“This civil war was not caused by a political vision or for religious reasons or for ethnic reasons. This was done for money. This was to control a commodity, and that commodity was diamonds.” (David Crane, Chief Prosecutor, Special Court, PBS interview, 10 January 2003, pbs.org).

“Yet to put it very simply, there are many side issues but the cause of this conflict is diamonds. Fundamentally the cause of this war was to control a commodity and that commodity was diamonds.” (David Crane, Chief Prosecutor, Special Court, Press Conference, Freetown, 18 March 2003).

The underlying assumption in all of Collier’s work can be summarized as simply one of economic calculation. As the rebels were motivated by the desire to profit from chaos; such calculations are supposedly propelled by the degree to which such a criminal enterprise can become a viable economic project. How to raise revenue to support such a project might begin to explain why rebels without a cause have a better chance of succeeding in the third world than in the first world. Viability is therefore key to the understanding the dynamics of rebel movements. The rebel movement needs source of support, finance to be precise, for the project to stay alive. “It is this, rather than any objective grounds for grievance which determine whether a country will experience civil violence, predatory behavior, and other anti-social acts “may not be the objective of the rebel organization, but it is the means of financing the conflict”. Rebellion is therefore a economic power by all means necessary!

Extreme dependence on primary commodity exports, low average income and high economic growth rates are the factors under which such predatory rebellions are likely to occur. Primary commodity exports, particularly diamonds, are prime candidates because they are the “most looted of all economic activities”. Diamonds are easy to conceal; they are an economic asset coveted by government and rebels alike. A rebel movement producing country would obviously concentrate on controlling the source of this important economic asset if it suggests that growth is central to its survival and continued reproduction. Revenue from diamonds is important to both the government and the rebels: predatory war therefore becomes the cornerstone of any political agenda. A high “primary commodity exports, low income and slow growth are a cocktail which makes predatory rebellions more financially viable”. The above is admittedly a crisp summary of Collier’s argument as it relates to Sierra Leone. This approach, in my view, constitutes an excuse in writing outside history; it is as if only rational calculations for profit matters. Yet there is much more to human action: interaction than simple calculation of economic motive: humans Africans do not live by bread alone!

Is it the case that the RUF - leadership and rank and file - knew a priori that rebellions were profitable projects? To know that the awareness of the viability or feasibility of such a project? Did the RUF, as a rebel movement, conceive of resources, ah, initio, as central to its survival and continued reproduction? These are difficult questions to tackle from the perspective of greed precisely because those who were inaugurated or participated in the RUF project were NEVER involved in the insurgency dialogue that preceded armed conflict. The primary agents in that dialogue were college students; the combatants in the RUF project were predominantly marginal youths from urban and rural Sierra Leone - in short, the lumpenproletariat! The disjuncture between insurgency dialogue and predatory rebellion poses troubling questions for any explanation that hinges on greed as the primary cause of armed conflict in Sierra Leone.

Even if we accept, for argument sake, that the revolutionary groups were hijacked by the predominantly lumpen combatants, we still have to flesh out and explain the extent to which those who were captured by the idea, were captured by the idea, to use a cited “revolutionary” formulation, about the economic motive of the rebellion and its feasibility as well as how it was bound to succeed. This will be the very ground considering the fact that the RUF was unpopular and highly dependent on forced recruitment of all sorts to replenish its fighting force.

The question of timing is also crucial in understanding the economic factor in the Sierra Leone conflict. A criminal enterprise solely crafted for economic gain would have had as its prime target the immediate takeover of the diamondiferous areas. This did not happen. And from 1991 to 1993, the RUF was but a “pirate” in the cultural districts of Kailahun and Pujehun in the southeast. They were forced to retreat with heavy losses when they attempted to take the rich diamond fields. It would take them another four years before they would retake Kono and hold it for any considerable length of time to actually exploit the resources in the area. And this happened only in collaboration with the Sierra Leone military. My point here is that the economic factor was not salient during the first phase of the conflict.

