

DEMOGRAPHY, ENVIRONMENT AND CONFLICT IN WEST AFRICA

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KAIPTC Occasional Paper No. 34

April 2011



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Introduction

It has been argued that the end of the Cold War lifted the lid from a cauldron of simmering tensions and plunged Africa, among other places, into bloody conflicts that exacerbated poverty, worsened disease prevalence and increased atrocities on the continent.³ In 1996 alone, 14 of the 53 countries of Africa were afflicted by armed conflicts, accounting for more than half of all war-related deaths worldwide and resulting in more than 8 million refugees, returnees and internally displaced persons (IDPs).⁴ The accompanying atrocities and human rights abuses meted out to non-combatants made Africa home to some of the world's most gruesome war-related human rights abuse records and atrocities.⁵

Contributing to this history of Africa in the post-Cold War era is the West African sub-region where Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea Bissau and La Côte d'Ivoire were, at different times, plunged into civil wars. Particularly, the atrocities against civilians in La Cote d'Ivoire since December 2010 have been particularly telling. The combined sub-regional effects and interrelated conflict complexes contributed to considerable negative tagging of the sub-region. In many quarters, West Africa has consequently been considered as unstable, dangerous and crisis-ridden.⁶ Against this backdrop, Ibrahim Gambari, a former United Nations Under-Secretary General for Political Affairs, described West Africa as dangerous. Herman Cohen and William

³. President Clinton as quoted in Devroy, Ann. 1994. "President Cautions Congress on 'Simple Ideas' in Foreign Policy," *Washington Post*, May 26, p. A31.

⁴. See a detailed discussion on the courses of conflicts in Africa in a UN report by the Secretary-General. Annan, K., *The Causes of Conflict and the Promotion of Durable Peace and Sustainable Development in Africa*, Report of the Secretary-General, (UN: April, 1998).

⁵. The situation of human rights in Africa is generally poor, and typically seen as an area of grave concern by the UN, governmental, and non-governmental observers. After the Cold War, the increase in civil strife and authoritarian rule, therefore, contributed to an exponential growth of human rights commissions on the continent in the 1990s. See Human Rights Watch, "Protectors or Pretenders? Human Rights Commissions in Africa," <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2001/africa/overview/summary.html>, accessed 03/02/07; See also "Human rights in Africa," *Wikipedia Encyclopaedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_rights_in_Africa, accessed 07/02/07.

⁶. Richard Kaplan. 'The Coming Anarchy', *The Atlantic Monthly*, 1994

Pfaff recommended a re-colonisation of the sub-region by former metropolitan powers as a way of stabilising it.⁷

The extent of human insecurity and its effects on sub-regional economic developments has necessitated the involvement of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in attempting to resolve these conflicts. Consequently, though originally crafted as an economic integration scheme, ECOWAS was transformed from an economic into a political-security organisation, in response to the worsening instability enabling ECOWAS to intervene in West African crisis situations.

In the pursuit of peace and the stabilisation of the sub-region, many attempts to understand the underlying social, economic, cultural and political factors for the conflicts and their ensuing dynamics have been made. Yet, very little scholarly research has attempted to test the argument that a combination of demography, particularly population composition and migration, and environmental factors have had critical impacts on the sub-region's conflict dynamics and should be critical variables in any analysis for designing future policy options. A review of scholarly work on conflict analysis in West Africa reveals an abysmal void in the establishment of the link between these important variables and the preponderance of conflicts or violence in the sub-region. In many instances such linkages are left to conjectures without substantial empirical arguments. This apparent lack of analytical input, we argue, has contributed to undermining both sub-regional and international endeavours to formulate holistic and sustainable intervention strategies that comprehensively engage the underlying causes of the conflicts in West Africa.

Rather than leave such linkages to conjectures and refutations, in this paper, we attempt to understand the complex and multiple inter-linkages between population composition, especially

⁷ . See Africa Recovery, July, 2003, p. 4; For detailed discussion of this, see Fawole Alade, W., "ECOWAS and the Crisis in Cote d'Ivoire: The Politics and Problems of Peace-Making in West Africa," *Journal of West African Affairs*, Vol.4, 2004.,pp.11-30; Cohen, H., "African Capabilities for Managing Conflict: The Role of the US," in Smock, D.R., and Crocker, C.A. (eds), *African Conflict Resolution: The US Role in Peacekeeping*, Washington DC: US Institute of Peace Press, 1995), pp. 95ff; and also Pfaff, W., "A New Colonialism: Europe Must Go Back into Africa," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 74 (1), 1995, pp.4ff. Africa Recovery, July, 2003, p. 4.

age distribution; environment and their associated dynamics that accompany the outbreak of conflicts in West Africa by using Liberia, Sierra Leone and La Cote d'Ivoire as empirical case studies. The choice of these cases is informed by their conflict dynamics reflected in the region-wide spill-over effects, multiplicity of actors, protraction and fluidity, which are the hallmarks of many other African crisis situations.

In this paper, we argue that West Africa's conflict experiences since 1990 have never been devoid of the concurrent influence of the youth bulge problematic and the effects of the economic downturns of countries in the sub-region. These factors can therefore not be relegated to the background in present and future attempts to achieve peace. We also argue that the outbreak of conflicts has had grave ramifications on the region's environmental security. In tandem with such developments, however, environmental changes are also playing an important role in fomenting tensions in many forest and Sahelian areas. In this context, desertification in West Africa is an early warning indicator that, given increasing population growth and the pressure on natural resources, tensions in the forest communities of West Africa between migrants and indigenes over access to arable lands, water resources and pasture might increase.

This paper starts with a section that analyses the nexus between demography and conflict from which evidence is deduced to explain the youth bulge phenomenon and supporting destabilising factors. Subsequently, we discuss migratory flows and conflict in terms of the role of migration and its impact in fuelling tensions and the cyclical impact of conflict on migration trends. The third section assesses the possible role of environmental challenges in fomenting tensions and the effects conflicts have on the environment. The paper concludes with possible policy options for West Africa.

Demography and Conflict: The Population Composition Nexus

Demography concerns the entire social characteristics of a population and their development through time. These include, *inter alia*, analysis of a population on the basis of age, sex, ethnicity, occupation, changes in population, and migration. In assessing the nexus between demography and conflict, therefore, several important deductive pairings can be made given the

many characteristics of demography. However, in this section we focus primarily on the population composition nexus and migration for the purposes of distilling policy-relevant conclusions.

