ability to achieve) upward mobility.

When assessing the extent to which certain armed groups might be reactivated to fulfill a function of local guardian more in line with traditional forms of urban/rural vigilantism, what is striking on both belligerent sides is that we are quite far from a ‘group’ response and that the phenomenon has remained relatively small-scale and limited to a few individuals. The question is therefore not so much framed in terms of why some armed groups continue to protect local communities over time while others do not (a collective bias several authors endorse), but how individuals are able to make sense of their limited options and how they are able to devise ways of coping with the different opportunities faced, even those deriving from warfare. The concept of agency is central to this approach. Social actors circulate between several sets of logic and choose between various standards: eventually, several rationalities come to meet.

**Conceptual implications**

In light of those conceptual and empirical findings, there are several elements to include in any analytical framework developed for conceptualizing the demobilization and reinsertion processes of young people temporarily drawn into armed groups. The variety of individual backgrounds must be carefully looked at, in terms of personal skills and situations but also in terms of motivations for engagement, in order to better guide the intervention. The second element concerns the extent of entanglement of the militarized sphere with the civilian and humanitarian domains. A comprehensive framework must address the complexity of the links militarized civilians continue (or not) to maintain with their close family and pre-war social networks during and after their time in an armed faction. Finally, for each given context, there is the need to get an idea of the dosage of interventions. Not so much to suggest a causal relationship (after all, whether interventions are at the core of side of a given environment, they are part of the local opportunity structures and have certain effects), but because in situations where humanitarianism does not play such a central role in the local context, interventions hardly run the risk to dry up existing social mechanisms, and this situation enables the analyst to study quasi-usual endogenous processes in socio-political-economic spaces recently affected by conflict. The specific character of an intervention is an empirical question, which cannot be determined in advance and which has to be contextualized at several levels; one of them is to assess the extent to which other factors have potentially played a role in an effect presumably boosted by the intervention.
The step forward

Humanitarianism has only been an extra in western Côte d'Ivoire and there is no need to overestimate its effects. Because it came late for most of the militarized civilians in this study (two or three years after their effective demobilization), and because it was never implemented on a large scale, it certainly opens up the debate whether an indigenous process of peace building is conceivable in western Côte d'Ivoire, given the context we know. There is certainly ample room for research in this respect, but we can perhaps guide the early stages of reflection by returning to one of the effects mentioned above. It has been empirically shown, humanitarian interventions targeting ex-combatants have the collateral effect of boosting demobilization and disarmament processes. Ironically, this is not considered to be their objective (and their goal remains framed and measured in terms of socio-economic reinsertion), yet de facto this unintended consequence is probably the most valuable contribution these interventions make in terms of conflict mitigation. As hinted earlier, it gives a sense of closure to those who were once involved in an armed group and to the local population they live amongst. It fosters self-demobilization and it creates political and media events that invite militarized individuals to return their weapons without being further chased. The possibility of indigenous recovery must therefore be analyzed in this light: are there alternatives in contexts where the global approach to post-conflict interventions has permeated so much the local contexts?
Photograph 11: Apprentices, including former militarized recruits, in a tailoring workshop, Guiglo

Photograph 12: Informal training in electricity, Man
(GTZ-IS was paying their tuition for three elements of the Forces Nouvelles)