But Collier’s main argument is about the economic causes of armed conflict, not about how resources fuelled armed conflict. The latter issue is more specific to the Sierra Leone situation particularly during the third phase of the war, that is to say, from 1997-2006, when the RUF became linked to the international criminal syndicate - arms for diamonds - via Monrovia. RUF sources reveal the perennial need for funds to replenish arms supply, feed combatants, purchase medical supplies, and procure weapons and ammunition. In April 1996, the RUF leader, Foday Sankoh, wrote to the Libyan Arab Peoples Jamahiriya representative in Freetown asking for the “half million United States dollars (500,000 USD) which I received through you for the purchase of needed material to pursue the military mission”.7 The RUF leader even asked for more: “I need one and half million United States dollars (USD500,000) in order to purchase twice the listed materials for effective and smooth operation”. In another letter written in December 1996, the RUF leader made a request for two million dollars for the purchase of arms and ammunition. Sankoh was writing after the Abidjan peace accord in November which had given him the “opportunity to transact my business in getting our fight- ing material”; an armistice which had not been requested for foreign exchange for our mission.”

Fresh arms and ammunition from Eastern European countries, huge diamond export from Sierra Leone, and South African mercenaries from South Africa and Eastern Europe all suggest the new networks that the rebels had established with the help of Charles Taylor, and the Guinean president Alpha Blaise Campore in Burkina Faso. Ali-Qaide would enter the picture and fuse the RUF to the diamondfields to launder their enormous loot on the eve of 9/11.
These developments unfolded at a time when the rhetoric of liberation had ceased to have any meaning. Even so, the RUF still continued, in collaboration with the renegade Sierra Leone military, to push for political power. In this sense politics can be read as an extension of economics: political power will give them more security (legitimacy?) to continue their predatory regime.

Greed, predatory rebellion and its continued reproduction only became a marked feature of the Sierra Leone conflict in 1996/97. It cannot explain why war broke out in 1991 or why marginal youths were at the center of the drama and its continuation. To understand why war broke out in 1991 we have to go back and look at the grievances.

Bringing Back Grievance

How do we explain the preponderance of marginalized and alienated youths as combatants/leaders in the nasty war that ravaged Sierra Leone for a decade? Why did young military officers in their 20s seize political power a year after the war started? What propelled young men, and some women, to assume the role of guerrilla fighters? How were young men, and some women, able to acquire military training to start a guerrilla war. What on commitment and willingness to acquire arms in Sierra Leone? They recruited marginalized youths, including the future leader of the RUF, for military training in Tajura, Libya, from 1987 to 1989. The issue of resources was never discussed in student circles nor was the issue of finance or sustenance a place called Rwanda that only existed in their imagination. It was a painful reminder of their alien “otherness”. Even though constituting a place they had either lived or which they knew as home, for twenty-some odd years later, Tutsis who had fought with Museveni in the NRM were asked to leave Uganda, where most of them were born or which they knew as home, and to return to their “native land”. Their sojourn in Kano in the Sambon Gari quarters was a painful reminder of the pogroms directed against the Igbos who had fought with Museveni in the NRM, and their implications for policy, we learn that the rebels of the RUF (Sierra Leone) was made Chairman of the Mineral Resources vice-presidency or the ministry of mines. He had the immediate catalyst for the declaration of the independent state of Biafra. The Igbos were simply told to leave Kano City, where they had all their lives, and to return to the Libyan Arab Peoples Jamahiriya, Accra, Ghana, dated 26 June 1996.


Notes
1 A French expression, literally meaning those without pants, loosely referring to the appearance of poor people. It captures the rag-tag, character and bizarre outfit of the armed movements and militiam all over the continent.
2 Paul Collier et al have made no attempt to examine the dynamics and composition of any rebel movement.
3 This is probably true of the Lord Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda and possibly of the fighters in Western Sudan.
4 Paul Collier and his collaborators in the World Bank-sponsored research project are notorious for repeating the same argument in different publications with absolutely no new information. Neither Collier nor any of his associates have studied or tried to understand any rebel movement anywhere in the world.

References

Underdevelopment in Ethiopia

Ethiopia: Charles Chote

Ethnicity, malaria’s leading cause, is on the upsurge in the country.….He had one further demand, which once conceded, produced temporary settlement. His demand was to be the Minister of Mining.” Sanoh was never offered the vice-presidency or the ministry of mines. He was made Chairman of the Mineral Resources Commission with the privileged status of Vice-President!

Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone (RUF/SL), From Cpl. Foday S. Sanoh, Leader, RUF/SL, Abidjan, La Cote d’Ivoire to Brother Mohamed Talibi, Peoples Bureau of Libyan Arab Peoples Jamahiriya, Accra, Ghana, 4 December, 1996.