Sex and age distribution ratios are two characteristics that are key to population composition considerations in relation to conflict analysis. Proponents of sex distribution ratio as a factor in conflict analysis argue that the greater the imbalances in a population in favour of men, the higher the likelihood of instability and conflict.⁸ On the other hand, the age distribution ratio contenders argue that there is a nexus between a higher proportion of young adults as a ratio of total adult population and the likely outbreak and sustenance of conflict.⁹ With the active involvement of young people in African conflicts and the consequent emergence and role child-soldiers play an analysis with respect to age distribution is useful as it provides an explanatory framework to understanding the underlying dynamics surrounding both their recruitment and usage for facts-based policy options.

The transformation of a population from one characterized by short lives and large families to one with long lives and small families is referred to as demographic transition. Demographic transitions occur in five basic phases: the pre-transition phase, early-transition, middle-transition, late-transition, and post-transition phases.¹⁰ A country's progress through these phases is linked to the birth and death rates of its population. All countries, therefore, belong to one of the phases. Countries in early demographic transitions are characterised by a decline in childhood death rates while birth rates remain high. This notably results in rapid population growth, unusually large proportions of children and adolescent dependents, and a relative dearth of working age adults per dependent.

⁸ . See Hudson, Valerie, & Andrea den Boer, *Bare branches: The security implications of Asia's surplus male population*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

⁹ . Hutchful, Eboe & Kwesi Aning. 2004 'The Political Economy of Conflicts in West Africa', in *West Africa's Security Challenges: Building Peace in a Troubled Sub-region*. in Adekeye Adebajo & Ismail Rashid, Eds (Boulder: Lynne Reinner); Huntington, S. P., *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

¹⁰ . Cincotta, R. P., Engelman, R., and Anastasion, D., *The Security Demographic: Population and Civil Conflict after the Cold War*, (Washington D.C.: Population Action International, 2003.), p. 32.

Between 1970 and 2000, countries that were in the late phase of demographic transition characterised by lower birth-rates and higher life expectancy had an evenly distributed age group ratios and were less prone to the outbreak of civil conflicts. As overall birth and death rates declined, however, the risk of conflict outbreak decreased.¹¹ Conversely, countries in medium demographic transitions characterised by higher birth rates and lower life expectancies resulted in high youth population as a proportion of total adult population and became more predisposed to the outbreak and sustenance of conflicts. Consequently, in the 1990s, the demographic factors that were most closely associated with the likelihood of civil conflict were a high proportion of young adults (aged 15 to 29 years), and rapid urban population growth rate.¹²

Countries where young adults comprised more than 40 per cent of the adult population were more than twice likely to experience the outbreak of civil conflict than those with lower young adult population.¹³ Also, countries with urban population growth rates above 4.0 per cent were about twice as likely to sustain the outbreak of a civil conflict.¹⁴ Whereas the Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire conflict situations buttressed this school of thought (see table 1), the examples of other countries such as Ghana which had similar characteristics but did not get into war, nuances the argument and highlights the importance of other underlying factors apart from demography in fomenting and sustaining conflict.¹⁵

Young Adults and Conflict: Conceptualising the youth bulge

¹¹ . Ibid, pp.13ff.

¹² . Ibid, p.13.

¹³ . See Paul Collier & Anke Hoeffler. For counter-arguments to this position, see Hutchful & Aning, op cit.

¹⁴ . Ibid, p.13.

¹⁵ . Hutchful & Aning, op cit; 2002; McIntyre, Angela, Kwesi Aning & Prosper Addo 2002. 'Politics, War and Violent Youth Culture in Sierra Leone: An Alternative Interpretation', *African Security Review*, Vol. 11, No. 4; Aning, Kwesi. 2009. 'Violent non-state actors in Sierra Leone: understanding the character and politics of the Revolutionary United Front', Ed, Kledja Mulaj. (London: Hurst & Columbia University Press)

Studies in the latter half of the 20th century show that populations with high proportions of young adults have had a high likelihood of becoming embroiled in civil conflict.¹⁶ Where countries are already in the throes of conflict, an unusually high young adult proportion of adult population is a factor in the intensity and sustenance of conflicts.¹⁷ These observations inform arguments about the proportion of young adults in a population and the proclivity for conflict outbreak, an idea which is summed up as the *youth bulge*.

The concept of youth bulge identifies young people (particularly aged between 15-29) as a historically volatile population and equates the high proportion of 15-to-29 year olds relative to total adult population to increased possibility of violence¹⁸ particularly in developing countries where the capacity to support them is lacking.¹⁹ According to François Bourguignon, “large numbers of young people living in developing countries present great opportunities, but also risks.”²⁰ In the 1990s, proponents of the concept argued that countries in which young adults

¹⁶ . Several historical studies lend credence to the argument that in periods when young adults comprise an abnormally large proportion of populations have tended to coincide with rebellions and military campaigns. In modern European history, rise in the number of young men entering adulthood have contributed to cycles of rebellion. Based on such observation, Herbert Moller hypothesised that a bulge in the population of elite young adults is a potential destabilizer of countries. In his view, rebellions and religious movements of the 16th and 17th centuries were led by young men who, upon arriving at adulthood, decided to force their ways into social affluence and relevance upon realising the non-existence of opportunities to advance their goals and also reward their efforts. See Moller, H., “Youth as a Force in the Modern World” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 10: 1967/68, pp. 237–260; Cincotta, Engelman, and Anastasion, op. cit., pp. 44ff.; Goldstone, op. cit.; Collier & Hoeffler

¹⁷ . Christian Mesquida and Neil Weiner argue that youth-laden populations in conflict-torn regions such as the Balkans and Central Asia are more likely to experience highly intense conflicts (measured in battle-related deaths per thousand people) than less youthful populations. See Mesquida C.G., Wiener N.I., “Human Collective Aggression: a Behavioral Ecology Perspective” in *Ethology and Sociobiology* 17: 1996, pp. 247–262; Mesquida C.G., Wiener N.I., “Male Age Composition and the Severity of Conflicts”, *Politics in the Life Sciences* 18(2): 1999, pp. 181–189.

¹⁸ . Cincotta, R. P., “State of the World 2005 Global Security Brief #2: Youth Bulge, Underemployment Raise Risks of Civil Conflict”, <http://www.worldwatch.org/node/76>, accessed 02/02/11.

