

**An Assessment of the Rebel Recruitment Strategies used
by the M23 Rebel Group
in the Democratic Republic of Congo, 2012-2022**

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Abstract

The recruitment of rebel soldiers is an important feature that determines the survival and ability of a rebel group to be able to conduct its operations. The strategies that a rebel group would use to lure and gain recruits are rather complex, as rebel groups use different strategies. This paper offers an understanding of the different strategies a rebel group in Africa would use to get recruits and the various factors that can affect a rebel group's recruitment strategy. The methodology employed is a desktop qualitative approach using a case study to understand the problem that has been identified. The recruitment strategies of the M23 in the Democratic Republic of Congo are used as a relevant case study to highlight the rebel group's recruitment strategies as well as the dynamic factors at play. Policy recommendations are also provided.

Keywords: *Rebel group, Recruitment strategy, Rationalism, Membership, Rebel group survival, Voluntary and Involuntary recruitment.*

Introduction

A rebel group is an organisation that aspires to have a revolution in a state and mainly uses armed conflict to oppose or overthrow a government (Cunningham & Loyle, 2021). The actions of rebel groups have been studied thoroughly, and the basis of what motivates them has been understood using models such as the greed-grievance theory (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004). The recruitment strategies adopted by the M23 have shed a light on the complexities of the conflict dynamics of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), a country that has over 120 rebel groups, with most of them being called the Mai Mai as a result of them having a small army in their operations (Hoffman & Verweijen, 2019:352).

The M23 rebel group in the DRC has been a subject of research for many scholars, policymakers, and analysts. It is without doubt that these scholars and/or academics have written extensively on this subject, and their contributions would not be side-lined in any way. The main problem with the current mainstream literature is that it has overused the concept of coercion and violence to elucidate how the M23 rebel group has managed to recruit its rebel soldiers. Another concerning issue which a lot of scholars have focused on is how Rwanda has played a pivotal role in supporting the activities of the organization, leading the organisation to be seen as a proxy tool for Rwanda. Such practice in the analysis of a deep political issue as this one would undoubtedly produce a uniform understanding of the subject under study. The purpose of this paper is to assess the recruitment strategies used by the M23 rebel group in its rebellion against the incumbent government of the DRC and to determine whether it has been effective enough in getting new members who would be a part of its organization. This is because most of the studies have not explored this subject, including those of Collier & Hoeffler (2004), Hoffman & Verweijen (2019), and Cunningham & Loyle (2021). The paper focusses on the actions of the rebel group between the periods of 2012 and 2022. Furthermore, the paper is driven by the following questions: has the M23 rebel group been rational in its recruitment strategies, and which factors have affected the M23 rebel group's recruitment strategy.

Methodological techniques

The three research methodological paradigms that are often used in social science-related fields are, namely, qualitative, quantitative, and mixed

methods (Shai, 2016:49). To discover and establish the truth concerning a specific research topic, each research is guided by a particular methodology or approach. This paper has used qualitative research methodology to assess the various recruitment strategies of the M23 rebel group in the DRC. Authors can collect two types of data, either in the form of primary or secondary data (Legodi, 2019:47). According to Legodi (2019:47), primary data refers to data collected for the first time, whereas secondary data has been collected before by other scholars. Walliman (2021:69) explains it better by stating that secondary data includes all the information that can be obtained from written sources or primary data. For this paper, secondary data has been used to address the topic at hand. In this paper, the authors have used sources in the form of articles, books, newspapers, policy documents, and documentaries. The secondary data sources that are being used for this paper mainly focus on scholarly articles addressing rebel recruitment strategies and foundations of the M23 rebel group. Due to the qualitative research method employed in this paper, the authors have made use of a single case study as a research design. The paper has used the case study approach to assess the topic at hand. According to Ridder (2017:282), a case study approach scientifically investigates a real-life problem in depth and within its environmental context. The case study research design (rebel recruitment by the M23 rebel group) is chosen because it assesses the strategies used by a rebel group in maintaining or increasing its personnel during the period under review. For this paper, a case study approach is suitable because of these reasons. Firstly, the case study approach has been able to capture the lenses of the recruiters and understand their thought processes in recruiting new recruits. Secondly, a case study approach is good for this kind of study because it has created an identification of patterns and relationships, providing an understanding of why and how things happen (Ridder, 2017:282). This paper employed Thematic Content Analysis (TCA) to analyse data in themes and sub-themes. As explained by Castleberry and Nolen (2018:808), TCA can be defined as “a method of identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data”. Furthermore, it is a descriptive method that tries to reduce data in a flexible way, different from other data analysis methods such as discourse analysis.

