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## Book Review

**Wessels, Michael. 2007. *Child Soldiers. From Violence to Protection*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. xv +284 pp. ISBN 0-674-02359-5 (hb). Price: \$45.00.**

by Bjørn Møller (17 April 2008)

A lot has been written about child soldiers, but most of the available literature comes out of humanitarian or advocacy groups. Whereas there is certainly much to be said in favor of such advocacy, it is usually not the best vantage point for academic analysis. Although this book is written by an experienced child protection practitioner, it largely avoids the advocacy trap and offers an unbiased analysis followed by a range of well-argued policy recommendations.

Even though it also deals with involuntary child soldiers, such as abductees in northern Uganda, brutally transformed into killing machines by the Lord's Resistance Army, most of the book is devoted to children who voluntarily join rebel movements, or government-sponsored irregular forces for that matter. Among the theoretical tools to explain such seemingly irrational decisions the author uses economic analysis. There are indeed economic advantages to be reaped from joining a rebel army which may make such a choice "rational," not because life as a child soldier is happy but because life as a defenseless civilian, victimized by roving armies, may be worse. Just as the possession of a weapon and membership in an armed gang may offer some protection, it also gives access to scarce resources such as food and it may thus be viewed as a rational coping strategy in an extremely difficult environment. Child soldiers thus are "active agents who decide that they are more likely to get a positive future by casting their fate with an armed group than by living the lives their biological families and societies have sculpted for them" (p. 32).

The author distinguishes between "push" and "pull" factors in the decision to join armed groups, arguing that most analysts have disregarded the latter by focusing almost exclusively on factors such as poverty and orphan status. In addition to economic pull factors such as the prospects of looting, rather than being looted, and of getting a job of sorts, he also points to factors such as self-esteem that may be enhanced by the power derived from being armed and hopes of being able to revenge past wrongs. Besides such selfish motives, social and political grievances as well as ideological and religious beliefs also play a role as motivational factors. He further analyzes decisions by rebel leaders to prefer the recruitment of children to that of adults. Low costs play an important role. Whereas children are often promised money, they are rarely paid and lack the power to enforce any claims. He further distinguishes between different kinds of child soldiers, based on the so-called Cape Town Principles, according to which any person under 18 associated with an armed group in whatever capacity counts as a child soldier. Whereas some serve as combatants — even as cannon fodder as in the LRA — others are used as porters, cooks, scouts and, especially as far as the girls are concerned, sex slaves. Depending on these varying war experiences, not all child soldiers are equally traumatized and/or brutalized, and some have acquired skills that facilitate their integration into society after the war. The author thus warns against the use of ethnocentric concepts, such as post-traumatic stress disorder,

which may not be an accurate diagnosis for all child soldiers. Some children may not suffer from any disorder at all, but in fact possess remarkable resilience and adaptability.

While he does strongly recommend devoting special attention to former child soldiers in disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) processes, Wessels equally strongly warns against the use of “one size fits all” packages as are often used by the international donor community. Not only does DDR require attention to differences among child soldiers, it also needs adaptation to special social and cultural circumstances.

**Bjørn Møller**, Danish Institute for International Studies.