¹⁹ . Quoted in Hendrixson, A., 2003. “The Youth Bulge...” ZNet Daily Commentaries (March 14). [<http://www.zmag.org/sustainers/content/2003-03/14hendrixson.cfm>], accessed 02/03/11

²⁰ . As quoted in World Bank Research, “World Development Report 2007: Development and the Next Generation,” *World Bank Research E-Newsletter* September, 2006,

made up about 40 per cent or more of the adult population were more than twice likely to experience an outbreak of civil conflict than countries with lesser young adult populations. This is because under situations of a high young adult population, the propensity is for their numbers to outpace available jobs and, thereby, result in even educated young adults wallowing in abject unemployment and poverty.

The accompanying frustrations and consequent resentment against those perceived to be enjoying the few available opportunities lead to the emergence of *desperadoes* resolved to survive by any means possible and wherever available. This phenomenon contributes to urban decay and accompanying social consequences. Over-exploitation of natural resources such as water, forest and arable lands drives them to critically low levels. Rural economies lose their capacities to absorb available labour which becomes compounded by other potentially destabilizing demographic forces such as migration and adverse social and economic conditions. These factors, together with other social realities, produce vulnerable youth populations who become ready-made cannon fodder for recruitment by rebel militias, political gangs and extremist networks. Through the foregoing, the youth bulge phenomenon leads to a demographic stress and thereby contributes to the complicated maze of factors that underlies the likely outbreak of new civil conflicts and the sustenance of ongoing ones.

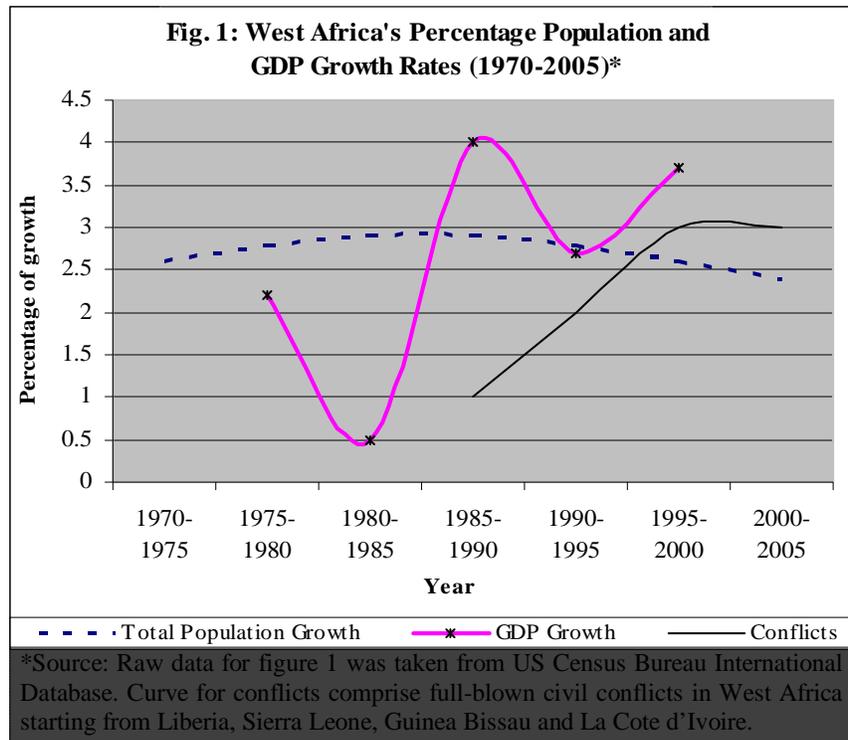
Adducing evidence from West Africa

In sub-Saharan Africa, a juxtaposition of the above realities with unstable countries from the early 1970s reveals that many countries have had to grapple with mutually reinforcing destabilizing situations of: (i) economic down-turns; (ii) population changes; and (iii) social tensions resulting from resource scarcity.

In the early 1970s, the global economy experienced a downturn due to the collapse of the Bretton Woods system of fixed exchange rates and increases in commodity prices, in addition to the quadrupling of oil prices in 1973/74. The impact, though adverse globally, was particularly

pronounced on developing economies. Many African countries lost control over their domestic economic parameters and economic indicators went amok as a result of the sudden rocketing of national expenditure owing to increases in oil prices, short-falls in export receipts, and dwindling productivity.

In their attempts to borrow from the Bretton Wood institutions, particularly the IMF and World Bank to make up for the resultant balance of payment (BOP) deficits, many African countries incurred crushing debts. The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of some countries subsequently grew at increasingly decreasing rates. As figure 1 show, the average annual percentage growth rate of total GDP of West African countries dropped phenomenally from 2.2% between 1975-80 to about 0.5% by 1985. Concurrently, total average annual population growth rate increased from 2.6% to about 2.8% in the same period.



The total GDP of Liberia, for instance, fell from an average of 1.5% between 1975-80 to – 1.8% by 1985 and further to –15.6% by 1990. Average population growth rate, however, increased from 2.9% to 3.0% between 1970 and 1985. Sierra Leone’s economy sunk from 2.2% of average annual total GDP growth rate between 1975 and 1980 to –0.2% by 1990. Côte d’Ivoire’s economic performance dipped from 4.7% between 1975 and 1980 through 2.8% in 1985 to 3.0% in 1990. In Ghana, the economy fell from stagnation (0% growth) to –0.1% between 1980 and 1985. These trends were worsened by a decreasing percentage of economically active people sub-regionally and nationally.²¹

In Liberia, the economic downturn contributed to the 1979 increase in the price of rice from \$22.00 for a 100-pound bag of rice to \$30.00, a situation which sparked riots and protestation against the Tolbert regime and greatly contributed to citizen distrust for his government. The distrust in turn provided a fertile environment which the Doe regime exploited in capturing power through a coup d’etat. Similarly, the persistence of the harsh economic and political conditions aided support for Charles Taylor’s National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) and the war that plunged Liberia into civil war.