The formation of the M23 rebel group

The origins of the M23 rebel group stem from it being a derivative group formed from the National Congress for the Defence of the People (CNDP), a splinter group of the Rally for Congolese Democracy (RCD), a military group that was formed in 1998 to oppose Laurent Kabila's

reign as president (Van Wyk, 2013:66). The CNDP was formed after the defection of three senior officers of the RCD, one of them being General Laurent Nkunda, who was left dissatisfied with the peace process in North Kivu (Lyall, 2017:14). In line with Van Wyk (2013:67), the peace process also left Tutsis living in the Goma region to be vulnerable to the attacks by another rebel group called the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), hence the CNDP was formed. According to Van Wyk (2013:63), the peace process, also known as the Sun City Agreement in 2003, was made to ensure that a transitional government would be created to end the Second Congolese War.

After obtaining the province of North Kivu as its main territory, many attempts were made by the DRC's military forces to thwart the control and influence of the CNDP, as it was alleged that the group was exploiting minerals in the region to finance its operations. All the agreements between the rebel group and the government were unsuccessful until a new agreement was made in 2009 to bring peace to the country (Lyall, 2017:14).

However, just like the Sun City agreement, which failed in 2003, this one also collapsed as members of the Armed Forces of the DRC (FARDC), which had integrated members of the CNDP into its ranks, failed to sustain the benefits of the March 23 peace accord and resulted in a splinter group in 2012 called the M23 rebel group led by Nkunda's deputy, Bosco Ntaganda (Lyall, 2017:14). Nangini *et al.* (2014:3) indicates that the group was named after the March 23, 2009, peace agreement (Goma Peace Accord) between the Congolese government and the CNDP.

In the early stages of its development, the M23 rebel group consisted mainly of Tutsi soldiers who felt marginalised by the government and believed that their interests were not being represented (Koko, 2014:261). Moreover, the Rwandan genocide can be attributed as being a major catalyst that resulted in the genesis of the organisation as many Tutsis escaped the bloodshed to neighbouring countries, including the Congo, where they faced new challenges such as discrimination and violence from other ethnic groups. In response, many Tutsis had to retaliate by forming armed groups to protect themselves and their communities. Bafilemba *et al.* (2014:1) understand that there were reports that the M23 rebel group was defeated by the Congolese Army with the assistance of an UN intervention brigade consisting of South Africa, Tanzania, and Malawi's armed forces. However, the group has seen a

resurgence in the last 3 years as alleged support from Rwanda has been its main stimulant.

Contextualising rebel recruitment

This section provides an analysis of the multiple pieces of literature that exist on the topic of rebel recruitment. To name a few, these studies include the work done by scholars such as Hegghammer (2013), Gates (2017), Salehyan, Sirotsky, and Wood (2014), Faulkner (2019) and Haer, Faulkner, and Whittaker (2020). Despite the different arguments made by the scholars, all of them have shown that rebel groups are often rational in their activities. Gates's (2017) and Hegghammer (2013) provide an understanding of the use of socialisation in luring and ensuring that there is no desertion of recruits. It provides great emphasis on the use of religion, ideology and ethnicity as key aspects which are often used by rebel groups. Gates (2017) also makes a comparison of rebel groups that did not have a polarisation of religion, ideology, and ethnic values compared to those that did. Such a strategy usually requires a bold and charismatic leader who will act as a messiah in the eyes of the recruits. The research conducted by Gates (2017) is important in understanding how elements that focus on the human psyche are important in analysing the success of a rebel group in its recruitment strategy, but it contributes less to understanding the challenges that the M23 rebel group might face in getting new recruits as it does not dwell too much on using religion and ideology in its recruitment strategy.

Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood (2014) and Faulkner (2019) have provided an analysis on the principle-agent theory. Their analysis is important because it explains the effect of foreign actors in funding a rebel group, a phenomenon that is currently happening in the intra-state war in the DRC, whereby it has been claimed that the M23 rebel group has received funding from the Rwandan government. Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood (2014) argue that rebel groups that receive funding from democratic societies might use less force compared to one that receives funding from a hostile government. Furthermore, rebel groups which receive funding from democratic states will often try to recruit candidates voluntarily because they must abide by the policies of their principal donors who often support the need to pursue human rights. The authors further argue that a rebel group that is funded by more than one external funder might be tempted to commit egregious acts of violence or forced recruitment because of the ability of other actors to continue funding them. The principal agent theory thereby creates a nexus between foreign funders, rebel groups, and the recruitment strategy of rebel groups with the foreign funder's type of political system playing a significant role in the actions of a rebel group. The only difference that can be found in

Haer, Faulkner and Whittaker's paper is that, the author substantiated the idea that in certain cases increased resources from principal agents can help rebels overcome recruitment problems as they can offer payments to possible recruits or offer them other tangible benefits. In this case the number of possible candidates who would want to join a rebel group would be high, as joining such an organisation would mean that they have a form of employment even though most of the rewards would likely go to rebel leaders, thereby making cohesion a challenge for the organisation as recruits might feel that the rebel leaders are leaving a better life at their expense.

Haer, Faulkner, and Whittaker (2020) focus on providing a link between a rebel group that has access to resources and how that influences the recruitment strategies of that group. Moreover, they discuss forced recruitment of child soldiers compared to voluntary recruitment. Haer, Faulkner and Whittaker (2020) provide two arguments. Firstly, they believe that rebel groups that have access to resources are significantly prone to using extreme forms of recruitment such as the forced recruitment of children in their organisations. Secondly, rebel groups which do not have access to resources usually opt not to use this strategy or have less incentive of using it. In their findings they persist with emphasising that rebel groups which have an advantage of having resources are less dependent on local communities and tend to suffer few costs from employing strategies which may seem to be too brutal in recruitment. Furthermore, Haer, Faulkner, and Whittaker (2020) argue that rebel groups that have access to resources usually target children in their recruitment efforts, as they know that they would not contest with rebel leaders for a share of the profits made from the access to resources, while resource poor rebel groups fear the grievances that might arise from the local community if children were to be forcefully recruited. The paper underlines important facts about how resource endowment plays a key role in the recruitment strategy of rebel groups and will be crucial in understanding the recruitment strategy of the M23 rebel group as it mostly conducts its operations in the city of Goma, which is abundantly rich with mineral resources.

Rationality in the recruitment strategies of the M23 rebel group

The M23 rebel group should be seen as a rational actor, especially when it comes to the tactics it uses for recruitment. Whether recruitment is voluntary or involuntary, the M23 rebel group looks for ways to boost its ranks and uses different strategies to fulfil this goal. Literature has shown that the organization has not struggled when it comes to using voluntary recruitment as it is easy for any rebel organization to build itself especially when it has close links to a certain population. However, as a

rational actor, the organization has realized that it will face situations whereby it cannot convince members of the local population to join. By facing difficulties in this manner, the M23 rebel group has had to use extreme or brutal strategies to keep its organisation alive. Richards (2014:301) also adds to this by arguing that in the DRC, rebel organisations often use forced recruitment as a result of experiencing manpower deficits and when accountability is low.

The use of ethnic propaganda

The M23 rebel group has been subjected to using ethnic propaganda to recruit new members into its organisation (Prince, 2013:33). This strategy is supported by the M23 because of how issues of ethnicity hold power in the DRC. According to Prince (2013:33), ethnicity is important in the DRC because it plays a role in the way in which power is distributed in society, organisations and politics. Hence, the M23 has stated that it represents the interests of Congolese-speaking Kinyarwanda Tutsis (Alida, 2014:73). This strategy by the M23 seeks to appeal to this ethnic group because of their being second-class-citizens and chief conspirators of armed conflict in the DRC.