²¹ . US Census Bureau International Database, <http://www.census.gov>, accessed 9/18/2007

Whilst the sub-region generally grappled with difficult economic factors, the population growth rate not only grew (see figure 1), but also increasingly changed in composition. The population of young people between ages 15-34 years increased markedly as a proportion of total adult population (>15 years) primarily due to decreasing life expectancies. In Liberia, about 57.4% of the adult population was aged between 15-34 years in 1975, 58.0% in 1980, 58.6% in 1985 and 58.8% in 1990 (See table 1). In Sierra Leone, about 52.8 %, 54.3% and 56.0% in 1975, 1985 and 1990 respectively whilst in Ghana, they were 57.9%, 55.1% and 62.2% respectively. ²²

In the conflicts in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire, young people comprised about 95 per cent of the fighting forces.²³ An estimated number of between 6,000 and 15,000 young people below 18 years took up arms from 1989 to 1997.²⁴ Strikingly, many of them were recruited from slums and gang networks of young adult desperadoes in the many slum communities of the respective countries and, sometimes, from contiguous countries were “wasting in idleness and attendant resentments”²⁵ got recruited into factions and merely motivated by the opportunity to drink, loot, murder, and enjoy higher living standards than previously.²⁶

Table 1: Population composition of Liberia, Sierra Leone and Ghana (1975-2005)

²² . According to the African Youth Charter, a youth within the African context is anybody aged between 15 and 34 years. On the basis of this definition, it can be deduced from table 1 that young adults (age 15-34) comprised more than 50.0% of total adult populations (aged above 15) in many West African countries and particularly those countries that experienced conflicts (Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea-Bissau and Côte d'Ivoire). This consequently has had dire implications.

²³ . Mastny, L., “The Hazards of Youth,” *World Watch Magazine*, (September/October, 2004), pp.18-21.

²⁴ . Human Rights Watch, “Summary”, <http://hrw.org/reports/2005/westafrica0405/1.htm>, accessed 18/02/07.

²⁵ . Staveteig, S., “The Young and the Restless: Population” in *Environmental Change and Security Program_ ECSP Report 2005*, Issue 11, pp.12ff.

²⁶ . Gourevitch, P., *We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families: Stories from Rwanda*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998).

Year	Total population	Population below 15	Total Adult Population (15<)	Young adult population (15-34)	% of Young Adults (over total population)	% of young adults (over total adult population 15<)
<i>Liberia</i>						
1975	1616534	705647	910887.0	522621	32.3	57.4
1980	1848799	809415	1039384.0	602982	32.6	58.0
1985	2136870	932113	1204757.0	706001	33.0	58.6
1990	2117239	928735	1188504.0	698606	33.0	58.8
1995	1975252	837746	1137506.0	670366	33.9	58.9
2000	2694875	1151814	1543061.0	909982	33.8	59.0
2005	2902179	1239736	1662443.0	1003580	34.6	60.4
<i>Sierra Leone</i>						
1975	3,027,190	1,282,417	1,744,773	920,914	30.4	52.8
1980	3,327,118	1,465,763	1,861,355	979,941	29.5	52.6
1985	3,695,969	1,597,315	2,098,654	1,138,596	30.8	54.3
1990	4,220,883	1,819,054	2,401,829	1,344,868	31.9	56.0
1995	4,381,750	1,919,823	2,461,927	1,437,353	32.8	58.4
2000	4,808,817	2,149,887	2,658,930	1,584,531	33.0	59.6
2005	5,867,426	2,632,299	3,235,127	1,912,218	32.6	59.1
<i>Ghana</i>						
1975	10,117,862	4,736,589	5,381,273	3,113,193	30.8	57.9
1980	11,016,641	5,163,686	5,852,955	3,378,797	30.7	57.7
1985	13,228,425	5,963,618	8,064,739	4,442,438	33.6	55.1
1990	15,413,80	6,806,10	8,607,692	5,353,32	34.7	62.2

	0	8		8		
1995	17,712,49 3	7,703,89 2	10,008,60 1	6,130,64 1	34.6	61.3
2000	19,736,03 6	8,215,75 4	11,520,28 2	6,917,23 3	35.0	60.0
2005	22,025,68 0	8,643,34 5	13,382,33 5	7,905,26 2	35.9	59.1

Source: Raw data from US Census Bureau, International Database²⁷

Table 1 reveals that before and at the onset of the civil wars in these countries, the young adult populations and even people below age 15 were substantially high.²⁸ This offered an opportunity for some warlords to recruit and exploit them as soldiers in the complex political emergencies that characterised the West African sub-region in the 1990s²⁹. Charles Taylor, and the NPFL, for instance, became infamous for the abduction, recruitment and use of boys, most of who were below 18 years. This tactic later spread to other rebel groups in Liberia and, particularly the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) of Sierra Leone.

When young people feel left out in the distribution of national resources and sidelined in the contribution to national discourse relevance, the proclivity to rise to revolt and to support any revolutionary inertia is well buttressed by political history.³⁰ Pragmatically, the incentives and calculations that inform young adults' enlistment into armed rebellion is generally the result of a carefully considered juxtaposition of what can be potentially lost and what can be gained.³¹ If young adults are left with no alternative to unemployment and poverty, and there are indications of future worsening trends, it is always easier for them to enlist into rebellions that promise

²⁷ . US Census Bureau International Database, <http://www.census.gov>, accessed 9/18/2007

²⁸ . See also population pyramids available from the U.S. Census Bureau, International Data Base. Further reading see www.census.gov/www/idbpyr.html, accessed 05/02/2007.

²⁹ .Aning, Kwesi. 2005 'The Challenges to Multilateral Interventions - UN, ECOWAS and Complex Political Emergencies in West Africa: A Critical Analysis', *Journal of Asian & African Studies*, Vol. 4, Nos. 1- 2

³⁰ Herbert Moller argues that wars in pre-modern and present-day Europe, including the rise of the Nazi party in Germany, corresponded with increases in the proportion of young men in the population. Similarly, High rates of youth contributed to the Bolshevik Revolution, the Iranian Revolution, and the current unrest in the Middle East. For more on this argument, see Moller, H., "Youth as a Force in the Modern World" in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 10: 1968, pp. 237–260.

³¹ . See, MacIntyre, et al, op cit

better life. According to Paul Collier, unemployment reduces the cost for young people to engage in conflict and, increases the proclivity to engage in collective violence and hence conflicts.³²

In many West African communities, the young adult population do not have substantial material benefits to lose when they participate in a civil conflict.³³ Rather, it presents opportunities and incentives for the daring ones to support themselves by looting, robbing and exploitation of available natural resources. In an interview with some sixty former West African combatants, crippling poverty and hopelessness were unanimously identified as the fundamental factors which motivated them to take up arms. Many of them recounted the extent to which they battled daily against abject poverty and the hallucinations of the struggle of daily survival and lack of access to resources. Given the difficult present, unpredictable future and unlikely fulfilment of their dreams, many of them thought that going to war was their best option for survival. The surrounding psychological and physical complexities aided and abetted their recruiters.³⁴

Once these situations got them into combat, many of them willingly crossed borders as veteran fighters into other wars in neighbouring countries under the influence of the same situations of unemployment and unstable economic circumstances.³⁵ To many of such young adults, warfare provides an avenue for survival through looting and pillage of property. A 24 year old Liberian who fought in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire confessed that:

³² . See Collier, P., *Breaking the Conflict Trap: Civil War and Development Policy*, (Washington, DC: Oxford University Press, 2003).

³³ . Braungart, R. G., 'Historical and Generational Patterns of Youth Movements: A Global Perspective', *Comparative Social Research* 7(1): 1984, pp. 3–62. McIntyre, Aning and Addo, op cit

³⁴ . Ibid.

³⁵ . Ibid.

There are some of us who can't seem to live without a weapon – anywhere we hear about fighting, we have to go. It's because of the way we grew up – and now it's in our blood. A warrior can't sit down when war is on...³⁶

Once civil wars break out survival becomes vital. Many young adults then learn to “live by the gun” through looting and robbery. The point is that many rebel soldiers have few prospects of finding a livelihood in civilian life, due to the fact that many of them have no professional or vocational skills with which to make a livelihood in the event of the end of the war and their return to civilian life. For many, survival by looting and robbery has to be maintained to sustain them rather than return to peace to confront economic uncertainties. The options available to them at the end of war alternate between seeking other armed professions, such as security guards; migrating across borders as mercenaries or criminals; or rekindling the act of war by joining any available splinter rebel group and refusing to demobilise. Thus, undermining the effectiveness of any mediation initiative or attempts to disarm, demobilise and reintegrate combatants after the war.³⁷

Indeed, these reflections lend credence to the high young adult determinist argument of the causes of conflict. From such a view point, we argue that the phenomenon has significantly contributed to the past and present security uncertainties of the West African sub-region.

Nuancing the Youth Bulge Argument: The Ghana Case

Whereas siding with the youth bulge determinist school of thought will cause one to admit that this phenomenon may have enormously contributed to the periodicity and sustenance of the conflicts in West Africa, it is also important to nuance the argument with certain key

³⁶ . Ibid.

³⁷ . Krishna Kumar (ed.): *Rebuilding Societies after Civil War. Critical Roles for International Assistance* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1997), pp. 85ff; Mashike, L. “Standing Down or Standing Out? Demobilising or Reintegrating Former Soldiers”, *African Security Review*, vol. 9, no.5/6 pp. 64ff; Malan, M. “Disarming and Demobilizing Child Soldiers: The Underlying Challenges”, *African Security Review*, vol. 9, no.5/6, 2000, pp. 35ff.

comparisons in the region. Particularly, it is essential to reflect on why certain countries in the sub-region with an equally high young adult population have steered clear of civil conflicts. We attempt to provide an analysis of the important mitigating factors that explain why some countries slipped into instability under situations of high young adult populations whilst others did not by using Ghana as a case study.

Ghana's young adult population has since the 1970s comprised an important fraction of the country's total population (see table 1). This provided Jerry Rawlings the initial support for his revolutionary actions in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Subsequently, majority of them were incorporated into his the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (CDR). The committees provided many young adults the opportunity to challenge the *status quo*, particularly traditional power arrangements and urban bureaucracies and to, generally, feel part of the revolutionary process at the time.

This counterfactual argument brings into sharp critique any attempt to employ the youth bulge phenomenon as a mono-causal and simplistic yard-stick to explain West Africa's past and present security uncertainties. It highlights the fact that whereas explaining the underlying causes of conflicts using a single conceptualisation could be persuasive, it could also be catastrophic. An extensive analysis of any conflict situation should, therefore, be considered on the basis of multiple causes taking into particular consideration the peculiarities of any given situation. Against this background, in addition to the youth bulge phenomenon, other factors such as specific local dynamics and responses to prevailing local conditions are important in understanding the effects of the youth bulge phenomenon in West Africa. Even though Ghana has a high young adult population, similar to other countries in the sub-region, its response to the economic and political marginalisation of the young adult component of its population differed.

Therefore, whereas the high young adult population argument holds true for some of the conflicts, Ghana's example suggests that it is not necessarily always the case. We argue that leadership, mobilisation and ill-exploitation of the massive youth energies by inept and selfish power-seeking political entities and personalities, indispensable factors that contribute to the explosive role of the youth bulge problematic in West African conflicts.

Migration Patterns and Conflicts: A Cause or the Curse?

West Africa is one region of Sub-Saharan Africa that is highly noted for intense human mobility. Traditionally, the patterns of intra-West Africa migration have been rooted in the economic performance and the availability of economic opportunities for migrant populations in the recipient countries. Throughout the sub-region's history, expulsion and deportation policies against migrants in the event of any economic down-turn have been notable. As early as 1958, for instance, Côte d'Ivoire expelled more than 1,000 Beninese and Togolese whilst Chad expelled thousands of Beninese. In 1964, about 16,000 Beninese were again expelled from Cote d'Ivoire; in 1967 Senegal expelled Guineans. Ghanaian fishermen were expelled from Sierra-Leone, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire in 1968. Following the implementation of the *Alien Compliance Order* in Ghana, an estimated half- a-million West Africans mostly from Burkina Faso, Niger, Liberia and Nigeria were expelled in 1969. The largest of such expulsion of aliens, however, occurred in 1983 and 1985 when Nigeria embarked on mass expulsion of aliens.³⁸

These statistics establish the extent of intra-regional migration which dates back to the pre-colonial era and heightened at the turn of the twentieth century³⁹. The statistics also highlight the ease with which migrants become objects of harsh *ad hoc* political policies of recipient states in the region. Between 1988 and 1992, for instance, more than 6.4 million migratory movements were recorded by Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Senegal together.⁴⁰ About 1.3 million of the movements occurred within the countries whilst 2.3 million

³⁸ . Adepoju, A. "Migration in West Africa," Paper prepared for the Policy Analysis and Research Programme of the Global Commission on International Migration, September, 2005. p. 4.

³⁹ . In an interview of the Statesman conducted by Hamza Lansah Lolly, reporter Newspaper one herdsman traced his migration into Ghana to about 50 years ago. According to him "some of us have been in Ghana for the past 50 years ..." See Hamza Lansah Lolly , "Fulani herdsman to cooperate with REGSEC," Statesman Newspaper, 25/09/2006, http://www.thestatesmanonline.com/pages/news_detail.php?section=1&newsid=653.