With the Rwandan genocide still in the minds of most people living in the DRC, the M23 rebel group has also voiced out the idea that the Hutus who started the war in Rwanda are in the DRC and have continued to torment Rwandan Tutsis in the country (Patten, 2013:901). Makonye (2023:7) further points out that the number of combatants which make up the ranks of the organisation come from the North-Kivu province and specifically from Masisi and Rutshuru where they have been able to gain local support from the Congolese-speaking Kinyarwanda Tutsis. Vlassenroot and Verweijen (2017) also add to this by pointing out that the M23 rebel group learnt to use ethnic propaganda to their advantage by looking at how it was frequently used during the Samba rebellion of the 1960s in the DRC.

The use of social media

The organisation should also be seen as being crafty in its methods, as it has used any opportunity available to them to gain sympathy from the general public and potential recruits. Graham (2019:274) further supported this argument and argued that the M23 rebel group used it to their advantage when a picture was disseminated on social media networks showing a member of the Congolese army humiliating the

corpse of a member of the M23 rebel group. The M23 rebel group used this picture to gain support and sympathy, as the Congolese army was seen to be the villain, whereas members of the M23 were seen to be dying for a heroic cause. As explained by O'Neill (2015:133) unlike other rebel groups in the DRC, the M23 have also been successful in using interviews to their advantage, and this can be seen when the M23 launched a media blitz on CCTV in 2013 by stating that MONUSCO's offensive operations had endangered the lives of civilians living in their territory and threatened to displace thousands of unarmed innocent civilians. When it comes to the issue of recruitment, the organisation has emphasised that they have only recruited adult volunteers and that they have returned child soldiers who had been recruited by Bosco Ntaganda (O'Neill, 2015:133).

Inducements

As a rational actor, the organization has been able to gain funds through various channels, while it is known that it continues to receive funding and support from Rwanda (Beswick, 2014:229). The organization has also used other means to get funds, as highlighted by Schouten (2019:925) the M23 rebel group was able to make an estimated 180,000 USD a month from their roadblocks which prevented trade flows. According to Schouten (2019:925) peddlers, NGOs, mineral traders and multinational corporations were among those who financed the organization to gain access to trade. Another interesting dimension with the DRC is the vast availability of natural resources which rebel groups are fighting for. However, Haeret *et al.* (2020:36) explain that with lootable resources being available for the M23, one could have expected the organization to use forced recruitment in its recruitment strategy due to them not needing local support for survival, but this has not been the case. As Walsh *et al.* (2014:700) pointed out despite being in a resource-rich country, the M23 has never used force against its local population.

To further boost its local support, the organisation has used inducements (remunerations) for its members to help recruits to be able to put food on the table. As stated by Richards (2014:307) rebel groups often use remunerations as a result of knowing that some individuals might want to join such an organisation as a result of them being motivated by greed. This has been a major factor which has resulted in members of the Congolese army deserting their positions and joining the M23 rebel group. According to Rotich (2013:2) after joining the organization former members of the Congolese army are given \$1000

upon conscription subject to hefty monthly pay and numerous loopholes for making more money in the form of extortion and taxation of either local businesses, foreign companies or local communities in the Eastern DRC. This thus influences them to leave the army, as they only get a low remuneration of \$70 a month (Rotich, 2013:2).

The use of child soldiers

Since its inception, the M23 rebel group has been implicated in the recruitment of child soldiers in its ranks, although this seems harsh, inhumane, and extreme. From a rational point of view, the recruitment of child soldiers has proven beneficial during times when a rebel group is facing financial difficulties and when a rebel group has been defeated several times and is looking to revive itself. According to Haer and Böhmelt (2016:153), rebel groups that recruit children are more military effective as it is cheaper to provide for children; they are more obedient, aggressive, and easily manipulable than adults. Despite the human rights violations of recruiting children in times of war, it can be argued that the recruitment of children is easier compared to the recruitment of adults who might take up arms and fight against any form of forced recruitment (Haer & Böhmelt, 2016:153).