⁴⁰ . Survey conducted by The Network of Surveys on Migration and Urbanization in West Africa (NESMUWA) with data from Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Senegal. Bocquier P. and S. Traoré. 2000. "Urbanisation et dynamique migratoire en Afrique de l'Ouest. La croissance urbaine en panne". L'Harmattan. In Decaluwé, B., J-C. Dumont, S. Mesplé-Somps, V. Robichaud. *Union économique et mobilité des facteurs: le cas de l'UEMOA*. <http://www.crefa.ecn.ulaval.ca/cahier/liste00.html>, quoted in Konseiga, A. "New

were international. Within this aggregation, migration between Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire were high representing about 40 per cent or 508,000 of total movements among the seven countries?⁴¹

In parts of West Africa where population movements force local residents to share scarce arable lands, forests, grazing lands, or water resources with migrants, competition for resources generate tensions between locals and migrants.⁴² Ghana currently grapples with migrant Fulani herdsmen from neighbouring countries who, in pursuit of grazing pasture, migrate into the country. In the wake of their presence in the country, many of them have been responsible for destruction of life and property at various villages. Some herdsmen and their livestock destroy crops, attack people, cause bush-fires, and conduct highway robberies. In some local communities in the Upper West Region of Ghana, economic activities among local villages where herdsmen operate have dipped significantly as traders, mostly women, are not able to conduct their businesses in other neighbouring villages for fear of being robbed, raped or killed by alien herdsmen operating around the communities. In one instance, property valued at about \$1,700 was destroyed by a herdsman in the Greater Accra region of Ghana.⁴³ Such occurrences have led to bloody confrontations in some communities between machete and or gun-wielding herdsmen and locals. In 2006, about 80 per cent of the inmates at the Tamale Prison were migrant herdsmen convicted for various crimes including highway robbery, cattle rustling, motorbike theft, murder, and rape.⁴⁴

Patterns of Migration in West Africa,” Stichproben. Wiener Zeitschrift für kritische Afrikastudien Nr. 8/2005, 5. Jg. http://www.univie.ac.at/ecco/stichproben/Nr8_Konseiga.pdf

⁴¹ . Bocquier, P., and S. Traoré. 1996. *Migrations en Afrique de l'Ouest: de nouvelles tendances. La chronique du CEPED 20.*, quoted in Konseiga, A. “New Patterns of Migration in West Africa,” Stichproben. Wiener Zeitschrift für kritische Afrikastudien Nr. 8/2005, 5. Jg. http://www.univie.ac.at/ecco/stichproben/Nr8_Konseiga.pdf

⁴² . Leighton, M., “Desertification + Migration = Conflict?” in Gardner, M., and Nicklas, U. (eds.), “Desertification: a security threat? – Analysis of risks and challenges,” *Specialist Conference Report* (Eschborn: GTZ, 2007), p. 21ff.

⁴³ . BusinessGhana, “Fulani herdsman granted bail” 25th September 2007, http://www.businessghana.com/portal/news/index.php?op=getNews&news_cat_id=&id=71141

Côte d'Ivoire is one of the countries in West Africa that experienced high rate of urban and rural population growth prior to the Ivorian crisis. From a population size of about 3 million in 1960, the country's population increased to about 13 million in 1990 and about 17 million in 2000. Within this important increase in population is a large fraction of migrants from other West African countries particularly Burkina Faso. The heavy migration patterns towards Côte d'Ivoire in the 1990s can be understood within the context of the country's flourishing economic activity, peace and stability, availability of arable land and ease of integration of economic migrants particularly those from neighbouring francophone countries. Compared to other countries in the sub-region, Côte d'Ivoire could be said to have been better economically than its neighbours. As a result of this, the country became attractive to economic migrants in the sub-region until the mid-1990s.

In 1998, no less than 26 per cent of the country's total population was migrants and till the onset of the crisis which distorted the patterns of migration to the country,⁴⁵ about one-fifth of the population comprised more than 500,000 Ghanaians, 250,000 Guineans, 2 million Malians, 3 million Burkinabes and other West African nationals.⁴⁶ One can establish the nexus between the huge migrant population in the country and its crisis via the evolution and emergence of the concept of *Ivorite* in the politics of Côte d'Ivoire which is inevitable in understanding the genesis of the current crisis in the country. The concept of *Ivorité* or the *Ivoirien-ness* of people of Côte d'Ivoire emerged among the intellectual community in the 1960s and 1970s as a way of giving

⁴⁴ . See Hamza Lansah Lolly, "Fulani herdsmen to cooperate with REGSEC," Statesman Newspaper, 25/09/2006, http://www.thestatesmanonline.com/pages/news_detail.php?section=1&newsid=653.

⁴⁵ . The onset of the political instability in Côte d'Ivoire distorted migration patterns in three major ways: It (a) influenced the patterns of internal displacements by forcing people to move towards the more peaceful south of the country, (b) the extent of atrocities associated with the civil war led to the movement of Ivorians as refugees into neighbouring and other countries, and (c) the extent of insecurity in the country had implications on the migration patterns into the country as insecurity generally influences the decisions of migrants into any country and hence Côte d'Ivoire.

⁴⁶ . Alade Fawole, *op. cit.*, p. 17; Gberie, L., and Addo, P., "Challenges of Peace implementation in Cote d'Ivoire," Report on an expert Workshop presented by the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KA IPTC) in Collaboration with the Zentrum für Internationale Friedenseinsätze (ZIF), 2004.

expression to Ivorian nationalism.⁴⁷ Following the emergence of the concept, it was employed as a public policy tool to prevent foreigners and immigrants, who hitherto had permeated the country's public service, from occupying key strategic positions. In some instances, migrants were dismissed from public services.

Following its exploitation and subjective application for the victimisation and marginalisation of political opponents by President Laurent Gbagbo, Côte d'Ivoire was plunged into crisis. Whilst migration cannot be directly blamed for the current crisis in the country, it is important to acknowledge that the concept of *Ivorite*, which was the critical triggering factor in the crisis, has its roots in the endemic permeation of migrants in Côte d'Ivoire since the country's independence.

One of such serious confrontations took place in 1999 between indigenous Kroumen and Burkinabé migrants leading to the death of about 50 people and forcing the Burkinabés in the community to flee. In 2005, a similar situation at the western region of Duékoué led to about 10 deaths and the displacement of more than 10,000 people.⁴⁸ In these two instances, the principal cause of the confrontations has been traced to the struggle over land and accusations that migrants are degrading the forests by burning them to commence farming activities.