Factors that might affect the M23 rebel group's recruitment strategy

Allegiance and loyalty

One of the major factors affecting the M23 rebel group's recruitment strategy is the challenge of finding recruits who would foster cohesion and recruits who would not desert the organization during tough times (Gates, 2017:674). The organisation has used both voluntary and, on a few occasions, has resorted to the use of involuntary recruitment. Gates (2017:674) explains that the dynamics of allegiance and loyalty to an organisation are complex and unpredictable as one could expect it to be harder to foster cohesion and loyalty to recruits who have been forced to join a rebel group as a result of them despising the organisation. However, Gates (2017:674) found out that rebel groups that use forced recruitment in their strategy have been able to have more loyal recruits than those who did not resort to this strategy. The M23 rebel group has a good foundation in North Kivu whereby it has depended on the loyalty of the people, but in other provinces, this has not been the case, and one

could argue that it could be a result of those provinces having communities of the Hutu clan, which the M23 sees as a foe to the Tutsi it represents.

Another problem associated with allegiance and loyalty concerns the issue of potential mutineers within the organisation (Hanson, 2019:8). With the DRC having a history of rebel groups having splinter factions, one could argue that leaders within the M23 rebel group might want to seize everything up for themselves and start another rebel organisation that could oppose the M23 rebel group. Shepherd (2018:5) provides an example of rebel groups creating splinter factions during the Second Congolese War (1998-2003), whereby the leadership within the Rally for Congolese Democracy (RCD) could not agree on the organisation's interests, thereby resulting in the organisation splitting into factions such as RCD-Goma and the Movement for the Liberation of Congo (MLC).

The influence of Bosco Ntaganda

One of the alleged leaders of the M23 rebel group, General Bosco Ntaganda, was regarded as an influential figure before surrendering himself to the International Criminal Court (Turner, 2013:188). Despite his notoriety of being known as a vicious warlord who has committed various war crimes such as sexual slavery, murder, and the use of child soldiers, Bosco Ntaganda had an impact on bringing several recruits into the organisation even though Saltani Makenga (the current leader of the M23 rebel group) has denied that he was part of the organisation (Turner, 2013:193). As emphasised by Bafilemba and Mueller (2013:2), under Bosco Ntaganda's leadership, the M23 rebel group worked closely with other armed militias such as the NDC, FDC, and FRPI; this meant that the organisation was also able to get recruits from these organisations.

With Bosco Ntaganda still being detained by the ICC, it remains to be seen whether the current leadership of the M23 rebel group has maintained these alliances (Bafilemba & Mueller, 2013:2). The influence of the former leader can be seen with his unique position in the Kivu province, where he controlled most of the territory in the area, as well as his other alliances with Rwanda and Uganda (Conlogue, 2013:1). It can also be argued that the decision of the ICC to bring him into trial was questioned based on the repercussions it would bring to the Kivu provinces. Hence, it would have been better for the peace process of the ICC to let him go (Conlogue, 2013:1). One could also argue that the lavish lifestyle displayed by Bosco Ntaganda during his time as a warlord

in the DRC had prompted some recruits who joined the M23 rebel group to get an opportunity to live the lifestyle once they climbed the ranks of the organisation. As Turner (2013:193) had explained Bosco Ntaganda was also known in Goma and Masisi as a rebel leader who enjoyed playing tennis, drinking wine in restaurants, and getting interviews from well-acclaimed journalists.

Policy recommendations

M23 rebel group

To be identified as a legitimate actor in the DRC's politics, the M23 needs to avoid using force all the time. The rebel group needs to start negotiating with the Congolese government in order to clarify its goals and ambitions with the hope that the government might respond in a manner that would result in peace being achieved even though peace agreements have failed in the past. The rebel group can try to transition into a political party for it to stand a chance of getting into government through legitimate means of winning power through elections rather than through force and coercion.

Even though a rebel group might view it as being rational to use child soldiers during times when it experiences manpower deficits. The recruitment of child soldiers paints a bad image for the organisation. Moreover, it results in the development of these children being hampered, as it has been shown that they often struggle to integrate back into society once they have left a rebel group or when the war is over. A child should not be conscripted to hold a gun and to be seen as a child soldier. They should be given the best opportunities to develop into mature adults. They should be given the best education, access to play sports, and be granted a chance to interact with their peers.