As is evident in figure 1, the average annual percentage increases to total West Africa population, started decreasing glaringly from the early 1990s. Whilst so many factors can be attributed to this decrease, it is equally important to realize that the West African civil wars were high about the same period. Our argument against this backdrop is that the intense casualty levels of the conflicts in West Africa significantly affected population growth rates by significantly increasing the morbidity and mortality ratios in the conflict-ridden countries.

⁴⁷ . Ibid, p.15.

⁴⁸ . Fulgence Zamblé "Ivory Coast: From Desertification, to Migration, to Conflict," *L'OCCIDENTAL - Afrique occidentale*, Saturday 6 January 2007, <http://www.loccidental.net/english/spip.php?article168>; <http://intercontinentalcry.org/west-africa-from-desertification-to-migration-to-conflict/>, accessed 25/9/2007.

In Liberia, years of civil war contributed to high unemployment, illiteracy, and increasing HIV/AIDS infection rates resulting from internal displacement and migration. The infant mortality rate rose to about 137 deaths per 1000 live births, and maternal mortality ratio increased to about 760 deaths per 100,000 live births.⁴⁹ Life expectancy dropped from 45.9 years to 40.5 years between 1985-90 and 1990-95 respectively.⁵⁰ In Sierra Leone, it reduced to 38.4 years from a previous of 39.5 during the same period. With the exception of Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia and Sierra Leone, all the remaining countries in West Africa increased their life expectancy levels. The sub-regional total fertility rate (children per woman) also decreased from 6.86 to 6.59.⁵¹ Whereas conflict cannot be wholly blamed for this reduction, the fact that all the then conflict-ridden countries registered a reduction in life expectancy establishes the impact West African conflicts have had on the population growth patterns of the sub-region.

The Environment: A Cause or a Victim?

According to Arthur H. Westing *et al*, the relevance of environmental issues in fomenting disputes leading to armed conflicts include: (i) disputes over access to renewable resources; (ii) disease burdens that overwhelm communities' ability to cope and that tear apart fragile social fabrics; (iii) the repercussions of migrant populations; and (iv) the unequal nature of adverse impacts and burdens.⁵² In West Africa, however, accessibility to renewable resources and the repercussions of the flow of “environmental refugees” are an important way by which the environment is greatly relevant to armed conflict. Whilst the former has been noted in almost all the major conflicts in West Africa and the ongoing Niger Delta crisis, the latter is rarely

⁴⁹ . UNFPA <http://www.unfpa.org/profile/liberia.cfm?Section=1>

⁵⁰ . United Nations, 2006, <http://unstats.un.org/pop/dVariables/DRetrieval.aspx>

⁵¹ .Ibid.

⁵² . See Westing, H. A., Fox, W., and Renner, M., “Environmental Degradation as both Consequence and Cause of Armed Conflict,” Working paper prepared for Nobel Peace Laureate Forum participants by PREPCOM subcommittee on Environmental Degradation, June 2001, <http://www.institute-for-nonviolence.com.au/downloads/pdf/EnvirDegrad.pdf>; page 5 of 16; accessed 28/9/07.

mentioned notwithstanding its importance in the discourse on the nexus between conflict and the environment.

In sub-Saharan Africa, migration is a form of coping mechanism adopted by settlers when environmental factors turn harsh.⁵³ For instance, in areas of West Africa where desertification is advancing, the incentive for migration as a coping mechanism is increasing. Between 1980 and 2005, up to 3.3% of West African forests were lost. From 1990 to 2000, about 1.2% or 1.3 million ha of forests vegetation was lost to exploitation from high dependency of national and domestic economies on available natural resources and rampant poverty.⁵⁴ The implication of a continuous depletion of the sub-region's forest through deforestation is increasing expansion of desertification which has serious implications on the patterns of migration between the Sahel and forest areas of the sub-region.

However, there is room for concern in the future given worsening environmental conditions. As a sub-Saharan region wrapping both Sahel and forest patches, West Africa has a variable climate that enhances the region's vulnerability to floods and droughts. Extreme conditions with warming between 0.2°C and 0.5°C per decade is expected to increase water loss to rising temperature, and about 10% less rainfall in interior regions.⁵⁵ Already, the Sahel areas are experiencing noticeable declines in rainfall patterns with recorded instances of drought in the countries such as Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger.⁵⁶

Given sustained further worsening trends of climate change, the Sahel and moderately degraded areas will predictably become drier. The resultant increase in degradation will increase

⁵³ . Leighton, M., op.cit., p. 21ff.

⁵⁴ . State of the World's Forests, 2001

⁵⁵ . UNDP, *Beyond scarcity: Power, poverty and the global water crisis* (New York: UNDP, 2006), pp. 160ff.

⁵⁶ . Ibid, p.165; See Nyong, A., 2007. "Drought and Conflict in the West African Sahel: Developing Conflict Management Strategies," http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?event_id=146065&fuseaction=events.event_summary. (accessed 11/10/07).

desertification as moderately degraded lands will become severely degraded and intensify pressure on farm lands. The increase in pressure on arable lands will directly add to the growing environmental strains and surge tensions in the forest areas of the sub-region between migrant farmers and pastoralists who may move further down into the forest belt from the Sahel. Currently, rivers in West Africa discharge more than 40% less than they discharged in the 1970s.⁵⁷ This implies that rivers in the sub-region could provide less water in the future than they are currently. With increasing sub-regional population growth and demand for water, it is fairly predictable that the region will run into a water crisis if environmental conditions worsen or even remain as they are presently. Within areas where situations will worsen, the likelihood of tensions developing over access to water is high. The Niger and Volta basins could then become possible flashpoints for inter-state tensions due to the fact that rivers in these basins are shared by several countries. The Niger River, for instance, currently provides water for about 10 countries; if it loses water and begins to run dry, critical security issues could emerge around the extent to which individual countries in the basin can draw on the available water so as not to run the river completely dry or deprive other dependent states. If inter-dependency and inter-state collaboration strategies in the management of the water do not emerge in such a situation, the likelihood of water-related inter-state tensions can be predicted.