The M23 should refrain from continuously using ethnic divisions as a way of ensuring that they would be backed by the Tutsi community to prevent history from repeating itself in the form of another apocalyptic conflict motivated by ethnic cleansing, such as the 1994 Rwandan Genocide. The M23 should follow Mao Zedong's advice of a rebel group becoming like fish in the sea. This means that they should try to blend in with different communities in the DRC and try to work with them instead of becoming their foe. This supported the fact that African rebellions support roving rebel groups instead of stationary ones that try to establish a monopoly of power in one area. Instead of solely using the

discrimination of the Tutsi people as a way of salvaging sympathy from the international community and Rwanda.

The DRC government

The Congolese government's track record of not upholding its peace agreements has been one of the major factors that has resulted in the seizure of conflict being inevitable. This problem has been one of the primary reasons for the conflict surrounding the M23 rebel group. As the organisation has blamed the government on not being able to uphold the 23 March 2009 peace agreement with the CNDP and subsequent peace agreement signed at Nairobi in 2013. In order to halt support from Rwanda and Uganda, the Congolese government should either find a way of closing porous borders with these neighbouring states or maintain a strong military presence in those borders. This will thus be a huge blow to the M23 rebel group, as it depends on these states for rebel soldiers and military personnel. The Congolese government should prioritise creating good relations with Rwanda by establishing diplomatic relations with Kigali with the hopes of convincing the government to stop funding the rebel organisation.

The Congolese government should ensure that its civil servants are paid well to prevent them from thinking of deserting to the M23. This includes raising the salaries of members of the military and police officers. With such advances, civil servants would be loyal to the government and would not try to jeopardise their careers and livelihoods by joining the M23 or any other rebel group in the DRC. One way that can deter individuals from joining the M23 would be to engage with vulnerable communities to educate them about the dangers of joining a rebel group and how it results in the spread of chaos and carnage in the country. Instead of working with merchants to deter the operations of the M23, the Congolese government should try to work with regional bodies such as the Southern African Development Community and the East African Community. The use of mercenaries in Africa has proven to be futile, as it has resulted in other atrocities being committed by these organisations. Mercenaries have added fuel to African conflicts and exacerbated social grievances, causing communities to hate the mercenaries and the government that bought them.

International community

The international community should put sanctions on countries that support the M23's recruitment efforts. This means that countries such as

Rwanda and Uganda should be warned first and given sanctions if they continue to support the M23. The ICC should continue to arrest suspected leaders of the M23 who have committed war crimes. This will prevent leaders who are motivated by the need to cause terror and instability from leading the organisation; thus, providing an opportunity for the organisation to be led by reasonable individuals who are motivated by helping their communities. This will also prevent recruiters from using forced or coerced recruitment when the organisation experiences manpower deficits. Furthermore, it would deter individuals who are seeking a sense of an adventure or an escape from boredom from joining the organisation as they would stand a chance of being arrested by the ICC. The African Union (AU) can work with organisations such as UNICEF to establish a program that provides at-risk youth with educational and vocational opportunities as an alternative to being recruited. This could reduce the need for some to join armed groups.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the idea that the M23 should be seen as an idiosyncratic rebel group that employs barbaric and brutal recruitment strategies ignores the fact that it is a rational actor that wants to boost and maintain its membership. To maintain a good relationship with the locals, the organisation has employed voluntary recruitment but has been forced at times to use harsher tactics in cases whereby, for instance, the organisation is operating in an area that is not dominated by Tutsis or when it has had to deal with manpower deficits. One could therefore argue that the recruitment strategies of the M23 are dynamic and change according to the situation the organization finds itself in. Hence, the organisation has employed various strategies and has not resorted to using one strategy. For instance, besides using ethnic divisions, the organisation has used the internet, inducements, grievances of the people, former members of the Congolese army, and the police force, as well as social relations of its members and peer pressure. Even though it has been argued that the organisation is merely a Rwandan puppet, it can also be argued that the leadership of the organisation has used its relations with Rwanda to its benefit as the organisation has received military personnel and funding from Rwanda. The factors that have affected the recruitment strategy of the M23 have been plentiful and

have made it difficult for the organisation to have loyal rebel soldiers who would not desert the organisation during tough times.

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