In Ghana, the Volta River which provides the country's primary source of electricity has its source in Burkina Faso. Between December 2006 and September 2007, a drop in the water level in the Akosombo Dam due to reduced water level in the Volta River had multiple economic and political implications as the country had to ration electricity. The extent of politicisation of the issue was so pervasive that the ruling party's governance capability was questioned by many political analysts. Yet, many traced the worsening drop of water in the dam partly to Burkina Faso's decision to construct a dam on the Bagri River which is the source of the Volta River in Ghana.⁵⁸ In a realist situation of state-centricism, this is a classical avenue for inter-state tension

⁵⁷ **FAO**, "Irrigation potential in Africa: A basin approach," *FAO Land and Water Bulletin_4*, 1997, <http://www.fao.org/docrep/W4347E/w4347e0u.htm>, accessed 9/10/2007.

⁵⁸ Some media reports also blamed the Bagri Dam in neighbouring Burkina Faso for worsening the flood situation that hit parts of northern Ghana in September 2007. See Gyebi, E., "Ghana: Food Shortage Predicted" *Ghanaian Chronicle*, 11 September 2007, <http://allafrica.com/stories/200709110940.html>, accessed 9/10/2007.

between the two countries if similar crises continue to occur downstream as a result of the activities of countries up-stream. Such crises could lead to inter-state tensions as water (rivers) would then become an inter-state security issue.

A panacea within such a situation would then be the extent of inter-dependence and inter-state collaboration in managing trans-boundary waters resources. Currently, there is no strategic sub-regional approach to avert such an occurrence between states. For years, both Ghana and Burkina Faso, despite the importance of the Volta River to both countries, had not consciously mapped out any strategy for mutual use until recent times when a joint committee for both countries on the management of the Volta Lake was initiated.

Whilst contributing to disputes in the sub-region, the outbreak of conflict in West Africa has had critical impact on the environment. These include: (i) the use of high explosive munitions; (ii) use of heavy equipment particularly tanks and other off-road vehicles; (iii) pitching of bases and camps; (iv) over-exploitation of the environment for shelter, food and economic purposes by insurgents; (v) Bush-burning as an insurgency strategy; among others. Whereas these stated points have direct adverse impacts on the environment, the breakdown of law and order due to civil war usually leaves protected areas and species vulnerable to over-exploitation by communities and warring factions. In Sierra Leone, forest protection officers such as foresters, rangers and guards were not paid for a long period during the civil war. This gave the leeway for illegal mining activities, logging and other forms of massive deforestation of the country's forest cover.⁵⁹

The Liberian civil war also gave room for poaching of wild animals of the country's wildlife for food and illegal logging. The breakdown of law and order subsequently led to marine pollution resulting from damaged and abandoned ships at the coastal sites. Urban waste collection arrangements were badly strained leading to hoards of uncollected urban waste with their accompanying environmental effects.

⁵⁹ . Squire, C., *Sierra Leone's Biodiversity and the Civil War*, (Washington, DC: Biodiversity Support Program, 2001), pp. 21–22.

Conclusion

In West Africa, the prevalence and devastation of human life by HIV/AIDS pandemic will critically have an influence on the youth composition of many populations and affect security adversely. Increase in AIDS-related deaths will reduce the adult population and increase the proportion of an already large young adult population. The trend will then have the capacity of creating a large population of under-educated and under-supervised young people who may have adverse effects on security of states.

Even though factors underlying conflicts are multi-causal and should be considered as such, it is high time realistic conflict prevention policy initiatives began to disaggregate the multiplicity of underlining factors so as to properly pre-empt policy orientation. We have argued that the youth bulge phenomenon, migration and environmental degradation are important perspectives from which security concerns in the sub-region should be confronted. Whilst admitting that the factors do not act alone to underlie the conflict situations in West Africa, it will be regrettable to discount these factors as mere coincidental conceptualisations and deductions that should be relegated to the background in the quest for peace. Together with the various underlying economic, social, political and structural factors in many countries, we have argued that some countries in the sub-region have fallen victim to the effects of a higher young adult population, and the complexities that ensue as the situation becomes concurrent with inadequacy/inequitable distribution of resources, and unpredictable domestic economic and political environment. Similarly, tensions surrounding the activities of *environmental refugees*' especially migrant farmers and pastoralists in the forest belt highlight the critical role of the environment in the security of West Africa.

It is, therefore, important that in addition to the many peace initiatives in West Africa, the following policy options are given vital consideration:

- Factors and processes that have the capacity of impacting on the demographic composition of states and further contribute to a skewed demographic composition in

favour of young adults must be confronted with utmost urgency in the sub-region. This is because such factors have the capacity to worsen the demographic composition of states creating a youth bulge and its associated complexities. An important factor in this regard is the HIV/AIDS pandemic which has the capacity to distort sub-regional demography by increasing the proportion of the already large young adult population through reduction in life expectancy.

The fight against HIV/AIDS could therefore be securitised both nationally and sub-regionally. This will positively affect the commitment of states in terms of resource allocation and political will to implement formulated policies.

- Policies that target young adults should be consciously crafted so as not to create discomfort and dissatisfaction that make young people vulnerable to political manipulation by desperate individuals who may want to exploit their desperate situations to foment unrests. In this direction efforts should be made to answer (address?) the chronic unemployment and the generally uncertain future that lies ahead of young adults. Youth development programmes should be made inseparable parts of DDR processes so as to sustain peace and also prevent youth-led implosion and re-ignition of conflicts. Specific intervention efforts should target training and job creation, and entrepreneurship promotion among young people.
- Environmental protection policies should be an important part of national and sub-regional security strategies. Presently, ECOWAS does not have an environmental policy for member states. Even though it is being drafted at the time of writing this paper, the document does not clearly outline sub-regional strategies for managing trans-boundary resources such as water. ECOWAS, through an environmental policy document, should clearly establish guidelines for inter-state collaboration in the usage of trans-boundary resources as a proactive way of preventing resource-based inter-state tensions in West Africa. Countries that share a particular environment-dependent resource (such as water in the case of Ghana and Burkina) should be encouraged to collaboratively craft mechanisms for their peaceful use.



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The **Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KA IPTC)** is a Ghanaian led institution, which is supported by the international community through the provision of staff and specifically focused international financial assistance. It operates on behalf of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to provide Operational Level training for personnel involved in global, regional and sub-regional Peace Support Operations. The Centre offers regional and international participants the opportunity to examine specific peace operations issues at the operational level and to update and share their knowledge of the latest practices through training courses, conferences and presentation and publishing of research findings.

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First published by the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre, PMB CT 210, Cantonments, Accra, Ghana.

